The Bard Microcollege for Just Community Leadership:
Bard College Launches the Nation’s First Tuition-Free College Dedicated to Advocacy, Arts, and Sciences

HARLEM, N.Y. — The Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) has announced the launch of its third tuition-free microcollege, which will open in Harlem this fall.

The Bard Microcollege for Just Community Leadership will be housed at the Countee Cullen branch of The New York Public Library on 136th St. in the cultural heart of Harlem. In a crucial moment for criminal justice reform, this microcollege will deploy the expertise and resources of three leading institutions in a community-based setting to cultivate directly impacted leaders, decision-makers, and advocates of the future.

A partnership between JustLeadershipUSA (JLUSA), College & Community Fellowship (CCF), and BPI, this new microcollege results from years of collaboration among three organizations insisting that education and community-based advocacy always be at the core of racial justice and criminal justice reform.

Culminating in associate degrees from Bard College, this new microcollege will enroll students who are formerly incarcerated or directly impacted by the justice system and others who aspire to careers in advocacy, community building or social justice. With courses starting this fall, admissions for the inaugural cohort begins in May.

“JustLeadershipUSA is proud to partner with the Bard Prison Initiative and College & Community Fellowship to launch this new microcollege,” said DeAnna Hoskins, president and CEO of JustLeadership. “We know that to truly invest in, elevate, educate and empower directly impacted voices, we must create leadership development and educational programs that fully unleash the potential of marginalized people, so that they can drive and create the bold, substantive changes necessary to end systemic oppression and build healthy communities.”

The founding partners, who have long collaborated at the intersection of higher education and criminal justice, plan for the new microcollege to become a hub of learning, teaching, and thinking among the community of formerly incarcerated people in New York City as faculty, students, and practitioners. The microcollege, which will engage students in a robust liberal arts
curriculum and coursework tied to critical race theory, history of social movements, theories of social change, and direct advocacy training, will provide a broad foundational education for students who aspire to careers in advocacy or lives of active civic agency.

“College & Community Fellowship is delighted to collaborate on this life-changing resource that will be offered to residents of Harlem who have been locked out of opportunities for equity and justice,” said Vivian Nixon, Executive Director of College & Community Fellowship. “It’s been twenty years since I was released from prison. Obtaining a college degree has been the most transformative undertaking on my journey toward a life of self-determination and dedication to social justice. System involved women who are enrolled in the new microcollege will have access to CCF’s range of support programs to build social capital, ensure educational success, and foster civic engagement.”

“This partnership is many years in the making,” says Max Kenner, founder and executive director of the Bard Prison Initiative. “It is not only about building a unique, city-based college for the justice-impacted community; it’s about deploying the lessons of twenty years of work in criminal justice reform and adapting them to the new, rapidly changing landscape.”

"As part of its mission to connect all New Yorkers, including and especially the most vulnerable, with the resources and tools needed to unlock doors of opportunity, The New York Public Library is proud to partner with Bard College to offer its innovative microcollege program at our Countee Cullen branch in Harlem,” says New York Public Library President Anthony W. Marx.

The Countee Cullen campus in Harlem will be the third Bard Microcollege. In 2016, BPI launched the pilot microcollege in Holyoke, Massachusetts with The Care Center. Graduates have gone on to bachelor’s degree programs at Mt. Holyoke, Trinity, Elms, Hampshire, and Smith Colleges, as well as on the main campus of Bard College. Bard at Brooklyn Public Library opened in 2018 and is the first college degree program offered within and in collaboration with a public library.

Learn more about Bard Microcolleges and how to apply here: https://microcollege.bard.edu/harlem/

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*JustLeadershipUSA, a national non-profit, is led by directly impacted people and is dedicated to decarcerating the United States by educating, elevating and empowering the people and communities most impacted by systemic racism to drive, amplify, and sustain the kinds of policy reform that builds thriving, sustainable and healthy communities. We amplify the power of*
directly impacted people by investing in their voices, so they have the tools and resources to self-organize and advocate for themselves and their families.

Founded in 2000, College & Community Fellowship (CCF) envisions a world where all people, regardless of criminal justice histories, have equitable access to opportunity. As one of the first organizations to focus on access to higher education for justice-involved women, CCF fills a unique niche in supporting women while they obtain college degrees and leadership skills that promote long-term self-efficacy and civic engagement. With work grounded in racial, gender, and economic justice through partnerships in the academic, policy, government, and grassroots activism communities, CCF invests in access to opportunity for those most harmed by mass criminalization.

Since 1999, Bard Prison Initiative has created extraordinary, tuition-free college opportunity in unlikely and innovative spaces. BPI has become a national leader in restoring college access within American prisons. Today, it enrolls over 300 students and organizes a host of extracurricular activities to replicate the breadth of college life and inquiry across six interconnected prisons in New York State.

Graduates of BPI have gone onto complete graduate degrees at a range of universities including: Columbia, Cornell, CUNY, Georgetown, NYU, and Yale; they work in leadership positions in a variety of fields including criminal justice reform, government, philanthropy, politics, public health, and in a wide variety of human services, community based organizations. The BPI Debate Union has garnered international attention after competing debate teams from Brown, Cambridge, Harvard, West Point, and others. Its students were the subject of the acclaimed 2019 PBS docu-series College Behind Bars directed by Lynn Novick and executive produced by Ken Burns.