

How the Bard Early College Network Changes Lives with Education

By Jeyka Rojas, BHSEC Queens Class of 2025

The day of the College Rise Up Ceremony was one of the best days of my life. And no - I am not 18, like most college students - I am actually 16. The memory of that day is still very vivid in my head, as I walked across the stage and officially became a college student. The price of college tuition increases with each passing year and there is a steady rise of students who drown themselves in debt. Bard Early College has allowed me and many others to pursue a good quality college education without worrying about a single penny.

College tuition and student debt are no new concern in the United States. Many students choose to attend college for the simple fact that a college education provides more opportunities, such as a larger social network and a better chance at having a high paying job. However, the cost of college has only escalated, leading many to resort to borrowing money that takes them years to pay back. According to an article by the Council of Foreign Relations, “As of September 2023, forty-three million U.S. borrowers collectively owed more than \$1.6 trillion in federal student loans.” The price of tuition has increased in the United States because of the greater number of students that are choosing to attend college. Although that means that the number of college-educated individuals has incremented, this rise in cost has created a disparity amongst historically marginalized groups because they tend to have more difficulty affording it. Studies have shown that students of color tend to struggle the most with repaying their loans because of their family’s lower income. Therefore, a college education has only become more inaccessible to certain groups of students and deprived them of the benefits that come with it.

The Bard Early College Network created a solution to this problem by providing many students the opportunity to receive a free associate's degree while in high school. From a very early age, I have always known I wanted to go to college. However, as a first-generation Latina with a low income status, I knew that the odds were not in my favor. When I was in eighth grade and applying to high schools, I was immediately drawn to Bard High School Early College Queens (Bard Queens) when I learned about their early college program. Bard Early Colleges provides young people with the opportunity to engage in a college leveled curriculum while in high school. Students at Bard spend their last two years of high school taking college level courses and receive their high school diploma along with an associates degree in liberal arts and sciences from Bard College by the time they graduate. Each year, the school holds a College Rise-Up Ceremony for rising juniors as a way of welcoming them into their college journey. The ceremony is a very special and emotional event for many students, including myself, as it is a huge accomplishment for those who are the first in their families to attend college or are from historically marginalized groups. As actual college students, Bard students are given the opportunity to pick and choose from a variety of college courses that fit their interests and potential majors. Courses range anywhere from computer science to Literature of Graphic Novels and are taught by legitimate college professors. Bard Early Colleges have helped many students pursue their dreams at attending college who might have otherwise not been able to.

It makes me glad to see many more students who come from similar backgrounds like my own be given the opportunity to pursue a college education as Bard Early Colleges continues to expand its network. It is important to let more students have the opportunity to go to early

college because it allows them to save both time and money. Students from BHSEC Queens save about \$67,000 in tuition because of their Associate's degree earned in high school at no cost. As mentioned earlier, students of color and those who come from low income backgrounds are significantly less likely to go to college. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), studies from 2021 and 2022 showed that 94% of BHSEC students go on to study at 4-year colleges and universities. Not only are the students at Bard Early Colleges prepared academically for college but also financially. Each of the credits earned by students have an estimated worth of \$1,215, so students save thousands of dollars at their next institution. As early college becomes more accessible to students, we are guaranteed a much more educated and advanced society. As a resident of the Bronx, I commute an hour every day to get to school every morning just for the opportunities Bard Queens offers me. When I was a prospective student, there was not an early college institution in the Bronx, which is why I made the daring decision to travel to Queens. However, it makes me really happy to know that a new Bard Bronx has opened in my borough. Now more students from the Bronx will have the chance to experience what it is like to be a college student while in high school.