

What's Inside:

Four Years of BTtoP—What Have We Learned?

What We Have Learned:

The Lessons of One Campus on Institutional Sustainability and Support

Letter from the Director

In Brief

- ▶ BTtoP Announces New Round of Grant Support for 2010–12
- ▶ Leadership Coalition expands to involve fifty-five presidents and institutions
- ▶ The BTtoP Civic and Mental Health Symposium will occur November 5–6, 2009, in Washington, DC

BTtoP Campus Highlight:

School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC)

Restructuring the Myth of the Young Artist:

Isolated, Self-Destructive Genius to Community-Engaged, Self-Sustaining Individual

Of the many challenges that befall first-year students in their transition to college, a few tend to be more intensified in scope and unique to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) campus, including greater reports of depression, smoking cigarettes, and drinking beer, wine and liquor (as compared to national [CIRP] and art school data). In addition, the students inhabit an urban, vertical campus, living in dorms with no food service and little or no access to nutritious and inexpensive food, all of which become an easy avenue to legitimating the myth of the tortured young artist. Living off cigarettes and vending machines, working overnight in the bright city in order to be passionately dedicated to creating brilliance... was not the path SAIC had in mind for its bright and talented young students.

SAIC's "Feasts," a food and community project housed within a first-year Residential College Program (RCP), illustrates the kind of programmatic innovation that gets at the heart of supporting and encouraging a holistic liberal education for all students by linking learning, well-being and civic development.

The RCP at SAIC is a first-year living/learning community offering seventy students the opportunity to attend class and live together on two floors of a residence hall. Terri Kapsalis, the director of the RCP, characterizes one of the main purposes of the RCP as "...redirecting the myth of the isolated, self-destructive, sleep-deprived genius artist to another and very prevalent type of artist, one that is community-minded, socially conscious and engaged. These



School of the Art Institute of Chicago

(continued on page 2)

Restructuring the Myth

(continued from page 1)

[Feasts] participate in a burgeoning commitment to food and service in international contemporary art practice.” As a schoolwide collaboration between faculty, students, staff, teaching assistants, and resident advisers, the RCP explores two key questions: 1) How can [we] as artists, designers, and writers

tial College. Lane observes, “There is something that happens when you cook next to someone you really don’t know. Most of the students are extremely good at just creating anything with their hands. [They were] building off of existing talents and discovering new ideas along the way. It was fascinating to watch everyone gather inspiration.”

Students involved described positive reactions to the Feasts and the RCP. One student, Kelly Pope, articulates

appreciating the focus of the RCP on health and wellness, something Kapsalis and Lane both noticed as well. What they didn’t expect to see was the transformation, over the course of the Feast day, of the students from “wound-up and unfocused” to “calm, relaxed, and focused on serving their peers.”

In addition, civic engagement initiatives were woven into the food-community focused program, with some students volunteering to create benches and fences for an urban farm, while others created worm bins and began a garden to provide food for fall ’09 Feasts. Students were also introduced to local organizations dedicated to social, cultural, economic, and environmental food issues that have inspired continued connection and collaboration. Kapsalis notes, “The Feasts helped set a tone of social responsibility through feeding oneself and others that ran throughout the year as eating together, urban agriculture, and generosity became key components of RCP.”

The success of the Feasts can be largely attributed to the collaborative nature of the RCP, with the involvement of many key campus constituencies and to the independence of the students and the room given for their innovation to have a great stake in the success of the projects and events. Plans are already underway to continue and sustain the Feasts project for the upcoming academic year, with additional thought being given to those who might be invited to the table this time, including potential community partners. The Feasts will also become a forum for collegial discussion on potential future civic engagement initiatives. ■



School of the Art Institute of Chicago

support and sustain ourselves and our practices? and 2) What are the varieties of ways that [we] can critically engage with the world?

From these questions came the RCP’s student-created and student-designed program of monthly “Feasts,” which, through collaborations with professional chef/artist Tara Lane, all six sections of the Research Studio designed and created a dinner and eating environment for the rest of the Residen-

why she would repeat the experience if she could: “I think the Feasts were really exceptional in linking the RCP students. Most everyone takes their Core Studio class in their first year, but unless they’re in conversation with another student in a different class, one doesn’t really get much exposure to how their classes differ... it provided an interactive way of experiencing the things discussed in a class other than your own.” Pope also commented on

Four Years of BTtoP—What Have We Learned? Overview of Findings to Date

Dr. Ashley Finley, BTtoP National Evaluator; Director of Assessment for Learning, AAC&U

While there is still much to be derived from the intricate connections between students' engaged learning, civic development, and mental health and well-being, aggregate findings from the Bringing Theory to Practice Demonstration and Intensive Site Program research over the last several years have provided strong evidence that the linkages among these critical elements of student success are connected in salient, and oftentimes powerful, ways.

One way to characterize our learning is through the examination of dyadic connections among the three pillars of the BTtoP project – engaged learning, civic development, and student mental health and well-being. While those connections are descriptively useful and can be found in reports posted on the BTtoP Web site, findings at this stage may be better summarized holistically by looking at patterns of programmatic effects on student learning associated with the intentional construction of engaged learning environments. These outcomes can be examined at both the individual level (i.e., the impact on students and faculty) and at the institutional level (i.e., programmatic best practices and institutional sustainability).

First, we do see that these environments impact student behaviors, with regard to both learning and living, relative to comparable students not in these environments. For example, students report greater levels of engagement in their learning characterized by more interest in the topic, more reflection on material outside of class, and increased desire to

take additional courses on a particular topic area. In some cases, these environments have affected student's choice of major. Correspondingly, faculty have reported that students in these environments exhibit better writing and critical thinking skills. With regard to well-being, students engaged in courses that address issues of substance abuse and/or mental health issues have, upon reflection, indicated greater recognition of their own health-related behaviors and attitudes and some changes in behaviors as a result. Additionally, there has been some indication over time that students participating in these engaged learning initiatives, specifically those with a civic development component, tended to consume less alcohol and at lower frequencies than students not in these programs.

We have also learned that educational environments intentionally aimed at promoting student engagement, including those that incorporate civic engagement, are consistently associated with high levels of satisfaction among students and faculty. The *sine qua non* of students' positive reactions to these programs seems to be the belief that at some point their learning felt consequential. For example, students would view their work as consequential because of the enlistment and fostering of peer review environments where classmates may be acting as evaluators or as an audience for student work. Students may also perceive consequence when engaged in learning environments that address a timely or policy-oriented subject matter. This could be achieved at

a micro level, for example, through educating students about mental health and alcohol-related issues that impact their daily lives as students, or through macro-level social issues such as inequality, globalization, or environmental sustainability that impact their lives beyond campus as local and national citizens.

The aggregate data from campus research has also revealed a compelling impact on students via the significant pro-social nature of these engaged learning environments. Specifically, such learning environments tend to foster communities in which peers and faculty become active participants in the process of student engagement. Campus reports suggest that the interactions that arise within or as a result of these environments are unique in that they occur with both frequency and substance. As such, students benefitted from being able to engage their peers in regular discussions outside of class about course topics, assignments, and even their civic work. Qualitative data suggest these social networks provided students access to alternate viewpoints, opportunities for reflection, and assistance that may help to relieve stress and foster coping skills. Peer interactions also provided students with a valuable outlet for validation – both with regard to learning (even when just to commiserate about coursework or professors) and living – particularly with regard to student drinking and substance use. Qualitative indicators suggest these peer networks may positively impact student drinking and substance behaviors in two

(continued on page 5)

What We Have Learned: The Lessons of One Campus on Institutional Sustainability and Support

Dr. Ashley Finley, BTtoP National Evaluator; Director of Assessment for Learning, AAC&U

Since 2005, Dickinson College has been examining learning and well-being outcomes associated with living-learning communities as part of its first-year seminar program. While we have learned a good deal about these outcomes over the last four years, we have learned equally about the complex nature of campus culture, sustainability of practices, and institutional change. Below are three of our most compelling findings:

Don't underestimate the value of a clear message. It takes a village to build interdisciplinary and campus-wide initiatives. But to get folks out of their huts and working together, the message has to be clear. When Dickinson's BTtoP project began, we saw a clear fit between the learning outcomes being assessed and the larger institutional mission. And though student and faculty learning community experiences were largely positive, we were also aware of a conspicuous thread of opposition. We came to understand our error had been in labeling learning communities as "engaged learning," thereby inadvertently labeling "other" first-year seminars as *unengaged* learning. Moving forward, we made a conscious effort to reframe our language to clarify learning communities were not *the* pedagogy, but *one type* of learning pedagogy predicated upon intentionality of design and implementation of activities intended to enhance student engagement.

Innovation is essential. Institutional sustainability often isn't just about working hard to maintain a well-designed program. Campuses are by nature

mercurial; faculty, courses offerings, and budgets change almost yearly. Thus the challenge for sustainability of practices is as much about innovation within a changing landscape as it is about maintenance. Because learning communities impose additional demands on faculty time and obligations, we revisited, and then reimagined, the basic structure of

Invite the change agents. Every campus initiative has its champions and its dissenters. The *change agents*, though, may be among the champions, the dissenters, and likely within the gulf of faculty in between. They are well respected, often hold innovative research and teaching dossiers, and, regardless of how loudly or how often they speak in faculty meetings,



Dickinson College

the learning community model. The answer was to develop a learning community "cluster" of four to five commonly themed seminars. The incorporation of the cluster model enabled more faculty to be involved in the learning community program and more students to connect classroom experiences with out-of-classroom learning. This model has been well received among faculty, resulting in clusters of courses examining such issues as gender inequality, globalization, and environmental sustainability.

are deeply loyal to the institution. As we concluded our research and turned our attention to sustainability, we began to invite faculty from across disciplines, ranks, and experiences to have conversations about not just our research but about this meaning of this work at Dickinson. Our emphasis was not on conversion, but on diversity. To effectively "bring theory to practice" we enlisted multiple perspectives to help drive discussion and pose the range of challenges needed to develop lasting institutional change and efficacy. ■

Four-years of BTtoP

(continued from page 3)

ways. First, students who prefer not to drink or to drink minimally increase their likelihood of forming ties with similar others, reporting a sense of relief in meeting peers who either reduce the pressure to drink or provide a social alternative to drinking. Second, peer networks have also been associated with caretaking behaviors. Thus, students' heightened awareness of peer behavior, either situational or over time, may function as a kind of first line of defense in preventing self-harm or injury.

In addition to the above findings, campus work has also represented a national learning community with regard to institutional best practices and routes to sustainability. Each of our campus teams represents a different culture and institutional climate, poised to be progressive but also challenged in particular ways to create the necessary pathways toward full institutional change and/or enduring progress. Thus for all our differences--in many ways representative of the differences across the landscape of higher education--we have found fundamental commonalities in our need to build programmatic best practices, to recruit key stakeholders (faculty in particular), and to contend with what increasingly appear to be outmoded constructs around faculty rewards and promotion and tenure systems. These are issues we have not solved but seek to more fully understand. To do so is vital to continuing the work of building sustainable, engaged and progressive educational environments in which deep learning may be better realized among our students, our faculty, and across our campus communities. ■

In Brief

BTtoP Announces New Round of Grant Support for 2010-12, requesting proposals from institutions nationwide to address two new strategic emphases: (1) institutional projects related to the connections between civic development and student psychosocial well-being; and (2) how institutions can plan to sustain the projects, priorities, and changes that are demonstrably successful in making more likely that students' educational experience is truly transformative. Proposal deadlines begin January 15, 2010; funds available July 1, 2010. (www.aacu.org/bringing_theory/abouttrfp.cfm)

Leadership Coalition expands to involve fifty-five presidents and institutions, with the convening of fifteen additional presidents (leading diverse types and locations of institutions), April 2009, in New York for a President's Seminar, joining the work of the forty institutions already committed to the Leadership Coalition. Joining the Leadership Coalition will entail grant funding, with the commitment from the participating institutions to execute relevant internal conversations regarding the institution's commitment to a call for a "campus culture for learning," and what strategies they may employ; establishing a leadership/planning team that would initiate plans to fit their own institutional culture; and putting into practice their plans beginning in the academic year 2009-10. A follow-up conference for the campus teams will convene in Washington, DC, in November 2009, and a 'retrieval and dissemination' conference for all fifty-five institutions participating in the Coalition will occur in January 2010 in Washington.

The BTtoP "Civic Engagement, Public Work, and Psychosocial Well-Being" Symposium will occur November 5-6, 2009, in Washington, DC. The goal of the Symposium is to assess the effects and affects of civic engagement and public work on the psychosocial well-being of college students. With the leadership and guidance of an extensive and experienced Advisory Board including mental health professionals, college presidents, faculty, and civic/public work experts, the Symposium will gather together researchers, educators, practitioners, and others with experience and expertise to bring information, whether an example, case study, or empirical evidence from qualitative or quantitative observation or research, which will develop the knowledge and build a national learning community among researchers, educators, and institutional leaders; and contribute to a field of practice and subject of study. To register visit www.aacu.org/bringing_theory/healthsymposium09.cfm.

UPCOMING EVENTS

BTtoP Working Conference
January 20, 2010
Washington, DC

2010: The Year of Faculty

Letter from the Director

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

Donald W. Harward, Project Director, Bringing Theory to Practice and President Emeritus, Bates College

In an earlier newsletter, we shared a synopsis of the BTtoP Project's work to date, looking back over the last few years. This piece instead looks ahead.

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 institutions 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 ensure 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 Web site (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 eighteen national conferences and workshops. Overall, the Project has had, and continues to have, a significant and unique impact on core issues of the work of nearly two hundred 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 fifteen 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) 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.

(c) Teams of three faculty and administrative leaders from each of the fifty-five Leadership Coalition 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 seek with that focus to understand and identify challenges, and support opportunities for faculty members to examine and 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.

(d) The RFP announcing funding for projects to be offered during 2010–12 has been distributed to more than three thousand 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

Letter from the Director

(continued from page 5)

sustaining transformative change. Projects with the second focus could include revising funding priorities, sustaining change through curricular reform—e.g., general education reform—and sustaining change through faculty development and rewards projects.

(e) 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—each of these are elements that will be receiving more significant attention from the Project.

(f) 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. ■

The Bringing Theory to Practice Project (BTtoP) is an independent national effort. It is funded by the Charles Engelhard Foundation of New York, and functions in partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) in Washington, DC.

The **Charles Engelhard Foundation** is a New York-based foundation whose mission focuses on projects in higher and secondary education, cultural, medical, religious, wildlife and conservation organizations.

S. Engelhard Center is a nonprofit public charitable foundation; its mission is to support projects and initiatives that affect greater and sustained commitments by educational institutions at all levels to provide effective means of addressing the intellectual, emotional, and civic development of today’s students in preparation for claiming their positive future.

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In the Next Issue—December 2009

- ▶ BTtoP Campus Highlight
- ▶ Leadership Coalition Follow-up Conference and Civic & Mental Health Symposium Reports
- ▶ Kicking off “BTtoP’s Year of Faculty”
- ▶ Letter from the Director, Donald W. Harward, President Emeritus, Bates College