

Brothers at Bard: Sustainable College for Students of Color

An OSUN Digital Case Study

Executive Summary

How can academic institutions build strong ties to their communities through student-led civic engagement initiatives? How can students of color align historically white liberal arts colleges with principles of equity and inclusion? How does peer-mentorship create more sustainable, enjoyable, and productive collegiate experiences? This Open Society University Network (OSUN) audiovisual case study explores these issues as part of a series of cases on Bard and OSUN Civic Engagement Projects.

This case explores Bard College through the lens of its Trustee Leader Scholar (TLS) program, which promotes meaningful civic engagement for its students, and Brothers at Bard, both a peer-support group for students of color at the school as well as a youth outreach program to guide high school students from low-income New York City schools on their path to higher education. This case includes interviews with the founder of Brothers at Bard Dariel Vasquez, Bard College administrators in charge of Civic Engagement Projects Erin Cannan and Paul Marienthal, Vice-Chancellor of OSUN Jonathan Becker, Kingston High School administrators Vincent DeCicco and Angela Armstrong, and high school students directly impacted by Brothers at Bard Damien Figueroa and Nathaniel Prendergast.

The case includes the following elements:

§ Video Interviews

§ Written Case Study: This Document

Bard College: A Different Approach to Higher Education

Founded in 1860 in the picturesque Hudson Valley, Bard College is, in many ways, a classic liberal arts institution. Like many other liberal arts colleges, Bard emphasizes a well-rounded education for all of its students. However, unlike other colleges, Bard believes that students need to be engaged beyond their academic life at the school. Civic engagement is central to Bard's mission.

This case was written by Seamus Heady, Marino Bubba, and Adam Stepan for the Open Society University Network, with editing by Nishtha Gupta. The faculty advisors are Professor Jonathan Becker and Paul Marienthal.

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In the words of Jonathan Becker, Vice-Chairman of the Open Society University Network (OSUN):

“We see civic engagement at the core of what we do as an academic institution. And in particular, we view liberal arts and sciences, the extension of liberal arts and sciences to underrepresented communities... as central to what we do.”¹

While emphasizing community outreach and civic engagement is not necessarily unique to Bard, the school’s support for students to pursue projects that impassion them and aid their communities certainly is. This reliance on student innovation is rooted in Bard’s core values in fostering civic engagement: citizenship. By empowering their students to take an active role in their communities, Bard seeks to cultivate citizens of a connected world. This approach, known as “students as citizens”, is only part of Bard’s conception of citizenship, though. In addition, Bard sees institutions as community citizens as well.

While many other colleges focus on teaching their students leadership and organizational skills by allowing them to create and head community-oriented projects, Bard emphasizes the project rather than the individual. This creates a “virtuous cycle between student initiatives and institutional initiatives” and has allowed many of the projects started by Bard students to persist long after students graduate, some for as long as two decades and counting.²

The desire to create sustainable civic engagement projects that are more than just the students who started them is the fundamental idea underlying Bard’s Trustee Leader Scholar (TLS) program.

TLS: Student-Led, Community Focused

TLS was not always a pillar of civic engagement at Bard. The program began as a way to use athletics to improve the health of students on campus. That’s how, in 1997, then part-time squash coach Paul Marienthal created what would go on to become one of Bard College’s most impactful programs.

Paul Marienthal is a self-described “post-sixties eclectic carpenter, stain-glass maker, basketball coach, educator, flute maker” whose polymathic background makes him perfect for supporting students in whatever passions and skills they have to offer.³ In Marienthal’s words:

“I’ve been a stained glass maker for 45 years. I coached a women’s basketball team to the finals of the AAU championship. I’ve kind of a weird set of skills. They really come in handy when students go to the West Bank and want to run a soccer camp

¹ Jonathan Becker interview with Seamus Heady. All subsequent interviews conducted by Seamus Heady unless otherwise noted.

² Jonathan Becker interview

³ Paul Marienthal interview

for young Palestinian kids. Well, I understand the field; I've played soccer. So I can ask good questions. And that's the heart of the matter for me."⁴

TLS began with twelve Bard student-athletes charged with creating their projects. Eight quickly dropped the program. One transferred schools entirely. Yet the program not only persisted but expanded to encompass any civic engagement project that students have the drive to see through to completion. Students who want to start a project with TLS have to answer three simple but critical questions.

1. What do you want to do?
2. Who do you want to do it for?
3. How do you know that they want it?⁵

These three questions are the building blocks for any project. Students must have a clear vision of how their idea will operate in the real world, they must know who they will be directly impacting, and they must be sure that their presence will be welcome. These last two questions are integral to the spirit of TLS, which is built around partnerships and open communication. TLS is not a community service project; it does not seek to act *upon* communities, but rather *with* communities reciprocally. The benefits from these true partnerships provide benefits that flow both ways. Marienthal described the goal of TLS:

"It requires students to be engaged with and to make a relationship, a genuine relationship. I'm not sending students out to save the world; that's not the point. The point is to become a human being... I'm interested in students developing their human qualities. And human qualities are caring about others, showing up, doing the work. It's pretty simple. It's a simple program."⁶

This simple approach is effective. To date, TLS has been responsible for fostering the creation of such notable projects as the Bard Prison Initiative, La Voz, the Bard High School Early College program, in addition to Brothers at Bard. But they are just the tip of the iceberg. Despite students being responsible for almost all of their organizational planning and fundraising, TLS sponsors 30-35 projects led by over 50 student leaders every year. Each project then brings in five, or ten or sometimes more additional student participants. In line with the college's emphasis on long-term institutional citizenship, many of these projects are long-term. Approximately two-thirds of current TLS programs have been running for five years or more, but some have been in operation for ten and, in some cases, over twenty years. Some of these more impactful projects, though not all, have been absorbed by Bard itself to ensure their longevity for years to come.

⁴ Paul Marienthal interview

⁵ Paul Marienthal interview

⁶ Paul Marienthal interview

Brothers at Bard

One such successful, long-term program to come out of TLS is Brothers at Bard. Brothers at Bard is a dual-beneficiary peer mentorship program, originally conceived as a way to build a community of Black students and students of color at Bard College which eventually expanded its reach to high school students, encouraging them to join higher education.⁷

While most student initiatives at Bard College help students affect change in communities around them, the Brothers at Bard program aimed to reform the community within the college along principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The initiative sought to ask the question of how a college, with its deep commitment to civic engagement, can engage its own diverse student body more meaningfully.

Forming Community from Isolation

When Harlem resident Dariel Vasquez arrived at Bard in 2013, things did not go as smoothly as expected. The transition from a vibrant but underserved Black community in the heart of New York City to a majority white prestigious private school in rural upstate New York was jarring for Vasquez. In his words:

“I had gone to predominantly Black and Latino public schools my entire life so I never sat in a classroom with white students before. Most of my peers and classmates were on free or reduced lunch. A lot of us came from neighborhoods, neighborhoods like mine (with) public housing projects, you know. So coming to Bard was both a culture shock in terms of race... but also in terms of class and wealth.”⁸

Vasquez, a first generation college student, felt out of place at Bard. Without the support of other students with a similar background around him, it was easy to feel as though he didn't belong. Despite these deep feelings of isolation and alienation, Vasquez's experience was not unique. Before the end of their first semester, some of Vasquez's Black peers had already transferred out of Bard because the campus atmosphere did not feel welcoming to students of color. When one of Vasquez's close friends, Harry Johnson, told him that he would be transferring out of Bard as well, Vasquez knew something had to change. He convinced Johnson to stay, but only on the condition that they work together to make Bard into a place where they– and students like them– could belong. Thus, Brothers at Bard was born.

At first, Brothers at Bard's objective was to support the students of color already enrolled at Bard. It began as a club where peers could meet together and talk about their grievances. The group– Vasquez, Johnson, and a few of their peers of color– met unofficially for the first time on Sunday, March 16th, 2014. They continued to meet unofficially throughout that spring. By the Fall semester of 2014, the group became an official club, meeting for the first time on September 5th. These meetings were structured in

⁷ Dariel Vasquez interview

⁸ Dariel Vasquez interview

the peer support model, in which every member of the now growing group had the opportunity to talk about their struggles as students of color at Bard. While it is often not easy to open up about personal troubles, the meetings were a safe space. This allowed the young men to be, as Vasquez describes it, “deeply vulnerable and sensitive.”

At first, some worried that Brothers at Bard could further isolate the students involved from the broader campus community. This fear is common in discourse surrounding spaces by and for individuals of a certain identity group. However, Vasquez is clear that this was not the case for Brothers at Bard.

“If you zoom out, it seems like *Oh, these guys got together and further isolated themselves...* But for us, that became the vehicle or the medium for us to then become more engaged with campus and challenge the institution to rethink and reframe itself.”⁹

To Vasquez and the other members of Brothers at Bard, forging their own community in solidarity was integral to allowing them to feel at home at Bard more broadly. This had a quantifiable impact on the members’ experience at Bard. Bard’s Black four-year graduation rate is just over 70%.¹⁰ The four-year graduation rate for Brothers at Bard members: 90%.¹¹

The perceptible effect Brothers at Bard had on its members made them want to impact other people like them beyond Bard. Having made the difficult transition from majority Black areas to Bard, the group knew how impossible this can seem and how many young men like them never find a way to college even if they want to. This prompted them to ask if they could expand their focus to not only keeping Black students in college, but getting them there in the first place.

Beyond Bard: Near Peer Mentorship

Empowered by the spirit of kinship, the group wanted to extend the same feeling of fraternity and brotherhood to other young kids who came from similar backgrounds. At the suggestion of Johnson, Brothers at Bard applied to become a TLS project with the goal of helping high school students of color from low-income communities reach college.

For Brothers at Bard, the TLS program was the perfect mechanism through which to help others like themselves because of its emphasis on student leadership. To Vasquez, this meant that the group could use their unique identity and experience as students of color navigating a historically white institution to inspire hundreds of others to forge their own paths. Vasquez began to ask himself:

“What happens when you take those people... who are closest to the problem, and often furthest from the resources, but because they’re closest to the problem they tend

⁹ Dariel Vasquez interview

¹⁰ Scholarships.com <https://www.scholarships.com/colleges/bard-college/graduation-rates/>

¹¹ *Brothers at Bard* <https://cce.bard.edu/community/brothers-at-bard/>

to have the most creative solutions, right? They tend to be those who can see the problem and understand it and break it down and address it better than anyone else, right? What happens if you actually give them those resources, give them the opportunities, right? Position that group to lead the work right and not just be objects of it.”¹²

Using Bard’s resources, Brothers at Bard became a long-term TLS project in the fall of 2014. They would focus on mentoring young people of color in their journey to higher education. At first, Brothers at Bard focused its efforts on a boys and girls club in Kingston, New York, a metropolitan area about 20 minutes from Bard. The boys and girls club offered Brothers at Bard a meeting space– the entire second floor of their building every Friday– which they used as a home-base for their first year of operation.

What sets Brothers at Bard apart from other mentorship programs is their commitment to using mentors from the same walks of life who are nearly the same age as their mentees. As Vasquez summarizes:

“That thirteen or fourteen-year-old sees (their Brothers at Bard mentor), it’s like a mirror put up to them, right? Where they’re like wow! This person looks just like me, they listen to the same music I listen to, they’re on Instagram... It makes me feel like I can literally be them tomorrow.”¹³

This near peer mentorship model relies on relatability. At the time of Brothers at Bard’s inception, they were a group of eighteen, nineteen, and twenty-year-olds. As such, they wanted to mentor kids almost their age already, on whom they could have the most impact, not the youths of the boys and girls club. So, with a base of operations secured, they looked on to recruit mentees who would be the most impacted by their program.

Kingston High School

The natural choice to look for recruits was nearby Kingston High School. As the only public high school in the entire city, Kingston High is a melting pot of students from diverse economic and racial backgrounds. Specifically, the ethnic makeup of the school– approximately 17% of the population are Black students and nearly a quarter are Hispanic– made Kingston the perfect choice for Brothers at Bard.¹⁴ To begin their recruitment process, Vasquez and Johnson, through Kingston’s guidance counselor, met with then Vice-Principal Angela Armstrong. On the meeting, Armstrong noted:

“I was very impressed that these young 19-year-olds in suits had a direction and they really knew what they wanted to do, and they wanted to start a program to support young men of color... I was all in at that point in time. You know, anything that’s going

¹² Dariel Vasquez interview

¹³ Dariel Vasquez interview

¹⁴ Vincent DeCicco interview

to help my kids in a positive light and I can help with it, then I was just all in.”¹⁵

The near peer mentorship structure made Brothers at Bard an instantly attractive program to the young men of Kingston and the group met for the first time on November 7th, 2014. Armstrong had no trouble sending “waves and waves of ninth through twelfth grade boys” to Brothers at Bard and the program quickly grew.¹⁶ Today, the program enrolls 51 high schoolers. They are fostered by ten members of the on-campus portion of Brothers at Bard¹⁷

For many of the students of color at Kingston, it was about more than just having a role model; it was about having a “second family,” in the words of junior Nathaniel Prendergast, who has been part of Brothers at Bard since his older brother introduced him to it freshman year. Not only did it provide a sense of belonging, but it helped him gain opportunities and perspectives for the future. As Prendergast stated:

“Without Brothers (at Bard), I don’t think I would know what I was going to be doing after high school. (Now) the plan is to go to college and after college, if it goes well, I plan on opening an architectural firm.”¹⁸

Too Much of a Good Thing? Sustaining a Growing Program

While academic help and after-school structure are invaluable to the students enrolled in the program, Brothers at Bard wanted to expand the scope of what they could provide their mentees. Figuring out how exactly to provide opportunities to the students mentored by Brothers at Bard would prove challenging, though, as the ever growing project threatened to stretch beyond its means.

Get Engaged

Vasquez first became concerned about ensuring the sustainability of Brothers at Bard at Bard’s annual *Get Engaged* Conference. This conference is a meeting of students and faculty from all across Bard’s international network, which has programs and campuses across Europe and Asia.¹⁹ Alongside his international peers at a conference in Istanbul, Turkey during Spring break of 2015, Vasquez presented on Brothers at Bard, sharing the program’s story. After his presentation, Vasquez was approached by Jonathan Becker, the Director of Bard’s Center for Civic Engagement (now Vice-Chancellor of OSUN), to discuss the future sustainability of Brothers at Bard. Following this conversation, Vasquez recalled:

“I became pretty obsessed with trying to make sure Brothers at Bard lived beyond me.”²⁰

¹⁵ Angela Armstrong interview

¹⁶ Dariel Vasquez interview

¹⁷ *Brothers at Bard* <https://cce.bard.edu/community/brothers-at-bard/>

¹⁸ Nathaniel Prendergast interview

¹⁹ <https://cce.bard.edu/international/global-engagement/>

²⁰ Dariel Vasquez interview with Marino Bubba

Yet it was another year until it became apparent to Brothers at Bard how they could achieve that sustainability. During the 2016 *Get Engaged* Conference, this time in Budapest, Hungary, Vasquez attended a speech made by Bard's president Leon Botstein. During a public question and answer session after the speech, Vasquez asked Dr. Botstein if he had any advice on how to achieve sustainability. The answer: "You've gotta get the money for it."²¹

Finding the Money: Kingston High School and Funding Partnerships

By this point, Brothers at Bard had become, in Vasquez's words "a full blown after-school program."²² They worked closely with Kingston High School, traveling there three times a week and operating programs for the students. But Vasquez and the others were still functioning under the fiscal constraints of a TLS project, even as they attempted to expand beyond that scope into a sustainable institutional initiative. The result: a team of exhausted volunteers and student workers performing duties "almost like a full time job" while maintaining their status as full-time students.²³ As Vasquez summarized:

"I was putting in a lot more time into Brothers at Bard than I think most other TLS leaders put into their projects."²⁴

This system was simply unsustainable.

Vasquez and Johnson knew that their time balancing school and work would soon come to an end; they were set to graduate in Spring of 2017. Therein lay the true problem: for all of the good Brothers at Bard achieved for their community, they were still not a sustainable institutional initiative. In many ways, Brothers at Bard was still inextricable from its founders. But Vasquez was committed to the ideal of sustainability that he had been obsessed with since his sophomore year and had a plan to get the money to continue the program.

The summer before Vasquez and Johnson's senior year, Brothers at Bard, with the support of the Bard administration, partnered with Kingston High School to apply for a grant from New York State to help keep their program running sustainably. This grant, part of New York State's *My Brother's Keeper* initiative, would make it possible for the program to remain funded even after the pair finished their time as students at Bard. After providing proof of the benefits of Brothers at Bard, as well as the meticulous time-keeping records that Vasquez kept to document the extensive nature of the student workers' hours, Brothers at Bard received the grant just in time for graduation.

The funding fundamentally changed how Vasquez imagined the project. He went from considering himself a student "chasing this dream" to someone with a career who was building a sustainable

²¹ Dariel Vasquez interview with Marino Bubba

²² Dariel Vasquez interview

²³ Dariel Vasquez interview

²⁴ Dariel Vasquez interview

institutional initiative. Without the money from the *My Brother's Keeper* grant, Vasquez would not have been able to stay on the project as a full time project head and Brothers at Bard likely would have fizzled and died upon his graduation from Bard. The grant did more than just allow Vasquez to stay on the project after graduation; by easing the strain of the work by covering the workers' compensation, as well as other logistical costs such as travel, Brothers at Bard became free to turn their attention to expanding the programming they could offer.

A New Era: Program Expansion

One of the ways in which Brothers at Bard hoped to expand was by creating an initiative to provide summer employment opportunities for their mentees. This was achieved through a partnership with Camp Ramapo, a youth summer camp for children with social, emotional, and learning challenges.²⁵ In addition to providing summer employment, the camp provides Brothers at Bard a place to meet outdoors, where the boys can engage with one another on their 250-acre campground. Ramapo also has classrooms where more formal meetings can be conducted. This partnership allows Brothers at Bard the freedom to be a community group that operates even outside of the bounds of school.

This extensive initiative was not cheap, however. Much of the ways in which Brothers at Bard paid for Ramapo's facilities was with a reciprocal system of the two entities helping one-another. Vasquez described the partnership thusly:

“We have bartered services before—so sort of like *I scratch your back; you scratch mine*. We provide some services, whether it's through workshops or going in on grants together, and then they provide us, you know, reduced rates for retreats. Or sometimes (they) just provide us programming, depending on how the barter system works out.”²⁶

This payment method showcases the creative ways in which Brothers at Bard had to come up with new and innovative solutions to stretch their funds. This flexible approach to funding has allowed the program to expand even further. Since becoming a TLS in 2014, Brothers at Bard has persisted beyond original expectations. Currently, the program has a yearly budget of approximately \$1.5 million. While the program is still supported by Bard logistically and institutionally, and Bard provides things such as office space and on-campus living quarters for their staff, Brothers at Bard is now mostly self-funded. The *My Brother's Keeper* grant, which has been renewed yearly since 2017, funds a significant portion of Brothers at Bard's Kingston operations. More broadly, about half of the program's funding now comes from philanthropic donors such as The William R. Kenan Charitable Trust, as well as other government grants which play a key role in Brothers at Bard's partnership with Camp Ramapo. The other half of their funding comes from contract work, such as the work Brothers at Bard does with JP Morgan Chase. Brothers at Bard partners with JP Morgan Chase's Fellowship Initiative, which works with

²⁵ Camp Ramapo <https://ramapoforchildren.org/services-programs/camp-ramapo/>

²⁶ Dariel Vasquez interview with Marino Bubba

underprivileged young men of color to prepare them for college and the workforce.²⁷ Brothers at Bard was formally introduced to JP Morgan Chase through the Bard High Early Colleges program even though Vasquez himself was a graduate of their program. Now, JP Morgan Chase, as a single client, accounts for approximately a third of all of the project's budget.²⁸ Through JP Morgan Chase, Brothers at Bard has the dual benefits of receiving funding while also furthering their positive effects on young men of color.

Becoming an entity that can sustain itself in large part without Bard is a crucial step for fulfilling the purpose of the TLS program: creating projects that are bigger than the individuals who start them. Brothers at Bard has become more than a student civic engagement initiative; it is becoming a sustainable institutional program that will continue to partner with the community to help those who most need it.

Looking Ahead: The Future of Brothers at Bard

The positive impact of Brothers at Bard has been staggering. According to Kingston High School principal Vincent DeCicco, the Black graduation rate at Kingston has nearly doubled since they partnered with Brothers at Bard.

“Our Black male graduation rate used to be 46%. Well, the last time I checked our data, our Black graduation rate was somewhere around 80%, 81%.”²⁹

Brothers at Bard's success has been no less impressive as a peer-support group at Bard. Not only have they been able to provide a sense of community and belonging to those who may otherwise not feel at home on campus, but the program has had quantifiable effects on students of color at Bard. The average four year graduation rate for students of color at Bard is just over 70%.³⁰ For Brothers at Bard mentors, the average four year graduation rate is 90%.³¹

The benefits of the program do not stop after graduation, though. An incredible number of Brothers at Bard alumni, upon graduation, have stayed in Bard's network to begin their careers. Vasquez himself was able to maintain his position as head of Brothers at Bard after graduation and still maintains that position today. But it goes far beyond alumni working for the program itself. Brothers at Bard has sent alumni all across the college's network. All of this is summarized with one impactful line from Vasquez:

“If they are a young man of color and they work in the Bard network, nine times out of ten, they're probably one of our alumni.”³²

²⁷ *The Fellowship Initiative* <https://www.jpmorganchase.com/impact/people/mentoring-skilled-volunteerism/the-fellowship-initiative>

²⁸ Budgeting information from Dariel Vasquez interview with Marino Bubba

²⁹ Vincent DeCicco interview

³⁰ <https://www.scholarships.com/colleges/bard-college/graduation-rates/>

³¹ <https://cce.bard.edu/community/brothers-at-bard/>

³² Dariel Vasquez interview with Marino Bubba

This incredible success has prompted Vasquez to hope to use Brothers at Bard as a model to expand the scope of the program. The goal of Brothers at Bard is larger than the project itself. As Vasquez explains, the next step is to build a coalition of like minded institutions to spread the work across the state of New York and eventually the nation.

“I think the biggest tasks we’re in with for the next four to five years is how do we create a statewide consortium of colleges and universities that are making the commitment the same way... I see this becoming a statewide consortium and eventually a national consortium where we’re not necessarily just copy/pasting the model and overseeing the model with all these different colleges, but folks are coming to us to get the best practices, to figure out how they can implement it on their campuses.”³³

Vasquez has made it clear that he does not want Brothers at Bard to keep its success for itself. Instead, the program should be a guide for others who want to help their communities in the same way. In keeping with this goal, new programs must emphasize the creative problem solving and flexibility that leads to the successes of many TLS, and which made Brothers at Bard uniquely successful as well. To Vasquez and the rest of Brothers at Bard, the goal of not only getting young Black men to college but keeping them there is one that stretches far beyond the scope of the Hudson Valley or New York State. Now, Brothers at Bard must show others how to partner with their own communities, just as they have.

³³ Dariel Vasquez interview