



## First US 'microcollege' helps single moms become liberal arts graduates

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Run by Bard College and The Care Center in Holyoke, Mass., the free-tuition program takes an education-first approach to ending poverty.

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MARCH 29, 2017 | HOLYOKE, MASS. — Coralys Perez was just trying to get her high school diploma. The single mom didn't expect that less than two years later she would be in college.

Back in 2015, determined to forge her own path to financial stability, Ms. Perez, then 19, returned from New York with her one-year-old son to her native Chicopee, Mass.

Her first stumble came when she tried enrolling in a high school equivalency exam program. After taking a test, she says the evaluator began asking and saying things that made her uncomfortable: "Was she on medication?" and "This probably isn't the right place for you." She tried another place, but the schedule made coordinating child care for her son impossible.

Scraping by on welfare, Perez thought she'd exhausted her options. During a routine visit to her counselor at the Department of Transitional Assistance, she met Jenna Sellers, the director of student support services at The Care Center in Holyoke, Mass. When Ms. Sellers told her the center would allow her to earn her high school equivalency degree, find her son day care, and provide them both with transportation, she was amazed. She also was struck by the stark contrast in how they saw her.

"They were approachable, they were very friendly. You asked them a question; they knew exactly how to answer it," she says.

Holyoke, Mass. is a former paper mill town in the state's western half, which has high poverty and a teen pregnancy rate nearly five times the state average. Founded in 1986, The Care Center, which started as a social services provider, also provides free alternative schooling coupled with comprehensive wraparound supports so that roughly 100 young moms like Perez pass their high school equivalency exam (HiSet) each year.

Now, it's enrolling them in college. Last August, The Care Center, in partnership with Bard College, launched the first nationally accredited "microcollege," a selective two-year liberal arts associate's degree program that admits a tight-knit cohort of about 20 Care Center high school graduates each semester. The center provides the young mothers with the same supports – including transportation, health care, child care, and counseling – designed to allow them to focus on one thing that will keep them and their children out of poverty: a degree.

"Higher education is bending over backward to make special efforts, particularly with disadvantaged populations, to provide them with the support that they need to not only get into college but to successfully complete college," says Paul Reville, a professor of education at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education and former Massachusetts education secretary. "And there are so many issues and such a disproportionate rate of college completion, that a program like this certainly speaks to a need."

It's an education-first approach to ending poverty that the architects of the microcollege say gives them the best shot at ensuring that the short-term social services they provide translate into long-term upward mobility for the students and their children. More than that, they say, providing a liberal arts education to low-income, single moms breaks pervasive models of thinking about these young women: that they don't have the intelligence or drive to achieve academically; that their finances are an insurmountable barrier to college access; and that such students are a drain on, rather than contributors to, society.

When people say "what people in poverty need is a skill ... that really is code for 'what they really need is to be trained for low-income jobs,' " says Anne Teschner, executive director of The Care Center. But "the leading industries around here are insurance, higher ed, and medical ... and all of those industries need people who have the skills that you gain through the liberal arts."

Ms. Teschner pitched the idea to Bard after a board member confronted her about the fact that while 75 percent of young moms who obtained their HiSets from The Care Center were attending college, only 15 percent were graduating.

Professor Reville says he is a "big fan of liberal arts education," saying it develops in students an array of skills attractive to employers such as critical thinking and empathy. But he says that, generally, students who earn a certified technical skill as part of their associate's degree find a job more easily and earn more money. Still, as long as the course work is as rigorous as it is for other Bard students, and strikes a balance between mind-broadening subjects and skills valuable to an employer, the microcollege sounds promising, Reville says.

The free microcollege model takes The Care Center's established social services infrastructure, and then Bard professors teach liberal arts college classes under the same roof. Teschner says the college is currently funded by Pell grants, with a roughly \$180,000 shortfall for scholarships and other costs covered by foundations and private donors.



The model works because Bard and the Care Center aren't doubling up on costs, says Max Kenner, founder and executive director of the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI), the college's first effort to help nontraditional students succeed.

"They're a social service institution, we're an educational institution, but by and large we want the same things for our people and to make similar contributions to American life," Mr. Kenner says. "The Care Center is already paying its electricity bill and its janitors and for the space it has, and ... for the social services it provides. Now how do we collaborate to make sure its investment in these young women pays off and lasts over the course of generations?"

"[It's] about spreading the cost and the investment ... and through that collaboration, creating a new model for funding higher education in the United States: a tuition-free college opportunity in the United States," he says.

It's an ambitious goal, but for these young women, the tuition-free part is key. If they were to attend Bard's Hudson Valley campus in New York this year, tuition and fees alone would be valued at \$51,384. Even with the biggest financial aid package Bard offers, the \$13,600 price tag would likely be prohibitive. Yet at a time when the earnings gap between college- and non-college educated Americans is at an all-time high, some type of post-high school education is key to escaping poverty.

"They actually care," says Perez about the center's approach. "They try to do their best to take those problems out of the way so you can actually focus in class."

On a recent Tuesday morning, 10 students, mostly women of color, sit around a U-formation of desks in an attic classroom. They're joking, enthusiastically asking questions, and moving through the material in Prof. Anne O'Dwyer's statistics class faster than she can come up with homework for them.

"We have each other's backs," says Sam Jordan, a mother of two who married as a teenager but has since divorced. Ms. Jordan used to teach at a private preschool, where she earned \$10 to \$13 per hour. "Also the fact of being able to have this opportunity to come here and get this done ... I don't think I would have been able to if I didn't have the support here."

But will this translate into measurable success? With Perez and Jordan's inaugural cohort about 18 months from graduation, the answer to that question will have to wait.

Bard's earlier program hints there may be promise. Seventeen years ago, it started offering free two- and four-year, full-time liberal arts degree programs to prisoners across New York's system. Today, it has roughly 300 people enrolled full time across six prisons in the state. Other universities, such as Yale in Connecticut and Washington University in Missouri, have launched similar programs in 16 states.

At the core of the model, says Kenner, is the conviction that "unconventional" students can achieve what academics often say is impossible. That conviction comes, he says, from the success stories of BPI alumni. In 2015, a team of three of its inmates beat a team of Harvard undergraduates in a debate. Last year, some BPI alumni earned graduate degrees from Columbia, Yale, and New York University. He says many go back to local communities to work in social services and public health.

Perez and Jordan have similar aspirations. The former wants to become a medical assistant in children's health, and the latter to continue her studies at nearby Westfield State University in social work.

The day-to-day push to get these students to the graduation finish line is sometimes an uphill one, says Ms. Sellers, The Care Center's director of student support services.

"It's a real battle to help students prioritize education because they're so distracted by appointments, babies, family things, boyfriend things, it's as if school fits in around those things. So we really hold the line: 'No, your day starts here,' " she says. "School first and that's what you need to learn about having a career and going to college."

"It's a family culture shift often, just having a career. This is a community where people work low-skilled jobs ... so how do you build the educational scaffolding for actually a white-collar career."

Perez, who knows the sting of low expectations, has a message for those who write off people like her:

“I just feel like people misunderstand us. And they just see us as lazy people, people who just have kids to get money from the government," she says. "So, yes, I've heard it all, but at the end of the day I see all of these girls, and we're not lazy people. We want to go somewhere, and it's frustrating when people who have jobs [are] like 'hmm ...' and it's just like, 'We want to be you right now.' ”