

Thriving Partnership Between Mercy College and Don Bosco Community Center Made Stronger by STEM Education Grant

A longstanding partnership between Mercy College and the Don Bosco Community Center (DBCC) in Port Chester, NY, has lately become stronger. Together, the two organizations are changing the life trajectories of youth and families in need, moving the needle on major issues that can impact the upward mobility and life fulfillment of immigrant, first-generation and low-income populations in the regions in which they live and work.

The non-profit DBCC provides a full range of programming that supports the social, emotional and academic growth of children from pre-school through high school graduation. DBCC's services include an early childhood bilingual program, college-readiness training and after-school enrichment programs. Programs are developed through a rigorous process of research and needs assessment, led by Martha Santaella Sud, founder and director of DBCC's Early Childhood Bilingual Program. Implementation of these programs is run by Program Director Andres Alvarez, who also benefited from DBCC services as a child.

For nearly a decade, Mercy has welcomed graduates of yet another initiative of DBCC that supports young people in their development — the Don Bosco Scholars Program, the organization's flagship college-readiness curriculum, which has supported 96 first-generation high school seniors in their admittance to college. The Scholars Program prepares low-income and first-generation students for their post-secondary education, several of whom have pursued their degrees at Mercy College. "Since 2017, we've had 10 Don Bosco Scholars attend Mercy College," said Michael Keating, program director of the Don Bosco Scholars Program. "We have a special



connection with Mercy. The College approaches working with first-generation students like we do and it's very differentiating from other schools."

The partnership between Mercy and DBCC has deepened and expanded over the years. In 2021, Mercy President Tim Hall was presented with the Center's Transformation in Education Award, given to

community leaders who promote equitable access to education. Mercy trustee Robert Niehaus, a former board member at DBCC, has championed both institutions, in both a philanthropic and an advisory capacity, to help students transform their lives through education.

Now, Mercy and DBCC are expanding the scope of their partnership, thanks to a grant from the U.S. Department of Education under the agency's Title III Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) STEM and Articulation Program. The five-year grant, now in its second year, supports Mercy's activities to increase the number of Hispanic

and low-income students attaining degrees in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). Ultimately, it will enhance Mercy's ability to educate a more diverse workforce in a variety of STEM fields.

The grant focuses on four innovative activity areas for implementing the STEM Ready Program: Course Redesign for Project-Based Learning in STEM; Faculty and Peer Mentor Development in Metacognition; development of a Mercy College/Westchester Community College Transfer Pipeline; and a STEM Workplace Academy. All activities are designed to significantly increase student engagement, foster the maintenance of good academic standing and improve retention and graduation rates.

"This grant will also help Mercy, a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution, boost students' competitive advantage upon graduation and prime them to meet

the growing demands of the workforce,” explained Julia Zavala '08, Ph.D., Mercy College assistant professor of psychology and STEM ready grant activity director. Stuart Sidle, Ph.D., dean of the Mercy College School of Social and Behavioral Sciences and project director for the grant, oversees a team of colleagues, one of whom is Zavala, as they implement activities of the grant. Many of these activities are focused on the vision of the global citizen.

“One of the most sought-after workplace skills is cultural adaptability — knowing how to work with people of different ages, values, nationalities or upbringing,” said Sidle. “The STEM Workplace Academy has a bilingual component woven in that will utilize and validate the full cultural experience of our Hispanic students.”

The grant will also provide stipends for Mercy College students who intern at DBCC, bringing STEM skills to the Early Childhood Education classroom. “Our focus is on children and their parents who lack basic and high-quality resources, and who need every advantage possible,” said Santaella Sud. “In preparing children for the early years onwards, bilingualism is a key differentiator to helping develop their cognitive and social abilities.”

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The close-knit staff and leadership of the DBCC are heartened by the developing relationship with Mercy College. Executive Director Jerry Rodriguez expressed it this way: “Our Center’s patron saint, John Bosco, always went where the need was greatest. That’s our mission and why we opened the Center. Now, a hundred years later, we see Mercy College with a similar mission and serving the same need by making new and vital resources available where the need is greatest. A wonderful synergy is emerging from this partnership. We are confident we will soon see a measurable impact.”



(front row left to right) Lisseth Cabrera '21, Marcela Oyervide '22 and Izabela Campos '21 with other Don Bosco Scholars.



(left to right) Mercy Scholar Marcela Oyervide '22, Mercy College President Tim Hall, Mercy College Trustee Bob Niehaus