

# Early College Folio

Milestones

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## Bard Early College Milestones, Looking Back

Ray Peterson

This is my second go at this article about Bard's Early College milestones. The first version was, I thought, rather orderly and balanced. It started with a definition of an actual, physical milestone . . . you know, those wooden or stone markers on the roadside marking the first mile of your trip, then the second, and so on.

Then it went on to talk about the founding of Simon's Rock, 1964, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. But actually, now that I think more about it, maybe Bard's early college origins actually began when Leon Botstein himself started college early at the University of Chicago. But these two events came together in 1979 when Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, became the ex-officio president of Simon's Rock as well, a position he still holds today.

My first article then mentioned President Botstein's seminal work, *Jefferson's Children: Education and the Promise of American Culture*, published in 1997.<sup>1</sup> It described his meeting with Harold O. Levy, Chancellor of New York City Public Schools, to discuss the ideas in that book which led to the 2001 founding of Bard's first early college campus in New York City. That campus, now located on Manhattan's Lower East Side, was joined eight years later by a Queens campus, then Newark, Cleveland, Baltimore, New Orleans, Washington DC, and next year a school in the Bronx.

The idea behind all of these schools is basically the same, that American adolescents can begin serious college study in the liberal arts at a much younger age—students at the Bard Early Colleges first enroll at about age 14. Those students who feel they are ready for this kind of challenge can finish their high school diploma and an Associate of Arts degree from Bard College four years later. All of this is offered tuition free because of a partnership with the local school districts. Bard shapes the curricula and hires college faculty to teach in all grades.

Many people were mentioned in this first article: Patricia Sharpe and Ba Win who came from Simon's Rock to work with Ray Peterson (that's me) to launch Bard's first High School Early College (BHSEC) in Manhattan; Michael Lerner and Valeri Thomson who served as principals of the Manhattan and Queens campuses, followed by John Weinstein, Dumaine Williams, and Lori Ween who

launched Bard's third school in Newark; Stephen Tremaine and Clara Haskell Botstein who established the administrative network which knit together the larger constellation of early college campuses. Ben Iselin, a Bard Early College parent, whose pro bono work established memoranda of understanding contracts between Bard College and each of its Early College participating school districts.

A friend and colleague of mine read that first milestone draft and told me that, while it was mostly accurate, it lacked voice and didn't make clear enough my main points:

- Point one: that maps with milestones can be read in two ways; they can show you where you have been, but they can also show you where you might want to go, and perhaps even why.
- Point two: that in 2011 with the opening of the Newark campus, this early college map took a significant turn in a new direction. There should be less chronology, my friend and colleague suggested; there should be more stories and a fleshing out of the article's two main points.

So here come the stories, not only to give voice and texture to this discourse but also to clarify, develop, and delineate those two central points. The first story comes from Stephen Tremaine who recounts a conversation he had recently with a Bard Early College graduate who went on to finish her Bachelor of Arts degree and now works in banking and, according to Stephen, is doing quite well. When Stephen congratulated her on her accomplishments in the field of finance, she told him that what was really important to her was the shelf of books Bard had given her during her four semesters of Seminar, everything from Plato to Virginia Woolf and postmodernism. These books and her Seminar experiences formed the bedrock, apparently, for finding college as a place to think.

Americans are in the habit of measuring the worth of their education in terms of their annual income, and there is a lot to be said for college study as a path to financial security, but the stories that really resonate with what we try to do along the way sometimes look in a different direction.

When I visit my local pharmacy for my annual flu shot, I sometimes have to wait until other customers have been served. There is a young pharmacist there, let's call her Anna, who seems to be loved by all of the store's patrons. She not only expertly dispenses prescriptions, but she also listens to her customer's stories about their aches and pains. When it is finally time for my flu shot, I compliment her for her friendly but professional manner. And Anna says to me, "Mr. Peterson, you don't remember me, but before going to pharmacy school, I graduated from BHSEC in 2003." Anna is from Ukraine; she's one of those first-generation immigrants to earn a college degree, and what she goes on to

tell me about Bard Early College is that it was there she learned that science is as much a part of the liberal arts as literature or history. “It was the best part of my college education.”

Also from the class of 2003 or 2004 was a young man who returned to our school several years later to secure a copy of his AA diploma. He apparently needed this certificate as part of his application to the Fire Department of New York. “I’ve always wanted to be a fireman, Mr. Peterson. I went to BHSEC with that degree in mind. It turned out that a lot of other great things happened during my four years here, but one of them was this opportunity.”

I sometimes think about these stories when we have visitors from other schools . . . from other countries. In Sweden I met a carpenter who was a skilled craftsman, but who also loved reading philosophy, something he learned about in his Gymnasium. In Finland, with its international reputation for excellent secondary schools, I read about the many students who want to become teachers because it is such a respected profession. It seems that many BHSEC graduates hold teaching in equally high esteem because of the professors they saw in their classrooms.

And a final story, one that is a bit more complicated to unpack. At a recent alumni gathering I spoke with a number of BHSEC graduates from 2003 on. Many of them had gone on to prestigious, four-year liberal arts programs where they did well, but where the sense of community was never quite the same. Perhaps this sense of loss had to do with the age at which our students began their college study? Colleagues who have left BHSEC to teach at other four-year liberal arts colleges sometimes share similar stories. Older college undergraduates sometimes seem less engaged, sometimes even jaded. It’s almost as if 16 is an ideal age to begin college study for American adolescents. It’s clearly not that simple; there are plenty of 16-year-olds who are not ready for the challenges of an early college education. But there are so many others who are.

So how do these stories help us read our map of early college milestones? They certainly tell us where we have been these past twenty years. They also suggest the diversity of destinations offered to our students in the future. They tell us that American adolescents are often eager and excited to begin this journey at a younger age, and, because of the curricular and pedagogical design of Bard’s early colleges, successfully finish their four-year degrees on time. (More on this below.) The stories also suggest that along this path students can learn to value things like critical inquiry as much as a diploma’s material rewards. And finally, these stories lead us to our second major point, that Bard’s Early College map can embrace an even more diverse population of students.

Around 2011, when BHSEC Newark first opened its doors, our map of milestones took on a dramatic change in direction. In Newark, as well as in Manhattan and Queens, students who gained admission were from a much

more divergent pool. For a number of reasons our admissions offices began turning to middle schools we had not before considered. By the time Newark was followed by Cleveland, Baltimore, Washington D.C., and New Orleans, the student population in our schools swelled to over 3,000 and the profile of those students had changed.

With this change came the concern by some that our academic standards might weaken, but our school's blueprint and curricular design proved remarkably resilient. It had much to do with having an excellent faculty, but also with how our students learned to closely read a difficult text, and how they used writing to organize their thoughts and discover things that were not initially visible. They carried these skills with them when they eventually transferred to four-year undergraduate programs. A recent analysis by the Education Trust followed students who came from families with fewer financial resources.<sup>2</sup> Their study indicated that students from Manhattan and Queens who had gone through Bard's four-year early college program had higher on-time graduation rates than any other high school in the state of New York.

So perhaps it is possible to use a map to not only look at where we have been, but also to choose new directions for where we want to go. As our program continues to evolve, those opportunities will continue to present themselves with new directions being chosen, and new milestones standing there for our consideration.

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RAY PETERSON was the Director of Bard College's Institute for Writing and Thinking from 1998-2001. He was also the founding Principal of both BHSEC Manhattan in 2001 and BHSEC Newark in 2011.

## NOTES

- 1 Leon Botstein, *Jefferson's Children: Education and the Promise of American Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).
- 2 "To and Through: Setting Students Up for Postsecondary Success," The Education Trust—New York, April 2022, [https://newyork.edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/To-and-Through\\_2022.pdf](https://newyork.edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/To-and-Through_2022.pdf).