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IN THE SCHOOLS

Free College Classes, From N.Y. to D.C.



Ken Cedeno for The New York Times

Faith Davis Ruffins teaches a class in the Bard College Clemente Course at the Latin American Youth Center in Washington.

By LAKEISHA R. CARR

Washington

Short of money and short on time, Laura Lopez withdrew from the community college she had been attending here. At 21, she had a 10-month-old baby to care for, a full-time job and little aid, financial or otherwise, or resources to help manage a laundry list of growing responsibilities.

"I was depressed," she said. "I just couldn't find enough money or time in my day to do it all."

Then a co-worker told her she could take free college courses

through a program operating right across the street from her job that was sponsored by **Bard College**, a small, liberal arts school in Annandale-on-Hudson.

"When people hear about it think they believe it's too good to be true," Ms. Lopez said. "I know I did."

The Bard College Clemente Course gives low-income students the chance to earn up to six college credits while attending classes for 28 weeks free of charge. Besides the program here, students are

enrolled at four locations in New York City, where it began in 1995 at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center in Lower Manhattan. The program also operates in Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

"The admission criteria are simple," said Mary Janney, director of the program in the District of Columbia, which is in its sixth year. "We're looking for students with a desire to learn, those who can read an English-language newspaper and

those committed to completing the program.” Students meet two nights a week at the Latin American Youth Center in the Adams-Morgan neighborhood, studying history, philosophy and other subjects in the humanities. Books are provided without charge, as are child care and snacks; students are also reimbursed for transportation.

Ms. Janney says expenses, including teachers’ salaries, are largely covered through fund-raising efforts and government grants.

Inti Traejo, 21, a Clemente student, said he heard about the program from a friend. That seems to be the main way people learn about the program, which is also promoted in neighborhood newspapers and fliers.

Ms. Janney, 84, has headed the program at the youth center here since it began, working as marketer, admissions representative, recruiter for both teachers and students and sometimes career counselor. She is aided by volunteers at the youth center, and two assistants who went through the Clemente program.

Students, mostly minorities, range in age from early 20’s to mid-50’s. Many have children and day jobs.

“Unlike traditional college freshmen, these people have real life experiences,” said Dr. Jenny Carson, 42, a professor with the program, “and are confident and willing to express themselves.”

Students interviewed here agreed that the diversity in ages, backgrounds and ethnicities creates a rich classroom experience. The format also provides a comfortable learning environment for first-timers and those who have been out of school for some time. No grades are issued, only extensive comments on the students’ performance. Once the program concludes, those who have done well receive credits that can be transferred to other schools as well as further educational coaching.

Out of the two dozen or so students selected for the program each semester only half of them finish, according to Ms. Janney, but she said those who graduate have done well.

Marcellus Arnold, 53, of Washington was 51 when he entered the program. After what he describes as a troubled youth filled with drugs and a stint in prison, Mr. Arnold entered the Clemente program after earning his G.E.D. only days before. After he had functioned with a fifth-grade education for more than 40 years, Mr. Arnold said, the Bard curriculum prepared him for higher education and helped build his confidence.

Now pursuing a bachelor’s degree in health services administration at Southeastern University in the District of Columbia, he said the Clemente program “prepared me for college and made me hungry.”

Ms. Lopez, still juggling a hectic schedule, plans to pursue a psychology degree after finishing the Bard semester with the hope of one day earning a master’s degree.

Turning those kinds of goals into reality is the reason for the program, Ms. Janney said, adding, “Intellectual talent is everywhere.”