

PROJECT NARRATIVE**A. Intellectual Rationale**

TOPIC AND AUDIENCE: Faculty at the City University of New York’s Borough of Manhattan Community College (CUNY-BMCC) propose a 36-month program that would bring together faculty from the diverse disciplines of philosophy, economics, history, business, and women’s studies, to create a new interdisciplinary curriculum in which humanistic texts inspire students from New York’s largest community college to explore their own sense of purpose, reflect on their learning, and draw parallels with their life experiences. The project creates a poverty focus for introducing humanities texts, which will allow us to bring cross-disciplinary studies in literature, history, and philosophy into any of our community college classrooms. Initially, the proposed curricular changes will be implemented by twenty-five faculty, directly reaching at least 3,000 and up to 12,000 BMCC and CUNY students during the grant period. Moreover, activities during the grant period promise to involve many more faculty and their students through shared curriculum, new course creation, and web-based, and public events that grow out of the initial curricular changes.

The majority (53%) of CUNY community college students belong to a family earning less than \$20,000 a year.¹ Many BMCC students face food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only exacerbated these vulnerabilities, but has also given additional motivation to find creative intellectual paths forward. BMCC has taken measures to address poverty at a practical level;² yet, within the classroom the subject of poverty is routinely

¹ “A Profile of Undergraduates at CUNY Senior and Community Colleges: Fall 2017:

https://www2.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/administration/offices/oira/institutional/data/current-student-data-book-by-subject/ug_student_profile_f17.pdf

² “BMCC Addresses Food Insecurity and its Impact on Students”:

<https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/news/bmcc-addresses-food-insecurity-and-its-impact-on-students/>

ignored, even as many other dimensions of the human experience are energetically discussed. When they do occur, classroom discussions about housing, childcare, food insecurity are usually improvised and treated as worthwhile “tangents” within that day’s lesson. We aim to study together and create curricular changes that make these conversations about poverty integral and critically anchored to the subjects our students are studying. We believe it will benefit every discipline and professional program to conceptualize and respond to issues faced by people lacking basic resources.

Our project responds to two salient facts: First, that underprivileged learners should be exposed to the value of an education in the humanities.³ It is through engaging with the complex ideas about poverty as a human experience that students can develop a sharper and more capacious perception and the critical thinking, reflective, and project-based learning skills they need for thriving in a world in flux⁴. Second, since many of our faculty do not teach within the humanities, and many of our students take only a handful of humanities courses, we want a framework for selecting particularly high-impact texts that can be introduced into both non-humanities and humanities courses. When deployed with interdisciplinary energy, a seemingly small curricular change can be transformative. For example, imagine the shift in student perceptions in a business lesson on purchasing power when they are asked to read and discuss Bambara’s short story, “The

³ As the Clemente Course in the Humanities has demonstrated, students are better able to break out of the cycle of poverty when they are able to explore their place in the world by engaging in dialogue about classic texts on poetry, art, music, literature and philosophy. See, Connell, Jeanne, M. *Can Those Who Live in Poverty Find Liberation Through the Humanities? Or Is This Just a New Romance with an Old Model?* Educational Studies: Journal of the American Educational Studies Association, v39 n1 p15-26 2006.

[http://courses.education.illinois.edu/eps201/PDF-NOTES/Connell_Educational%20Studies%20\(2006\).pdf](http://courses.education.illinois.edu/eps201/PDF-NOTES/Connell_Educational%20Studies%20(2006).pdf)

⁴ Davidson, Cathy, N. *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*, 2017, Basic Books, New York, NY

Lesson” or DuBois’s chapter, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.”⁵ John Marsh wrote self-critically that teaching poverty literature to privileged students only led to a greater appreciation of their own privilege, but not to a more profound connected learning.⁶ But what might happen when our students who have recurring and diverse experiences with poverty are able to work with such texts? Whether through classroom activities or participation in school-wide events, when students see the epistemic value of their own experiences, they can begin to generate their own educational goals and research questions and become better prepared for life in the 21st century.

Our project has three interconnected components: (I) the “Poverty and Humanities Institute for Faculty,” (II) “Voicing Poverty” events and activities hosted at the BMCC campus, and (III) the “Poverty, Humanities, and Teaching” website, which will include both a digital database and a student “Mapping Poverty” project. The pivot for our project is the one-week *Poverty and Humanities Institute for Faculty* open to 20 CUNY community college faculty, joined by the project team and over a dozen guest speakers. Together we will engage in intensive discussion of timely and relevant texts, teaching tours, and pedagogical workshops. Institute Fellows and the project team will develop curricular materials for implementation in the classroom on topics that will include literary, artistic, and historical depictions of poverty. In the semesters following the Institute, Fellows and the project team will teach poverty-humanities-enhanced courses, reaching 3,000 - 12,000 students across a wide array of subjects.⁷ In conjunction with our teaching, we will mount several “Voicing Poverty” events

⁵ Bambara, Toni Cade. “The Lesson.” *Gorilla, My Love*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1992.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The souls of black folk*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co. 1903. Chapter 1

⁶ “The Literature of Poverty and the Poverty of Literature Classes,” *College English*, Vol.73 No. 6 (July 2011), pp. 604-627.

⁷ The range 3,000-12,000 is arrived at in the following way: At minimum there would be 100 enhanced courses x 30 students per course (with project team teaching 60 enhanced courses and fellows teaching 40 enhanced courses over two semesters). The upper limit would be much higher, since each participant can teach five semesters @ avg. 4 courses per semester over the grant period, which adds up to approx. 400 possible enhanced classrooms x 30 students (approx..12,000 students taught)

at BMCC, including a half-day event and a day-long regional symposium to highlight the stories of our students, the research and pedagogy of our faculty, and the innovative work of invited guests, all demonstrating how humanities texts deepen our understanding of poverty. To help facilitate our work, we will create a project website that will act as a database for Institute fellows as well as a platform for a student-focused non-linear narrative project called “Mapping Poverty.”

The *Poverty and Humanities Institute* is designed to root BMCC faculty in a humanistic grasp of poverty and to create teaching tools for eliciting reflections on poverty from our students. Critically engaged personal writing about homelessness, hunger, and the longing for security can become powerful anchors to the theoretical elements of our teaching, whether in psychology, economics, business, history, or ethics. Poverty can be a sensitive topic, given the unjustified shame that surrounds it. Works must be carefully chosen and lessons carefully crafted so that they awaken curiosity rather than reinforce myth. Benefitting from dialogue with experienced guests, the Institute will give faculty more precise tools to responsibly use the humanities to spark dynamic and productive conversations about poverty in the classroom.

The *Voicing Poverty* events are designed to promote student and faculty collaboration, moving our engagement with experiences of poverty from the individual classroom to the wider CUNY community. These events will advance the questions and ideas raised in the Institute, as participating faculty learn from poets, community leaders, artists and especially from our students. The website, with its digital repository and student “Mapping Poverty” project, will provide faculty and students alike with resources and connections for creative and critical thinking about poverty.

B. Content and Design

1. POVERTY AND HUMANITIES INSTITUTE FOR FACULTY: An intensive set of

workshops and seminars, the Institute will be open to 20 faculty—half from BMCC and half from across CUNY’s community colleges,⁸ selected by a simple application in which they briefly explain their interest in enhancing their teaching by using resources from the humanities to focus on experiences of poverty.⁹ In August 2021, participants will engage in five and a half days of intensive seminar discussions, presentations, teaching tours, and pedagogical workshops. Each day will present a different focus, captured by a cluster of humanistic works (see Workplan for the detailed Institute schedule, readings, and list of visiting scholars). Guest presenters and teaching tours will help to frame our discussions. Each day will include time devoted to pedagogical workshops, where participants will work in small groups to develop humanities-enhanced teaching modules and explore effective techniques for discussing literary works in the context of their own disciplines. Participants will post to the digital repository and share their new lesson plans, returning ten days later for a half-day meeting, during which those plans will be discussed and further feedback will be offered. Participants will teach their first poverty-humanities enhanced courses in the Fall of 2021 or Spring of 2022. Near the end of each semester, between Fall 2021 and Fall 2023, Fellows will be able to attend follow-up assessment meetings in which they share the results of their work and discuss possibilities for revising and carrying out enhanced teaching in the upcoming semester.¹⁰

2. “VOICING POVERTY” EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES: Several activities and events will be scheduled during the grant period, unfolding from the Institute and enhanced teaching. These include “Poverty, Humanities, and Pedagogy Brownbags”, (11/21, 3/22, 11/22, 3/23, 9/23), a student & teacher tour of the Museum of the City of New York (Spring 2022), the “Mapping

⁸ Ten places will be reserved for BMCC faculty who apply. The 5-member project team will participate (=25 faculty).

⁹ Others interested in participating will also be able to follow along through live and recorded internet access.

¹⁰ For a detailed description of the schedule of the Institute, please see Work Plan, section I.

Poverty” digital narrative project (Spring-Fall 2022)¹¹, the “Students Giving Voice to Poverty” half-day event (2/23), and the one-day “Crossroads of Poverty” Symposium (11/23).¹² “Poverty, Humanities, and Pedagogy Brown-Bags” are informal gatherings, open to all CUNY faculty, during which one or more participants from the Institute share what they have learned about teaching with key humanistic texts. “Mapping Poverty” will utilize the project website (see the following subsection and Workplan, section III) to engage in work in experimental humanities. Students will utilize an interactive map to create non-linear and visual narratives in which they describe a day in their life moving through institutional and other meaningful spaces. This project will be highlighted in “Students Giving Voice to Poverty” (2/23), an event open to contributions from across the BMCC and the wider CUNY community, with priority given to supporting and showcasing work by students who are taking the poverty-humanities enhanced courses. Students and faculty will be invited to respond in creative and scholarly ways to an influential and timely humanities text about poverty, and a scholar familiar with the text will be present to respond to their interventions. “Crossroads of Poverty” (11/23) will be a one-day symposium and the culminating event at BMCC for the project’s grant period (see Workplan, II.D). Open to faculty and students across CUNY, papers and presentations will be selected that illuminate connections and disjunctions between how poverty is described and explored in humanistic texts and how it is defined and understood in the social sciences, business, media, and social work. We will provide a platform for showing how engagement with the humanities across disciplines can help generate cutting-edge thinking about how to recognize and address challenges of poverty.

¹¹ Details on “Mapping Poverty” are given in the Work Plan Section III.B, which discusses the website.

¹² For details about each of these events (except Mapping Poverty), see Work Plan, Section II.

3. “POVERTY, HUMANITIES, AND TEACHING” WEBSITE: In the Spring of 2021 we will launch the first phase of the website, announcing the project to prospective Institute Fellows.¹³ As the Institute proceeds, the site will house syllabi and course modules, as well as a video archive of work done at the Institute and the Voicing Poverty events. The site will be an ongoing resource for Institute Fellows and their students, providing useful links to open-source materials. A second major use for the Website will be to initiate the “Mapping Poverty” project, described above.

C. Project Personnel:

All project personnel are full-time faculty at BMCC and will work together to implement this project. In addition to the roles specified below, all will help facilitate the sessions of the Poverty and Humanities Institute. **Cara O’Connor**, Assistant Professor of Philosophy will serve as Project Director. **Christine Farias**, Assistant Professor of Economics as Project Co-director. Both will oversee the administration of the grant. **Farias** researches poverty alleviation, economic and moral approaches to sustainability, social enterprise and engaged-learning pedagogy. Farias is a member of the United Nations Principles for Responsible Management Education Anti-Poverty Working Group and organized a conference on cross country learning for poverty reduction in and from Nicaragua. **O’Connor** received her Ph.D. from Stony Brook University, where she coordinated the groundbreaking conference: “Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy.” She is working on a theory of respect that captures the respect-needs of people who lack material resources. **Jamie Warren**, Assistant Professor of American History, will oversee the “Mapping Poverty” project and will help organize the “Voicing Poverty” events. Her research focuses on antebellum slavery and 19th century philosophies of history. She is currently working on a book on

¹³ See Workplan, Section III.

death and enslavement in the long 19th century. **Sangeeta Bishop** and **Mahatapa Palit** will serve as Coordinators creating and implementing the assessment tools and will also co-direct and coordinate the “Crossroads of Poverty” Symposium. **Bishop** is Chairperson of Social Sciences, Human Services and Criminal Justice Department, and has a Ph.D. in Economics. Her areas of expertise are econometrics and applied microeconomics. **Palit** is Chairperson of the Department of Business Management. She has over ten years of experience in entrepreneurship education, and a belief in the changing role of business in society. In 2016, project team members **Bishop and Palit** co-managed a grant involving BMCC and CUNY students that explored the role of performing arts and humanities in education, community, and economy using student voices and experiences to study the development of a creative campus. (See the Workplan for list of Visiting Scholars and consultants.)

D. Institutional Context:

BMCC, educating nearly 35,000 students and located in the heart of New York City, is the largest of the twenty-four colleges in the CUNY system. The typical student in a BMCC classroom is a person of color (41% Hispanic, 33% African American and 14% Asian)¹⁴, of which 71% belong to households that earn less than \$30,000 and a majority struggle with food insecurity, housing insecurity or homelessness. Addressing food insecurity and its impact on students, Interim President, Karrin Wilks, emphasized that as we design for success, we must also design for a culture of care taking responsibility for the whole student¹⁵. This project is supported by the Office of the College President, Vice President and Provost, and is aligned with BMCC’s strategic plan goals “to

¹⁴ Total Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity and College (Fall 2018):

https://www.cuny.edu/irdatabook/rpts2_AY_current/ENRL_0015_RACE_TOT_PCT.rpt.pdf

¹⁵ BMCC Addresses Food Insecurity and its Impact on Students; <http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/news/news.jsp?id=14261>

integrate global perspectives across the curriculum and expand cross-disciplinary offerings.”

This project will be housed in BMCC’s Department of Social Sciences, Human Services and Criminal Justice and is additionally supported by the Center for Excellence in Teaching, Learning and Scholarship (CETLS). Both will provide meeting space and other logistical support as well as help with outreach and recruitment. We have support from the BMCC Library’s Open Educational Resources. BMCC’s Social Science department has successfully launched and completed NEH-funded programs which have enhanced teaching across diverse disciplines. Our project is informed by the success of an NEH-funded program at CUNY-BMCC, “*Building Asian American Studies across the Community College Classroom*” (2016-2017), housed in the BMCC’s Center for Ethnic Studies. Colleagues who directed and participated in this initiative are enthusiastic about our aims and have offered to help us in ways relevant to our overlapping concerns. We will partly model our digital database after the website built for “Building Asian American Studies across the Community College Classroom.”¹⁶ The “Voicing Poverty” events have institutional precedence in CETLS’ brown-bags and the annual Social Sciences Symposium.

E. Follow-up and Dissemination:

At the end of fall and spring semesters from Dec. 2021 - Dec. 2023, participants will join for follow-up meetings in which they share the results of their work and discuss possibilities for revising and carrying out humanities-enhanced poverty teaching in the upcoming semester. During the grant period we expect at least 100 and as many as 400 enhanced courses to be taught, reaching 3,000-12,000 students in the classroom from 2021-2023 and thousands more in future semesters.¹⁷

¹⁶ <https://buildingaas.commonsgc.cuny.edu>

¹⁷ Participants will be likely to duplicate the change across multiple sections and for consecutive semesters. This means that for every faculty member in the institute, as many as 20 enhanced courses could be taught in five semesters that follow the Institute, during the grant period.

The Voicing Poverty events will raise awareness across the college and expand student involvement beyond the classroom. Institute participants' pedagogical innovations will be disseminated through the brown-bag discussions, which will reach around 75 additional faculty, and through the "Poverty, Humanities, and Teaching" website. By creating new poverty-focused, humanities-rich courses¹⁸, we will reach many more students majoring in Economics, History, Sociology, Psychology, and Business. We will support participating faculty to develop their observations into presentations at the Community College Humanities Association Conference and other venues. The participation in the Institute by the Fellows from other CUNY schools will expand the reach of our initiative and inspire similar collaborations to enhance teaching and build community at numerous institutions.

F. Evaluation and Assessment:

In the application for the Institute we will ask faculty to share their goals and reasons for wanting to explore a humanistic approach to poverty and to indicate specifically where they might integrate that into their teaching. Post-Institute, we will ask participating faculty to assess the effectiveness of the Institute in supporting their plans for integrating humanities, with a substantive follow up after their first and second semesters of enhanced teaching. Qualitative and quantitative measures will be used, allowing us to assess the effectiveness of both a professor's initial attempt and any changes they might implement for the next semester. Team members will design a questionnaire for participating faculty to provide to their students at the beginning and at the end of the semester. We will track the number of students in classes where changes have been implemented, and how many chose to participate in other events. After events we will get feedback and collect attendee data.

¹⁸ Developing new courses is a goal we will be pursuing beyond the 36-month grant period.