

Summer 2004

Ms. Reidy,

Over the last few months, I've been actively planning for the next four years of my life by touring colleges from Chicago to Boston, in rural and urban areas. The whole process is, of course, overwhelming but I still have had time to reflect. I've tried to picture my life as a college student, walking through a grassy campus, dorming with a roommate and eating in dining halls. I've thought about the differences between the college experience and what I am used to, the high school experience. While all of the colleges I've visited have proven to have very different academic philosophies, there is one thing that unites them—the immense spirit of the student bodies.

While Bronx Science maintains a vibrant student community, there is very little which ties us together. Students shouldn't have to wait for college to experience this unity.

Many groups have proposed ideas to help invigorate the student organization. I would like to contribute an idea which will add much to our community. This is a proposal for a documentary project tentatively called "The Great Chalk Experiment" which will be sponsored, run and created by the Media Activism Club. Many club members have already expressed interest in the project, and we would greatly appreciate your support.

Thank you for helping us to make our student body a more spirited place!

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CC: Ms. Weissman, Mr. Kailin

What is the Great Chalk Experiment?

Colleges and Universities across the country have utilized a unique form of communication, which takes shape scrawled out across the brick and pavement paths of their campuses. Students are constantly using chalk as a medium to spread political messages, inform students of events and to display poetry and art.

Bronx Science has a very large concrete campus, accessible and used by hundreds of students every day. The Great Chalk Experiment would make ordinary sidewalk chalk widely available to the student body so that students can actively assert first amendment rights. While this may seem like a somewhat silly concept, the project goes much further. The Media Activism Club would like to attach chalk bins to the benches around the campus, and would then like to intensively film what happens through the course of a week. It is an experiment because there is a certain level of risk involved—what will students use the chalk for; writing poems? drawing pictures? expressing political views? advertising school events? sustaining active dialogues about important issues?

We've discussed the risks of the project thoroughly at Media Activism this year. We know that students may use the chalk to write profanity and the like, but we feel that the pursuit of the answers to our questions is more important. Our documentary will not just be about what happens when we give some 2800 students access to a medium of self-expression, but about students first amendment rights and about youth free expression in general. We have much research to complete, but we also have several committed students ready to take on a new project, and a very clear plan of action.

We've also taken advice from the student government, and would like to utilize the television sets currently available in almost every classroom. By mass producing copies of the DVD's of our documentary project, we would like to transmit our project to the student body during a homeroom session, perhaps by the beginning of the second semester. Below, the process is expounded upon in greater detail.

Project Preparations

At the first meeting of the Media Activism Club, students will receive data sheets which will ask members if they are interested in participating in the project. We will gather important information, such as free periods, free days and email addresses. Once we have this information, we will use further club meeting time to organize. We will, as we have done in years past during Media Activism Club, talk at length about youth free expression, using the media as a tool and about tools in documentary film making. Each student will go through a camera tutorial.

We will spend much of our pre-filming time conducting research to examine the role of youth in the media by visiting websites like Harlem Live's teen online magazine, mediachannel.org, FAIR's media critiques and many other sources. We will take a stand on the state of youth and the media issues today. Then, we will conduct on camera interviews with students around the school. We'll find out whether or not students think their voice is heard in school politics, and why they think it is not heard. We'll gauge the student body's attitude toward self-expression and the influence youth have in the media.

Project Logistics

Much of our time will also be spent setting up the logistics of the week of intensive filming. Ideally, we would like to film during the lunch periods and ninth period of each day during the week of intensive filming. To accomplish this, we will have students with the same free periods working in teams of 2-4.

Media Activism currently has on loan from Region One, three digital cameras, three microphones, headphones and camera bags. A complete set will be brought to school every day of this week (by the club president), and then transferred from group to group. Each student in the club and his/her parent will have to sign a contract which binds them to respecting the camera equipment. There will be a Great Chalk Experiment locker in a designated hallway which will contain five folders, one for each period of the day. Each folders will contain two digital blank tapes (bought with club dues money), interview questions, and a comprehensive list of instructions created by club members to help students get the best possible shots, interviews and footage.

Students will know the locker combination and will meet at the locker at the beginning of their free periods to get the camera equipment from the prior group and to pick up their folders.

Hopefully, if we can obtain the cooperation of the principal and custodial staff, we can nail plastic boxes of chalk to benches around the campus. Each box will contain the chalk and laminated instructions advising students to use the chalk and telling them about the project. Maybe, we can attach a small flag to each box so that they will catch student's eyes.

A well-coordinated week of intensive filming

Students will primarily work in teams with similar free periods. At the beginning of fourth period every day of the week, the club president will meet with the first group at the project locker to give them the camera equipment. They will also take their groups' folder and will then go out onto the campus to interview, gather footage and assess what students are doing with the chalk and should get 15-20 minutes of footage. At the end of the period, they will return to the locker and pass the equipment to the 5th period crew which will do the same. This will be done during every lunch period, as well as during ninth period for 5 days. Groups may not find anything interesting to tape during their period, but they should still bring the camera out to the campus with them when they eat lunch.

Post-Production

Several club members already know how to edit digital video from past years. We will continue to train students to edit video and will use the equipment loaned to us from region one. Post-Production tends to be the most difficult and time consuming process. We will leave the chalk out on the campus and may bring the camera back periodically to conduct more interviews and to assess the affect the chalk has on student's free speech.

Spreading the word

Once the project has been created, we would like to screen it to the entire school, using the technique utilized by the SO last year for elections. We can use club dues money to make several copies of the DVD and then distribute them to

homeroom teachers on a designated day. We will reserve a special place on the Media Activism Club website for responses from students about the project.

Goals

By exposing the student body to a unique media of self-expression, and then recording the discussion about free-speech that ensues, we hope to spread student awareness of the power of the media and the power of youth voices. The Great Chalk Experiment has the potential to invigorate the student body, and may make for a more spirited Bronx Science community. We hope that you consider our proposal for what may prove to be the most memorable aspect of the 2004-2005 school year. Thank you for your time.

The Media Activism Club