



La Voz – Connections in A New Land An OSUN Digital Case Study

Executive Summary

Can student-led initiatives at liberal arts colleges help the communities around them come together meaningfully? Can a student from Argentina give voice to the Latino community in her new home in upstate New York? This Open Society University Network (OSUN) audiovisual case study explores these issues as part of a series on Bard and OSUN civic engagement projects.

This case explores the world of Bard College, its Trustee Leader Scholar (TLS) Program which promotes students to participate in civic engagement, and the story of La Voz – a Spanish language magazine started by a Bard student in 2004 which has now transformed into a multimedia platform that binds the Latino community around Bard College together. The case incorporates interviews with Paul Marienthal, Director of the Trustee Leader Scholar program; Jonathan Becker, the Vice-Director of the Open Society University Network; Erin Cannan, Vice-President for Civic Engagement at Bard and Mariel Fiori, the Founder and Managing Editor of the La Voz magazine.

The case includes the following elements:

- [Video Interviews](#)
- Written Case Study: This Document

Bard College: Connecting Learning to Leadership

Located in a scenic and idyllic corner of the Hudson Valley in the state of New York, Bard College first began as a parish school and a chapel for the local community in 1860. 162 years later, it still continues to serve the community, however, its scope and mission have expanded exponentially since then. It identifies as a “private institution in the public interest.” Through its commitment to creating meaningful impact and focus on civic engagement, Bard College has created a network of leaders that goes beyond international borders.

While many universities and colleges support some degree of engagement with the communities in which they are based, many times this takes the form of traditional volunteer work with outside organizations. Bard has developed a different model, which is part of what is described as an “ecosystem

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of engagement.”¹ It is designed to harness the willingness and idealism of its students to create change in the world and combine it with a support structure that takes the ideas from conception to fruition. Professor Jonathan Becker, the Director of the Civic Engagement Center at Bard College and Executive Vice President of the Open Society University Network, describes the learning environment at Bard College as:

An ‘enabling environment’ that encourages and values creativity and social entrepreneurialism among faculty, administrators, and students, and underlines the institution’s preparedness to take risks, especially where important issues of public policy are at stake.²

At the core of Bard College’s philosophy surrounding education are two vital conceptions of citizenry: “students as citizens,” educating students who will become contributing members of society in the future, and “institutions as citizens,” which places responsibility for civic participation on schools and educational institutions.³ As a result, the school has set up various initiatives that provide education to lifelong learners, in prisons, refugee camps as well as early colleges across the globe.

With its focus on creating empowered citizens who think critically and effect change in their communities, their regions, their countries, and ultimately the world, Bard College emphasizes on a classroom setting where the students and teachers engage meaningfully and learn from one another. The goal is to give students the agency to ask the right questions about the world around them. It encourages students to come up with initiatives that seek to solve a problem they see in their neighborhood and provides them with the support to scale these initiatives into something bigger and impactful.

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¹ Jonathan Becker, “Bard College: An Ecosystem of Engagement,” *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education* 11 (2019): 38-52.

² Ibid.

³ Interview with Jonathan Becker.

From Classroom to Grassroot: The TLS Program

The TLS program at Bard College is the coming together of student-led initiatives with institutional initiatives and serves as both a means of innovation as well as student engagement. The program began in 1997 when Bard College asked then Men's Squash Coach Paul Marienthal to develop a leadership program that could attract prospective students. The first cohort, 12 new Bard students, struggled to adapt to the demands of the program, but Paul Marienthal was able to convince students one by one to buy in.

The TLS program now acts as an incubator for student-led initiatives. These initiatives range in scope and subject matter but focus on the concept of civic engagement. Students come up with ideas to impact the communities around them and the school provides them with guidance, resources, and academic oversight. Notable initiatives with origins in the TLS program include the Bard Prison Initiative, La Voz, the Bard High School Early College program, Brothers at Bard, and many more.

Paul's eclectic resume, revealing his diverse professional pursuits as an athletic coach, glassworker, and flute player, is reflected in the way the program is run. His approach to the TLS program can be summarized by a quote on a stained glass window in his office, "Say 'Yes' Unless There's a Compelling Reason To Say' No.'" He sees it as his responsibility to provide institutional support, inspire confidence, and empower students to become exceptional human beings. The core of leadership within the TLS program is communication. The projects live and die by the quality of inter-team communication.

Paul Marienthal sees the goal of the TLS program as "I'm not sending students out to save the world. That's not the point. The point is to become a human being. I'm interested in students developing their human qualities and these human qualities are caring about others, showing up, and doing the work".⁴

Students often come to the TLS office to pitch initiatives that revolve around art, music, sports, mentorship, etc. Students are mostly responsible for their own organizational planning and fundraising, but some particularly impactful projects are absorbed by the college itself. The TLS sponsors 30-35 projects led by over 50 students every year. Roughly two-thirds of current TLS projects have been running for over five years and some even for over a decade.

The TLS program is both an agent for change in the community and a program designed to build leadership skills for the participating students. It is this partnership between student and community that creates benefits that flow both ways.

For many students, TLS projects have become their full-time profession. One such student was Argentinian journalist and translator Mariel Fiori, who found a way to connect the Latino community in the Hudson Valley through the power of media.

La Voz – The Voice of a Community

When Mariel Fiori arrived at Bard College in 2003, she was overwhelmed by culture shock and a rural land entirely dissimilar to the city she left behind. In Argentina, Mariel was trained as a translator, later working in journalism and radio production. As a newly registered student at Bard College in

⁴ Interview with Paul Marienthal.

Annandale, New York, a question she repeatedly asked herself was, “What does it mean to be Latino?”⁵ The only thing she knew for sure was that “knowledge was power” and she was committed to bringing the discussions that were taking place at Bard to the underrepresented Latino community around the school.

With this aim in mind, Fiori began writing articles in the Spanish language. Fellow classmate Emily Schmall read one of her articles and asked her to collaborate on a project through Bard’s TLS program entitled “La Voz” (‘The Voice’ in Spanish). Speaking about how her education at Bard College prompted her to start La Voz, Mariel Fiori says,

Bard [College] brings many speakers to the class and discusses many important topics that do not make it outside the school. What I wanted to do with La Voz is bring the ivory tower to the masses.⁶

La Voz began as an eight-page black-and-white newsletter, distributing 600 copies quarterly. Since then, La Voz has evolved into a 20-page color publication with new issues every month. Over 90% of its original content is produced by volunteer Bard College students, alumni, professors, and local community members. Its readership is in the tens of thousands, and the magazine has become the most respected Spanish language publication in the region. Today, La Voz serves 170,000 Latinos of Columbia, Dutchess, Greene, Orange, Putnam, Rockland, Sullivan, and Ulster counties in upstate New York and publishes 6,000 copies each month.⁷

Laura Garcia, an activist from the area, agrees. “Not only does La Voz give us the information we need as Latinos, but every page has a story. Many things in the magazine talk about our neighborhoods and communities. It allows us to have a voice as a community of Latinos in the Hudson Valley where the Hispanic population represents a huge force and we often fail to realize that. Through La Voz’s stories and articles, we can unite as a community,” she says.⁸

For contributor Enrique Murillo, it is the variety that La Voz provides to its readers that contributes to its success. “It is interesting because you get articles that are very simple and educational but at the same time you also get articles that invite people to think about serious issues like law, education, and politics,” he adds.⁹

La Voz has successfully made the transition from a student-led initiative to a permanent college initiative. When Mariel Fiori graduated from college, she knew she had to keep the project running. So she approached the President of Bard College Leon Botstein with a proposal to scale the magazine from a student publication to one serving the local community full-time. The administration at Bard College realized the impact and potential La Voz had and set out a budget for the magazine.

⁵ Interview with Mariel Fiori.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “About Us”, La Voz, accessed July 18, 2023, https://lavoz.bard.edu/quienes_somos.

⁸ Bazin Jest, “10 Años de La Voz”, October 19, 2014, video, 1:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yb5U8wR6HqI>.

⁹ Ibid, 9:02.

After graduating, Mariel Fiori became a full-time employee of Bard College, overseeing all of La Voz magazine's operations and the publication set up shop in the middle of the college's sprawling campus. To this date, the publication is deeply anchored in the Bard community as it employs students (a team of six at present) who work 10 hours a week each handling office work, the magazine's social media operations, and distribution. The students are also primarily responsible for creating content for the magazine, and its website, translation work as well as editorial duties.

Laura Pérez began her studies at Bard in the Spring of 2019, pursuing a double major in Violin and Human Rights. She enjoys working for La Voz because it "allows me to be connected to the Hispanic community of the Hudson Valley and bring valuable contributions to this community. As a Human Rights major, sometimes I would go to my shifts at the office between classes and feel how, by working in La Voz, I am materializing what I just learned in the classroom. Having La Voz at Bard is certainly an important and rare educational tool for students, especially those who are interested in social justice and advocacy," she says.

Lisa Litin came to Bard in 2020 and is currently studying political science with a concentration in human rights. Elisa grew up in Santiago de Chile but finished her school studies in Los Angeles, California where she expanded her interest in the rights of Latin American immigrants. "Being part of the La Voz team allows me to advance my journalistic skills and stay in touch with the Spanish-speaking community of the Hudson Valley."

In order to run its operations and pay employee salaries, La Voz draws funds from multiple sources including funding from Bard College, advertisements, grants as well as fundraising through ticketed events and art auctions held in collaboration with local artists. Initially, the organization was largely supported financially by Bard College. Being located on the college campus allowed the team to save on large expenses such as rent. However, as the magazine grew, it gradually became a self-sustaining venture. It has largely come to depend on advertisements for generating revenue over the past decade and now draws ads primarily from banks and health services seeking to reach the Latino community in Hudson Valley. According to Fiori, 20% of La Voz's expenses are met by Bard while the rest of the costs are covered through advertisements and grants which the non-profit receives.

Unlike traditional media publications, La Voz relies on the community for its growth. While copies of the magazine are available at local businesses, it also utilizes the large local library system in Hudson Valley and Poughkeepsie for distribution. This has allowed the publication to increase its readership to span eight counties in the region, a fact that brings in more and more advertisements every year. The organization has now been able to buy a car allowing it to reach readers who do not live near Bard College. Speaking about the trajectory of La Voz, Mariel Fiori says, "All the growth has been organic, very slow, but I think secure, safe, and rooted. And that's the type of growth I wanted, to put roots in here, really be anchored in the community."¹⁰

La Voz is now involved in a host of activities that knit the Hispanic community of Hudson Valley together. This includes sponsoring and publicizing the La Guelagueta festival, an annual event that sees 5,000-6,000 people come to the Hudson Valley to celebrate the Mexican Oaxacan culture. Mariel Fiori also hosts a daily Spanish radio show entitled '*La Voz con Mariel Fiori*' (The Voice with Mariel

¹⁰ Interview with Mariel Fiori.

Fiori) at the local Radio Kingston, covering interviews, commentary, current events, art, and music. Her show is the first Spanish-language show in the history of the radio station.

The initiative is an example of how a simple idea can spark change and create an enduring impact. But how does that happen?

What Makes the Bard College Model Successful?

The motto of the TLS program at Bard College is 'bold, sustained engagement.' Talking about the mentoring work of Paul Marienthal, Jonathan Becker says,

Paul's belief in individuals and willingness to empower them, his belief in young people - it's what makes a critical difference. By believing in young people, by investing in them, by allowing them to fail, and still supporting them, he creates a basis for these long-term engagements and projects. It's a matter of belief.¹¹

Bard credits the success of its program to three factors: First, its "ecosystem of engagement" which ensures that a host of people – including students, faculty, administrators, and others are committed to the mission of the institution as well as the projects they undertake. Second, Bard College's commitment to ensuring access to social justice and education for all leads it to engage with a wider spectrum of institutions such as prisons, high schools, and international networks. And thirdly, fundraising efforts for student-led initiatives take priority as they form the core of the College's mission.¹²

In its guide "Converting Student-Led Projects into Permanent College Initiatives," Bard College outlines steps vital to creating long-term sustained initiatives including clearly-defined objectives, aims, and mission programs. Students also need to think about the financial viability of their programs and sources for fundraising. Other criteria to keep in mind while creating a proposal include the measure of impact, where the project will go in 6 months, 1 year, and so on, as well as, and what are the challenges involved in starting.

As Paul Marienthal says, "I am looking for warriors. I am looking for zealots. I am looking for people who are willing to go, however far they have to go, to make something happen."¹³

When it comes to individual projects, La Voz and other similar long-term TLS initiatives all have a few key factors that make them sustainable over the long term. The most important is strong leadership – each project requires a leader who perseveres despite setbacks and detours in achieving their vision. The key lies in starting small but working hard and putting the hours in till the project reaches the desired level of impact. La Voz is an award-winning Spanish language magazine today but it started as a one-page leaflet handed out on campus.

For Mariel Fiori, the key to creating long-term success lies in building trust, collaborating, and upskilling. Fiori points out that at Bard College people recognized the work she was doing as a journalist and that helped create faith in her idea:

¹¹ Interview with Jonathan Becker.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Interview with Paul Marienthal.

You cannot just come in and say, "I have an idea." The institution will say, "Great, but this requires money. How can I trust you?" It's the same thing that banks do, right? They will not give you money unless they know you. And so for an institution, they need to know you first. I didn't have money but I had the idea and the conviction.¹⁴

She also advocates for passionate leadership and perseverance as many college projects fail as the students graduate, or get employment elsewhere. Organic growth has allowed La Voz to reach where it has now but it is important to remember that the magazine was fully dependent on funding from Bard College for the first decade. It was only through its commitment to creating meaningful content that the publication created trust in the local community and cemented its position as the voice of the Latinos of the Hudson Valley. Based on this trust, the publication is now able to attract advertisements and funding from readers and is on the path to complete self-reliance.

This success is not the work of one woman. Fiori is a firm believer in the power of teamwork and collaboration. She points out that when she first arrived at Bard College, she had journalistic skills but was not aware of the issues that affected the local Latino community. It was through her work with colleague and student Emily Schmall that Fiori was able to reach out and build connections. An adage that underpins the philosophy of La Voz is "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, let's go together."¹⁵

However, conviction and connection are not enough. Successful leaders also need skills to run successful enterprises. Mariel Fiori recognized that while she had the editorial skills to run La Voz, she would soon need to learn business skills to keep it running. To this end, she went back to school in 2008 to get an MBA degree from NYU. The degree also helped her tell the world how serious she was about her mission.

So what does the future hold for La Voz? For Mariel Fiori, it lies in strengthening the roots of the initiative and embedding it so deeply in the community that it no longer needs a Mariel Fiori to keep it going.

¹⁴ Interview with Mariel Fiori.

¹⁵ Ibid.