



HEOP STUDENTS PARTICIPATED IN AN ADVENTURE-FILLED TRAVEL COURSE TO COSTA RICA IN JANUARY

# GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES

## MMC'S HIGHER EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM (HEOP) CELEBRATES 50 YEARS OF EDUCATING ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

**T**his spring, 18 students—hailing from some of New York's most economically and educationally underserved communities—will take what may be the most important walk of their lives, across the stage of Lincoln Center's David Geffen Hall as they graduate from Marymount Manhattan College.

This proud group joins more than 200 MMC alumni who have participated in the Arthur O. Eve Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) at MMC. HEOP provides support and financial assistance to eligible students attending independent colleges and universities in New York State. The program is sponsored and partially funded by the New York State Education Department (NYSED). This year, HEOP celebrates its

50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and MMC honors the program and the extraordinary students who have gained access to a brighter future because of it.

### BACK TO THE BEGINNING

In the early 1960s, MMC faculty and students were at the forefront of progressive thinking about who was entitled to a college education. This vanguard regularly conducted outreach in underserved communities in Harlem and Brooklyn, seeing it as an essential civic responsibility to provide educational opportunities to students who would otherwise be denied access to higher education and its many benefits—personal, economic, and civic.

Over time, this social awareness expanded, and MMC as an institution recognized its duty to open its doors to academically and financially disadvantaged students from surrounding communities. In addition, for the first time in the College's history, funds became available to pay tuition for students who couldn't afford a college education—much less an education at an independent, private, small liberal arts college like MMC.

And so, in the summer of 1967, the Community Leadership Program (CLP)—HEOP's predecessor at MMC—was born. In collaboration with community centers in Fort Greene and East Harlem, the CLP offered admission to approximately 20 promising high school students each year. These students received not only funding to attend MMC, but also holistic support through tutoring, counseling, and meaningful interaction with their cohort.

Eilene Bertsch '59, former Vice President for Academic Affairs and CLP's (and eventually HEOP's) first director, recalls: "When we understood some of the difficulty these students were having—they were hungry, they couldn't afford bus fare, they didn't have some of the foundational knowledge they needed for their classes—we saw that it was critical to step in so we could fully champion their success as students by helping their life conditions."



HEOP STAFF AND STUDENTS CIRCA 1983

### HEOP AT MMC: ABOVE AND BEYOND

When the New York State Legislature established HEOP in 1969, MMC was immediately awarded a grant and accepted into the program, paving the way for the CLP's seamless transition to a new funding format. Today, there are 52 independent colleges and universities across New York that participate in HEOP, serving disadvantaged students from every county in the state.

Institutional support at MMC continues to be essential to the program's sustainability and success, and to the success of HEOP students. Eighty percent of MMC's HEOP students graduate in six years or less, as compared to 59 percent for HEOP students state-wide and only 14 percent for this demographic across the United States. It is not an understatement to call MMC HEOP students' outcomes phenomenal.

"HEOP at Marymount Manhattan is highly successful because of the sense of community we have created, and the sense of belonging students feel," says Harmony Cross, HEOP's Director. "As an institution, MMC has been very intentional about the support we give to this important student population."

Cross, who joined the College in January, has years of experience seeing how these types of programs work at other institutions. She most recently served as the first appointed Director of Special Programs/Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at Nassau Community College (NCC), and prior to that she was Director of HEOP at Mount Saint Mary College, in Newburgh, New York.

"At MMC, we have a large, comfortable, welcoming HEOP center, directly across the hall from the library, for students to call home," says Cross. The space includes computers and areas for studying, as well as private rooms for counseling, and couches for downtime between classes. In their vibrant shared space, HEOP students have created a deep sense of fellowship among themselves and are often joined by other MMC students, who are playfully called "adoptees" by their HEOP classmates.

"HEOP students have a tremendous positive impact on our campus community and climate," says President Kerry Walk. "They are academically successful individuals who are student leaders. The chance to share their life experiences with others and to belong to a tight, successful learning community helps to make HEOP students stronger, more self-confident adults."



MORE THAN 200 STUDENTS HAVE GRADUATED FROM HEOP AT MMC



THE HEOP CENTER SERVES AS A PLACE TO STUDY AND SOCIALIZE



MMC'S HOMECOMING WEEKEND FEATURES AN ANNUAL HEOP RECEPTION FOR STUDENTS, FAMILIES, AND ALUMNI



CLASS OF 2018 STUDENT SPEAKERS (LEFT TO RIGHT): TATIANA VALENCIA, CHRISTEL MITCHELL, AND KARLA CASTRO

## SUPPORTING HEOP INTO THE FUTURE

In 2018, a major gift from an anonymous donor allowed Rebecca Mattis-Pinard, the HEOP Director at the time and currently the Chief Diversity Officer and Title IX Coordinator at MMC, to establish a professional development fund for HEOP students. This support covers the costs of internships, conferences, workshops, graduate school preparation, and study abroad programs for HEOP students.

In the last decade, a total of just 11 HEOP students were able to study abroad, hindered by the high cost of participation; now, thanks to this generous gift, ten HEOP students participated in study abroad programs in the past semester alone. In January, five HEOP students took a 14-day travel course to study eco-tourism and sustainability in Costa Rica (see p. 14). Over spring break, two students participated in a study abroad trip to London and Paris as part of a course called *Global Fashion Business*, and two more students traveled to Puerto Rico for the College's Alternative Spring Break, an annual service learning and volunteer experience. And finally, one HEOP student spent the entire spring semester in Paris as part of her academic program in International Business and Marketing.

"Study abroad is extremely important for students to gain exposure and a broader life perspective," says Cross. "This gift has provided HEOP students with life-changing experiences."

The anonymous gift also enabled HEOP students to attend the annual Inclusive Leadership Conference at Temple University, in Philadelphia, in February. Students enhanced their leadership skills through presentations, workshops, dialogues, and panel discussions. They also met privately with Tiffany Tavares, a Bronx native who is now the Vice President of Community Relations at Wells Fargo. In April, Cross accompanied three HEOP honor students to the National Student Leadership Diversity Convention (NSLDC) in Chicago, where they learned to advocate on topics of social justice and diversity.

Finally, the gift has funded a series of on- and off-campus workshops for students to develop personal and professional skills, including a dining etiquette class for graduating seniors and a lesson on "dressing for success." Students have also been able to participate in a variety of guest speaker events, conferences and networking opportunities, and other high-impact experiences that expose them to the many career and life pathways available post-graduation.

A combination of winning factors makes HEOP at MMC so successful. "It's not just one thing that makes HEOP work so well here," says Mattis-Pinard. "These students are often seen as outsiders in higher education—the academically underserved, the financially underserved, people of color, the children of immigrants. At Marymount Manhattan, we've spent more than 50 years making sure they know they belong."

As a testament to the power of HEOP at MMC, the 2018 Senior Speakers at Commencement—Karla Castro, Christel Mitchell, and Tatiana Valencia—were all HEOP students. Their joint speech, presented in a slam poetry-style fashion, was inspirational and shed light on the transformative impact of education on their lives.

"I realized I was afraid of getting lost and never being able to get back on track, afraid of failing my family that had worked so hard to set up a foundation for me in a new country. But I realize that in getting lost, I've learned so much about the essence of who I truly am. So remember to have a plan, but realize that there's not only Plan A, but Plan B, Plan C, and plans for the whole alphabet. Chase your dreams; don't become so close-minded that you can only see one road. *Be willing to get lost.*"

—Karla Castro '18

"Four years ago I went through one of the hardest points in my life. I was discouraged, unmotivated, and tired. Tired of people not believing in me, tired of having to work harder to prove my worth as a woman of color. *I was tired of seeing trees grow on the east side of Brooklyn while dreams didn't.* A lack of encouragement from educators in my life and constant reminders throughout my neighborhood of my fate led me to believe that college would not be an option.... The day I received the congratulations letter—'you have been accepted into Marymount Manhattan College'—I cried tears of joy because my dream turned into a reality. And four years later here I am sharing my story with you."

—Christel Mitchell '18

"It's been a process for me, not an easy, one but one that has left me feeling whole and more curious about the world than I have ever been. Different life stages demand a different version of you—graduation is not the last stop because where there is an end, there is a new beginning."

—Tatiana Valencia '18

HEOP offers life-altering experiences to economically disadvantaged, highly deserving students, thanks to support from generous donors. To make your gift today, please visit [mmm.edu/donate](http://mmm.edu/donate).