Case Study: Bronx Community College

I often refer to Bronx Community College (BCC) students as an extraordinary population. Hispanics make up about half of all students at BCC, and African Americans aren’t too far behind in numbers. In fact, according to CUNY’s Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, the population at BCC in 2014 was: 7,024 Hispanic, 3,728 Black, 388 Asian/Pacific Islander, 344 White, and 22 American Indian/Alaskan Native. As an instructor in an urban community college, I quickly learned that BCC students are different from the traditional college student because many students, mostly black and Hispanic, have chosen to attend college despite degrading factors that surround them. The majority of BCC students have traveled from other countries to attend school. While this is an exciting journey for them, for many the disadvantage is that English is not their first language. This makes it difficult to integrate into college-level courses that are for the English-speaking student.

BCC students, like many CUNY students, are usually the first generation in their family to obtain a higher degree. Some are married while many are supporting children and work more than 20 hours a week but have a household income of less than $20,000. A large percentage of students have entered college with a diploma from a New York City public high school. Students at BCC are often from areas such as the Bronx, Harlem, Washington Heights, Yonkers, and a few other inner-city communities in Queens and Brooklyn. They strive for excellence despite experiencing broken homes, limited employment opportunities, lack of family and community support, and so much more. Many students are returning students who have taken breaks from school for various reasons, including financial limitations, lack of time, and tending to family. In fact, there is a small population of students who have engaged in deviant and/or criminal behavior and, despite the label of a convicted offender, are still dedicated to getting an education.

Starting in the fall of 2015, BCC began offering several new programs to help students: “academic success coaches,” WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) fellows, and more learning community clusters.

Academic success coaches work closely with students and faculty. Their role is to advise students and ensure that students set educational and career goals, choose the right courses to stay on track towards graduation, and encourage students to take advantage of academic support services.

WAC fellows provide supplemental instruction for faculty who are teaching writing-intensive courses. The role of the WAC fellows is to assist faculty with creating writing courses and assignments appropriate for students.

Learning community clusters are two or three courses taught by faculty who work together on a curriculum for students taking each class together. The goal of learning community clusters is that students will learn to build a communion with one another by taking the integrated courses as a group. Faculty members meet periodically to discuss students’ academic progress in the classes and are able to aggressively intervene for students who may need additional help.

Student Needs
Like most community colleges, college readiness is a major issue that can delay students’ academic progress. As of fall 2014, the average GPA for all BCC students was 2.50, and for students in the Criminal Justice major, it was 2.29. What contributes to BCC’s low average? Students often come to BCC unprepared for college. Upon entering college, prospective students are usually asked to pass entrance exams in English and reading, as well as math. The majority of students who are required to
take these entry exams do not pass. They are then required to take remedial courses before taking college-level courses. Students often attempt to take other courses, leaving remedial courses for the end of their semester.

BCC students are not required to participate in a First Year Seminar program. Data shows that BCC students who do participate in First Year Seminar have better results than nonparticipating students; in particular, they have a higher GPA. First Year Seminar instructors have also exposed students to other academic support services, while nonparticipating students may not be fully aware of supplemental services available to them. First Year Seminar courses have often exposed students to key skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college. These include communication skills, stress and time management, and study strategies. Participating students learn classroom etiquette, how to register for courses, BCC’s policy on plagiarism, and various campus resources. For these reasons, students — especially those in the Justice Academy — should be encouraged to join the First Year Seminar.

**Student Strengths**

BCC students are ambitious, though it is common for obstacles to hinder their academic journey. As a professor, I consider their personal experience to be their strength. I’ve learned that as much as I teach them, they teach me. Though at times they struggle with separating their street identity from their school identity, personal experience encourages them to seek an education. For Criminal Justice students in particular, I’ve learned that the reasons for studying the major varies according to personal experience.

Some students are interested in learning basic rights as a citizen, some are seeking opportunities that challenge policies that target minorities within our criminal justice system, and others are seeking an opportunity to join law enforcement as defense mechanism for victimization resulting from police and citizen tension. Because of these various reasons, teaching BCC students is an honor. It is an opportunity to teach students how to transform their experience into a learning experience for a greater purpose. Despite the educational, financial, and other personal obstacles that may interfere with their academics, BCC students are teachable as many of them are willing and excited to learn.

**Student Challenges**

BCC often has trouble retaining students. As they lack basic reading and writing skills, many students become discouraged and do not return to school for the following semester. For most black and Hispanic students, an associate degree is the academic limit. Moreover, the majority of BCC students take longer than the average time — 2 to 2.5 years — to complete a degree. I have personally met students who have been in community college more than 5 years.

Addressing this challenge can be difficult because institutions could provide the resources for students to succeed, but resources are still limited. Faculty members are not responsible for what students experience outside the classroom. Outside obstacles often discourage students from returning to school. As educators, it is important not to hold ourselves accountable for help we cannot provide to students. Most faculty at BCC are willing to extend extra effort to help students succeed. Sometimes that means supporting students throughout their journey at BCC, encouraging them to register each semester, informing them about academic support resources and student life, and generally being accessible.

As the Greek writer and philosopher Nikos Kazantzakis said, “True teachers are those who use themselves as bridges over which they invite their students to cross; then, having facilitated their crossing, joyfully collapse, encouraging them to create their own.”