

...realize the principle that higher-education institutions can and should operate in the public interest.

(Bard College Mission Statement)

Bard College is a private, four-year liberal arts college located in a rural setting - the Hudson Valley, 90 miles north of New York City. The College professes to recognize the central role that the arts and humanities play in education and public life and believes that higher-education institutions can and should operate in the public interest. Such commitments have seen the College produce innovative liberal arts education projects that have centered the importance of students learning within a welcoming and inclusive – but crucially, civically engaged – educational environment. Whether cooperating across disciplinary boundaries to examine contemporary civic issues through “Common Courses,” with civic partners beyond the campus gates through “Engaged Liberal Arts and Sciences” courses (ELAS), or internationally and domestically with other institutions of higher education via its Network Collaborative Courses (NCCs), Bard College has sought to realize the learning benefits of deep public engagement based on mutuality and reciprocity. In what follows, I have sketched out some of the projects that have emerged from this commitment, along with some reflections and challenges upon them.

First-Year Seminar: The Republic Revisited

Bard College’s First-Year Seminar (FYSEM) is a two-semester course taken by all first-year students. Its goal is to create a basis for shared conversation among the first-year class and build foundational skills for success in college—attentive close reading of challenging texts; respectful and inclusive dialogue with others; the ability to ask profound and interesting questions about what you read; and development of an academic voice through writing. Through a shared set of readings, curated around an annual theme, faculty from across the College instruct small seminars of first-year students such that every entering student simultaneously progresses through a curriculum designed to equip them to become intellectually engaged students.

The First-Year Seminar is directed by a team of faculty for 3-year cycles, operating under a designated theme. Considering pressing contemporary issues associated with citizenship, the College has brought forward a cycle of FYSEM themed “The Republic Revisited” to commence in Fall 2024. The aim of this cycle is that it equips students to be publicly as well as intellectually engaged citizens. Arranged around two core texts – Plato’s *Republic* and the U.S. Constitution - student will be positioned to discuss the structuring of national governments, the principles of democracy that are embedded within – and absent from – those structures, and the history of contention that has driven the development of constitutional government. In seeking to revise the FYSEM for this cycle, the co-directors have sought to identify a series of additional texts which will provide pillars for discussion of democratic self-rule and the responsibilities of citizenship, while also exemplifying practices of authorship and civic engagement. Such texts will provide students with a framework that can orient them within the history of debates over democracy while also providing crucial insights into the potentiality and fragility of democratic rule.

The fall semester focuses on the idea of the Republic as a commitment to organizing society and political life as a shared endeavor, taking Plato’s *Republic* as its anchoring text. The spring semester will build from the constitutional documents of the United States (and elsewhere) to address the obligations and possibilities that arise for individuals as a consequence of membership of such a

community. Authors will include Aeschylus, Plato, Douglass, Wollstonecraft, Locke, Montaigne, and Achebe, as well as challenges to existing constitutional orders, such as those offered by the Suffragists, Native American groups, and others.

Network Collaborative Course: Student Voting: Power, Politics and Race in the Fight for American Democracy

As part of its self-understanding as a private institution operating in the public interest, Bard College has taken a particular interest in student voting rights. Over the last quarter century Bard College has participated in four successful lawsuits, one federal and three state, grounded in the 26th Amendment, that have established student voting eligibility, a polling site on campus, and contributed to the adoption of a New York state law mandating polling sites on college campuses with more than 300 registered student voters and outlawing campus gerrymanders.

Beginning in Fall 2023, it has directed connected these efforts to curricular offerings through the undergraduate course, PS 261: Student Voting: Power, Politics and Race in the Fight for American Democracy. The course is a historical and interdisciplinary examination of the 26th Amendment, which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 and outlawed age discrimination, using it as a prism through which to examine both the history of disenfranchisement and the fight for voting rights in the United States. The role of college communities, including but not limited to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), is a central focus, as is the relationship between social movements and legal change. The course connects four institutions in the U.S. that have been the sites of voting rights struggles via a network collaborative course. The course is co-designed by faculty from the respective institutions, and is taught simultaneously, with key assignments and invited speakers shared by the campus sites with the aim of facilitating synchronous classroom discussions and collaborations between the different sites, with opportunities for exchange among and between the classrooms.

The history of the struggle for the vote at each institution is engaged by students in order to produce a broad study of youth voting rights in the United States. For example, Prairie View A&M was the site of the first and only Twenty-Sixth Amendment lawsuit to go before the United States Supreme Court; nearly four decades later, youth voting rights continue to be the subject of federal litigation in the county. North Carolina A&T University was the spark of the student-lead desegregation movement across the south; decades later, youth voting rights continue to be the subject of federal litigation at this institution as racial and partisan gerrymanders, now overturned, cut through campus. Tuskegee University was a critical site to major civil rights issues in this nation's history and was the site from which arose the first political gerrymandering map to be successfully challenged before the United States Supreme Court. Bard College has similarly been the site of repeated youth voting rights legal challenges for decades, including recent challenges in 2020 and 2022. Materials produced for and during the course have been made available under creative commons licenses for use in other educational settings.

Civic Education Across the Disciplines

A lower commitment approach to thinking about civic education has been piloted on campus through an invitation to all faculty to commit 15-30 minutes of a single class to discussing their own approach to civics, broadly defined. The intention is that faculty, especially those in disciplines not usually associated with “civics,” can offer students way into thinking about how citizenship and government intersect with a variety of topic and disciplinary areas e.g. how concerns over water quality can lead an engaged citizen to study biology/chemistry, or how government funding can influence the agenda of scientific research. Framed as a voluntary endeavor, the invitation was supported by a prior workshop for faculty on how to introduce such concerns into the classroom and the incentive of subsequent course development grants should faculty wish to use such a conversation as stepping-stone to a more formal connection between civics and their subject area. The approach was modeled on another long-standing initiative at Bard to offer 30 minutes within a variety of classes to discuss climate change during climate week each year.

Reflections:

We are fortunate at Bard College to have an administration that is highly supportive of efforts to embed civics education across the College, valuing the ideal of the College as a civic actor. Prior experience through a struggle for student voting rights and an institutional center in the form of Bard’s Center for Civic Engagement have provided an experiential and institutional foundation for addressing the contemporary challenge of civics education. Each of the discussed projects are ongoing and all are endorsed by the administration and productively revision is encouraged. One area of challenge has been gaining both student and faculty “buy-in” – for faculty it can seem an additional and daunting request, and we have most success with faculty already disposed by discipline to engage these topics. This has the consequence that we are in some respects addressing the same student audience, and one that is perhaps already open to the value of civic education. Reaching students that regard civics as not relevant to them has been a particular concern. The one space in which a broader reach is more assured is the universally required First-Year Seminar, but this has the disadvantage that as a compulsory course it tends to generate less enthusiasm on the part of students. It is also a course that is less amenable to the forms of civic and cross-campus engagement that allow for an enriched learning environment.