

SYNOPSIS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BRINGING THEORY TO PRACTICE PROJECT, 2002-2010

Listening to students and other voices on many campuses, the Bringing Theory to Practice Project (an independent entity working in partnership with AAC&U and guided by a national advisory board) documented in 2002-2003 (with the assistance of a national study led by Columbia University's Center for the Study of Alcohol and Drug Abuse) increasing patterns of student disengagement, behavioral disengagement (particularly exhibited in substance abuse), emotional disengagement exhibited by many students self-reporting episodes of depression, and civic disengagement and disinterest that was so apparent as to be a systemic threat to democratic responsibilities. While these patterns were apparent to many faculty members, and to most professional student affairs and counseling staffs, they were infrequently being addressed as systemic issues. Many institutions struggled with ameliorating symptoms, as they responded to related issues of liability and security concerns, but not to contributing causes.

The Project saw its initial role as calling on campuses to address causes of these patterns—and to do so with the “hunch” that the patterns shared important connections and that strengthening student academic engagement would have implications, effects and affects, for student behavior, well-being and civic development. This was not a “hunch” regarding therapy for a subset of students who exhibit patterns of illness; rather, the hunch suggested that more deeply engaged learning and community involvement (at multiple levels) had contributing effects and affects for most, if not all, students.

That “hunch” was the basis for steps taken by the Project to commission research and national studies. Refining the hunch to an hypothesis in order to study the specific forms of engaged learning and the capacity of affects and effects defined as possible outcomes, the Project identified national demonstration sites, and eventually, concerned about bias of small samples, supported national intensive sites where entire student populations were involved. In addition, seventy-plus campuses received small programmatic or research grants to explore in their own context the possible relationships when students are actively academically engaged to their well-being and civic engagement.

This initial period of the Project's work (concentrated between 2002 and 2008, although some demonstration sites continue and new ones will be funded for 2010-2012) resulted in the establishing of a “preponderance of evidence”, including empirical data that confirm the relationship and point to directional actions that could maximize the achievement of specific outcomes—cognitive, behavioral and emotional, and civic.

The Project's achievements during this period were enabled by over \$5,000,000 of support from multiple foundations—with the greatest part of that support coming from the Charles Engelhard Foundation, the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, the William and Mary Greve Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, the Lumina Foundation, and by individual gifts. These funds were subsequently made directly available to campuses or to support conferences and commissioned studies.

With the confirmation and documentation of the linkages, and in light of the viable campus projects that demonstrated success in generating positive outcomes, the BTtoP Project moved to addressing two major issues in 2008-2009: (a) “Can we achieve greater clarification of specific outcomes and begin to determine reasonable means of assessing whether students obtain them?” And (b), “Can

we, by looking at the costs now associated with how campuses address the symptoms of disengagement, determine more cost-effective and efficient steps that will address conditions and causes not by adding on, but by reordering priorities and by bridging academic, social and civic resources?”

The positive answers to both questions are part of two core reports: the Outcomes Project Report and the Cost-Study Report; both were completed in the fall of 2008 and serve as central resources for the Project. These reports, as well as all studies commissioned by the Project, are posted on the BTtoP web site, or can be received by contacting the Project’s office.
(http://www.acu.org/bringing_theory/index.cfm)

The BTtoP Project has been intentional about theory, intentional about evidence, and now moves its resources to the support of practices. This is the main thrust of the Project’s initiation of a Leadership Coalition. By May 2009, there will be 55 institutions, representing the great diversity of higher education, actively participating in the Coalition. Each of them is receiving grant support to plan and to take action steps that strengthen the “culture for learning” on their campus. Specifically, they find themselves moving on an “arc of change”, transforming their practices, reward structures, and priorities so that they can achieve, assess, and sustain experiences that address the whole student and that maximize the students’ expectations and choices of opportunities that are at the center of learning, and have affects and effects that link to student well-being, student flourishing, and to their civic development.

Within the next few years, the Project will provide additional support opportunities, will convene the campuses involved, will evaluate the campus initiatives, and will report their successes in a major publication of both “theoretical and practical” significance for how colleges and universities might use emphases and expectations regarding the academic opportunities students have in ways that truly transform the institution as well as result in transformative experiences for their students.

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