

The Bringing Theory to Practice Project: Looking Ahead 2010-2012

Earlier this spring, we shared a synopsis of the work of BTtoP to date, looking back over the last few years (a copy is attached). This companion piece looks ahead.

With expressions of deep gratitude to the Charles Engelhard Foundation, to Julie Johnson Kidd and the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, to A. Kiser and the William and Mary Greve Foundation, to the Spencer and the Lumina Foundations, to the leadership of Carol Schneider and our AAC&U partnership, and to the unflagging – and active involvement of the Project’s Advisory Board and participating institutions, the BTtoP Project currently enjoys a period of significant recognition and support for its work. That work has had two persisting phases and themes. The first has been to understand and to help colleges and universities use their academic strengths to respond to patterns of disengagement (intellectual, behavioral, emotional, and civic) experienced by students (and by some faculty). That help began by asking the institution to reflect on how those patterns of disengagement were connected to the culture of the institution, then the campus could consider whether creating an expectation and probable means for greater engagement would affect those patterns while determining how and whether the interrelated objectives and core goals of liberal education were being realized.

From that phase and theme emerged a second: to provide help and support to those institutions willing to initiate the systemic and sustainable programmatic and process changes that would lead to transforming the culture of their campus—strengthening the campus culture for learning and making the necessary changes that would assure the participants that the promise of liberal education (to be itself a transformational experience for the whole student) would be sought as an institutional priority. Expectations, actions, programs, and rewards would have to be aligned to achieve that priority.

Reported on the Project’s website (http://www.aacu.org/bringing_theory/index.cfm) are some of the Project’s many past activities, conferences, sponsored research reports, and supported campus initiatives. Over the last few years, the BTtoP Project has extended over \$5 million in grants to campuses; it has sponsored 18 national conferences and workshops (including those specifically addressing students, faculty, and student affairs professionals). Recently, seminars and conferences for 55 college and university presidents (and later for their campus leadership teams) have been central aspects of a national Leadership Coalition bringing about transformative change in higher education. Overall, the Project has had, and continues to have, a significant and unique impact on core issues of the work of nearly 200 colleges and universities and the thousands of students they educate.

As we progress, maintaining both of the themes and emphases that characterize the Project, more specific objectives and plans have emerged as we consider the upcoming next few years. We are committed to:

- (a) Having teams of faculty and administrative leadership from the final 15 institutions to join the Coalition meet in a Follow-up Conference for Provosts, Student Affairs and Faculty on November 6-7, 2009 in Washington, DC.
- (b) In addition to the particular campus specific steps each of the 55 Leadership Coalition institutions is taking, (with the support of a BTtoP planning grant), additional opportunities have been funded for Leadership Coalition institutions to participate in AAC&U summer institutes. For others, evaluation and assessment resources and consulting are being provided. Most Leadership Coalition institutions will be considering how their individual

actions can be developed and sustained, and in so doing, many will be responding to the BTtoP RFP for 2010-2012.

- (c) A major “Retrieval and Research” conference focused on civic engagement and its psychosocial consequences will bring together practitioners, scholars, researchers, and policy advocates for a major conference to be held November 5-6, 2009 in Washington, DC.
- (d) Teams of three faculty and administrative leaders from each of the fifty-five L.C. institutions will gather for a one-day conference/workshop on Jan. 20, 2010. The objectives of the conference/workshop will include opportunities for update reports on campus initiatives, and to plan the year 2010 activities that will reflect BTtoP’s emphasis to make 2010 the “Year of Faculty”. We mean by that understanding, identifying challenges, and supporting opportunities for faculty members to examine, and to champion their role as agents of transformational change. Detailed projects for the year, as well as approaches and patterns of support will be identified, addressing such issues as discipline pressures, graduate training and modeling, reward structures, pedagogy and curricular design, and faculty intellectual leadership. The conference/workshop will also provide an opportunity for consideration of a pilot study of faculty attitudes, values, perspectives, and role assessment.
- (e) The RFP announcing funding for projects to be offered during 2010-2012 has been distributed to over 3000 institutions. Two emphases will be given priority: (a) proposals focused on civic engagement and its connection to student psychosocial development; and (b) proposals focused on sustaining transformative change. What constitutes sustaining change could include revising funding priorities, sustaining change through curricular reform—e.g. general education reform—and sustaining change through faculty development and rewards projects.
- (f) Layered on the work of the Project over the next few years will be emphases on evaluation and on the campus determination of an ‘arc’ of change that clearly suggest objectives to be achieved, and the determination of how effective the changes are in achieving those objectives.

Also, the Project will be attentive to the “dynamic” or “logic” of change in an educational context. “What actually encourages changes in choices and behaviors?” Decision theory, the documentation of influences, behaviors and choices that are currently part of the campus culture, as well as understanding how to alter those influences while maintaining the necessary conditions of intellectual freedom and campus autonomy—are each elements that will be receiving more significant attention from the work of the Project.

- (g) Finally, the Project will continue to serve as a catalyst for changes that are identified by, sought by, and sustained by, the institution. For many, this means planning grants or funds for initial steps that are effective agents in encouraging lasting change.

In the immediate years ahead, the BTtoP Project will be seeking additional foundation grant and individual gift support in order to maintain the emphases and projects it has already planned, as well as to add occasional and desirable new opportunities.

One such opportunity is to bring back together in 2010 presidents (and perhaps representatives from their Boards) of the Leadership Coalition Institutions. To do so has been a frequent request from the Coalition presidents themselves, as they indicated their positive assessment of the value of the previous meetings and the paucity of the occasions in which the core issues of education and leadership are actually considered and their experience and insights shared. As we consider this additional opportunity, one possibility might be to link a successful meeting of the Leadership Coalition Presidents (and perhaps members of their Boards) with AAC&U’s President’s Trust in a

seminar, participatory, format. There already is some existent overlap of presidents, (the Engelhard Foundation has been supportive of both initiatives) and perhaps greater clarification of future agendas and possible influences for change, within an even broader spectrum of higher education, could result.

Other plans, possibilities and eventual projects will surely arise and we look forward to involving your perspective in considering whether and in what form BTtoP might be involved.

Again, we share our appreciation and profound respect for your commitment and efforts on behalf of strengthening transformative liberal education, the experiences our students will have, and the campus cultures for learning that will encourage them.

Warm regards,
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