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The Bard Sequence Program:
An Equitable Approach to Virtual Learning

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I. EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF EARLY COLLEGE

The Bard Sequence was conceived as an equity-based initiative that could bring dual enrollment courses to students around the nation who did not have access to college courses while in high school. Though the Bard Early College model has proven to be a tremendous success in places where Bard Early Colleges (BEC) and Bard High School Early Colleges (BHSEC) have opened, there is a limit to how many campuses Bard can realistically maintain. Given the limited number of seats available at a BHSEC or BEC, the Bard Sequence can fill a substantial need for many students—a substantial number of whom are first generation college aspirants—looking for their first experience with college in a way that lets them decide whether college is for them without any financial risk. The majority of Sequence students are from schools that are either Title I or feature more than 75% of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and Sequence offers them a chance to get their foot in the door of college and develop the skills and confidence necessary to succeed in future college endeavors.

Although the Bard Sequence began as an in-person program, in order for it to reach more of our targeted demographics of students and expand the impact that the Sequence can have nationwide, it is important that we go virtual. The Bard Sequence was originally created as a four-semester suite of sequential interdisciplinary humanities courses modeled on the Seminar courses taught to 11th- and 12th-grade students across the Bard Early College network. Up to this point, in-person Sequence courses have been clustered around places where there are already BEC or BHSEC campuses, i.e. in New York City, New Jersey, and Washington, DC as well as in the Hudson Valley of New York. The presence of a BEC or BHSEC in these areas not only provides logistical support to the Sequence, but it also means that issues of accreditation and licensure are easy to overcome because the path has already been paved. This model has shifted in multiple ways as the Sequence program has developed, expanding to include additional Sequence Electives alongside the core Sequence Seminar courses and, most crucially, expanding by way of virtual courses into parts of

the country where there are no Bard campuses. In most cases, these virtual courses are the only option for reaching underserved students around the nation with high-quality, experienced, Bard-trained college teachers and the liberal education that is a hallmark of Bard and the Sequence program. This virtual expansion is particularly crucial for those districts where the most students are suffering under the current, nationwide teacher shortage. Currently, in the Tulsa Public Schools district, for example, one in five students is learning from at least one long-term substitute because they cannot find enough certified teachers to staff their classes; Tulsans are being asked to step forward in order to alleviate the shortage of substitutes. Tulsa is hardly unique in facing these difficulties, which are rooted in deep structural inequalities: flagging economic, political, and social support for the profession of teaching, plus the outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is exactly why the Sequence is headed—remotely—to Tulsa in the Spring of 2022.

II. ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES

The idea that virtual courses can be an opportunity for real equity work may at first seem like a misnomer. This is especially so given the reality of virtual learning in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic. Quarantine learning, which we may distinguish from virtual learning, was devastating for many students who were already dealing with structural inequality on a daily basis. The pandemic separated many students from tutoring and support, made education a secondary or tertiary family concern (understandably so) after family health and economic welfare, rendered many students totally vulnerable to the digital divide, isolated students with mental health struggles (as well as all students) from systems of social and emotional support, imposed serious nutritional challenges on families who relied on school-provided meals, and forced students to learn in environments that could be noisy, crowded, and stressful.[1] This hit students of color especially hard given that they were disproportionately exposed to the risk of COVID-19 infection, less likely to have health insurance, more likely to have family members with underlying health conditions, and more likely to have family members who were deemed essential workers and were not able to stay home during the pandemic.[2] These factors often meant that parents were unable to stay home with their children to help them with virtual classes and assignments, to help young learners to adopt sleep and study schedules that would help them succeed in virtual classes, and to provide much needed emotional and social support to struggling students.

For some students the results were devastating. In schools where Black, Hispanic, and White students had similar levels of class attendance before quarantine, Black and Hispanic students were far more likely to experience severe drops in attendance rates and chronic truancy; outcomes that were devastating to student success.[3] To make matters worse, as many districts

began to open back up to hybrid or full-time in-person instruction in the Spring or Fall of 2021, students of color have been far more likely to be stuck in virtual-only education.[4]

By contrast, the Bard Sequence's virtual electives are available to students who opt in to them because they would like to experience a college course and earn college credits. Virtual courses, much like technology in the classroom, are neither inherently good nor bad: if they are grounded in learner-centered pedagogy, created with the intention of increasing student access, taught by scholars who are experts in their field, and made to foster a sense of intellectual and social community and belonging, they can be incredibly successful. Any early college program that supports students while maintaining a culture of high expectations, whether virtual or in-person, can create "a college-bound culture for historically underrepresented students."[5] This is all the more important because, as Kuh has pointed out, historically underserved students are also the least likely to have access to the very high-impact educational practices that we offer in the BHSECs, the BECs, and the Bard Sequence.[6] Indeed, data from students who have taken dual enrollment courses have demonstrated that access to dual enrollment is a significant source of educational equity. Students with GPA averages in the B and C range, for example, make greater gains than A students who are taking similar dual enrollment courses.[7]

Unfortunately, students who have the most to gain from taking dual enrollment courses are also least likely to have access to quality programs or to dual enrollment programs at all. Eligibility requirements and the cost of enrollment for some dual enrollment programs present significant barriers to some of the very students who would see the greatest benefit.[8] Even when some dual enrollment programs are "free," students must still shoulder the burden of purchasing books, finding and paying for transportation, and covering other hidden fees.[9] These financial barriers—along with a societal sense of who "belongs" in college—play out in the numbers, with students from historically underrepresented minority groups and low-income students being about half as likely to enroll in a free dual enrollment program as White or more affluent students.[10] Another barrier is the transferability of credits. For some students whose dual enrollment credits are never accepted for transfer at institutions of higher education, they see virtually no benefit from having taken dual enrollment courses. Only 29 states require public colleges to accept dual enrollment credits without restrictions and, of those 29, some states only require that these credits be counted towards general education requirements and not major requirements.[11] Some students graduate with the same amount of debt as those who took no dual enrollment courses.

Another major issue with dual enrollment as it currently exists nationwide is the quality of instruction.[12] This is not surprising given the meteoric rise of dual enrollment numbers since the turn of the century and the overwhelming demand for access that often sidesteps questions about rigor and quality.

Between 2002 and 2011, the number of high school students taking college courses for credit increased by 68% and by 2015, nearly 70% of high schools offered dual enrollment, according to the Government Accountability Office. As the American Association of University Professors put it, "financial considerations…too often predominate over pedagogical concerns."[13] *Dual enrollment* is often a catch-all term deployed to cover any course for which students earn high school and college credits, a vague definition that often covers canned lectures, asynchronous work with little meaningful interaction with peers or professors, and classes offered by teachers who are not experts in their field or who are minimally qualified. In many instances, dual enrollment courses are taught by high school teachers, and in more than half of all states, those teachers are not required to hold the same credentials as the professors in the partnering higher education institution that has accredited the course. In some schools, teachers are required to have a master's degree or a certain number of master's-level credits, but these requirements have sometimes been ignored until an audit of the program discovers that program leaders overlooked underqualified teachers in order to meet demand for dual enrollment. In many cases where this has been the norm of dual enrollment, rote memorization at an accelerated pace has been touted as college learning.[14] To put it succinctly, there is some humbug lumped in with the term *dual enrollment*.

The results of dual enrollment nationwide has, thus, dovetailed neatly with pre-existing structural inequalities and racial hierarchies which are the warp and weft of the American fabric. Dual enrollment is far less likely to be available to low-income, rural, and minority students. According to the US Government Accountability Office, only a quarter of small-school, high-poverty students have access to dual enrollment and that figure only rises to 50% when larger low-income schools are factored into the data sets. Even in low-income areas that do have available dual enrollment, Black and Latinx students participate at significantly lower rates than their White and Asian peers.[15] Civil Rights Data Collection statistics in 2015 indicated that Black students made up only 9% of high school students enrolled in college courses, while Latinx students accounted for 17%.[16] In the Bard Sequence, by contrast, over 90% of students identify as Black or Latinx and more than 85% of those students are passing their courses with a C or better and earning college credits that are being accepted at colleges and universities around the nation.

III. SHAPING AN AUTHENTIC COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

When done right, however, dual enrollment can be a significant factor in student success in college and beyond. In addition to the money they save by taking dual enrollment courses through the Bard Sequence, which is not insignificant, students who have access to dual enrollment courses are significantly more likely to attend college, more likely to stay in college after their first year,

and typically earn more college credits during their first year than students who have not taken dual enrollment courses.[17] One study that tracked more than 200,000 high school students who earned college credits while in high school, using National Student Clearinghouse Data, found that 88% of these students continued in college after high school, and most earned a certificate or degree or transferred from a two-year college to a four-year college within five years.[18] There is also significant data that suggests that earning just 12 college credits while in high school is an extremely powerful predictor of student graduation from college. According to US Department of Education researcher Cliff Adelman, when students are enrolled in dual credit programs that present "true postsecondary course work" 12 credits is the gold standard that is a "guarantee of momentum" that will push students to finish their college degrees.[19] The average student graduating from the Bard Sequence currently earns a minimum of 12 credits and, in some programs in which partner schools offer both the Bard Sequence and Sequence Electives, students have the opportunity to earn as many as 28 credits in 2 years.

Unlike many dual enrollment programs, the Bard Sequence does not have—and has never had—minimum GPA requirements, standardized exam score requirements, or other academic or financial barriers to student access. Most students applying to our virtual programs have only to submit a writing sample and answer a series of basic interest questions or interview with a member of the Sequence team. In fact, we often advertise the Sequence as a program for students who don't often get the chance to shine because they are not at the top of their class or straight-A students, and we encourage students to participate even if they are not sure whether they wish to go on to college. When advising our partners on the kinds of students they should nominate for our program, we recommend students who would be the first generation in their family to attend college, who want to find out if college might be for them, who want to continue building the skills that they will need to succeed in college, who are looking for a different experience than what their high school might offer, and who are excited about where education can take them.

The Bard Sequence further seeks to counteract models of dual enrollment as synonyms for poor instruction and as harbingers of the already unequal American education system. As outlined above, it does so by targeting first-generation college learners, students from low-income families and historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, and students who may not have been deemed "college-bound" by their high school records or even their own interests. What the Sequence program asks of its students—and what we screen for in student interviews and writing—is a desire to take on the challenge of college learning by coming to class, participating actively in activities and discussions, and being open to the intellectual expansion that a great college course can offer. As has long been evident at the Bard High School Early Colleges, which are set in some of the most economically and educationally striated American cities, it is not necessarily the students who come to us with the highest GPAs or the most wealthy parents who will most succeed in

our courses; it is the students who themselves want to be in our college classes who will come away with a true college education.

A cornerstone of that authenticity is the Bard Early Colleges' grounding in a liberal arts education that seeks to prepare students not for a specific vocation, but for encountering the world as critical, innovative, informed thinkers. Many existing dual enrollment programs slot students into community college courses geared toward specific adult careers in fields like healthcare, business, the trades, or criminology. These fields are, of course, vital and worthwhile, but the courses that build towards them incorporate little space for adolescent students' introspection, questioning, or exploration. And yet these are precisely the skills that historically underrepresented students need in order to address the inequities of their world and envision themselves as independent, crucial thinkers within it. This is why Bard Sequence courses—like the Bard Early College and Bard College courses that they are modeled on—implement a liberal arts ethos in which students are trained to question reigning pieties, interpret complicated concepts and texts, and confidently express their viewpoints in discussion and writing. The success of the Bard Early Colleges demonstrates the demand among students for this kind of collegiate experience.

This liberal arts ideology plays out in the structure of the Bard Sequence's virtual college instruction, which is key to its success and also what sets it apart from vocational programs like those at community colleges and the lazier, inexpert pedagogy that plagues many dual enrollment opportunities. Many existing virtual courses structure student work around asynchronous assignments that students can complete at their own pace—assignments that, at times, verge on "busy work" or a simple checking of boxes. While this concept allows flexibility for learners who might have other family or work obligations, it does so at the cost of two of the main benefits of a college classroom: the opportunity for students to learn from and alongside each other and the chance for students to interact with an expert college professor who can guide them through the rigors of their field. If there is one thing the experience of quarantine should have taught us, it is how much we depend on community to create positive, meaningful learning experiences for students; it is impossible to build true communities of caring through asynchronous work.

With its focus on synchronous, lively, discussion-based courses, the Bard Sequence places these two facets of college education at the forefront. Students in our virtual courses are held to the same high standards of attendance and participation as they would be in in-person classes with accountability for synchronous work and discussion, and indeed, there is something a bit miraculous about being able to talk and learn from students and instructors a bus, train, or plane ride away. Sequence courses maintain the flexibility of all virtual offerings by the fact that students can join the class from anywhere and on any device with which they can access the internet. Students tune in on phones and laptops, from their homes, their buses, their after-school classrooms, and even McDonald's.

This requirement for students' presence within the virtual classroom is balanced against a recognition that the socioeconomic and technological realities of students' lives may limit how they demonstrate this engagement. From the beginning of Sequence's foray into virtual coursework, professors have erred on the side of leniency in asking students to appear on camera or speak on mic, as we recognize that students may not wish to share a view of where they are or may have unstable internet connections that prevent them from A/V access. One upside of quarantine learning has been the fact that districts have become much more committed to providing their students with access to laptops and technological support. While this has significantly mitigated barriers to internet access for students, those challenges still exist, and the central tenet of Sequence's college learning is that students are treated with the respect, autonomy, and trust of college students even as they are expected to participate actively in discussions in whatever way they are able, whether that be on or off camera, on mic or via chat.

Discussion is a mainstay of Sequence's virtual courses—like its in-person offerings—and it is one of the aspects that students most frequently cite as the most notable and favorite feature of our courses. As one student reflected, "My most favorite thing about Bard were the class discussions. It allowed for my peers and I to talk about topics that have a bigger meaning to us, and it allow[ed] us to gain better knowledge and understanding of something that we didn't before, changing our view point on certain topics." Active discussion sets our courses apart from the rote learning that students often encounter in their high school classrooms, the flurry of handouts and packets inherent to pandemic-era remote learning, as well as the asynchronous and at times trivial work offered in some other dual enrollment courses. Discussion also sets Sequence courses apart from test- or portfolio-based pre-college courses like the Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, since it recenters the core of the class around the everyday process of learning rather than a high stakes end product. Our partners, despite also offering AP courses to their students through programs like New York City's "AP for All," have voiced their disappointment at students failing to achieve a high enough score on AP exams to earn college credit; they have chosen to join with Sequence precisely to fill this gap, to provide a chance for students to earn college credit through the process of a college class rather than a single exam. Students succeed in Sequence courses—where they might not in other virtual, advanced placement, or dual enrollment offerings—because they are given the chance to improve, take chances, and make and learn from mistakes in every class, rather than having their learning and college credit ride on the outcome of a single paper or exam.

Discussion in Sequence's virtual courses takes many forms. Often, it resembles a classic college seminar, albeit with students chiming in on multiple planes, such as out loud and via the chat. Sequence's online instructors have also harnessed technology to facilitate student-student and student-instructor interaction in ways that might be impossible in an in-person classroom. Using

the Google Suite (Google Classroom, Docs, and Drive), students can write and edit their writing collaboratively, creating and responding to marginal comments and questions. Writing workshops are particularly lively in Sequence courses, as instead of sitting at home or in a computer lab writing alone, students can interact with their instructor in real-time, with instructors following along with and commenting upon students' work as they write. Indeed, Sequence's virtual courses have reinfused some of the more isolated parts of humanities education—such as writing an essay or reading a challenging text like Homer's *Odyssey*—with a sense of communal effort, using online tools like Perusall (in which students can annotate and discuss a PDF text as they read) to transform the experience of learning. While the core intent of discussion in Sequence's virtual courses remains the same as in any Bard course—to discuss challenging ideas with other smart people in the same space—the dimensions of that space have expanded to fit the virtual sphere.

Discussion is almost always paired with writing in Sequence's virtual courses. Instructors in all of our dual enrollment courses ground their classes in the Writing and Thinking pedagogy used across the Bard network. In most classes, this entails frequent "focused free writes," in which students respond to topical questions with a timed period of brief, informal writing. These exercises not only ask students to ponder a question that leads into or reflects upon discussion, but they also train students to stretch their writerly and critical muscles, challenging them to push past the point of a "good enough" answer to consider a question from a new angle or perspective. This kind of informal writing—married with more formal academic writing (essays, discussion posts, etc.)—sets Bard's virtual courses apart from other dual enrollment offerings, as it provides a space in which students can think in writing without the demand that they give that writing a specific or "proper" form. Particularly for a generation raised on text messaging and Instagram captions, this kind of brief, approachable in-class writing helps to bridge the gap between the excitement of new ideas and the challenge—sometimes drudgery—of putting those ideas into formal prose. And in the virtual sphere, this Writing and Thinking pedagogy is enhanced by the capacity for students and the instructor to respond to classmates' writing in real-time, sharing "free writes" out verbally and also harnessing them as the basis for further discussion.

All of Sequence's virtual courses are taught by veteran Bard professors who are trained in Writing and Thinking as well as experts in their given fields. This differentiates Sequence's virtual offerings from similar dual enrollment courses, as instructors hold PhDs and, like all Bard professors, are galvanized to work specifically with younger students. As experts in their fields, Sequence's professors bring knowledge to their virtual classrooms, but they also bring the energy of scholarly excitement, an energy which is often contagious among their students. Bard virtual courses are designed to be specific and engaging, with titles like *A History of Disease and Medicine* or *Civic Engagement*, the sorts of courses that are envisioned and taught by experienced academics. As dedicated and seasoned secondary education instructors, these professors are also

poised to adapt advanced topics for uninitiated learners, setting high standards of rigor while providing the guidance students need to achieve them.

In many—indeed, in nearly all—dual enrollment courses outside of Bard, high school-age students are thrown in among other community college or undergraduate students, with little or no additional advising or attention paid to them as beginner college learners. It is easy, in this context, for students to become discouraged, feeling like their professors don't care about them personally and, if they find the work difficult, that they are "not meant for college." This is true of many novice college students, but it is especially—and most damagingly—true for historically underrepresented and low-income students who have few personal or community models of what it means to succeed in higher education. For these students, participating in such dual enrollment courses runs the risk of achieving precisely the opposite of what the dual enrollment movement, in general, sets out to do by potentially convincing students that college learning is beyond them. In Sequence, by contrast, professors enter the virtual classroom with the knowledge that their students are encountering college for the first time and the interest and pedagogical skills needed to smooth this transition. What's more, the students in Sequence courses are *all* dual enrollment students, so they are in good company as they learn to navigate this new educational arena. Students emerge from Sequence's courses feeling like they know how to seek support from a college professor, that their professor has their back, and that they can carry this confidence and trust into their future college courses.

As the Bard Sequence has rolled out its virtual courses in New York City, Baltimore, and Washington, DC, the program has continued to reflect and improve upon its model in response to the stumbling blocks inherent to such a new enterprise. Sequence students still struggle with some of the technological roadblocks that many encountered during the pandemic era of remote learning, though school systems have bolstered their technological support and students have shown an increased resilience in accessing learning in whatever way they can. Students have learned to integrate online courses into their lives by attending class while riding home on the bus or jumping on the internet at a fast food joint when their home network is down. While such a flexible approach to learning is generally a positive development—showing that dedicated students will find a way to be in class no matter their circumstance—it can also make virtual classes more unwieldy than an in-person setting, with some students unable to use their mics or to toggle between apps (e.g. between Google Classroom and Google Docs) in real-time. As in all of Bard's Early College offerings, Sequence's virtual classrooms will likely remain a site of compromise between students' circumstances and capabilities and the high expectations of a college classroom.

One of the great boons of Sequence's virtual courses is that students have, by and large, elected to be in them, choosing to expand their learning after school, on their own time. This makes Sequence courses lively and productive, but it

also means that students occasionally have a more casual approach to their matriculation in these courses than they might in, say, a course required for graduation. It has been challenging to assess which and how many courses to offer to students, as many students voice their interest in courses, but not all of those who are admitted end up committing to attendance throughout the semester. In addition, students who do matriculate into Sequence courses at times find that they have conflicts between the courses' after-school hours and other personal or family obligations (some Sequence courses are built into the regular school day, but most virtual courses—which usually incorporate students from multiple different schools/districts—are generally after school to accommodate discrepant schedules). This can pose a quandary, as students who do not pass Bard's courses might earn a less-than-desirable grade on their transcript, thus jeopardizing their further admission to college or enrichment programs. Sequence will continue to monitor and tabulate data on student matriculation to best allocate resources to courses we offer and the students we serve, as well as to find solutions so that our instructors can continue to hold high standards of rigor while avoiding penalizing students for their desire to take on the challenge of a college course. At the same time, we will also pursue aggressive outreach to students beyond those who see themselves as "college learners," so that we might draw in students for whom Sequence's introduction to college courses would be most pivotal in their educational trajectory.

As of the Fall of 2021, the Sequence is poised to expand. We are slated to begin offering courses in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Denver, Colorado in the Spring of 2022 and Cleveland, Ohio soon after that. There are no plans to stop there. We've partnered with Stepmojo, an online learning platform that is helping to open doors in school districts around the country that are reeling from the national teacher shortage, a lack of access to dual enrollment programs, and/or from dual enrollment programs lacking the legitimacy and rigor necessary to have a meaningful impact on the lives of their students. Now, in this moment of reflection upon an unprecedented international crisis, we need to decide what sort of education is going to be offered to students around the country. It might be—as it too often has been—buildings full of long term subs, AP courses dependent on a single test to determine college credits, and dual enrollment programs that discourage and alienate first generation college students. Or it could be the Bard Sequence Program, providing real, rigorous college education and credits that actually transfer to the students who need them most. We sincerely hope it will be the latter and we will keep working until the Bard Sequence becomes synonymous with meaningful, accessible, virtual dual enrollment.

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DR. EMILY HAYMAN served as the founding Director of the Bard Sequence Program from 2019-2021 and has taught "Writing and Composition" for Sequence. She was previously on the English faculty of Bard High School Early College Baltimore, and has also taught in the Robinson Center for Young Scholars (University of Washington), Columbia University, and Yale University. She currently teaches writing at the University of Tampa. Emily holds a PhD in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University.

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