



Valeri Thomson '85

## BARD HIGH SCHOOL EARLY COLLEGE OPENS NEW CAMPUS

**In seven short years** Bard High School Early College (BHSEC) has become one of the most sought-after public high schools in New York City. To channel that demand, and further its commitment to developing an innovative early college alternative to traditional high school programs, Bard has partnered once again with the New York City Department of Education to open BHSEC II this fall in a brand-new school building in Elmhurst, Queens. Like the first school, BHSEC II will use a high school-college model. In four years students can progress from ninth grade through the first two years of college, graduating with an associate in arts (A.A.) degree from Bard College and a New York State Regents diploma.

The Queens location has several benefits. The borough has a richly diverse population, with many recent arrivals from around the world opting to live there. Due to the vagaries of the New York subway system, students from Queens face some of the longest commutes to the first campus. “We liked the idea of accessibility for an underserved population. We also value diversity in our student body, and there’s a large immigrant population in Queens,” says Valeri Thomson ’85, principal of BHSEC II. The push to expand owes the most, however, to the original school’s intense popularity as well as Bard’s desire to show that BHSEC could be replicated as a model early college program. In order for students to continue to benefit from a seminar-based early college education, “we want to keep BHSEC the size it is,” says Ray Peterson, principal of BHSEC. Yet the school receives so many applications that “the numbers alone” justify the second campus, he says.

Peterson and Thomson explain that the BHSEC model attracts New York City parents by offering both a demanding program and a special profile. “We treat students as adults,” says Thomson, and, conversely, the students “expect that everyone in the building will go to college. They are trained to think and behave in seminar style. They learn to build a logical argument and express it, to respect other students and hear them out.” As a result, 96 percent of BHSEC graduates go on to a four-year college.

Thomson, a microbiologist with a Ph.D. from Columbia University, looks to replicate some of the teaching models she used as director of ISROP—the Immediate Science Research Opportunity Program—which she created at Bard. ISROP let students, even if they did not have a science background, participate as research assistants as part of their class work. BHSEC II is also collaborating with the New York Academy of Sciences (NYAS), an association that brings together scientists in various disciplines. NYAS regularly provides speakers to BHSEC II who complement students’ course assignments.

The city’s Department of Education singled out BHSEC II’s approach to teaching science as a key reason to support the expansion. “Bard wants to create a school that melds writing and scientific thinking,” says Julian Cohen, director of new school development. “The early college idea is enormously attractive too. It allows really rigorous college-level work and lets the students get credit for it.” BHSEC II is the third of seven additional selective high schools that the Department of Education has committed to opening in the next two years.

BHSEC II’s first location is not permanent—next year the school will move to another building, in Long Island City, a Queens neighborhood across the river from Manhattan.

Thomson earned a master’s degree in education from Teachers College, Columbia University. She completed the Summer Principals Academy, which involved two intensive summer sessions plus a year-long apprenticeship as an intern in Peterson’s office.

Thomson’s time with Peterson at BHSEC, where she also taught a course last semester, proved invaluable. She particularly admires the way in which the school fosters careful and thoughtful reasoning. “I’ve seen the students encouraged in their ability to make an argument and support it with evidence across all the disciplines,” she says. “From their very first day through all four years, the kind of logical and linear thinking is present that’s at the heart of the teaching I’ve been doing in the science laboratory.” One of her goals is to re-create that approach at BHSEC II.

Peterson knows the BHSEC ethos will thrive in the new setting. “The spirit of starting a new school, with not quite everything in place, and students coming in to take a chance, brings with it the chemistry and energy that we have here,” he says. “You can sense that feeling in our students, and Valeri is excited about this model, this design, which stems from the way teachers treat students in the classroom, as adults. All of that will be present at BHSEC II.”

—Hanna Rubin



*This newly renovated building in Elmhurst, Queens, is the home of BHSEC II for the 2008–09 academic year.*