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Profs teach classics to low income students

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News Contributor

Every Monday and Thursday, Amy Thomas teaches victims of poverty, primarily those from minority backgrounds, a variety of subjects in the humanities. She participates in the Odyssey Project, a series of courses intended to give members of disadvantaged communities a liberal education.

Offered in twelve US cities, the **Bard College Clemente Course in the Humanities**, which is based in New York, helped to develop this new Chicago affiliate almost a year ago.

"It's a program that offers the opportunity for the poor to engage in college-level humanities courses," said Thomas, a graduate student at the University of Chicago Divinity School. "It is based on Petrarch's notion of the liberal arts."

This notion is that education in the liberal arts will help victims of poverty better their conditions by strengthening their analytical thinking.

The Project, which is in its first year, was funded and started by the Illinois Humanities Council as a Chicago affiliate of the Clemente Program. Its participants include Northwestern University and the University of Chicago. Classes meet two evenings a week over a 28-week period at a host site located in the community.

"There are five courses -- literature, American history, philosophy, critical thinking, and writing," said Thomas, who, along with faculty from local colleges, including two other U of C instructors -- Danielle Allen, associate professor in the departments of classics, politics, and the Committee on Social Thought, and Charles Elder, an instructor in the Basic Program of the U of C -- hope to fulfill the goal of bringing the humanities to everybody.

"It's an opportunity for a more diverse group of people. It's such a cool thing to do," Thomas said.

Like the Bard College Clemente Course National Program in New York, the Odyssey Project removes many of the financial barriers to higher education -- books (donated by publishing companies such as Norton and Farrar-Strauss-Giroux), carfare, and childcare are provided, and tuition is free. Moreover, college credit is offered by Bard College upon successful completion of the program.

The Clemente Program, which is in its sixth year, was founded by New York author Earl Shorris, who believed that this traditional core of knowledge would strengthen the inner lives of individuals and would also be a means of improving their outward conditions.

"Studying these works captivates the imagination and stretches the mind and challenges them as people," said Martin Kempner, Clemente's current national director.

Kempner, who formerly taught philosophy at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., also teaches at the original site in New York. He claims that the program is successful, as it expands into other cities across the nation.

"Many of the state humanities councils, including Washington state, Florida, Massachusetts, and Illinois, have recognized our program as a way to provide the opportunity for a positive postsecondary educational experience," Kempner said.

The Odyssey Project developed last year after the success of the Clemente Program. "The Illinois Humanities Council approached us and said they were interested in becoming one of our affiliates," Kempner said. "The people in Chicago decided to give the program another name -- the Odyssey Project."

Now in its eleventh month, the Project currently has fifteen adults enrolled. "The students are excited and grateful. They've been waiting to do this all their lives," said Thomas.

As the Project expands, Thomas claims that more local universities are showing an interest in it. "Last Thursday, we had an orientation in which various representatives from UIC, Malcolm Xavier University, and the U of C, and a high school guidance counselor came to talk to the students about how to think about college, what to consider, and how to figure out what was best for them," said Thomas. "They really wanted to go to college."

The Odyssey project does face a number of challenges in its operations. "We lack infrastructure. We don't have office hours or places where students could come to us during the day," Thomas said. "Most of the students don't have email. And because the subjects rotate every three weeks, continuity is challenged."

Despite this, the program is nationally proven to be a great success. According to the Bard College national office, 56 percent of those who enrolled completed the full course of study and earned certificates of achievement. Of those completing the Course, 84 percent earned college credit and 71 percent have gone on to college or plan to do so in the near future.

The same success is also anticipated for the Odyssey Project. "I have high expectations for the class and I want to see it become revolutionary. It's very gratifying to know that these students are going home with something they never had. It's changed their lives. This in itself is a success," Thomas said.

Come fall, faculty members of the project hope to expand the program, establishing one base on the North Side and continuing the current base on the West Side. Eventually, the Odyssey Project will be accessible to the poor throughout the state of Illinois.

"I think it has very great promise, and I have great hope and trust that it will be a success," Thomas said. "I'm counting on it."