



Borough of Manhattan Community College • The City University of New York  
A Journal of Faculty and Student Excellence in Research and Learning  
2016-2017



## A Journal of Faculty and Student Excellence in Research and Learning

I'm proud to present the 2016-2017 *Marks of Excellence*, our annual showcase of outstanding BMCC faculty and student achievement. In this issue you'll read about students who are pursuing their goals of higher education and promising careers. Some have taken a new path; others have stayed on the course they set as soon as they enrolled.

Higher education is as much a process of discovery, as it is a series of pre-determined achievements. At BMCC, we facilitate that process by offering internships in which our students apply their classroom skills in the field they aspire to enter. We open doors for our students by creating innovative majors and strengthening our partnerships with the business and non-profit community in New York. We encourage our students to explore, to take on new academic challenges and to apply their aptitude and passion as they interact with professionals in the careers that interest them.

Often, the trajectories students take begin before they find their way to BMCC. Sanou Wourohore Laurent was working as a security guard, but dreamed of a career in technology. He enrolled at BMCC as a Computer Information Systems major, was guided to an internship through Code to Work, and hired at J.P. Morgan Chase as a technology analyst. Education major Kelly Monge, who still feels the positive impact of her own second grade teacher, is well on her way to becoming a second grade teacher

herself. In addition to classes and an evening job, she is completing her course fieldwork through a BMCC project funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation at P.S. 125, an elementary school in Harlem.

Just as we are focused on student learning, we provide opportunities for faculty to continue growing as educators. This issue features an article about the BMCC Teaching Academy, in which our professors work with a Master Teacher as they share and apply pedagogical strategies to maximize student learning. They are building community across disciplines as they work together to help students take important steps on their academic and professional journeys.

I hope you feel inspired by the hard work and accomplishments these stories reflect.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Antonio Pérez".

Antonio Pérez, President  
Borough of Manhattan Community College  
The City University of New York



## Life Changing Lessons in the Classroom

**Kelly Monge, Teacher Education major, completes fieldwork at an elementary school and applies life experience to educating another generation.**

“I had a teacher in second grade who changed my life completely,” says BMCC Teacher Education major Kelly Monge. “I kind of struggled with reading and had family problems, so she kept an eye on me and included me in after-school programs.”

Now as part of a BMCC Teacher Education project funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Monge is experiencing second grade from another perspective — that of a teacher’s aide, completing her fieldwork requirements for a full year in a classroom at P.S. 125, an elementary school in Harlem.

By working with students in large and small groups, she is seeing first-hand how children’s development is linked to learning. “At this stage, kids are more aware of people other than themselves,” she says. “They’re starting to write full sentences and make little stories. Right now my class is learning about rocks and plants; they each have their own plant on the windowsill and keep track of its growth.”

The opportunity to work with the same students over the course of a year, gives Monge perspective on their growth. The Kellogg grant also provided a supply allowance, enabling Monge to create a Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics (STEAM) Center in her classroom. “I ordered supplies and set it up,” says Monge. “The kids sit at a special table where we have things including an ant farm. It introduces biology, as well as engineering, as students examine the tunnels the ants are making. They also make artwork based on the ants.”

To generate income while she completes her degree, Monge is working nights, cleaning offices with her parents. “It’s hard,” she says, “working and going to school and doing fieldwork, but it’s worth it.” Looking beyond BMCC, she has applied to bachelor’s degree programs at Hunter College and Lehman College, both in the CUNY system. “I want to continue focusing on early childhood education, and teach second grade in a New York City public school,” she says. “Second grade is a life changer. Education is a life changer for everyone.”





# IT by Degree

Two Computer Information Systems majors begin their academic journeys with job-ready skills.

In 2015, Jian Lim Choong moved from Malaysia to New York City with his parents, and Tiantian Xia arrived from Shanghai with his father. Both Choong and Xia were new English speakers when they enrolled at BMCC, and both struggled with the writing portion of the CUNY admissions exam — which led them to the BMCC CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP).

Their paths didn't converge, though, until they started classes at the BMCC Center for Continuing Education and Workforce Development, in a program that helps students to gain nationally recognized computer certifications, while they earn four credits toward a Computer Information Systems (CIS) degree at BMCC.

Choong and Xia didn't end up in that program by chance. Steven Nuñez, Senior Program Coordinator for Information Technology (IT) Programs at BMCC's Center for Continuing Education and Workforce Development, makes regular presentations to students in the CLIP program. "We want to make sure that anyone with an interest in IT, knows they can earn certifications to do computer hardware repair or network administration and continue working on their English," he says.

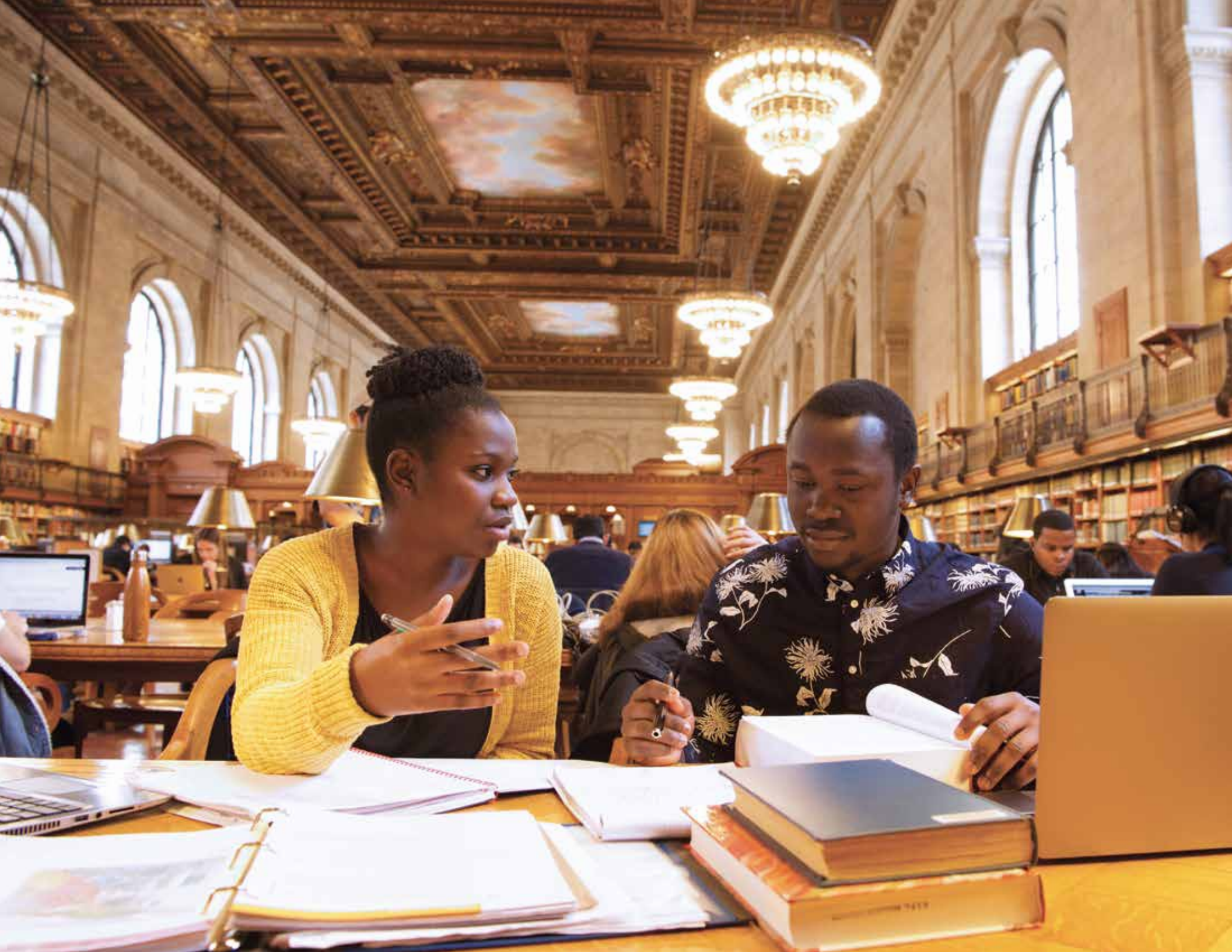
Not only that, Nuñez explains, while students complete their certifications, they earn four credits toward an Associate in Applied Science degree in CIS at BMCC — and transfer into that degree program as soon as they complete their certifications.

Both Xia and Choong have thrived in the training and degree program. "We both speak Chinese, but in class, we have to speak English," says Xia. "We have to do a lot of problem solving together. We reassembled a desktop computer and did trouble shooting."

As certified technicians, they are eligible for better part-time jobs, while completing their associate degrees. Choong is working as an on-call desktop support technician for an IT service provider. "In ten years, I hope to have more certifications, degrees and skills, so I can work in network technology at a large corporation," he says. "I would love to start a company, but I learned in my economics class, that involves risk. I want something steady."

"I hope to go to a four-year university," says Xia, who sees himself as a game developer or researcher at a major university. "My dream would be MIT."





# Graduating With Honors

Two outstanding students help make the Honors Program a reality at BMCC.

Science major Norbesida Bagabila, a member of the Kaplan Leadership Program at BMCC, was caught off guard, he says, “when one of the Kaplan Scholars from another college said to me, ‘It’s too bad you’re not an Honors student’.”

“That kind of hurt my ego,” Bagabila admits. “I’m a little competitive.” Tredesha Howard, a Business Administration major at BMCC, is also a fan of Honors programs. “The way you get high achievers to go further, is to challenge them,” she says. “We want to go on to prestigious colleges, and graduating with Honors helps our chances.”

When Bagabila asked his English Professor, Jason Schneiderman, why BMCC didn’t have an Honors Program, he learned there was an effort at the College to create one. “He explained that the proposal had to be approved by the BMCC Faculty Senate,” said Bagabila, “and I asked, ‘What can I do, to help make that happen?’”

As it turns out, both Bagabila and Howard did a lot to make the Honors Program “happen” at BMCC. They joined Honors pilot classes and spoke about their experience to the BMCC Faculty Senate — and the vote went

in their favor. “You could see the emotion on their faces,” says Howard. “They got it. If you are going to say ‘Start Here, Go Anywhere’, you have to give us the tools to ‘Go Anywhere’.”

The BMCC Honors Program will start in Fall 2017, engaging students in research and interdisciplinary studies. “It will let students push themselves in ways that will be easily recognized when they transfer to four-year schools or apply for highly competitive scholarships,” says Schneiderman.

Bagabila has found that to be true. “In visits to private colleges, I’m learning that being an Honors student is a ‘hidden requirement’ for admission,” he says. In fact, his Honors experience at BMCC might have been among the reasons he just won the prestigious Jack Kent Cooke Transfer Scholarship, which will cover tuition for his bachelor’s degree.

Howard, meanwhile, was just accepted at Baruch College, CUNY, where she will join a rigorous bachelor’s degree program, International Business and Finance. “In a progressive society you want your students to be their best,” she says. “You want the platform that best challenges them.”





# Raising Awareness of Health and Labor Politics

Public Health major Bryan Welton aspires to fight injustice in the workplace.

Bryan Welton has been drawn to fighting injustice for most of his life. As a high school student in San Diego, he wrote a grant application in support of immigrant rights — and while he left high school before graduating, he continued his activist commitments in California and Philadelphia. Eventually, he moved to New York, where he worked with organizations such as Picture the Homeless and Families for Freedom, and earned his High School Equivalency diploma.

In 2015, Welton enrolled at BMCC to pursue a degree in nursing. His academic goals have shifted since then, but his focus on social issues has remained a constant. “I wanted to work in a context that felt humane and contributed to social well-being,” he says, adding that the nursing prerequisites, such as chemistry and anatomy — the physical sciences — helped him switch his focus to public health.

“I see people’s sense of agency and freedom as being connected to their health and well-being,” says Welton. “Ultimately, I’m interested in the labor politics of health, and how work environments can be incredibly damaging to one’s health.”

At BMCC, he has continued his activism by organizing in support of immigrant students and workers on campus. With support from Social Sciences Professor Soniya Munshi and Criminal Justice Professor Shirley Leyro, he helped put together an immigrant rights teach-in, “Challenging Deportation,” in Fall 2016. A few weeks later, Munshi, Leyro and Welton held an organizational meeting for the Free BMCC Sanctuary Working Group, to help establish BMCC’s status as a sanctuary college for immigrant students.

Now based at BMCC as a CUNY Baccalaureate for Unique and Interdisciplinary Studies (CUNY BA) candidate, Welton is pursuing a dual concentration in Public Health and Geography. “I am planning to research occupational and environmental health outcomes in relation to the political economy of the U.S. South,” he says. “I want to look closely at the role of economic status as it relates to race and gender, and how all those things impact people’s health and well-being in the world.” Eventually, he says, “I would love to work in the labor movement — in particular, with an emphasis on working conditions, how they relate to safety and health, and how people can push back.”



## Composing a Career

Two musicians hone their talent and performance skills at BMCC.

Both Fitore Mehmetaj and Eun Ho Kim traveled great distance to enroll at BMCC, and find their place in the Music and Art Department. Mehmetaj attended a music high school in the Republic of Kosovo, and tagged along to watch her older sister in dress rehearsals at the National Theater of Kosovo. Kim learned piano at home from his mother, and was immersed in choir music at his church in South Korea.

Now having earned an Associate Degree in Liberal Arts at BMCC, Kim hopes to continue his education and eventually study conducting with a focus on sacred music at Yale University or the Westminster Choir College at Princeton University.

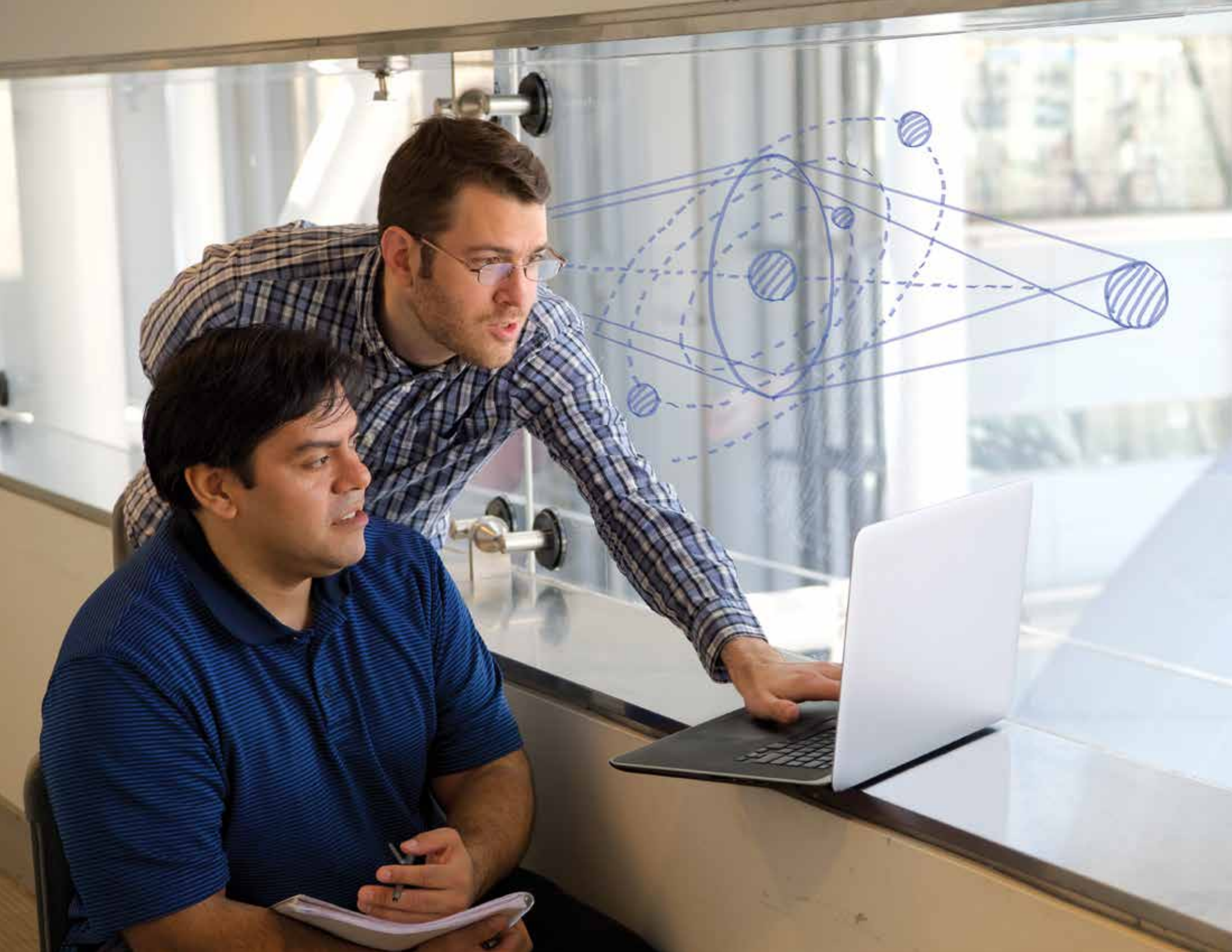
“But first, I need to improve my English,” he says. “I get a lot of conversation practice with students I tutor at BMCC, coaching them on piano technique and music theory.” Kim also performs on piano with the BMCC Select Choir, and his original composition, “New York to Texas,” was First Runner Up in the 2016 Jack Stone Award for New Music at Northwest Vista College in San Antonio, Texas, where a violinist, cellist and marimbaist performed his piece.

Mehmetaj attended the Film Music Academy in Wuppertal, Germany before becoming a Liberal Arts major at BMCC. “The best voice teachers of my life are here,” says the mezzo-soprano whose repertoire includes roles in the operas of Georges Bizet and Robert Schumann. She has also learned digital music software at BMCC and her composition “Themes and Variations,” for cello and piano, was performed in the 2017 Composers Now Festival at BMCC’s Shirley Fiterman Art Center. “I have met so many amazing artists through these experiences,” she says.

To make ends meet, Mehmetaj became a certified yoga instructor and has a second job as a receptionist at a finance firm in lower Manhattan — all while finishing her last semester at BMCC and attending auditions to transfer into bachelor’s degree programs in voice performance and music education at New York University and elsewhere.

“Singing is a meditative experience,” she says. “You become the role you are performing. I don’t know what roles are ahead for me as a teacher and performer, but I am excited to find out.”





# From Crunching Numbers to Counting Stars

James De La Torre leaves a career in accounting to become a science major and work toward a career in astrophysics.

"As a kid, looking out at the sky, I would ask, 'Why do stars move the way they do?'," says BMCC Science major James De La Torre. "I had a huge interest in astronomy and planets, and when I was in high school I would cut classes to visit the Museum of Natural History and their planetarium library."

Today, De La Torre doesn't have to cut school to visit the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) on Manhattan's Upper West Side. He and other CUNY students meet there to discuss recent papers in astrophysics, and plan talks they will present at the AMNH project, Physical Sciences Research Experience for Undergraduates.

De La Torre is taking part in these activities through a National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded project at BMCC, "Testing the Cold Dark Matter Model by Constraining Dark Matter Substructure in Gravitational Lens Galaxies," led by BMCC Science Professor and astrophysicist Quinn Minor, who is also a Research Associate at the AMNH. Funded through the NSF's Division of Astronomical Sciences, the project enables students

to learn programming languages such as Python, and operating systems including Unix, "the standard for scientific software," says Professor Minor.

This is a long way from where De La Torre thought he was heading, when he earned a bachelor's degree in business and accounting from Queens College, CUNY, worked at Citibank and became a Certified Public Accountant. "Then one day I went to the planetarium," he says, "and it hit me — 'If I don't do this now, I never will.'"

Soon after enrolling at BMCC, he was on board with Professor Minor. "He had me analyzing computer simulations of gravitational lensing," says De La Torre. "He wants us to know broader concepts like the Big Bang Theory and how the universe originated. We also took a class at the Museum, 'Methods of Scientific Research', working with scientific equipment and weight scales, testing for changes in density." After graduating from BMCC, De La Torre plans to major in physics then earn a master's degree in astronomy. "I feel like I fit in," he says. "I'm finally meeting people who think like me."





# Diverse Stories Converge Through Screenwriting

Aspiring writers develop screenplays in intensive workshop funded by the Time Warner Foundation.

Born in Portugal, Afonso J. Henrique moved to New York City with his family at age five. "I was always writing poetry and short stories," says Henrique, who went another route after high school, joining the U.S. Navy as a culinary specialist. Maty Dakar moved to the United States from Senegal, immediately after high school.

Eventually, both Henrique and Dakar enrolled at BMCC, Henrique as a Writing and Literature major and Dakar as a Video Arts and Technology major.

Their paths converged in Fall 2016, when they were selected to join an intensive screenwriting workshop funded by the Time Warner Foundation and led by Video Arts and Technology Professor George Stevenson.

The ten screenwriting fellows met for a semester then showcased their scripts or television pilots, which were read by professional actors in an event in the BMCC Tribeca Performing Arts Center.

Dakar's piece, "U.S. of A.," chronicles first-generation immigrants as they adjust to life in New York City. It reflects her own experience, says Dakar. "I would like for the reader to get a sense that this is about the immigrant experience from the perspectives of different generations, nationalities and upbringings all colliding in America. I hope it will enlighten American viewers about what it means to be an immigrant, and address some common cultural misconceptions that I've observed over the years."

Henrique's TV pilot, "A Hot Mess," centers on a young man who breaks the engagement with his older boyfriend, then moves back in with his roommates — who aren't thrilled about it. "Making a living in film and television can be tough," says Henrique, "but I have the utmost faith in my work, and the fellowship pushed me to do even better."

Stevenson, who led the students, says, "We focused on whether their ideas would work best as a feature or for television; questions of form, and of course, content — the hard truths inside their stories."





# Cracking the Code to a Career

An internship in a tech accelerator leads Sanou Wourohire Laurent to a job with J. P. Morgan Chase.

Sanou Wourohire Laurent earned his bachelor's degree in English in Burkina Faso, West Africa, at the University of Ouagadougou. While there, he met two American Fulbright professors who talked about New York City and motivated him to move there.

A few months after graduation, Laurent did just that, finding an apartment in the Bronx and a job in Queens as a security guard, in a building filled with finance companies. Outgoing by nature, he befriended a few of the tenants, including a man who worked as a software developer, and who encouraged him to learn coding.

"He lent me some computer science books and I began to explore my options for schools," said Laurent, whose dormant interest in technology was finally emerging. He enrolled at BMCC as a Computer Information Systems (CIS) major and in Summer 2016, was encouraged by BMCC's Internships and Experiential Learning staff to enter the Code to Work program, which recruits first-generation immigrants and others into technology-focused jobs. Laurent attended a series of computer coding "boot camps," or intensive training sessions at Code to Work, and

developed computer applications, he says, "with a lot of help from Google software engineers who were volunteering there."

The Code to Work staff then placed Laurent in a paid internship with Drawbridge Networks, a startup within Grand Central Tech, a tech accelerator which provides free office space and resources. "At Drawbridge, I built a chat application," says Laurent. "When that ended, Code to Work sent me on job interviews."

The first of these was for a technology analyst position at J.P. Morgan Chase, and resulted in two callbacks. "They asked a lot of questions about my CIS classes at BMCC and Code to Work," says Laurent. "They even wanted to hear about my job as a security guard."

In December 2016, J.P. Morgan offered Laurent a position starting June 2017. "It's beyond my wildest expectations," he says. "I've had my struggles here in New York, and maybe the hardest was going to college while working as a security guard — but I was a security guard who wanted to be a coder."





# Exploring the Body's Last Frontier

Recent alumna Bella Matias continues research she started at BMCC.

Though she majored in Business Administration at BMCC, one of Bella Matias's favorite classes was Psychology — an experience so resonant that when she took a break from college to raise her toddler, she spent those few years researching career options in the field of psychology.

In Fall 2014, Matias re-enrolled at BMCC, joined the Psychology Club and was elected vice president. At one of their meetings, Psychology Professor Marjan Persuh attended and joined in the discussion with Matias and others, on animal consciousness. The college had not yet instituted its Psychology degree program, but there were opportunities for students to take part in research in the field, and this was one of them. Matias asked if she could work with Persuh as a mentee under the BMCC Collegiate Science and Technology Entry Program (CSTEP), and he agreed to bring her on.

That project, "The Origin of Visual Working Memory Capacity Limitations," was funded by PSC CUNY and took place in the BMCC Social Sciences Laboratory. Volunteer subjects sat in front of a computer, using a chin rest as their pupils were monitored and they viewed shapes, colors and other stimuli to explore working memory. In May 2015,

Matias presented findings from the project at the BMCC Collegiate Poster Presentation, and was chosen to represent the college at the 2016 Undergraduate Research and Creative Works Poster Program, in Albany.

Matias continued being part of the research into visual perception after she graduated from BMCC and transferred in Fall 2015 to major in Psychology at City College of New York (CCNY). There, she joined a research team that happened to include her former BMCC Professor Persuh, as well as CCNY Psychology Professor Robert Melara.

In February 2016, she and Persuh presented findings on visual perception at the Cognitive Neuroscience Society's annual meeting and in April, their research was selected to be part of the Collegiate Science and Technology Program at Sagamore Resort on Lake George in upstate New York.

"The brain is one of the last frontiers, as far as the human body is concerned," Matias says. "My time at BMCC provided a critical foundation, as I went on to pursue a four-year degree and continue participating in research projects."





# Art Directing a Dream

Multimedia Arts major Luis Bernal lands a job at a cutting-edge ad agency.

When Luis Bernal moved to New York City in 2011, he worked in restaurants — but dreamed of working in advertising. He enrolled at BMCC and started ESL classes, determined to improve his English.

By the second semester, he felt confident enough to declare his major in Multimedia Arts, and began focusing on the computer graphics, web design and programming skills he would need to land his dream job as an art director.

“I was doing pretty well, using my skills in class, but I wanted to try them in a professional setting,” says Bernal, who applied in June 2016 for a volunteer position at the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in lower Manhattan. He reported to Gennady Zaritsky, Director of Retail at the museum, who charged him to come up with a T-shirt design around the concept of hope.

“Luis came back with a design that featured the word ‘hope’ in several languages and also incorporated the words, ‘connected’, ‘loyalty’, ‘solidarity’, ‘reflect’ and ‘remember,’” said Zaritsky. “He utilized his e-commerce and Photoshop skills. During the 10-week externship, he also helped create web banners and collages for the museum website.”

As Bernal approached graduation from BMCC in June 2016, he visited the college’s Center for Career Development, where staff helped him polish his resume. At the same time, he began assembling samples of his work for a portfolio he sent to advertising agencies and firms that employ graphic artists.

In October 2016, those efforts paid off. Bernal received an offer to work at Wing, a creative agency within GREY Group N.Y. in Manhattan, which creates advertising campaigns for the Hispanic and Latin American market — and he jumped at the chance.

Today, Bernal is an intern art director at the agency, and works closely with the creative, strategy and account teams as they market international brands.

“It’s exciting to be here,” he says. “My English is much better now and I’m trying to do everything to follow the North American way of life as a citizen, student and as a worker. I’m fortunate that I found BMCC and the museum, supportive places to learn my skills, and now I really am pursuing my dream.”





# Teachers as Learners

Through the BMCC Teaching Academy, professors support each other in developing their strategies.

As students progress, teachers evolve through academic research, collaborations with colleagues, and initiatives such as the BMCC Teaching Academy, which bring professors, or Teaching Fellows, together to reexamine their approaches. Guided by a Master Teacher, they observe and discuss each other's classes, addressing gaps in student learning and other classroom issues.

"Many of us tend to get good evaluations from students," says Anastassios Rigopoulos, a film documentarian and Media Arts and Technology Professor, "but we have this nagging sense that those evaluations don't tell the whole story."

Rigopoulos is a Teaching Fellow along with his colleagues Revathi Iyengar, an organic chemist and Professor of Science; Chun-Yi Peng, a socio-linguist and Professor of Modern Languages, and Erica Campbell, a poet and Professor of English. Master Teacher Judith Yancey, whose focus is language pedagogy and who teaches in BMCC's Academic Literacy and Linguistics Department, leads the group.

"I like the fact that we all come from different disciplines," says Peng. "Seeing how teachers from other fields strategize to help students learn

is enlightening for me." What the group has in common, he says, is a commitment to address learning barriers that transcend content. His colleague Iyengar agrees. "We all have students in the back of the room," she says. "How do we get them to talk?"

In Iyengar's case, feedback from the Teaching Academy "helped me explore simple changes in teaching a conceptual subject like chemistry," she says. "The concepts build in a sequential way, and students must stitch them together into a larger picture. This is true for many disciplines."

Campbell, who teaches writing, points out that the academy's "non-evaluative" observations "have helped me be less evaluative with my students, as well. The anxiety that evaluations can produce is an issue in writing, a practice steeped in 'correctness'."

As Yancey puts it, feedback within the Teaching Academy is intended to be descriptive; not judging. "We're looking at what happens when we make small changes in the classroom, and staying aware of what students are doing," she says. Iyengar adds that since joining the academy, "I've become brave enough to take more risks."



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199 CHAMBERS STREET

NEW YORK, NY 10007

