

Early College Folio

Milestones

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The Future of Early College

An Interview with Dr. Leon Botstein

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The first public, tuition-free Bard High School Early College (BHSEC) opened in Brooklyn in 2001. Today, an entire network of Bard Early Colleges operates in partnership with public school systems to offer students affordable access to higher education in a cohesive, engaging environment. Simultaneously, alternative takes on early college (Early College High Schools, dual enrollment, early entrance) have proliferated across the United States, providing even more opportunities for younger students to earn college credit.

In December 2022 I sat down with Leon Botstein, President of Bard College, to examine how the pandemic made new demands of educators everywhere. Together, we looked ahead to the next two decades of public early college, taking a closer look at our own limiting and unexamined assumptions about adolescent education, equity, and inclusion, and predicted the ways in which Bard Early College can meet the academic, social, and developmental needs of current and future students.

DUMAINE WILLIAMS: There are many things we've learned in the 20 years since Bard's first public High School Early College opened, but let's start with a reflection on a recent experience faced by the students and educators everywhere. What has the pandemic taught us about the role of early college?

LEON BOTSTEIN: There is a renewed impetus for keeping students engaged in the ways they're seeking to learn. For example, we have already witnessed a shift in students' desire for the serious study of issues and learned skills and techniques from really experienced professionals earlier than what we normally do in college. The pandemic proves the point. And returning to school after the pandemic, returning to the habits of schooling, it's all the more important that we actually do that in a way which jumpstarts the curiosity, the discipline, the use of time that is essential for success in learning. It's not clear that we do that as a matter of normal course in conventional high schools.

I think we could also talk about that same dynamic in the context of traditional college or undergraduate studies as well.

Yes, I think one can say that. In general, it's probably reasonable to assume that we've come to a time when the practices of what we do merit a serious reevaluation because of the incredible deficit that is revealed by what normally goes on. The other insight that's new from the pandemic period is that mental health, which many constituents are concerned about, is not divorced from the way in which a young adult or adolescent is able to create meaning in the context of life.

For many adults, a key element of their sense of well-being, what we call mental health, is tied to work, right? Meaning you will have a meaningful place in society, whether that is work or whether that is family or other things we associate with that of life. For the young adult or the late-adolescent to mid-adolescent, those things aren't really quite available since we're no longer in a period of unskilled labor; those types of opportunities are increasingly limited. So, the way to achieve a dignified life is more and more dependent on mental activity, on the use of the mind—not brawn, but brains. If you think of it in that way, the more serious, the more consequential, the more engaged the adolescent is in understanding that learning is essential to the conduct of life—finding a place in life and creating meaning—the better off. This means it requires rethinking not only what we do in a normal college but also, for example, the relationship with theory and practice, like internships and classroom learning.

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Most of the interesting problems we think about are probably derivative of the questions, the predicaments, the ambiguities, the complexities we encounter in trying to negotiate our daily life. And that's involved with being *in the world*. Serious college education early should involve the students in deepening their sense of curiosity, of understanding something. Take illness—the pandemic itself is the best example of that; it is the greatest opportunity to deepen interest in science and how the body works. What is disease? How do we understand it? How do we fight it? What do we know? What don't we know? What's the difference between washing hands, wearing a mask, and taking a vaccine? What is the vaccine? It's all these things which are no longer theoretical issues, they're crucial.

Given the way the political conversation in the country has gone, one of the key attributes of a good education is to try to show a young person that they have a place in the world as a citizen, that there's something they can do about a society that seems either paralyzed or polarized or inefficient or unfair or cruel or discriminatory or lopsided in its distribution of privilege. There's every reason that education is the key to propelling society forward. And we're not doing it. A lot of it also has to do with the enormous teacher shortage that's looming and the number of teachers leaving the profession. This is a prime moment for renewal.

You mentioned privilege, but related to this is a larger conversation around equity and access, which coincides with all the conversations during the pandemic around structural issues of access and equity. I'm curious about how you think education broadly, but specifically early college, can respond to this. It's not a new issue, but there is a lot more emphasis and attention to equity considerations in the larger public discussion these days.

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The early college has a way of making two points, which was always the intention. One is that too much of the discussion of the issue of equity is that in some implicit way, it's viewed as incompatible with the achievement of excellence when in fact, the opposite is the case. So just as the vocabulary we use, *inclusion*—well, *inclusion* presumes the existence of a boundary of something from which people have been excluded and legitimates the importance of entering that space from which you have been excluded. And that's understandable. I

actually see a different way; I'm not sure that what we're doing is so good. That there's a conceit about the people who are included and have excluded others, that they represent excellence—I don't think they do. So, what equity actually is, it's opening the doors of access to populations who indeed have been excluded. And that exclusion has been at the expense of excellence, because you're excluding people who can contribute to a better definition of *excellence*.

So it seems to me that the standards were never high enough. Standardized testing is a poor yardstick of excellence and discriminatory at the same time. The reason for early college is that it intervenes early enough in the population to reveal the hidden talents that have been obscured by such bad schooling. It's a way of thinking about the problem of equity that seems to be an essential mechanism to ensure excellence. They're not opposed to one another. The great success we've had with the Early Colleges is that we've shown that if one

intervenes at the right age, one can change not only the rates of achievement but also the standards of achievement.

Some of the other players in the early college/dual enrollment field, with the pandemic and with the shift to virtual instruction, have leaned into virtual instruction and technology in the classroom, saying things like, “We can expand and do a lot more work if we do it virtually.” Of course, the hallmark of the Bard experience is in-person, small classes and seminar-style discussion. I’m curious about where, if anywhere, you see the role of technology in the classroom in the context of these students and their relationship to technology.

Technology is, I think, a terrific supplement, a terrific tool. It enhances learning. It helps use the learning time more effectively. But it is not a surrogate. Learning is a collective, human, in-time, in-real-space experience. It is the building of relationships, not only with teachers (that’s cross generational), but also it is the developing of relationships among the students. So you have a community of learners. That becomes a collective activity, a group activity, as well as an individual activity. And it becomes the forum of a common ground that doesn’t recognize race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation—the things that divide us. Let’s say you’re all learning biology; you are in the same room and you’re figuring out understanding the mechanisms of the cell. The conversation is a common ground that is germane to everybody in that room. It foregrounds learning around the universality of language, the universality of language as the instrument of learning, of thought. It works against the things that we like to cite that divide us from our neighbors.

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Lots of learning and teacher learning, individual effort, and collaborative effort are all essential to the learning experiences and social experiences that cannot be replicated in the isolated space of a virtual machine. It’s similar probably to online dating; you can make contact, you can find out who might be out there, but you’re not going to form the relationship virtually any more than a successful relationship was forged by an epistolary exchange in the 18th century. Eventually you have to meet.

So technology is useful. Of course it has tremendous advantages like more democratic distribution of the materials of learning, databases, texts, or visualization. There are innumerable things that technology makes easier, but there

is definitely an exploitive tendency in the ease of doing this, which is really another way of substituting credentialing for education.

One of the things that I always think about is the fact that the Early College model is such a unique aspect of the American education system. However, in other countries, the concept of students being engaged in college coursework at 16 years old is not as novel of an idea because the education systems are more nimble. As Bard does more work internationally and with the Open Society University Network (OSUN), how do you imagine the ways in which early college or conversations about college work for younger students could shift or change?

First of all, there are big differences between ourselves and other places in the world, given the structure of our secondary and higher education system. However, I think generally, the world is facing—because of the ubiquity of technology and popular culture and the amount of time people are now dependent on machine social networks and so forth—that we do face some kind of fundamental crisis of connecting elementary and secondary education to tertiary education. In other words, I think this is a worldwide problem. We're losing a lot of talent along the way. It's like an inefficient water transport system. We have a lot of water, you know—elementary school—buckets of water. You're carrying the water up a hill, and it's spilling out, just buckets of water spilling out. It's not efficient. You're trying to move water to the top and you're losing 70% of it! Now, you wouldn't install such a system in your house. If you had a six-story building you wouldn't do that. You wouldn't have it as a form of irrigation, for the precious nature of water—you wouldn't tolerate such wastage.

So in our system, for example, kids are segregated at 13 years old into different tracks. Access to higher education has collapsed. The problem is that the segregation at 13 was designed at a different age of understanding of human development and at a time when humans' life expectancy was shorter.

If your life expectancy was 50 or 65 years, 13 is a reasonable age. Now, advancing the life expectancy to 75 years, the ratio of 13 isn't that persuasive anymore. Furthermore, what we know about learning is more than we once knew. Still, there's no hard evidence that 13 years old is a universally valid cut off point. There's a lot of evidence that shows that there's much more variation, which means a more flexible system has more entry points to go the distance than that one entry point. So I think what we're seeing in contemporary life is that whatever system has been in place outside of the United States, for example, the loss to the university system is enormous. Our loss in America is simply that the system is so poor, that even though a higher percentage of the population finishes secondary school, and maybe a higher percentage gets access to higher education, they don't survive higher education; completion rates are very low. Community colleges' rates are terribly lower. State four-year

colleges are very low. And therefore, the preparation for university has been too weak. So again, it's an argument for early college to improve. Now abroad, the Early College strategy is something that holds attraction even in a different system of engagement between elementary, secondary, and tertiary.

For the last two decades or so of early college, work has really been focused on expansion within the public Early Colleges. I'm curious if you're looking ahead to the next two decades. What do you imagine? Is it along the same track? Are there different ways you anticipate the work will shift? Are there specific goals that you have for the Early Colleges?

I think what would be ideal is that in all the major urban areas there would be a successful early college based on the Bard model, in other words, an early college in a single facility. It doesn't require the student to leave the building. The College faculty also teach the ninth and tenth grades, so it's an integrated environment, and it has its own culture, which strongly supports learning. An expansion of access to that, more broad than we have now, is the first goal.

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The second is to try to find a way to get rural and suburban school districts to cooperate with one another to create, let's call it "magnet" early college. We now only operate, as you know, in systems that have enough volume that there is a pressing need for a good secondary-school-equivalent, age-equivalent educational opportunity. The

need is revealed by the fact that both Bard High School Early College (BHSEC) Manhattan and Bard High School Early College (BHSEC) Queens are the state leaders in the rates of completion of BA degrees by populations whose track record in doing that is much lower. There's the first need, the demographic need; certain populations are so disadvantaged that they're losing their talent with the absence of a good alternative. So how do you replicate that in a suburban, quasi-rural way?

The second need is unexpected. The public school system, which we're a part of—not a charter school system—presumes that the best situation is for young people between the ages of 13 and 14 or 16 and 17 to go to school while living at home. Okay, now, let's take the murky ideal of at home out. Let's assume that irrespective of social class (it can be a suburban mansion home or inner city, impoverished public housing, or homelessness—throughout that entire category of home) it can be argued over history that the sending away of young people at that age away from home may be an optimal circumstance to great

learning and the acquisition of skills and the ethics of responsibility and all the nominal virtues we identify with adulthood. So that means that just as there was a move at one point for residential high schools and states' specialized residential high schools, maybe in science and the arts, I predict that there is a role in each state for public, *residential* early college.

They could be private, nominally. But access to them should not be dependent on income. I can imagine, because there is a need in the country—again, irrespective of social class, or race, or religion, or region—that there is a 14-year-old who would be best off not living at home, but going to an early college with other early college students in a residential format.

This interview is being conducted on the eve of Christmas and in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, in the ghost of Christmas past, we have the famous story of Scrooge's unhappy childhood. In the 1951 film it is revealed that Scrooge was abandoned by his father after his mother died as a result of his being born. So the father is cruel and heartless and sends the boy off to boarding school away from the bosom of his family. And he is, you know, devastated, unhappy. His sister, Fran, is his advocate. She comes to rescue him on the eve of Christmas and has talked the evil father into taking him back home. Now this is a kind of a literary image of the idyllic circumstance of home. But we all know that that is the exception and may not be the rule. What about the reverse? Harry Potter is living, ostracized by some other family, and then is rescued by the invitation to Hogwarts to go away from home in order to flourish as a student. So, we're Hogwarts. We are believers.

You are a parent and I am a parent. We are in the category of those who would prefer—and we see this in the BHSECs—that our children go to high school-aged schooling from home. However, we are reluctantly content to send them away to college. Is it possible that you or I—I mean the British aristocracy sent their children off to boarding school at a much earlier age than even we're proposing—I'm just suggesting that given what we know about the development of young people, there's going to be a need for an expanded network of residential early colleges. But they can't be based merely on wealth.

If you had a 13-year-old child and some educators representing the State came to you as a parent and said, "Listen, your son or daughter has been selected to join this residential program. This is an opportunity of a lifetime! See the track record of the people who went to this place. They had a much higher chance of getting training so they could choose careers in science and engineering, and they were more assured entrance into a first-class place." Well, it's all the same to you financially and as sad as you might be to lose your child at that age, there is no evidence to show that you're going to live a long time and that your child is going to live a long time. We haven't really figured out what the best early childhood and adolescent years are to form a long-lasting adult relationship with our children. It could be argued that if you're going to have a great relationship with your children for 40 or 50 years after they finish all

of their schooling, who cares about the three or four years you might add on when they're away for school? So, I think we have to rethink the unexamined assumptions that sending children away to school early is a bad idea. There are circumstances in which it might be, but there are many, many circumstances in which it could be lifesaving.

Yes, like all forms of early college, it is for a select population of students for whom these standards work well.

The students for whom the Early College “works” is not a select group that is defined by standard metrics of so-called academic ability. Our experience in the Early College is that standard metrics are behavioral indications and motivations. We'd rather have a focused, ambitious student for whom it takes longer to get the work done well than a bright, quick-on-the-feet student who could do it if that's what he wanted to, but either is cynical or lacks the motivation. We actually evaluate, for lack of a better word, the whole person, as much as we can through a subjective, differentiated way of selecting the student not only on grades and test scores.

With continued growth in the next two decades we'll be able to identify more and more students who will benefit from earlier access to a college education and environment.

The three avenues for growth: replication of the current model, the creation of cross-district alliances in suburban and rural areas, and the expansion of the residential option—all of it requires public funding.

DR. DUMAINE WILLIAMS, Vice President and Dean of the Early College, oversees academic programming across the Bard Early College campuses and promotes Bard Sequence's academic quality and integration with the broader Bard network. Dr. Williams has served as the Dean of Students at BHSEC Newark and as the founding principal at BHSEC Cleveland.

DR. LEON BOTSTEIN has been the President of Bard College since 1975. In addition to steering Bard toward a legacy of improved access and distinguished, innovative academic programs, Dr. Botstein has written extensively about American education and education reform. An accomplished conductor, Dr. Botstein also serves as the Director of the American Symphony Orchestra and continues to influence international scholarship around the intersection of music, history, and culture.