

An Evaluation of
The Odyssey Project
(Champaign-Urbana)

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Prepared for:

**Odyssey Project,
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The Odyssey Project

The Odyssey Project (OP) is an Illinois-based adaptation of the Bard College Clemente Course begun in 1995. The Clemente Course aimed to provide low-income individuals with access to college-level education in the humanities. The Clemente Course consists of four core content subjects: U.S. History, Literature, Art History and Philosophy, plus Critical Thinking and Writing. The Clemente course has been delivered more than 100 times in 14 different states. Typically students taking a Clemente course pay nothing for tuition or books and attend classes in a cordial non-campus environment. They receive college credits if they attend and complete the work required for the course. No grades are given.

The Odyssey Project began in Chicago in 2000, then spread to Springfield and finally to Champaign-Urbana in 2006. According to the Odyssey Project website, OP is “founded on the premise that liberal education is education to make people free, and it proceeds on the conviction that engagement with the humanities can offer individuals a way out of poverty by fostering habits of sustained reflection and skills of communication and critical thinking.”[\[1\]](#)

In an undated funding proposal to the Illinois Humanities Council, the project’s “goals, objectives and outcomes” were stated as follows:

- To provide high-quality humanities education to low-income adults
- To begin each class with 25-30 students, to graduate at least 60% of the students who begin the project and to maintain an 80% attendance rate
- To continue follow-up with graduates in order to assess the long-term impact of the course for grant-seeking, evaluation, and program planning purposes.

The Champaign-Urbana (C-U) OP began in academic year 2006-07 largely at the initiative of Assistant English Professor John Marsh, who served as the program’s director for three years. Marsh believed the university had a responsibility to reach students beyond the traditional target group. He set out to create a program to reach adult learners in Champaign-Urbana and discovered Odyssey Chicago. With funding from the Illinois Humanities Council and the University of Illinois, the Odyssey Project opened its doors in 2006-07. Since its inception in Champaign-Urbana, Odyssey has resided administratively within the Illinois Project for Research in the Humanities (IPRH).

Structure and activities of the project

Odyssey follows the Bard Clemente program, offering two of the core classes per semester. Students who complete the courses receive six academic credits which are transferable to a number of institutions. A Critical Thinking and Writing (CTW) course is offered in support sessions of the content courses at various points in both semesters.

The criteria for students' admission are: a high school diploma or G.E.D. and a desire to access college level study. In addition, students must qualify as low income, meaning a household income less than 150% of the poverty level. The project does not verify income.

Once admitted students receive free tuition, notebooks, pens and books. Additional benefits include bus tokens, flash drives and child care at the classroom site for those in need.

Recruitment of students has encompassed a wide variety of methods. In the early years OP relied largely on media releases, along with meetings with management of community-based organizations and social service providers. More recently, recruitment targeted a broader spectrum of groups with the aim of speaking directly with members or users rather than management. In addition, Odyssey Chicago has done publicity for the project via the print media and the production of pamphlets. The Champaign-Urbana project expressed an interest in doing some of their own media work as well but have not yet worked out the details with Chicago.

Students typically enroll for one academic year (two semesters), although in 2009-10 some students were allowed to enroll for the second semester only.

A range of instructors has taught at Odyssey, varying from senior academics to Ph.D. students. Faculty recruitment has focused on approaching relevant departments with requests for qualified and willing instructors. With the exception of Critical Thinking and Writing, subject instructors have changed from year to year. Though no core subject faculty have taught in consecutive years, three have come back to teach their course a second time. Odyssey does not hire faculty directly. Funding through the Chancellor's office provides money to "buy out" services with a stipend roughly equal to the money needed to hire an adjunct for a semester. Beginning in 2007-08, the university allotted money for graduate student assistants to do administrative work. The university also supported a half-time Director's post for the first three years. Upon Director John Marsh's departure from the U of I at the end of academic year 2008-09, the salary funds were withdrawn. For 2009-10, Odyssey has functioned with a volunteer Director, Professor Dale Bauer from the English Department. A new volunteer Director, Cris Mayo from Gender and Women's Studies and Educational Policy Studies, will take over for 2010-11.

All Odyssey classes take place at the Douglass Branch of the Champaign Public Library in a room that belongs to the Parks District. The branch library is part of the Douglass Center, a central institution for the community in that area and of special significance to African Americans. The classroom used is spacious, sunny, and offers considerable though not flashy infrastructure, including Internet connection for presentations by the instructors. There are no computers available for student use.

Funding for Odyssey comes from three main sources:

- the Chancellor's Office funds instructor buyouts and accreditation through Bard
- the Illinois Humanities Council covers student expenses - books, supplies, child care, transport

- the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences supports wages for two graduate assistants

The project also generates small ad hoc grants from university- and community-based groups for items like food at graduation and tickets for students to attend plays on campus.

Why an Evaluation?

No evaluation of Odyssey Champaign-Urbana has ever been conducted. Though the Chicago office provides guidelines and forms for ongoing internal assessment, the Champaign-Urbana program has not always followed this plan. Two issues lent urgency to this evaluation: problems of retaining students and the lack of follow up on Odyssey graduates. These issues were directly related to the capacity of the project to meet the goals, objectives and outcomes stated above. Brief comments on each of these two issues will be offered here.

Retention of students

The challenge of retaining students for the entire academic year was a dominant concern throughout the first three years of the project. While following the broad dictates of the Bard Clemente Course and the OP guidelines from Chicago, each year participants dwindled from a full classroom at the outset to a handful of students by year's end. 2008-09 had the lowest retention rate, with only six students graduating after an initial enrolment of 25. By contrast, in 2009-2010, the situation at Champaign-Urbana changed dramatically. As the second semester opened, 18 students of the original 32 remained. By the end of the academic year, 17 of those marched in the graduation ceremony. In the course of a more general project evaluation, there was also a need to explore specifically what factors contributed to improved retention rates in 2009-2010.

Need for follow up information on Odyssey participants

Apart from the issue of retention, a fundamental notion underlying Odyssey is the capacity of humanities education to improve peoples' lives, in particular to help lift them out of poverty and help them see beyond present life conditions and look for pathways to further post-secondary education. During its first three years, the Odyssey Project did no systematic follow up of former students. Hence, the contribution of Odyssey to the improvement of their lives could not be assessed. This evaluation sought to fill that gap.

Design and Implementation of the Evaluation

The evaluator planned to begin the process by attending all Odyssey classes for the first month of the spring semester. Through this activity, the evaluator would gain firsthand experience of the content and method of the academic program as well as build a rapport with students and faculty whose support and participation would be central to the evaluation.

During that period he also planned to survey all project documentation, draw up a plan for the evaluation, and form an advisory committee for the exercise.

The evaluation would include quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative side would focus on examining retention rates and the numbers of graduates continuing with post-secondary education or other life-improving activities. Retention rates would assist in quantifying the dropout problem, while tracking graduates' post-Odyssey experience would measure the project's success in improving peoples' lives. The evaluator would rely on OP records as well as interviews with former students as sources of information on past students.

The qualitative side would attempt a holistic portrait and analysis of the course content, pedagogy, management practices, and ethos of the project. The evaluator would supplement his classroom observations with individual and focus group interviews of present and past students, faculty and graduate assistants. While all faculty were not targeted, the plan was to interview at least two from each year and one person from each of the four content subjects offered in the program.

The evaluator designed separate protocols for interviews with each of these groups. (See Appendix A which also includes the consent form signed by interviewees.)

The first phase of the evaluation went according to design. The evaluator attended all classes for the first month. An advisory team was formed, comprising two U of I faculty: Professor Jennifer Greene of the Educational Psychology Department and Professor Clarence Lang of African American Studies and History. A plan of action for the evaluation exercise was drawn up (see Appendix B).[\[2\]](#)

The evaluator also completed the project document analysis which included a generic funding proposal, planning documents, course-related materials, student data, a few monthly reports from the Director, and information about the Odyssey Project nationally. This basic information gathering included lengthy telephone discussions with the Director of Odyssey in Chicago, Amy Thomas Elder, as well as conversations with faculty director Dale Bauer and Kerry Pimblott, the 2009-10 Graduate Assistant responsible for recruiting and administrative work.

Thirty minute individual interviews were conducted with six current students during March and April. Three students filled in written forms in May. In addition, a focus group interview with seven current students was completed on March 16. These were all done at the Frederick Douglass Center before class. Students were eager to participate and spoke freely and easily. Answers were recorded by the evaluator on a laptop.

Past and present faculty also participated willingly. Altogether eight faculty were interviewed out of a total of twelve who have taught in Odyssey. Two of these interviews were done via telephone since the interviewees were out of the state. The others took place at various venues on the U of I campus. The interviews included faculty from each year and subject, as per the plan. (A list of interviews, dates and venues appears as Appendix C.)

The evaluator also interviewed all three graduate assistants who have worked in the project.

E-mails were sent out to all past students for whom such information was available. OP had email addresses for 31 out of 69 past students on their records. Past students had the option of responding via email or scheduling a personal interview. The evaluator also asked present students to forward contact details of any past students with whom they were in touch.

Only six people responded to the emails. Current students produced one name. Out of this, two face-to-face interviews took place, and two people answered questions via email. Kerry Pimblott attempted to solicit some grad student volunteers to phone past students but none was forthcoming.

Despite this important shortcoming, a wealth of information was obtained through the evaluation process, sufficient to gain considerable knowledge about some key areas of interest for the evaluation.

Overall Findings

Odyssey can make a powerful difference in participants' lives.

The overwhelming common thread which ran through the interviews with faculty, students and administrators was the importance of the Odyssey Project, the special place it occupied in peoples' education and life experience. A selection of quotes will illustrate this dominant theme.

Faculty views

"I'm amazed at the excitement and enthusiasm of the students; their sense of an intellectual community is stunning." (Dale Bauer, Literature Instructor and Director)

"I think the program is important, it's an important part of me, of who I am. I identify myself as an adult learner, a returning student." (Michael Burns, Graduate Assistant and Critical Thinking and Writing Instructor, 2008-10)

"There were fabulous students in Odyssey." (Cris Mayo, Philosophy Instructor)

"Teaching at Odyssey made me a better teacher and made me look more seriously at teaching. When I look at the students I can't help but care how they respond. After working all day, they come here and they're tired. I care. Sometimes when I look at my 19 year old undergrads I don't feel the same...the term 'life experience' means more to me now."

(Todd Kukla, Philosophy Instructor, 2009-10)

Students' views, past and present

“I have a list of books to read. .. I feel smarter. I can read Stephanie Plum in a different way... every white person should read Black Boy.” (Linda Ellison-Smith, student 2009-10)

“I like the unconventional type class style. More geared toward people with life experience. ..Other people give you a boost because they want to do something.” (Lisa Causley, student 2009-10)

“I think it [OP] prepared me in life. I used to wait to the last minute to do everything. I said I work better under pressure...I didn't realize how being a procrastinator wastes so much time.” (Shawnika Lucks, student 2006-7)

“I've grown a whole lot, especially with my writing...For many people in Odyssey Project it's like a beginning, a whole new world...a blessing...I realize I have a voice. I actually make some sense...You have to dig deep in your soul to find your voice.” (Darlene Wilson-Johnson, student 2009-10)

“Now I do read, interact more with my childrens' homework because I'm more positive and able.” (Anonymous student, 2009-10)

I've met new people in my community. I'm learning about my history...I'm also able to discuss philosophy armed with information and ask questions.” (Malik A. Abdullah, student 2009-10)

“It's very beneficial to have it in the community. So many people could benefit. It brings together different races, cultures, ages. We have to adapt in the class room...I wish they had this when I was a teen mom.” (Tanya Weatherly, student 2009-10)

“Some things I knew already but I saw them from a different point of view. Philosophy showed me new things that I didn't know before like a book where women were in charge, a society where there wasn't war gave me ideas about how women would rule.” (Julio Rosario, student 2008-09)

The comments above reflect the general conclusion that most students and faculty drew: that Odyssey Project had improved the lives of students both in terms of academic skills and knowledge and personal development. However, while comments show this more subjective success, the Odyssey Project began with certain goals, objectives and outcomes in mind. Let us now turn to an examination of how OP has performed in relation to those.

Findings Related to Project Objectives

This section reports on evaluation findings related to the OP objectives of (1) providing a high quality education to low-income adults, (2) retaining participants for the whole year, and (3) following up on graduates.

(1) The Odyssey Project in C-U has provided high quality humanities education to low-income adults.

Recruiting low-income learners

Students selected appeared to conform to the profile of Odyssey's intended beneficiaries. In the first two years, recruitment relied mainly on mailings of the Odyssey handbook and fliers to community-based organizations along with articles in the *News Gazette*. John Marsh recalled that, in the first year, they didn't have enough students to constitute a class until the *News Gazette* ran an article seemingly at the urging of Odyssey people in Chicago.

However, in year three, outreach began to extend to a wider network of organizations. Then in 2009-2010 graduate assistants Tara Lyons, Michael Burns and Kerry Pimblott made personal visits to a host of organizations and spoke not only to administrators but also to meetings of constituents. The organizations included Planned Parenthood, Women's Center, Food Pantries, The United Way, Human Services Council, and the Vineyard. Odyssey recruiters also attended a number of events in various housing projects in Champaign-Urbana. The C-U recruiters wanted to develop their own contacts with local media but this was discouraged by the Odyssey office in Chicago.

The increased outreach was situated in a context of desperation. With the departure of John Marsh and the withdrawal of the salary of the director, the entire project was in jeopardy. As Kerry Pimblott put it:

“When I came back this year, things were on the verge of collapse. We just needed ten students to make it keep going. It was just a question of survival.”

Perhaps surprisingly, the project has done more than survive. This extended outreach yielded a far bigger pool of applicants (more than 90 for the 2009-2010 program). The final selection of students for this year involved lengthy interviews informing students of the rigorous nature of the Odyssey academic program and their need to prepare for a year of hard work. Though Odyssey required no income verification for students, the sites of their recruitment and the general economic profile of the students obtained through interviews and personal interaction with the evaluator indicate the students are largely from the intended beneficiary groups.

Three further issues about the recruits are worth noting. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of Odyssey students have been women. Of the 112 students enrolled over the four years, 95 (85%) were female. As a number of women noted in interviews, Odyssey provided a window for

mothers whose children had grown. As Lisa Causley (2009-10) put it, “all my kids are in college or graduated. It was my opportunity to do something now.”

Secondly, the students are overwhelmingly of the “mature age” category. The average age of students whose age was recorded from 2007-2009 was 38. Clearly this is a constituency who generally do not attend the University of Illinois.

Thirdly, unlike Odyssey Chicago, the Champaign-Urbana OP has kept no records of students’ racial or ethnic affiliations. However, it seems that the students have been somewhat diverse. In 2009-2010 the majority of the students are African American. But in the previous year, not a single African American graduated. Previous cohorts have also apparently included a number of immigrants from other countries, though no official data on this were available.

The quality of the humanities courses

Nearly everyone interviewed praised the content and teaching within Odyssey. My own review of course syllabi coupled with faculty comments reflect conceptual parity with first-year university level courses. Faculty repeatedly remarked on the high level of discussion and debate of the students.

“I’m sure we did stuff they never considered. I was surprised at how quickly they picked up stuff that was so foreign. They pick this up much quicker than U of I students. For example, Plato’s idea of the soul. It’s really abstract.” (Todd Kukla, Philosophy Instructor, 2009-10)

“I found students much more engaged than U of I undergrads. [Odyssey students] were more interested in pushing their thinking like a grad seminar ...also they saw how the ideas in the course were useful for planning their lives, a certain drive I didn’t see in my grad students.” (Cris Mayo, Philosophy Instructor, 2008-09)

“I was impressed with how people made connections, how they reached across readings...pulling things together to make analogies and contrasts.” (Audrey Petty, Literature Instructor, 2007-08)

Students commented on how the material impacted their way of thinking:

“One of my greatest fears was when I heard the word philosophy. This material scared me. I realized I am a part of philosophy. I really enjoy philosophy.” (Darlene Wilson-Johnson, 2009-10)

“Initially I thought Black Boy was too thick. Then when I started reading it, I couldn’t put it down. It’s someone’s life from wherever to wherever...Wright was a why person, I’m a why person. You won’t always get answers. There are enough things in that book that I have seen, heard, experienced...that tells me it’s valid.” (Anonymous student, 2009-10)

“The most important thing I’ve gained from Odyssey is an appreciation for the humanities, respecting other peoples’ interpretation of the humanities, having open conversation, respect for other peoples’ opinions and experiences.” (Janice Walker, 2009-10)

“I gained the knowledge of historical relevance and how it relates to the present and the techniques of analytical writing, critical thinking, and self-discipline.” (Angela Elzy, 2009-10)

“The perspectives I was exposed to with a community peer group enhanced each class from the pages of books ...to our real world.” (Shamika Goddard, 2009-10)

“My writing skills greatly improved as well as my confidence.” (Joe Trotter, 2008-09)

The challenges of writing

While students’ responses showed great enthusiasm for the content and process of Odyssey classes, their responses on the subject of writing were mixed. Several students expressed a genuine hatred of writing. One believed that fear of writing was one of the main reasons why some students dropped out. “They got a block,” was how she put it.

Beginning in 2008-09, Michael Burns attempted to address students’ difficulties with writing by changing the orientation of the Critical Thinking and Writing (CTW) class. Up to that point, the CTW classes were stand alone, de-linked from the content and assignments of the other two academic subjects. Burns de-emphasized specific work for his class and focused the CTW sessions on the assignments required in the other classes. In 2009-2010, he dropped separate assignments for CTW altogether.

In Burns’ assessment, this imbedding of skills into the course work yielded a much improved writing performance and also helped students to cope better with their academic subjects. In addition, Burns consulted with subject teachers concerning their writing assignments, providing advice in terms of frequency and length of assignments as well as how to construct appropriate prompts. Jim Barrett, one of the instructors who worked closely with Michael, argued that this attention to skills was the most important factor contributing to the higher retention rate in 2009-10.

Despite these improvements, few Odyssey students have developed the capacity to sustain essays of the length typically required of university students. While performance is uneven, according to faculty, many students struggle with basic structural and syntax issues, and only a few can comfortably handle an assignment of more than two pages. This issue will be explored further below.

Two more issues related to the quality of the education warrant discussion here: the requirements of the Clemente course and classroom methodology.

The Clemente Course approach

A major notion informing the Clemente approach is that key subjects and texts are essential to humanities knowledge. Hence, the Clemente Course mandates the teaching of Plato and Shakespeare. This requirement has prompted some discomfort from instructors (and at times students) on two levels. Some instructors cited their own lack of expertise in these classical works. Two of the literature faculty said their expertise was far from Shakespeare and believed they might be disadvantaging students by teaching less familiar materials. Another faculty member argued the works of Shakespeare and Plato were inappropriate starting points for low-income adult learners. She argued for a pedagogy that moved from the familiar to the less familiar. In the opinion of one philosophy instructor the “great books approach was all built around white European culture.” He tried to build in a greater “cultural sensitivity” to his classes and felt some students might share those biases.[\[3\]](#)

Another aspect of this curriculum debate emerged in the history class. At one point there was a discussion about the need to include some local history in the syllabus. The instructor responded to this request enthusiastically and made a change in his program to include local material. However, there is an uncertainty as to whether that change is in line with Clemente Course approach.

Classroom methodology

Surprisingly, the majority of the instructors claim not to deviate widely from the method they use to teach U of I classes. Yet, at least two adaptations have been almost universal. First, the quantity of reading and writing is reduced. Second, the instructors don't assume the students have done the reading. Therefore, materials are often read aloud in class. Instructors cited two reasons for this: (1) students' varying level of familiarity with the discourse and demands of academia, (2) students' commitments outside the class especially to work and family matters.

This raises two important questions. First, if students at Odyssey Project are not given similar reading and writing loads as their first-year counterparts elsewhere, are they being adequately prepared for further study? Students and faculty were mixed in their responses to this specific question. While nearly every student believed s/he had developed greatly in terms of knowledge and conceptual understanding, the student focus group interviewees expressed reservations. One participant (Linda Ellison-Smith) said she wasn't sure if Odyssey was trying to “wake up the students or help them prepare for further study.” In her face-to-face interview she was even more specific: “You guys need a clear mission statement and a clear vision. Giving them a social consciousness or teaching them to go on?” Janice Walker, 2009-10 student, was more equivocal:

“If people want to go forward, this is a wonderful program to get that feel for returning. I don't know if it prepares them but it gives the flavor of what it's about. It's a great starting point.”

Yet students such as Darlene Wilson-Johnson, Geraldine Witkovsky, and Deborah Fairley confidently responded that Odyssey had prepared them.

Faculty were also ambivalent on this issue. While noting the students' high level of understanding of ethical issues, the economy and the political system, history instructor Jim Barrett said he was a "little guarded about" the preparedness of students for further study. Rebecca Ginsburg (Art History) was more positive, arguing that the introduction to texts opened their minds as well as the familiarization with new disciplines like art history. Audrey Petty (Literature 2006-07) thought that the "close readings of works" combined with examining passages and rhetorical strategies provided the students with skills that could "carry over into lots of fields."

A second issue which emerges from the classroom methodology is the relationship between Odyssey Project and broader notions of adult education. The pedagogy advocated by the Bard Clemente Course revolves largely around the Socratic method, a teacher at the center asking questions which probe the reasoning of the student. Project documentation also claims that the humanities have the power to lift people out of poverty.^[4] These are very large conceptual assumptions which OP participants have not explored. In fact, within Odyssey there has been little if any discussion of this Socratic approach or any other approach toward adult education, much less the role of Odyssey in the community where it operates. While nearly every faculty member remarked positively on how the students linked course material to their life experience only two explicitly mentioned this as part of their methodology. Furthermore, only one faculty member noted how his experience in teaching at Odyssey affected his classroom practice at the U of I. There was little sense as to how the educational work at Odyssey linked to the university.

Art history instructor Rebecca Ginsburg noted this engagement was a key issue for Odyssey. She argued that the OP approach seemed to go "only one way," from the campus to the community. In her view, Odyssey was missing out on a number of opportunities. She noted that the program provided a chance for faculty and students to "think aloud about pedagogy and curriculum, about purposes of higher education, especially for non-traditional students." She believed that the project had a responsibility to challenge the campus community about what was going on, "to let people know there's life in North Urbana." In her view, this could only be done by building Odyssey into a "teaching and learning community," not just a group of unconnected people who attended or taught classes.

Michael Burns shared some of these sentiments. His concern was that the barriers between the university and the community should "become at least permeable." He echoed Ginsburg's opinion that Odyssey should play a role in pressuring the university as to how it carries out its mission of community engagement.

(2) Odyssey Project retention rates and longer-term benefits remain unknown.

The other two goals of the project relate more to the quantitative aspect of the evaluation.

- To begin each class with 25-30 students, to graduate at least 60% of the students who begin the project, and to maintain an 80% attendance rate
- To continue follow-up with graduates in order to assess the long-term impact of the course for grant-seeking, evaluation, and program planning purposes

Neither of these goals could be adequately assessed due to the record keeping practices within the project. There was no data base which included the details of students in the project and their academic results. (Notably, there were no data on student graduation from OP. Existing student information was in disparate documents which had to be collated through the generous efforts of Kerry Pimblott, the current graduate assistant.)

The lack of consistent, complete student records also hampered making contact with former students for this evaluation. Such communication was further complicated by the nature of the constituency of Odyssey. A large percentage of the enrollees are somewhat transient. Their addresses and phone numbers change; their use of email is spotty. Hence I was unable to get an accurate picture of how many students had continued their post-secondary education or changed their lives in other ways after Odyssey. I got anecdotal reports of students who had graduated from Parkland College or who had entered U of I, but nothing firsthand. Furthermore, Amy Thomas Elder, Director of Odyssey in Chicago, reported that their tracer study of Odyssey Project graduates from ten years of the operation showed that many of them only continued their studies some three to four years after completing OP.

The best I could generate in terms of quantitative data was a table of yearly throughput, presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Extant data on OP student participation

Year	No. Enrolled	No. of graduates	% Completion Rate
2006-07	24	11	46
2007-08	19	7	36
2008-09	25	7	28
2009-10	32	17	53

I should note that the number of graduates may be questionable in the first three years. At least two faculty members interviewed noted that they got a “surprise” at graduation when they saw students receiving credits who had not completed their classes (in one case the faculty member said the student came to her class once and “fell asleep”).

Moreover, there are no records of attendance during the course of the first three academic years. Apparently such information was recorded manually and not retained. Thus, precise accounts of the dropout rates at various points in the academic year are not available. The few monthly Director’s reports available along with observations from faculty and past students indicate that there was often a rapid drop off in the first month, followed by a gradual attrition thereafter.

Overall this retention rate was far below that of the Clemente Course nationally, which boasted a 62% completion rate with 54% of all enrollees earning college credits[5].

For the C-U Odyssey project, digital attendance records were kept for the first time in 2009-2010. This record not only enabled better record keeping but provided the opportunity to replace students who dropped out early with those on the waiting list.

Interview responses highlighted two broad categories of those who failed to remain in the program. The first group was those for whom factors outside of Odyssey precluded their continued attendance. Boshra Jamali, who enrolled in 2007, said she didn't graduate because she was "busy with my children." Other students had to leave due to changes in working hours or health issues. Julio Rosario (2008-09) cited "economic reasons" as the main factor.

Yet the students who did complete tended to stress questions of the preparedness of those who dropped out. "Some people weren't ready personally" was how Darlene Wilson-Johnson put it. Other respondents echoed this notion, emphasizing that many who entered Odyssey lacked the self-discipline or will to complete the course work. "If you aim to come," said Lisa Causley, "you will force yourself to come."

Student Deborah Fairley noted that perhaps at the recruitment process more emphasis needed to be given to how much work was involved in tackling Odyssey. Similarly, several members of the focus group recalled Odyssey advertising that said the only prerequisites were a high school diploma or G.E.D. and the ability "to read a newspaper." They argued that this gave a false impression, citing many people they knew who could read a newspaper who would never be able to cope with the amount or level of work in Odyssey.

2008-09 student Julio Rosario thought some students dropped out because the Odyssey Project did not offer concrete links to further education, training or employment opportunities. He cited his own case. He easily completed the Odyssey course and found the information interesting and useful but lacked the funds to continue his studies. As he put it, "the classes are nice, but after that what?"

The focus group participants made similar comments. One student said Odyssey was "uplifting and a let down. I end up back where I started. There should be an ongoing process beyond this."

In terms of the higher retention rates in 2009-10, a number of factors emerged. The contribution of integrating writing into content courses was noted earlier, as was the more extensive recruitment. A further important tactic was personal phone calls to absentees. In the past, Odyssey staff occasionally phoned frequent absentees. In the current year, Michael Burns phoned every single student each time s/he missed a class. He stressed that these were not harassing phone calls, but supportive:

"I used an affirmation approach not 'oh, you're falling behind now' but rather 'we need you. You bring something to the class that no one else can bring.'"

He believed that at least a few students were “bolstered by our efforts to contact them personally.”

Kerry Pimblott noted one other factor in her interview: offering Philosophy second term. She observed that many students found the reading and terminology of the subject very difficult. She suggested they would be better prepared to tackle Philosophy after completing one semester in Odyssey.

Discussion and Implications

Key findings

The Odyssey Project in Champaign-Urbana has implemented the Bard Clemente Course for the intended target group. Interviewees involved in the program showed an extraordinary level of commitment and enthusiasm for the importance of taking university-level humanities classes to non-traditional learners among the low income population of Champaign-Urbana.

The fundamentals of the project have been carried out. Students have been enrolled for each of the four years, faculty have run courses as planned, books and other learning materials have been provided, as well as additional support such as bus tokens and child care. Students have also gained considerable knowledge and personal development from these courses.

While every past and present learner interviewed praised the program, Odyssey has important shortcomings. Dropout rates have been high during the first three years, and no tracking of former students has been done. While the present evaluation intended to contact more students, inadequate record keeping, limitations of resources, compounded by the somewhat transient nature of the Odyssey target population, made it difficult to reach a broader sample of former students. The overall impact of Odyssey on past students remains largely unknown.

At present the future of the project also appears somewhat uncertain. Through incredibly effective work by Dale Bauer and Graduate Assistants Michael Burns, Tara Lyons and Kerry Pimblott, OP has gracefully weathered the storm of the departure of the founding director and delivered the project’s most successful year. Great steps have been made to improve the retention rate and the writing skills aspect of the program, as well as updating student records.

But this has not been enough to secure the project’s future. This will likely revolve around three factors:

1) Availability of funding

Operational funds for 2010-11 appear to be secure. Beyond that there are lots of uncertainties. Dale Bauer and Kerry Pimblott have written a number of proposals during the present academic year to access funding for the future. These have included salary funding for a Community Humanist/Director to manage the project, as well as money for providing IT training for students. At present the prospects are unknown.

2) Continuing the current year's high retention rates

A number of factors have been cited which contributed to better retention this year. If this year's performance can be replicated or even improved, the chances of continuation will be greatly enhanced.

3) Building the Odyssey Project as an organization and network

Odyssey needs to expand its presence in the university and community as a force for educational change. This means building on its greatest resource – the faculty and students of the program. This calls for some different thinking about how the organization runs. Better record keeping and administrative systems are essential, but the project needs to involve past students in promoting and running the program and find ways to profile its educational interventions to the campus community. This organization building will greatly contribute to the Odyssey Project's capacity to access funding and attract appropriate faculty and volunteers.

Action steps for consideration

1) Continue the practices from the current year that have contributed to higher retention rates:

- a. Meet with members of organizations and users of services targeted for recruitment.
- b. Integrate critical thinking and writing with the assignments and requirements of the four content courses.
- c. Use digital attendance records and follow up with students immediately when they are absent.
- d. Use the waiting list to replace students who drop out early in the first term and to fill places at the beginning of the second term.
- e. Offer Philosophy during the second term.

2) Make more effective use of students in the project. They are Odyssey's greatest untapped resource. To consider:

- a. Take past students to recruitment meetings with potential enrollees, especially to organizations where they are known.
- b. Use past students for interviews on local radio stations.
- c. Invite past students to participate in the orientation of new students and new faculty.

- d. Consider setting up a mentoring system where new students are paired with a past student for support.
- e. Involved currently enrolled students in more certain decision-making related to the project, for example:
 - i. Electing their own keynote speaker at graduation.
 - ii. Planning the details of the graduation ceremonies.
 - iii. Deciding how to handle outside researchers/evaluators/media people.
 - iv. Deciding what student-produced material goes on the website.
 - v. Considering setting up a representative structure, wherein representatives would liaise with the administration if problems arise with instructors, content, or other aspects of the courses.

3) Build Odyssey Project as a network with a specific history and ethos. For example:

- a. Profile the organization and build pride among student and faculty participants via reproducing student work for the web page, producing Odyssey t-shirts, and organizing public forums on the Odyssey experience and its relevance for the university and community. Such forums could be used to recruit student volunteers with specific skills which could be helpful to the project (e.g., web page generation and maintenance, data base management, marketing).
- b. Organize internal seminars where teaching and learning within Odyssey would be interrogated. In particular, there is a need for a more thorough orientation of faculty at the beginning of the year. Such a session should link up incoming faculty with past instructors and students, focus on what has worked and has not worked in Odyssey, and how teaching at Odyssey is both different from and complementary to teaching on the University of Illinois campus. The session should be a workshop, not a briefing.
- c. Build connections with other initiatives that do similar things. Odyssey needs to break out of its isolation. Immediate targets for linkages should be:
 - i. The Education Justice Project (EJP) which does similar work in the Danville Correctional Center. Odyssey would greatly benefit from sharing experiences with EJP, in particular how EJP prepares their instructors and how they reflect on their educational practice.
 - ii. Other venues where the Bard Clemente Course has run. Sharing of syllabi and other documentation would be extremely helpful in determining the parameters of the Clemente Course and may also provide some ideas for sources and/or methods of obtaining funding.

4) Build up a more efficient system of record keeping, particularly student records.

A method of following up past students needs to be put in place as part of the annual work cycle of the Project. Past students and graduate student volunteers could be used to carry this out.

5) Develop more links with local colleges and training programs for Odyssey graduates.

6) Develop a summer program for Odyssey graduates to enhance their computer skills.[\[6\]](#)

Appendix A: Odyssey Evaluation Protocols

Focus Group Protocol

1. How did you hear about Odyssey?
2. What did you expect from Odyssey?
3. Has OP met your expectations?
4. What are the strong points of Odyssey? What have you gained?
5. What else did you gain from OP?
6. Has Odyssey improved your writing skills? Explain.
7. Has Odyssey prepared you for further study? Explain
8. Suggestions for improving Odyssey. (possible prompts: more individual help with writing and career counseling, different subjects, different styles of teaching, more relations with past students, better facilities)
9. Any other comment?

Student Evaluation Form

Oral Interview

1. Why did you enroll in Odyssey?
2. What were your expectations from OP?
3. Have your expectations been met?
4. What is the most important thing you have gained from Odyssey Project?
5. What else have you gained from OP?
6. Do you think Odyssey has prepared you for further study?
7. What was your favorite reading? Discussion? Assignment?
8. What was your least favorite reading? Discussion? Assignment?
9. What steps do you think Odyssey could take to reduce the number of students who drop out?
10. What else could be done to improve Odyssey?
11. Any other comment?

Protocol for Faculty Interviews

1. What class did you teach and what year(s)?
2. Roughly how many students started and finished your class?
3. How were you oriented by Odyssey staff? Meetings? Documents? Training sessions? How extensive was the orientation?
4. Were you briefed on the nature of the Bard Clemente courses and its perspective on Liberal Arts education as a liberatory force?
5. How did your pedagogy for your Odyssey classes differ from what you use in mainstream U of I classes?
6. Were you able to complete your syllabus as planned? If not, why not?
7. Do you think your class was successful? Explain.
8. Did you see development among your students as the class progressed? Explain.
9. How would you rate the students' responsiveness to the material and presentations?
10. Did you link up with the other teachers-those doing another academic subject or the teacher for Critical Thinking and Writing? Explain.
11. How much writing did you assign? What kind of written work were they required to complete? How was their overall performance in the written work? Did they improve as the term progressed
12. Do you think the Odyssey project helped prepare students for further tertiary level study? Explain
13. Do you think the students benefited from this class in other ways apart from academic preparedness? Explain.
14. Did you receive adequate administrative backup for your work?
15. What was the most memorable moment for you in teaching at Odyssey?
16. How do you think Odyssey Project could be improved?
17. Any other comment?

Past Student Evaluation Form

1. What year did you enroll in Odyssey?
2. Did you graduate?
3. If not, what factors led to you discontinuing your studies?
4. How did you hear about Odyssey Project?
5. Why did you enroll?
6. What were your expectations from Odyssey?
7. Did Odyssey Project meet your expectations? Why or why not?
8. What was the most important thing you gained from Odyssey?
9. What was the biggest problem you encountered in Odyssey ?
10. Do you think Odyssey Project adequately prepared you for further study? Why or why not?
11. Did you continue your studies after Odyssey?
If so, please tell us where you studied, what courses or degrees you pursued, and how far you went.
12. What steps do you think Odyssey could take to reduce the number of students who drop out?
13. What was your favorite class in Odyssey?

- Why was it your favorite?
14. What was your least favorite class in Odyssey?
Why was it your least favorite?
15. If you could change one things about Odyssey Project, what would it be?
Explain.
16. What else could be done to improve Odyssey?
17. Any other comment

Appendix B: Evaluation Plan

Plan for Odyssey Project Review

Goal: Complete a review and analysis of Odyssey Project activities and impact by May 8, 2010

Output: A 5-10 page evaluative report

Method: Review of relevant existing literature and documentation, interviews with past and present students, faculty and staff.

Plan of Action

Activity	Person Responsible	Time Frame
Review of existing documentation	James	Feb. 28
Establishing Advisory Group of U of I Faculty	James, Michael	Feb. 28
Recruitment of volunteers to assist	James, Kerry	Feb. 28
Complete data base of ex-students and faculty	James, Michael	Feb. 28
Develop protocol for focus group of current students	James	Feb. 28
Conduct interviews with past students and faculty	James, volunteers, present students	March 31
Focus group with present students	James	March 31
Interviews with past students	James, Michael, volunteers	April 10
Write up draft report and circulate to advisory group	James, advisory group, any others willing to read it	April 20
Write up final report	James	May 7

Appendix C: List of Interviews

Current Students (all at Douglass Library)

Linda Ellison-Smith, March 11
Janice Walker, March 11
Deborah Fairley, March 18
Anonymous student, March 30
Darlene Wilson-Johnson, April 6
Lisa Causley, April 13
Angela Elzy, May 4 (written form)
Shamika Goddard, May 4 (written form)
Malik A. Abdullah, May 4 (written form)

Focus Group Participants

March 16
Sandra Mitchell, Linda Ellison-Smith, Deborah Fairley, Angela Elzy, Geraldine Witkovsky,
Tanya Weatherly, Diana Bialeschki,

Past Students

Shawnika Lucks, March 30
Julio Rosario, April 8
Boshra Jamali, April 15 (email)
Joe Trotter, May 3 (email)

Faculty and Grad Assistants

Cris Mayo, March 8
Jim Barrett, March 9
Mark Leff, March 9
Rebecca Ginsburg, March 10
Audrey Petty, March 19
Kerry Pimblott, April 5
Tara Lyons, April 6
John Marsh, April 7
Michael Burns, April 12
Dale Bauer, April 19
Todd Kukla, April 22

APPENDIX D:

Consent to Act as a Human Research Subject

Evaluation of Odyssey Project

Purpose, Scope, and Benefits of Research

You are asked to participate in a research project that is designed to study the history of the Odyssey Project. The results of this research will aid in the development of practices to help improve the functioning of the Odyssey Project. This study involves group and individual interviews with past and present students and faculty.

Publication and Identifiability

The results of this research may be published in the form of journal articles, electronic publications, or books, and they may also be presented at professional conferences. I may quote from any comments you make in the interviews.

It is possible that you could be recognized by people who know you and happen to read, hear, or view these research presentations. To minimize the potential that you might be identified, I will remove your name and other identifying information from all published reports of this research, if that is your preference. **YES** [] **NO** [] Beyond the risk of identifiability, there are otherwise no anticipated risks to participation beyond those that exist in everyday life.

Your Rights

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate or discontinue participation at any time during the project, **even after you sign this form**. Your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will have no effect on your grades at, status at, or future relations with the University of Illinois.

Contact info

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact James Kilgore at (217) 778 2354 or jjincu@gmail.com. If at any time you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the Odyssey Project Office.

Please review and check either “Yes” or “No” for each of the following options before signing below.

- I agree that any portions of class observations may be used for written publications, electronic publications, and/or oral presentations associated with this research. **Yes** [] **No** []
- I agree that any portions of my personal interview may be used for written publications, electronic publications, and/or oral presentations associated with this research. **Yes** [] **No** []

I have read this informed consent form and checked the answers to the statements above, and I voluntarily agree to participate in the research.

Name: _____ Signature _____ Date: _____

[1] <http://www.prairie.org/OdysseyProject>, accessed April 24, 2010.

[2] The author expresses his gratitude to Professors Greene and Lang for their support and critical comments.

[3] Indeed in the opening session of the 2010 Philosophy class observed by the evaluator, one of the African American students contested the notion of Greece as the starting point of philosophy and pushed for an inclusion of some material on Egypt.

[4] John Marsh initiated some discussion of this with a paper published after his departure from Odyssey but to my knowledge these issues were never discussed by participants in the project. See “Neither Necessary nor Sufficient: Community Education and the Fight against Poverty.” *Pedagogy* 9.2 (2009): 205-215.

[5] These figures are from the Bard College Clemente course website, <http://clemente.bard.edu/about/>, accessed April 22, 2010

[6] At the time of the write up Odyssey received funding for an IT skill training program to begin in summer 2010.