Harvard Credit for High-Schoolers

“This is a story about kids succeeding, about the success of an experiment,” says Cabot professor of American literature Elisa New, describing the online poetry course she taught last fall to an unusual set of enrollees: eleventh- and twelfth-graders from more than two dozen Title I high schools (serving mainly low-income students) across the country. At the end of the semester, roughly 250 students came away with four credits from the Harvard Extension School and a wider sense, New suggests, of what other possibilities might lie before them.

The 12-week course was titled “Poetry in America: The City from Whitman to Hip Hop.” Lesson by lesson, it walked students through poetic expressions of the ever-changing American metropolis: Walt Whitman’s New York (and Langston Hughes’s, Maya Angelou’s, and Frank O’Hara’s), Robert Hayden’s Detroit, Gwendolyn Brooks’s Chicago, Kendrick Lamar’s Compton, California.

Most weeks’ readings revolved around broad themes: work, protest, leisure, the Great Migration, urban adolescence and coming of age. In a video introducing students to a unit focused on the poetry of immigration, New highlighted Emma Lazarus’s sonnet “The New Colossus,” engraved on the Statue of Liberty. It is a cultural touchstone that “begins to unpack what we mean by mobility”—both literal and symbolic—she said, but also a poem that puts literary devices like rhyme, allusion, and formal rhetoric to powerful use. At the end of the six-minute video, New concludes, “From navigating its sonnet form to understanding its place in its own historical moment, and ours, you can be—we all can be—changed by this poem.”

The course is one of several online classes developed as a part of Poetry in America, a public-television series and multimedia digital initiative created and directed by New. But it is also a class that has been building since 2013, when New first starting offering poetry instruction online through HarvardX and discovered that almost half the people signing up were schoolteachers—and that they were hungry for more. She came to realize how “thin” humanities content was in K-12 classrooms, where teachers were tasked with presenting literature that of-
Elisa New explains "that talent is evenly distributed, but opportunity is not."

We proved that what Larry Bacow says is true," Elisa New explains "that talent is evenly distributed, but opportunity is not." 

students were expected to make and support an argument analyzing the poems. At the end of the course, they each wrote a final essay. For some students, "The reality of having to do the work, having to meet the deadlines, that it's not enough to simply be smart," came as a new concept, she says. "I think that was really valuable for them."

Crucially, students’ work was overseen onsite by teachers in their own classrooms, who helped keep them on task. That’s part of what makes this model novel. “Kids of this age need support, and for many of them, it’s not possible to get it at home,” New explains. “Some of the students were living in homeless shelters; some were living in foster homes.” Others had to care for younger siblings while their parents worked multiple jobs. The students also had regular videoconferences with Harvard teaching fellows, who graded all their work and helped coach them through the writing assignments. And the high-schoolers took part in online conversations with classmates at their own schools—and with fellow students taking the course across the country.

Preliminary findings show that of the 363 who first logged on to the course, 81 percent finished. That by itself is remarkable: the typical retention rate for online courses ranges between 5 and 15 percent, and an MIT study from 2019 found a 96 percent dropout rate over five years for online courses offered by MIT and Harvard. Of the 277 who finished New’s course, 63 percent received either an A or a B; 10 percent failed.

One surprise, though, Cornfeld says: in follow-up surveys, students with the lowest grades were equally likely to report that the class helped prepare them for college, and some who failed have expressed interest in trying again.

Not everything went smoothly. New describes a blizzard of administrative problems: “Just any number of barriers and impediments to docking these two types of...

Of the 363 who first logged on to the course, 81 percent finished. That by itself is remarkable: the typical retention rate for online courses ranges between 5 and 15 percent, and an MIT study from 2019 found a 96 percent dropout rate over five years for online courses offered by MIT and Harvard. Of the 277 who finished New’s course, 63 percent received either an A or a B; 10 percent failed.

One surprise, though, Cornfeld says: in follow-up surveys, students with the lowest grades were equally likely to report that the class helped prepare them for college, and some who failed have expressed interest in trying again.

Not everything went smoothly. New describes a blizzard of administrative problems: “Just any number of barriers and impediments to docking these two types of...
institutions together,” she says. “You have to have a certain kind of infrastructure to do group enrollment of high-school kids,” and Harvard doesn’t have it. She says about 100 students originally slated to be in the course were unable to take part, mostly because of scheduling or system login issues.

Money is another consideration. Extension School courses usually cost $1,800 per term, but New says she learned early on in designing curricula for wider public audiences that, “If you want to be making change in American education...outside of elite environments, you have to offer credit, and you have to make it affordable.” She has long pushed for reduced rates for the teachers and high-schoolers in her classes, and Harvard charged school systems only $250 per student to enroll last semester (the Education Equity Lab helped raise money to close the gap for schools that couldn’t afford to pay). Cornfeld notes that “Harvard has long demonstrated that universities can both do good and do well.”

This spring, New is offering her course again, to students in the same schools—but this time through Arizona State University, while Harvard steps back to assess last fall’s pilot project and determine whether to proceed with similar courses. (New and Cornfeld serve on the task force weighing this question.) In the meantime, New is immensely pleased. “We proved that what Larry Bacow says is true, that talent is evenly distributed, but opportunity is not,” she says. Her purpose is to change that. “We taught many very, very talented students who absolutely deserve to thrive in a college course.”

~LYNDALYE GIBSON

Upending U.S. Politics

Among the many ways U.S. politics has been transformed in the past decade, the rise of nationwide citizens’ activist groups devoted to resisting a president—the Tea Party on the right, and Invisible on the left—has been especially remarkable. These groups reflect both the renewed grass-roots energy animating civic-minded Americans, and the severe polarization that now frames seemingly every dimension of national politics. A new book released this January, edited by Thomas professor of government and sociology Theda Skocpol and Caroline Tervo ’18, presents fresh, scholarly essays exploring these movements.

Upending American Politics: Polarizing Parties, Ideological Elites, and Citizen Activists from the Tea Party to the Anti-Trump Resistance (Oxford University Press) is itself from the grass roots, in a sense: it includes work by five recent undergraduate thesis writers advised by Skocpol, one current undergraduate, and three current Harvard graduate students. Their contributions reflect an impressive breadth of fieldwork in politically important states. The book began to come together last March, Tervo explained in an interview, just after the class of 2019 completed their theses: “Theda was looking around and I was looking around, realizing that there had been a lot of interesting and important research done that added up to a coherent story of American politics over the last decade.” Much of that story is about the role of extra-party organizations—groups other than the two major political parties—in shaping policy and re-ordering the American political landscape. These developments, and particularly the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, “have flummoxed many observers of American politics, including political scientists and sociologists,” Skocpol and Tervo write. “Established perspectives such as median voter theory—the idea that parties will lean to the middle and avoid polarizing extremes—are misleading at best when applied to recent U.S. developments.”

“Most political scientists who study U.S. politics rely these days on national social surveys or election data or data about votes in Congress,” Skocpol wrote in an email. “We use all those kinds of information, but are also reviving some field and interview methods of the kinds all social scientists used to use—go out and look and talk to people. I learned in my Tea Party work a few years ago that there is no substitute for that when you are trying to understand breaking, new developments” (see “Tea Party Passions,” January-February 2012, page 8). Tervo’s chapter, for example, based on her senior thesis on her home state, North Carolina, draws on field interviews she conducted with local conservative and progressive activists. “The craft brewery was where the local Invisible group met,” she notes, “and the Olive Garden and the IHOP are where the local Tea Party groups met.”

Tervo, her classmate Sally Marsh, and three members of the class of 2019—Alexandra Caffrey, Maximilian Frank, and Sophia Young—adapted their senior theses for chapters in Upending American Politics. Within weeks of turning in their theses, the 2019 graduates had to edit their texts down to short, jargon-free chapters accessible to non-specialist readers. (“That’s very, very impressive to me,” Tervo says. “I know when I submitted my thesis, I wanted to wash my hands of it.”)

For Caffrey, “The combination of a bunch of senior theses and people who are younger academics or not academics at all...getting to write about the current political era with a renowned political scientist like Professor Skocpol is a really cool, different thing. I’m really excited to see what [the book] does.” Skocpol says it’s “not usual for undergraduate work to be published this way, but I was delighted we could pull this off in just a few months, to get this timely work out for this year’s pivotal U.S. election season. We want all educated citizens, policymakers, students, and political analysts trying to make sense of current U.S. politics to read our work and use it as they can.”

Tervo’s contribution examines how the Republican-dominated legislature there moved far to the right, enacting policies that are unpopular with most residents, like refusing federal funds to expand Medicaid. She first became interested in these