

By Zafnah Unaisah

What if college did not begin after high school, but during it? Well, that is the reality for students in early college programs where higher education is no longer something to look forward to but rather an active part of their lives as they progress through high school. It is these programs that provide students with transferable college credits alongside invaluable mentorship and opportunities that influence their futures far earlier than expected.

The Bard High School Early College is one such program, and as a current student, I have experienced firsthand the incredible resources it provides. Bard College partners with high schools allowing students to take college classes taught by professors starting in their junior year and continuing through the end of senior year. Over the course of two years, students can earn up to 60 college credits, which is equivalent to an associate's degree, at no cost. Yet reducing early college to simply earning free college credits overlooks its most transformative function: exposure.

More than anything, the program exposed me to a completely different way of learning. When I first started high school, I refused to raise my hand to participate. I did not want to share my thoughts because I did not think it was necessary. With seminar-style classes, however, I became more inclined to speak because the ideas shared in class always left room for more questions, more interpretations, and more comments. Participation no longer felt as intimidating and instead became meaningful, as I was contributing to conversations that needed to be voiced, where each perspective including mine deepened and complicated the discussion further. In fact, the seminar curriculum is deliberately built around texts that, though written in earlier periods, remain relevant to contemporary society, pushing students to continuously question and reinterpret ideas rather than accept a final answer.

Having experienced this new way of thinking and learning, the way I approached reading itself began to change. The texts I encountered in Seminar were no longer separate from discourse in the classroom, but part of an ongoing dialogue that extended beyond it. When I read *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, I was struck by the way corrupt systems often transform the oppressed into the oppressor. However, it is not with malicious intent, but rather because the oppressed fear that their bodies will be destroyed. When I read *Tell Me How it Ends* by Valeria Luiselli, I was confronted with the reality that migrant children are often stripped of the privilege of childhood itself, and seek safety when they cross the border. But no one is concerned about *why* and *how* they came.

Through those discussions, I also discovered my love for the humanities. Before Bard, I never imagined myself gravitating towards literature. Now, I cannot imagine my education without them. Countless discussions surrounding identity, morality, contemporary politics, and human nature have fundamentally changed how I view myself and the society we live in. This is perhaps the greatest advantage of early college education; these programs create spaces for students to experiment intellectually and expose them to concepts essential to life early on.