

## The New York Times

# Plato and the Promise of College



By **Frank Bruni**

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Kimberly Lantigua, 17, is an avid reader, but of a somewhat unusual oeuvre. Not long ago she worked her way through novels that spawned movies starring Meryl Streep, one of her favorite actresses. “The Devil Wears Prada” was a breeze. “Sophie’s Choice” is Kimberly’s unsummitted Everest.

But for three weeks in July, she kept to a literary diet that focused on Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke as she sat for several hours daily in a seminar at Columbia University titled “Freedom and Citizenship in Ancient, Modern and Contemporary Thought.”

On the morning when I dropped by, she and 14 other high school students between their junior and senior years were listening to their professor, Roosevelt Montás, discuss Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s treatise on “the social contract” and the balance of rights between an individual and a community.

Although the summer sun was shining like a cruel taunt outside the windows, the kids paid close attention, nodding and chiming in. There was no stealthy texting on smartphones. No fidgeting that I could see.

At a time when a lot of the talk about diminished social mobility in America is just that — talk, lip service, a wringing of hands rather than a springing into action — this seminar represents a bold exception, worthy of applause and emulation.

Most of the teenagers in the classroom with Kimberly — and most of another 15 in a separate section of the seminar — are minorities who were referred from the Double Discovery Center, a program in Upper Manhattan that couples undergraduate mentors from Columbia with New York City kids who hope to become the first in their families with college degrees.

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This was the seminar's sixth consecutive summer and the first in which the number of students rose to 30 from 15. The course intends to get them ready for higher education, and that isn't unusual in and of itself. Many summer enrichment programs attempt as much.

But the distinction of this one and the reason it should be replicated is that it doesn't focus on narrow disciplines, discrete skills, standardized tests. It doesn't reduce learning to metrics or cast college as a bridge to a predetermined career.

It assumes that these kids, like any others, are hungry for big ideas. And it wagers that tugging them into sophisticated discussions will give them a fluency and confidence that could be the difference between merely getting to college and navigating it successfully, all the way to completion, which for poor kids is often the trickiest part of all.

Montás also wants for these kids what he wants for every college student (and what all of us should want for them as well). If the seminar is successful, he told me, they wind up seeing their place on a continuum that began millennia ago, and they understand "their fundamental stake in our political debate."

"They read the news differently," he said. "They see themselves as political agents, able to participate."

So as he toggled over the span of the seminar from the French Revolution to Obamacare, he wasn't just connecting dots for them. He was rooting them in our noble, troubled democracy, and trying to turn them into enlightened caretakers of it.

For the course's duration, thanks to funding from the Teagle Foundation and the Jack Miller Center, the kids live and eat free at Columbia. For Kimberly, who typically shares a two-bedroom apartment with her mother and five siblings, that was part of the lure. Another student, Mysterie Sylla, 17, told me that her time on campus was a reprieve from stints in foster care.

For every five kids in the seminar, there's one teaching assistant, a Columbia undergraduate who will maintain contact with them over the next year and guide them through the college-application process. What a great model: Current college students who are blessed enough to be in the Ivy League extend a hand to would-be college students whose paths haven't been easy.

The kids who completed Montás's seminar in the summer of 2013 are bound this fall for a range of schools including Syracuse, Brandeis and, in three cases, Columbia itself.

Montás is the director of Columbia's celebrated Core Curriculum, which requires freshmen and sophomores to dive into the Western canon. His summer seminar asks kids like Kimberly, who attends high school at the Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics, to splash around in it.

She was intimidated only briefly by the texts. "Once Professor Montás walks you through them, they're approachable," she told me.

The proof was in her participation. I heard her pipe up repeatedly: about the meaning of liberty, about necessary checks on what she called our “innate thirst for total power.” Her voice was clear and strong.

I bet she wrestles Sophie to the ground soon enough. And I think that college could carry her far.

Joe Nocera is off today.

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