

A ‘Microcollege’ for Student Moms



Mary Anne Myers (standing), program director of Bard Microcollege Holyoke and a scholar of British literature, talks with students about Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

By Kelly Field APRIL 16, 2017 [PREMIUM](#)

HOLYOKE, MASS.

In the attic of a stately brick mansion here, nine young mothers are discussing *Frankenstein*. They're developing topics for their final papers and writing

them on the whiteboard: Is the creature more masculine or feminine? How do Victor and the creature suffer for their pursuit of knowledge?

Mary Anne Myers, program director of Bard Microcollege Holyoke, helps them refine their ideas.

"Why is it OK for humans to have a companion, but not the creature?" she asks, reading aloud another question. "What is problematic about relationships?"

Angelique (Angie) Vera, who is wearing a baseball cap backward and a tank top that proclaims "I Need More Weekends," pipes up. "You could get screwed over. You could get pregnant — again!" she says, only half-joking.

The nine students in this classroom know something of the perils of human relationships. All got pregnant young, in a city where the teen birthrate, at 40 percent, was four times the state average in 2015, and only 63 percent of young women graduated from high school on time last year. All the students are former dropouts themselves.

Yet here they are, debating classic literature in a seminar that is pretty much indistinguishable from a seminar at a selective liberal-arts college. And that's the idea behind this first-in-the-nation accredited "microcollege" for young mothers, its creators say.

"Too many of our elite colleges have an extremely narrow view of who a college student is meant to be," says Max Kenner, founder and executive director of the Bard Prison Initiative, the model for this program. "We've lost faith that ordinary Americans are capable of the work we value most."

"The prejudice that we weave into the work has to be destroyed," he says.

Like the renowned prison program, which enrolls nearly 300 incarcerated men and women in New York State, the Holyoke microcollege offers a tuition-free liberal-arts education to students who might never be expected to succeed in mainstream higher education. It holds its young mothers to the same rigorous standards as freshmen and sophomores on the main campus, giving them a grounding in grammar, art, literature, the social sciences, and math.

But these mostly Latina students in western Massachusetts face many challenges that the typical Bard student does not, among them poverty, homelessness, domestic and gang violence, and day-care and transportation challenges. So the Care Center, a local nonprofit group that hosts the program in this turn-of-the-century Holyoke house,

offers many supports that traditional colleges do not, including food, transportation to and from class, and on-site child care and health care.

"We clear the decks so students can be academics," says Anne Teschner, executive director of the Care Center.

The center, which has helped pregnant and parenting teens earn their GEDs since 1986, has offered a free six-credit course in the humanities through a partnership with Bard College for two decades. Over the years, 80 percent of the women who have completed the course and 75 percent of all Care Center clients have continued their college education.

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But many of these women have struggled outside the supportive cocoon of the center. When Ms. Teschner ran the numbers, five years ago, she found that 200 former students had attempted community college, but that only 25 had actually graduated. "When they went to community college, all those supports fell away," she says.

She decided the solution was to "bring college into the support bubble," so she approached Bard about trying its successful prison program with a new population. The college, which had been looking to expand into new settings, agreed, and Bard Microcollege Holyoke at the Care Center, a 60-credit associate-of-arts degree, was born.

The microcollege, which plans to enroll 100 students, opened with 10 students last fall. A second cohort of 15 students started in January.

The walls of the Care Center are covered in student artwork. Along one stairway is a series of paintings of phoenixes rising from the ashes. In the art room, someone has created a colorful mural that reads "Keep Calm and Mommy On." In a downstairs bathroom, there's an inspirational quote, by the young poet Stephanie Bennett-Henry: "Life is Tough, my Darling, But so are You."

Life outside the center is indeed tough. Holyoke, population 40,000, is a poor city, with a per-capita income of just \$22,000 and a quarter of citizens living below the poverty line. Gang violence is common.

Students at the microcollege are resilient and motivated to succeed, but sometimes, says Ms. Myers, "life gets in the way." A child gets sick, or child care falls through, and they can't make it to class.

That happened last semester to Ms. Vera, who had to take time off to watch her 1-year-old after the other baby in the child-care arrangement got sick. Her professors let her do her work from home and even agreed to do advising over the phone. Within a week, they found her a spot in the center's own day-care program.

"If you're transparent about what you need, they'll find a way to remove the obstacles," she says.

Still, there are times when she feels as if she's "drowning" in schoolwork. The pace is "way more intense" than the community college she'd attempted a couple of years ago, and "the expectations are higher." When she starts feeling overwhelmed by an assignment, she grabs a cup of coffee and switches to another subject.

"You just have to breathe through every moment," she says. "You never know when your 1-year-old will stay up all night, or your 7-year-old will get sick. You don't have room to feel sorry for yourself."

With a little over a year remaining until her graduation, Ms. Vera, who hopes to become a nurse, says she's "stepping up to a level never expected of me."

"I'm really fighting for my education tooth and nail now," she says.

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