
BTtoP Case Study: Kingsborough Community College

The Brooklyn Public Scholars (BPS) Project

In 2012, Hurricane Sandy hit New York City, and the Kingsborough Community College campus, located in Brooklyn, New York, was dramatically impacted, disrupting classes and the lives of students, faculty, staff, and members of the surrounding community. The campus at once became a disaster area but also a sanctuary for nearby residents in trouble. Some students and faculty disappeared, and others became homeless. As the college community literally picked up the pieces from this disaster, administrators and faculty knew they were forever changed and thought differently about their teaching and their students. “Who really are the students we teach, and what resiliency enabled them to carry on?” they asked themselves. “How can we teach differently to tap the strengths of our students and the community around us?”

Centering on the experiences of students who not only survived Sandy, but also on their everyday lives in times of deepening structural disparities, the BPS Project places emphasis upon recognizing and valuing the knowledge that working class, immigrant, students of color bring with them to college, as a starting point for understanding the ways that they are already highly engaged in civic life.

Caitlin Cahill and Michelle Fine, co-PIs of the BPS, both at the Public Science Project, Graduate Center, CUNY, developed a proposal in consultation with faculty and administrators at Kingsborough Community College. Cahill’s unique position as a faculty member at both institutions supported the partnership. Associate Provost Reza Fakhari was a key member facilitating the project for KCC.

Cahill has a background in community development and urban studies and teaches urban geography and politics. She is a founding member of the Public Science Project at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York in Manhattan, which encourages participatory action projects and research. In 2011, she helped launch the Charles and Stella Guttman Community College in Manhattan. That experience convinced her that faculty development could be used to strengthen community colleges. When she learned about the Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) demonstration site grants, she realized Kingsborough would be a good place to launch a new project to rejuvenate the faculty. The CUNY Graduate Center (with the assistance of Distinguished Professor Michelle Fine) and Kingsborough Community College formed a partnership and with BTtoP funding created the Brooklyn Public Scholars Project.

A Call for Civic Engagement

Kingsborough Community College is located on a 71-acre campus that rests on a peninsula at the southern tip of Brooklyn, a spit of land that juts into the water and is surrounded by Sheepshead Bay, Jamaica Bay, and the Atlantic Ocean. The community college was founded in 1963 for the residents in the area. It offers credit classes for approximately 18,000 students, non-credit courses in the liberal arts, and career education for students with high school diplomas or GEDs. Fifty-eight percent of the students enroll full-time and pay \$1,575 in tuition. Forty-two percent of students are part-time; per credit tuition ranges from \$120 to \$250. Seventy-five percent of students receive financial aid.

The student population represents 140 different countries and speaks 70 languages. Fifty-six percent of the students are female, 87 percent are 29 years old or younger, 27 percent are younger than twenty, and 48 percent are U.S. born. Matthew Goldstein, former chancellor of CUNY, once proudly noted that 60 percent of Kingsborough students transfer to four-year colleges; this rate is far greater than the national average of 26 percent.

Partly in response to a national call for a greater engagement in learning among college students, Kingsborough began rethinking its mission in 2008 to explore ways that students could become more engaged through different kinds of educational experiences and service learning opportunities.

Administrators, including then President Regina Peruggi, became interested in creating more opportunities for civic engagement for students and saw the need for a civic engagement requirement. Faculty wanted to know what this would look like and how they would be supported.

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The Brooklyn Public Scholars Project Mission

A collaborative partnership between the Public Science Project (Graduate Center, CUNY) and Kingsborough Community College, The Brooklyn's Public Scholars (BPS) project builds the capacity of CUNY's Kingsborough Community College to engage with the critical issues facing our students and working-class urban immigrant communities, through "civically engaged" pedagogy and public scholarship.

The BPS supports community-based teaching and engaged scholarship to expand opportunities for studying critical urban issues. Cultivating new opportunities for 'studying abroad in your own backyard,' the project focuses on teaching and research projects that engage with Brooklyn's richly diverse communities. The project builds upon faculty members' own research projects and interests to develop strategic partnerships with community organizations for engaged scholarship.

When beginning the project, Cahill first looked at what Kingsborough was already doing. She completed a study on service learning programs at Kingsborough and interviewed faculty to see what support they would need to address service learning in a substantive way. She found that when faculty tried to do this work, they mostly did it on their own. "They were not unified," she said. "They had no faculty development around this, no course releases, no recognition. We began thinking about how to do this work in a way that could be transformative for the campus."

According to Fine, the new BTtoP initiative was "organized around a faculty seminar and a substantial group of courses in which civic engagement was deeply embedded in the coursework. We involved the faculty in sharing critical pedagogies and thinking about how to connect the college to the larger community. In particular, because Kingsborough has working class students, students of color, and immigrant students, we were really interested in understanding how the gifts those students bring to the university could be appreciated and cultivated in the classroom. It was a slight turn on civic

engagement, which often means that wealthy white children from a college move into a community to help. Here, it was about building authentic reciprocal relationships between community and university facilitated by resources that immigrant and working class students were bringing to the classroom and the community."

Kingsborough put out a call "to an interdisciplinary group of faculty who would be interested in cultivating classrooms in which civic engagement was at the intellectual and ethical core of the class," added Fine. Sixteen Kingsborough faculty members expressed an interest. Jason VanOra, an assistant professor of psychology, was one. "The BTtoP project at Kingsborough started with Caitlin Cahill," he said. "I remember being in a meeting when she talked about this opportunity to be in a community of scholars that would do civic engagement in their classes and also study its impact on students, on learning, and on other educational outcomes such as persistence and engagement. I said, 'Sign me up.' I wanted to see if I could civically engage the students in my Introduction to Psychology class."

The Brooklyn Public Scholars project (BPS) was born and additional faculty from sociology, education, biology, tourism and hospitality, psychology, and English were involved. BPS began in the fall of 2012 as a two-year campus program to show what "community-based engagement, public scholarship, and experiential education might look like," Cahill noted. "One of the first things we did was talk to faculty members to set up a structure for a seminar that would be at the heart of the project."

That meant establishing a day for a seminar and obtaining course releases and stipends for the participating faculty. The scholars were given a choice of 1 course credit release per semester or \$1,000.

"We wanted to explore what public scholarship means," Cahill further explained. "We planned a two-year program so faculty would think of themselves as public scholars and created a faculty development seminar to model a process that we hoped faculty could then bring to their own classrooms. We wanted an intellectually creative space in which faculty could have meaningful conversations about what public scholarship meant to them, what were their concerns, and what did they think the concerns of the students in their classrooms would be. We wanted them to think about the opportunities and barriers to this work. We wanted them to think of themselves as scholars, which is different from other schools," she added. "In community colleges, faculty are thought of as teachers, not scholars. Their own scholarship is marginalized. Partly what we wanted to do was to think about how scholarship could occur in their classes. If they teach nine classes per year, they often don't have time for their own scholarship."

Debra Schultz, an assistant professor of history, started out as one of the faculty participants and then became director of the project. She said that the goal was "to work with faculty to do a couple of things. One was to support individual faculty members in thinking through what it would mean to

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include civic engagement as a graduation requirement starting with incoming freshmen in the fall of 2014. At the same time, the Brooklyn Public Scholars program wanted to give community college faculty an opportunity to reflect on what they were doing as a form of public scholarship even while working on practical questions such as how to write about it as a discipline and the larger questions of what public scholarship means."

To Schultz, public scholarship meant "knowledge creation in the service of the public in general, in the service of communities that touch the lives of students, in the service of Kingsborough as a community. I am personally interested in having a conversation about the history of race in the United States as a civil rights historian. One half of our students are foreign born and represent 140 nationalities, so the student body is racially and ethnically diverse. But whether or not they were born here, their knowledge of history and race in this country, including slavery, is very spotted. Yet because we are embedded in a community in which there is gentrification and racial profiling, issues that have historical and contemporary ramifications, we are attempting to figure out ways to talk about them."

The Thrust of the Project

BPS faculty participants met approximately once per month for two years to find ways to promote community-based teaching and scholarship. They discussed the theory and practice of engaging in civic research. They looked at how to transform courses in various disciplines and surveyed students about their concerns and commitments. They also identified organizations that could become community partners.

During that first semester, the faculty also identified the classes they would use and created proposals for what they wanted to do. "For many of them, this was the first time they had done this kind of work," said Cahill. Cahill met with faculty one-on-one to help them create their proposals. To find community partners, some faculty members connected with the Kingsborough service learning coordinator, who many did not know existed. Still others explored different teaching strategies to discover more about their students and how that could inform their teaching.

In the second semester, faculty were asked to implement their proposals in some way and to try some sort of public scholarship intervention in their classrooms. Meanwhile, Kingsborough adopted a new civic engagement requirement that became effective in the fall of 2014. Many of the BPS participants implemented their ideas with this in mind, documented what they were doing, asked questions, tried something new, and revised their courses. "The faculty seminars were the thrust of the project," said Schultz, "being able to struggle and try things, talk to colleagues about what worked and what didn't work, and have a process to refine a course over two years."

The meetings often opened with the faculty answering questions about scholarship. What does civic

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education mean? What is the most rewarding thing we are finding? What is the most challenging? How can I connect to my own research? How can I understand ESL better? What are my students learning challenges? Through questions such as these, they discussed various kinds of civic engagement activities. "For me personally," added Schultz, "it was talking about the dilemmas we faced and the ways the traditional model of service learning would not work without adaptation for our students because many of them work full-time and go to school full-time. We talked about different ways of managing that."

Another dilemma was the wide range of skills among students in one class. Some faculty addressed this by organizing group work, pairing students, or creating mentoring relationships so that stronger students could with weaker ones to foster a community of learners.

During the second year of the project, the faculty integrated community-based activities into their courses. "A couple of faculty members posited the campus as community," said Schultz, "and asked what kind of experiential learning would the students find on campus." Kingsborough has an urban farm, for example. After Hurricane Sandy, Schultz took her class around campus to help clean up after the storm.

The BPS Classes

Approximately 30 classes were sponsored as BPS classes. Once the BPS project was underway, some students interviewed community members on a variety of topics, including gentrification. Another class looked for local heroes and then created markers in the community, for example, for the first day care center, the person who organized against drugs, or the grandmother who got a speed bump put on a street to slow down trucks.

There was a course on multicultural counseling and how different communities mourn, grieve, and deal with trauma and depression. In another class, students visited a local farmer's market in Brooklyn and conducted cooking demonstrations. Others completed research on some of the people in the community regarding issues such as health and cultural background.

Jason VanOra conducted his BPS project with George F. Hill, an academic advisor and case manager in the Opening Doors Learning Communities, a program for first-semester, first-year students. VanOra and Hill decided to link their courses: VanOra's Introduction to Psychology and Hill's first-year seminar on the exploration of community and what it means for students to be a part of one. They designed joint projects for which students received credit in both courses. The first joint assignment was a collage; students worked in groups of four and discussed questions such as the following: What do you think community means? What does it mean to be part of a community?

"We wanted them to start to think about what their responsibilities are to a community," said Hill, "why is it important, and what the community does for you. Students had varied responses. Some took it to mean the neighborhoods they lived in, so one group talked about pictures of their neighborhoods. Another group thought about the community on campus, travelled around campus, and found resources. The goal in my classes is to connect the students to resources on campus to make them more successful in college," said Hill.

Students visited the urban farm located on campus, for example, to learn about food justice and why the farm was created. Students then researched and wrote about other resources on campus, such as the men's resource center, women's resources, and organizations that are part of student life, in the hope of inspiring students to get involved in campus groups or experiences.

Students also interviewed other students who were identified as community activists. They read about race and class, IQ testing, stereotypes, and the achievement gap. Students were asked to draw upon psychological concepts in their writings about community and in their creation of the collage and how psychology could be a vehicle for social change. "The students then wrote legacies," VanOra said, "and talked about what they learned about student engagement in a community beyond their individual friends and families, a community that includes the college but goes beyond college. We called it a legacy because we turned it into a book. The first reading assignment the next semester was what the previous students had written."

The legacy piece is something Hill has traditionally done in his other seminars; it serves as advice from current students to upcoming students. But for the BTtoP courses, the legacy was focused on why it might be valuable to be engaged in a civically-minded way on campus. Students wrote about what they did, what they wished they had done better, what they learned about community, what civic engagement meant to them, and why they thought it might be valuable for future students to undertake similar endeavors.

Assistant Professor Indira Skoric teaches classes on immigration at Kingsborough. In the past, her class would have centered more on theoretical discussions, and she would have been doing much of the talking and directing the flow of discussion. For the BPS class, she allowed the students to be the focus. Many were themselves immigrants, and they described their experiences and voiced their concerns. "The idea was to have a place for immigrant and non-immigrant students to talk about immigration reform," she said.

Students discussed immigration reform with each other, but Skoric also invited speakers to class who described the history of the immigrant in American society, for example. Representatives from Facing History in Ourselves talked about immigration in America and the state of immigrants abroad.

Skoric created a web site called the Immigration Hub, an online space for students to voice their opinions about certain aspects of the immigration experience and the issues surrounding immigration reform. It was not mandatory, she noted, and it was anonymous. Students had a common log-in so their privacy was protected. A question on the discussion board asked students for suggestions for immigration reform. Another asked what tactics advanced immigration reform. Students had to formulate opinions and state their cases.

Skoric also organized two Immigration Days with general speakers and student speakers. At the October 2014 event, topics included the following: Current State of NY Dream Act Advocacy and Latino Justice Initiatives in New York: How You Can Get Involved; Asylum Seekers and Work at Urban Farms in Queens; An Update from CUNY Central on Supporting Immigrant Students; Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Outreach for Social Services; and an open mic for students.

Meanwhile, the activities in class were "more than sharing thoughts," said Skoric, as important as that

was. Students needed to learn a framework of skills: how to volunteer for organizations, become an advocate, and become a good listener. Some skills focused on conflict resolution and negotiation and how to organize, develop campaigns, build alliances, make presentations, organize events, and engage in fundraising. Students learned how to help immigrants find resources in their communities. All of these skills honed communication skills and enhanced knowledge of the issues. But to Skoric, "The most important aspect was that students had a shared narrative about immigration reform from one group of students who had that experience and felt safe to speak, make sense of their own experiences, and then help others."

In 2012, Jason Leggett, an assistant professor of political science, was working on a related civic engagement project sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities called Bridging Cultures to Form a Nation. He integrated the humanities themes of democratic thinking and community into the curriculum of his class on the American legal system. For BPS he expanded his project to examine the same issues, particularly ones related to immigrant access, such as legal rights and citizenship. "I wanted to see different perceptions of the rule of law by groups that were not getting equal access," he said.

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His students were required to learn three skills: legal research using mostly online sources, how to complete legal documents and forms, and how to conduct small scale mapping of neighborhood services, such as immigration services, free and legal services, and public health services. His BPS students then conducted interviews with service organizations. He compiled the data that students collected during two semesters. "I wasn't studying students; I was studying with students, and they became my fellow researchers. I also realized from my students that legal access wasn't the only difficulty immigrants had."

Students created maps of neighborhoods using Google maps and then added their research data. They conducted workshops in their public libraries using a tablet interface. For example, one student heard that his area of New York was a "food desert" but learned that this was not true. An urban farm in east New York and a farmer's market accepted food stamps. So he gave a video workshop, Food Stamps to Farmer's Market. He hopes to create a touch screen for New York libraries so visitors can access this information.

Leggett said students were shocked on two levels: first they were able to use their own interests and their own communities for the class and second, they could follow their own suggestions and write a poem, create a video, or draw a political cartoon. Leggett feels that students also acquired skills useful in today's and tomorrow's workforce by learning how to use technology for innovation. "We turned the e-portfolio [course] into a learning environment so that as they do their work, I can interact with them and see their critical reflections. Instead of being that person up at the front of the room, I am on the sidelines being more of a coach."

The BTtoP funding also enabled the faculty to create an online community database of various

partners. For example, a faculty member can type in the words *community gardens* or *obesity* and identify possible community partners or click on a map to see what organizations might be in the area. Different resources, such as a curriculum or materials, can be uploaded so that other faculty can see them. "Often faculty don't know what other faculty are doing down the hall," noted Cahill.

Once they started teaching in a new way, it changed the way they were as educators and scholars. There is now a cohort of faculty who have developed an expertise at an institution and are an amazing resource.

"The faculty participating in BPS said there should be a way to build visible relationships among the faculty, students, and the community," said Fine. "So there was a citizen science project, for example, where a biology professor had students track the first bud of a particularly rare plant and the first butterfly sighting. They put that data in a national citizen science data bank. They also tracked how environmental pollution might limit a bird's access to the Kingsborough site."

Sustaining the Scholarship

The BPS program gave pre and posttests on civic engagement and well-being in which students were asked if they were involved in their communities and what they got out of their classes. The assessment included a quantitative pre and post analysis of the nearly 1,000 participating students. The faculty seminars were documented to describe individual teachers and stories. The online mapping of university partners served as another source of evaluation of the project. Cahill and Fine conducted an analysis to determine where the institution-facilitated work was completed and wrote an overview of the courses, the experience, and the faculty.

For VanOra, the result of the project was that "students were interpersonally closer with one another than we had seen in previous groups. Their academic outcomes were better. The grades just on the psych exams and the assignments that were not directly related to civic engagement were better. The work unified them and helped them connect in a way they had not in other semesters. Going to the farm and watching us try to dig and plant with them brought us closer together. They were closer to us as faculty, they did better in terms of attrition, and the grades were good."

Hill found that attending the BPS meetings and talking about different ways of thinking and different ways of doing things was most helpful. "It was helpful in terms of thinking about our own project," he said, "but also for finding out more about other resources available on campus. For example, one of the biology professors did a project with her class to research volunteer opportunities for students interested in health care, nursing, or physical therapy. This kind of information helps me in my advising capacity with students. It gives me more knowledge about what resources they can use."

Fine notes that the faculty participated, not because they were compensated, which was inadequate, "but because they loved it. They built a community of ideas and ethics, a place to talk about scholarship and teaching and writing. It became very much a coveted space."

Indeed, BPS became "a small community of faculty," said Cahill. "Once they started teaching in a new

way, it changed the way they were as educators and scholars. There is now a cohort of faculty who have developed an expertise at an institution and are an amazing resource. They are now running their own faculty inquiry groups and bringing in other faculty. It is now up to the institution to value and support the faculty to do this work and support other faculty.”

According to Fine, three things in particular worked extremely well that could be adapted by other institutions. One was “building an explicit safe space for interdisciplinary faculty to talk about scholarship and pedagogy that took students’ cultures seriously and that fed into future courses that were being offered,” she said.

“The second was building a culture in classrooms where the wisdom that students brought from being immigrants, from living on the edge, from negotiating a lot of institutions was valued as part of the curriculum and community-based inquiry projects that really flipped the script. Usually working-class students think their knowledge is wrong and they have to learn the dominant knowledge. They got to be in the conversation of the dominant story and the story they knew all too well,” she added. “The third was being on a campus that takes civic engagement seriously and understands it has a responsibility to the local community.”

The fact that the work continues after the grant, and the fact that a book was produced based on the knowledge of community college faculty are two amazing consequences of the BTtoP grant.

In fact, even though the funding for the project ended in the fall of 2014, BPS sponsored a forum for faculty to share their experiences. One panel explained what it means to do civic engagement in a discipline. Another panel focused on what it means to use the college as community and the community as college. The purpose of the forum was to “explore how faculty could create an environment that supports meaningful civic engagement experiences for students, and what other institutional partners can do to help deepen civic engagement.”

In 2016, the Brooklyn Public Scholars published a book about their experiences: *Civic Engagement Pedagogy in the Community College: Theory and Practice*. Also, Fine and María Elena Torre, Director of CUNY’s Public Science Project, were hired to work with an interdisciplinary group of faculty at Montclair State University to build a public scholars community there.

The program did meet challenges. “Community colleges tend not to be very respectful of the time or intellectual pursuits of their faculty,” said Fine. “There wasn’t a smooth machine to facilitate the work. We had to educate the university about what it means to treat faculty work with respect and support. That wasn’t automatic, but ultimately, it turned out really well. We were able to come to a consensus within the university. The fact that the work continues after the grant, and the fact that a book was produced based on the knowledge of community college faculty are two amazing consequences of the BTtoP grant.”