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**Office of Research, Evaluation  
& Program Support  
CUNY Office of the Senior  
University Dean for Academic  
Affairs**

*An Evaluation of CUNY Freedom  
Prep's "Reading the Biography."  
Exploring the Experiences of exalt  
Alumni in a Specially Designed  
College Now Class*

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# Introduction

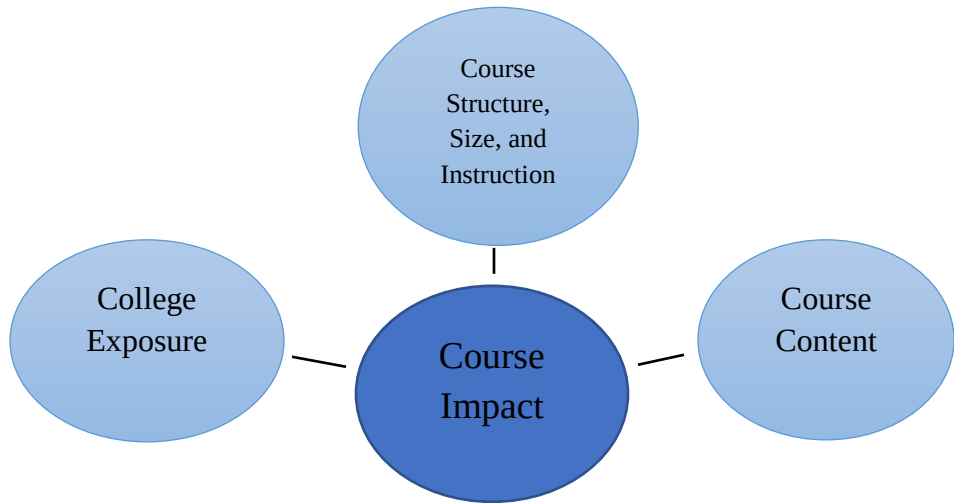
In spring 2018, CUNY Office of K-16 Initiatives launched a pilot program called *Freedom Prep* to provide a supported, structured pathway to college for formerly incarcerated and court-involved young people. In addition to the opportunity to earn three college credits through a free college class, the students receive college counseling and advising through CUNY programs such as the Foster Care Initiative, Prisoner Reentry Institute, College Now, and CUNY Start. Freedom Prep gives students who have experienced multiple barriers to getting an education the opportunity to take a college class and eventually go to college.

For the pilot, CUNY Freedom Prep, College Now, and LaGuardia Community College partnered with the exalt program to offer young people involved in the criminal justice system the opportunity to enroll in college courses prior to postsecondary matriculation. Youth involved in the criminal justice system are especially likely to experience recidivism, a reality exalt strives to combat by equipping students with educational and behavioral skills that lead to sustained upward socioeconomic mobility. By offering exalt alumni early exposure to college, this joint effort seeks to increase the likelihood of eventual matriculation and degree attainment—both of which are integral to improved social and economic outcomes.

Stephanie Gilman, Freedom Prep Founder and Director, designed and taught the first course offered through the exalt-LaGuardia-College Now partnership. Held at CUNY’s Court Street office in the spring of 2018, the one-semester course, “Reading the Biography,” delved into select American biographies and memoirs—covering works by authors such as James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, and Junot Diaz. With a focus on in-class discussion, students worked through the literary mechanics of the texts, as well as the personal, ideological, and socio-cultural contexts underlying them.

This report finds that “Reading the Biography”—through its specific structure, instruction, and size, as well its relatable content and college-level work—had a positive impact on students’ academic confidence, educational commitment, and, ultimately, their college readiness. Through qualitative data collection, coding, and analysis, this report aims to contribute programmatically as well as academically. As this initiative continues to grow in the months and years ahead, we hope that this work will provide useful insights to inform implementation and future evaluation.

Figure 1: Components of the “Reading the Biography” Course’s Impact



## Literature

### ***Barriers to postsecondary education and early college access***

Though the total number of students enrolling in college continues to increase, the enrollment rates of low-income students lags behind. Students from households of lower socioeconomic status (SES) are less likely to attend, persist in, and graduate from college (Walpole, 2003). In addition to the financial obstacles many face, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often have access to fewer resources that build *college knowledge*—logistical information about the transition to and financing of higher education (Tierney, 1980; Rosa, 2006; Roderick et. al., 2009).

Existing literature indicates that early college access increases students' overall college readiness, both academically and logistically (An, 2013; Bailey & Karp, 2003; Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2009; Struhl & Vargas, 2012). Broadening exposure to challenging coursework aids in the development of academic skills necessary to succeed in college (Hughes, Rodriguez, & Edwards, 2012). In fact, students who have received early exposure to college level coursework and classes are more likely to graduate from high school, attend a four-year college, persist in their post-secondary education, and earn higher grades (Hughes, Rodriguez, & Edwards, 2012).

Early college access is particularly effective in assisting groups historically underrepresented in higher education (An, 2013; Struhl & Vargas, 2012). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds particularly benefit from participation, as early exposure to college has been shown to increase rates of postsecondary matriculation (Struhl & Vargas, 2012), credit accumulation (Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2009), and degree attainment (An, 2013).

Research finds that individuals involved in the criminal justice system are significantly less educated than the general population (Brazzell et al., 2009). In turn, scholars have considered whether access to higher education can serve as a mechanism to improve the lives of justice-involved individuals. Studies illustrate that access to higher education during incarceration and re-entry both reduces recidivism and improves post-release employment (Brazzell et al., 2009; Gaes, 2008; Davis, 2013). Although existing literature has not yet considered the efficacy of early college access in cultivating college readiness among justice-involved youth, these findings underscore the effectiveness of higher education in improving social and economic outcomes.

## Methods

To better understand student perspectives, experiences, and course impact, the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Program Support (REPS) conducted a focus group in May 2018. Five students from a class of six agreed to attend the focus group (one was unable to attend due to illness), which was held during the course's final week. Students who wished to participate read and completed consent forms after being briefed about the purpose of the evaluation. The focus group, while semi-structured in nature, utilized a questionnaire developed to explore course experience, academic self-perception and esteem, educational goals, and perceptions of college accessibility. The discussion was audio recorded and later transcribed.

Using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software package, student responses were coded and organized into an extensive flow chart to elucidate the relationships between themes and ideas that arose throughout the discussion. In analyzing the density and distribution of codes throughout the transcript, the following findings emerged.

## Findings

### ***Course structure, size, and instruction***

Our analysis reveals that the structure of "Reading the Biography" had a profound impact on student experience. In requiring regular engagement through free-flowing, yet reading-driven discussions, students felt compelled to come to class prepared and ready to debate—a notable departure from much of their experience in high school classrooms. In many cases, this marked the first opportunity for students to help steer the direction of class discussion. As a result, students expressed a greater level of commitment to and engagement with the content and ideas of the course. This level of commitment was

articulated by one student, who noted, “And I would like that because...I’m a slow reader, so I would challenge myself to like read fast before the next class. Every day we have to talk about it in class, so if you didn’t read it, you was lost in the discussion...” This reflection demonstrates an increased commitment to the course, as well as to the quality of its discussion, ensuring that the assigned material was read prior to the start of class in order to be able to meaningfully participate in the day’s conversation. This effect is notable as several students mentioned that they did not particularly enjoy reading, whether inside or outside of school. For one respondent, the change was especially pronounced:

Like even the story about the James Baldwin story, and *The Color of Water*, all those different type of stories, I feel like those stories got me engaged. Because before I don't know what type of books that I used to like to read, cause when I went to the library I never went to go check out books. I went to the computer... I feel like this was also good for me because I'm not really good at reading, and this was good. And there was only one other book I finished, well not one other book, but one book that I finished by myself. And that stuck with me, it was *Sponge Bob*, and this was the second one, *Color of Water*.

The course’s discussions also provided students an opportunity to listen to and consider unique perspectives from classmates. One student framed this reality rather poignantly, sharing:

I think I became more successful...or like being more open minded to different opinions. Cause like in the discussions like I heard like a lot of voiced opinions on certain topics that I like really enjoyed a lot...like say not be ignorant, but like to understand what the person is saying in a sense. Like see how they see certain things, so like it made me see like how to be in another person’s shoes in a sense.

This reflection provides insight into the ways in which regular reading-driven discussions cultivated a classroom environment of both intellectual curiosity and respect—two key components of college coursework.

Course participation also appeared to boost students’ academic self-esteem. According to one respondent, “...I was going around the school telling people, you know, I’m in college class. I got to go to college class. I can’t be with y’all.” This brief anecdote reveals an underlying pride resulting from these students’ new academic experiences. For many in the class, “Reading the Biography” not only provided early exposure to more advanced coursework—it also served as a marker of prestige.

In addition to course structure, class size was a significant factor impacting student experiences. This was clearly illustrated by a participant who explained, “[I]n big groups I feel like it’s more complicated. Like I feel this is much more simpler and easier, because some people don’t like big groups, stuff like that.” While definitely accentuating benefits drawn from the course’s structure, thoughts about course size also seemed to accompany students’ uncertainty and anxiety around future college enrollment. Several students captured this in their responses, with one noting “I feel like if I went to like a real CUNY that I would like classes like this, cause like you know, like TV they show like big classrooms and a lot of students,” while another added, “I feel like in a real college classroom it wouldn't have been anything like this from what I've heard, like cause my sister, her classes is not like this. And she's in like big classrooms like how they be in the movies. Like she goes to [...], so she has like professors just put like projecting at her and stuff.” In conjunction with the course structure, the small class size provided students with a level of comfort that allowed for a more open expression of ideas and opinions with peers. Simultaneously, however, there was notable concern among students that they may not be ready for larger classrooms on *real* college campuses, where they may experience less peer familiarity and comradery, as well as weaker relationships with instructors.

Stephanie Gilman’s role as an instructor was also fundamental in shaping student experiences. Students expressed gratitude for the respect that Gilman showed them, as well as the motivation she provided for weekly assignment completion. The manner in which students reciprocated this respect is illustrated by the feedback of one participant, who explained, “Like give respect, you get respect, so I think like I owed it to her to actually like do the work. My other teachers they don’t know me, like I walk in their classroom and it’s like, ‘you’re in my class?’” This response displays the impact of respect from authority on students: The respect put forth by Gilman resulted in a greater respect from students, both interpersonally and academically. In addition to the respect Gilman afforded each of her students, she was also quite accommodating of their

individual needs. Several students explained that Gilman’s flexibility with their schedules ultimately allowed them to persist in the course. Her willingness to make accommodations for her students was explained by one participant, “Professor Gilman, she helped me create a schedule. She said as long as I did the work, she’s going to try to help me.” This response displays Gilman’s willingness to work around non-academic issues that might have arisen—a reality that sustained course persistence throughout the semester for many.

### ***Course content***

Beyond structure, size, and instruction, the content of “Reading the Biography” greatly impacted student experience. The relatability of the covered material, in particular, provided students unique perspectives to share in course discussions. Students were able to connect narratives discussed in class to their own experiences, ideas, and opinions. As one student articulated, “What I really liked was Malcolm X, cause the way we like we analyzed the book, and she tried to like refer to like the time. Like every story that we read throughout this whole session, they were all connected to me.” For another individual, the course connected to a specific experience:

And what I did was religion for Ruth, that was James' mother, and basically when she encounters like with her family not really supporting her in her decision, I have the same dilemma with my aunt. Cause I don't really, cause I grew up to be, I was grown to be a Christian. But once I started asking certain questions and she couldn't answer it, it started like really drifting, like I started to drift apart from that religion.

In sharing perspectives rooted in experience, students were able to more clearly think through concepts together—a powerful and memorable activity for many in the class.

### ***Exposure to college and perceptions of postsecondary accessibility***

Student experiences of “Reading the Biography” also appear to impact perceptions of college. During the focus group, students expressed feeling more prepared for college enrollment than at the semester’s start, both logistically and intellectually. For one student, the change was small but important nonetheless; he noted, “Yeah, I feel like if I started college right now I would be at least a little prepared. I would like the gist of it already.” Beyond academic preparation, the course seemed to impart logistical knowledge on several students, providing insight into some of the important considerations preceding postsecondary matriculation, like college applications and financial aid. This was well summarized by one participant’s response, in particular, who noted: “[Gilman] actually helped me with college readiness, like different from the class, but like otherwise making some decisions and like off-topic stuff. So, she was the professor, but she was also somebody to talk to in a sense like conversation wise.” Prior to enrollment in “Reading the Biography,” students often drew their perceptions and expectations of the college experience from mass media depictions. This semester, however, students gained an additional source of information—one grounded in real experience and, thus, more likely to prove helpful in planning for their own postsecondary enrollment.

Despite discussing ways in which they were better prepared for college, students indicated a desire to further improve themselves. The challenging nature of the course both shed light on areas for personal growth *and* provided motivation to actively address them—be it work ethic or academic habits. Even with a more intense academic workload, students expressed newfound pride in their schoolwork. Whether this manifested in reading on the bus for the first time or telling friends “...don't talk to me right now. I'm doing something for college,” students appeared proud of the challenges that the semester brought and, ultimately, their ability to face them.

## **Discussion**

While many students vocalized the different ways in which they improved academically over the semester, students still made note of the obstacles they would face in matriculating into a postsecondary institution. Specifically, conversation about college applications and enrollment was often tethered to an understanding of personal socioeconomic status. Students discussed academic obstacles with a keen awareness of their own family’s economic standing, as illustrated by one student who explained, “...if I had money it would have been a different situation. I don’t think I would have been in exalt. If I had

money I would not have been in exalt.” This reality, voiced by most participants, affirms the importance of Freedom Prep’s mission to provide college course-taking opportunities at no-cost to court-involved students. “Reading the Biography” was able to introduce six students to college-level work, opening them up to new academic experiences and expectations that serve to reinforce their momentum towards college matriculation.

Through the course’s discussion-based structure, use of relatable content, and student-centered instruction, “Reading the Biography” seems to have addressed many aims of all partners—Freedom Prep, College Now, and exalt. While students may still struggle to adjust to campus life and larger class sizes in the coming semesters, they have undoubtedly obtained relevant academic skills and experience, leaving them more prepared for a transition to college.

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