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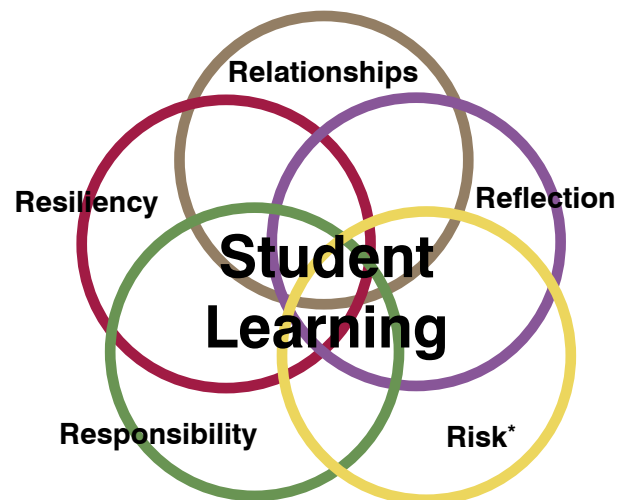
SPECIAL ISSUE

Reflections from the BTtoP Student Conference

Welcome to a special edition of the Bringing Theory to Practice newsletter. This past November, the project held its fourth National Biennial Student Conference, titled *Recasting the '3Rs' of Learning: From Reading, WRiting and ARithmetic to Reflection, Resiliency, Relationships and Responsibility* in Washington, DC. The conference was so productive and special that we decided to dedicate an entire newsletter to what we, as national project leaders, learned, and to what the attendees learned about themselves. This newsletter will be composed almost entirely of the thoughts and reflections of students and faculty who attended the conference.

Typically, this newsletter would be structured to include a feature article from a guest author, a campus highlight authored by a BTtoP grantee, and a column by the project director, Don Harward. This issue of the newsletter will feature three sections as well; however, the content will be different. The first section will highlight student and faculty reflections on the question, "What did we learn about the 4Rs at this conference?" The second section is dedicated to asking ourselves and the conference attendees, "What else should we have learned at the conference or should we be learning about the 4Rs?" And finally, looking forward, we explore what we think you (our reader) can, as a higher educator, do to further this progress in your own teaching and learning.

With this student conference we took a new direction. From inception, the agenda was informed by a great number of outside participants—not necessarily grantees, nor advisory board members, nor solely core staff and consultants. Sally Engelhard Pingree, president of the S. Engelhard Center and one of the major supporters of BTtoP, is especially passionate about work dedicated to highlighting the student voice. She was instrumental in setting a first round of meetings and discussions,



*Risk was added as a fifth R during the conference

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Reflections from the Student Conference

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asking, What is most important for students to be learning right now as related to BTtoP priorities? From those conversations arose the theme of recasting the 3Rs of learning. Throughout the process, students' voices were highlighted as we requested their input and advice for the content and format of the agenda. The goal, throughout, was to focus on student learning: What would students be able to take away from this event?

The conference format included participatory sessions and activities that depended upon the students' active involvement, rather than passive absorption of information. Don Harward, BTtoP director, opened by challenging the students to think about risk in how they approach their engagement in the conference, in their educational experiences, and in their lives. He focused on the contrasts of vertical and horizontal engagement, and the benefits and potential limits of each. (His words were highlighted in his column in the last issue of this newsletter.) Each session featured an R, and each was represented through a different type of activity: relationship role-playing, student presentations on the many manifestations of resiliency, reflective writing and sharing, and civic responsibility skill-building workshops. Many students responding to a post-conference survey mentioned the workshop they attended or presentation they witnessed as the highlight of the event. ■

For more information, see the conference Web page www.aacu.org/bringing_theory/StdntConf.cfm

What Did We Learn About the 4Rs?

Students participants were asked to submit written reflections to be included in this newsletter. They were asked the following questions:

- What is your understanding of the recasted 4 Rs?
- What are the roles of the 4 Rs in your life?
- What have you risked for the sake of change on your campus or in your community?
- What does the world need from you? What will the world need from you?

Student Reflections

“At the Bringing Theory to Practice Project Student Conference last November, I gave a presentation on how community service can help students develop resiliency by giving them greater perspective. Tutoring adults studying for their GED (high school diploma equivalent) in low-income communities provided me with insight into my own education and the privileges I've been afforded. Conversations I had with other students at the conference inspired me to expand the program so that more students on my campus could become involved. Elizabeth Bennett's workshop (“Greatest Impact”) reminded me that issues such as educational inequalities are too big for one individual to tackle; however, we can work toward improving one aspect of the problem. The world doesn't need me to singlehandedly solve the issues related to educational inequalities right now, but it does need me to continue tutoring, and to expand and improve the current program I'm working with. Hopefully, the skills I've learned will help me be able to take on bigger projects related to my interest in promoting social justice through eliminating educational inequalities.”

**Kimberly Probolus, student,
Smith College, MA**

“Reflection has great importance during times of increased learning and growth, which usually occur during the years of university life. The development of my identity as an adult and a proactive member of society benefits from the ability to reflect on the process of involving myself in civic work and social change, noticing mistakes and challenges—then adapting based on past experiences. Resiliency is essential for student leaders, in that it is a characteristic necessary for facing and overcoming challenges that occur when individuals are trying to initiate change. Relationships help to build a community that fosters better growth and progress than any individual can achieve alone. In my experience, the fourth R, responsibility, was not truly meaningful until I became a student leader. In that role, the amount of responsibility is correlated with a certain level of risk. The more responsibility you acquire, the more risk there is for failure, but you have to be willing to face the risk and to own your part in any experience, even when things don't turn out as you would wish. Something that I learned from the conference is that what the world needs from me is to apply my passions and skills to the work that I do, in the best way possible.”

**Mackenzie Morris, student,
California State University-Chico**

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What Did We Learn?

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“As the former president of the Student Environmental Alliance and current president of the Student Government Association, I have been a key student activist in these efforts. For me, advocating for environmental stewardship is an innate part of my being—it is my passion. However, along with any passion, with any unyielding dedication to a cause, comes risk and sacrifice. Focusing on developing campus sustainability often becomes extremely consuming; I am constantly at risk for losing the personal balance necessary for a healthy and successful collegiate life.

When I am in my office working until midnight or eating my meals as I simultaneously revise proposals and initiatives, I often reflect on what I may be missing. Am I sacrificing my grades, am I losing friends, or am I missing out on ‘typical’ college experiences? Ultimately, I have realized that sacrifice is a necessary risk to create a meaningful and lasting impact on communities...as



Students at conference discussing the 4R's.

long as you remain aware and in control of your sacrifices, you can manage and justify the risk of losing balance.”

**Erik Howard George, student,
Concordia College-Moorhead, MN**

“I believe that everyone is sent into this world to do something great, something worthwhile, something unique. Every individual has the responsibility to play his/her position in our ever-growing society, but that charge can often be hard to pursue. Today, I believe that the world needs me to stay focused on obtaining my college degree. Once that step has been overcome, the world will require something even greater from me: to give back and share everything that I’ve learned and obtained with those in need. This is by far the hardest task any individual can be faced with as we are often blinded by our own problems, oblivious of the breakdown that our own communities are facing.”

**Jacques Pape, student,
Morehouse College, GA**

Faculty Reflections

Attending faculty were also invited to share their thoughts and reflections on what they observed and learned at the conference.

“The questions I ask myself now, having attended the conference, are: How can I support student-initiated reforms better? What forums can I offer so that students’ voices inform campus decisions? How might we alter traditional methods of offering curriculum so that students’ work as campus/community organizers becomes a recognized part of their progress toward a degree? What gets in the way of students on my campus pursuing changes they believe in, and

how can my program provide support for such work? The BTtoP Student Conference offered faculty members a rare opportunity to immerse ourselves in our students’ dreaming and planning for a better world. It was one of the most positive experiences of my professional life.”

**Thia Wolf,
First-Year Experience Director,
California State University-Chico**

“From the perspective of a faculty member and administrator, the Bringing Theory to Practice Student Conference offered a wonderful affirmation of the positive effects that BTtoP is having on students across the country. Students spoke in powerful and personal ways about the sorts of intellectual and practical risks that they are taking in the quest to grow both academically and as whole people. I was particularly impressed with the ways that the students exemplified the sort of resilience envisioned by the project. Through [their] endeavors, the students transformed themselves from knowledge consumers to partners in the process of knowledge creation. I was delighted for the opportunity to attend the student conference and to witness student transformation that is both encouraging and instructive. This transformation called on students to reimagine themselves, their work, and their contribution to the world. It was this act of reimagination that proved most provocative to me as a faculty member and administrator.”

**James Sloat, Associate
Dean for Assessment and
New Initiatives,
Washington & Jefferson College, PA**

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What Else Can and Should Be Learned about the 4Rs?

Conference participants (both students and faculty) were asked to reflect on the question: “What other aspects of the 4Rs should have been discussed at the student conference—or what aspects do you think need be addressed when considering the future of higher education?”

Student Reflections

“In addition to reflection, resiliency, relationships, responsibility and risk I think there is one more “R” that needs to be addressed when considering the future of higher education: Recognition. From one’s self to an organization, recognition provides a vision and direction to the future. In order to better improve, one has to recognize where they are, what they are capable of and what external factors influence their ability to accomplish a task or goal.”

**Raymond G. Lord, III, student,
State University of New York-Geneseo**

“I think the Four Rs definitely provide a blueprint for responsible decisions and growth but what should have been addressed was how do you recognize as an individual when you are truly utilizing all 4 Rs productively and what could be potential results.”

**Carlton McFall, student,
Morehouse College, GA**

Faculty Reflections

“At the 2011 AAC&U Annual Meeting, which took place about ten weeks after

the BTtoP Student Conference, one of the most anticipated, well-attended, and most discouraging presentations was by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, on the findings presented in their recent book, *Academically Adrift*. The authors presented a sober and unassailably data-driven picture of higher education, and it wasn’t pretty. Something like 40 percent of students, for example, showed no significant improvement in critical thinking, reasoning, or writing over four years of college.

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What Did We Learn?

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Bringing Theory to Practice Reflections

In reflecting on the success of the conference, we asked ourselves what, specifically, made this conference as transformative as it seemed to be for students, faculty, and ourselves. We took into consideration the conference model, and determined one of the greatest factors in its success was that it consistently relied on some form of participatory engagement from the students—in fact, it demanded it. Further, using very few “talking heads” and reflecting early on what might be in line with the audience’s cultural preferences (which turned out to be role-playing, debate, skill-building workshops, etc.) was important. The

aggregation and synthesizing of advice and ideas from many diverse project constituencies as to the goals, tone, and format of the conference was key.

Perhaps most significantly, we learned from this conference to persist in our steady and meaningful encouragement of our grantees and colleagues to continue to challenge and push students in and out of the classroom—students’ resiliency in the face of new information and change is simply astounding and needs to be tapped into in order to further higher education in general, and most important, to foster transformative student learning and development. We take the outcomes of the conference and the students’ opinions very seriously to inform future conferences and meetings, and to the way in which the project views “successful campus work” when determining funding priorities and what

can and should be considered “transformative educational practices.”

**Jennifer O’Brien,
Project Manager, BTtoP**



Students listen to debate discussion.

What Else Can Be Learned?

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Another of Arum & Roksa's points that stood out for me was the terribly high percentage of students—it may have been more than 50 percent—who said they rarely or never discussed, in any way, any aspect of current events with anyone. In other words, the passionate engagement, initiative, and urgency that we saw so clearly among students in the BTtoP fold is not at all typical. If the capacity for reflection and responsibility can vary that much, I wondered what it was that made the

It is inherent in the very meaning of higher education that its ultimate purposes are both of intrinsic value and of extrinsic or external value.

BTtoP students different. The AAC&U crowd, mostly deans and provosts flying at high altitude, was passionate about programmatic and institutional assessment and innovation. But there are smaller and equally valuable scales of analysis. What would we find at the level of the individual? Why do some students have full sails, while others merely drift?"

Joshua Fost, Assistant Professor of Philosophy and University Studies, Portland State University

Ask the Director

It has been a steadfast belief of the BTtoP Project that students are often the most untapped resource on college and university campuses in terms of

engaging stakeholders to move good (or difficult) work forward, and that their voices are not often enough highlighted as some of the most important in considering strategic next steps at our institutions. Students have extraordinary amounts of energy, boundless creativity, resourcefulness, and potential for innovation (especially in this age of technology), and are often yet less burdened by cynicism than most.

Instead of a column from director Don Harward in this issue, the student conference participants were tasked with asking questions of Don (president emeritus of Bates College) that perhaps they wouldn't normally have the opportunity to ask. In reflecting on their

experiences and what was learned at the student conference, several students posed interesting questions relating to higher education in general.

Student: "During my years in college I have noticed a lack of participation by students in programs or events that are centered on uplifting the community. 'The Bringing Theory to Practice Project encourages colleges and universities to reassert their core purposes as educational institutions not only to advance learning and discovery, but to advance the potential and well-being of each individual student, and to advance education as a public good that sustains a civic society.' Thus, what are some things colleges and universities can do

to incentivize civic engagement amongst the student body to encourage them not to think about themselves and the trendy outfit they plan on purchasing, but better yet, their neighbor and their lack of a next meal?"

Marcus Wedge, student, Morehouse College, GA

Harward: Question (1) is primarily a statement—one that resonates positively with the BTtoP Project. I believe that it is inherent in the very meaning of higher education that its ultimate purposes are both of intrinsic value and of extrinsic or external value. The intrinsic value has to do with self-worth and achieving potential development as a whole or realized person. The extrinsic value is often seen as pragmatic—contributing to practical gains both social and personal. While dimensions of higher education's extrinsic value are currently intensively emphasized ("qualifying for a good job in an increasingly complex world economy") a necessary element of its practical gains is the pursuit of common, community, goals—among them the serving of social justice; self-determination; and access to the means to achieve both.

These are not naïve or occasionally considered values (although they currently receive less attention from the media), but are essential to defining higher education and learning and make it distinct from skill acquisition, training, indoctrination, and socialization. These are the values—and their expression in interaction with what is beyond the campus "bubble"—that make "higher" education higher in purpose and potential.

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What Else Can Be Learned?

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Student: “What responsibility do colleges and universities have to eradicate educational inequalities? I’m wondering how these institutions can reconcile the way they perpetuate inequalities through their admissions practices and role as ‘gatekeepers’ to social and cultural capital with a civic and ethical responsibility to ensure everyone has access to a high quality education. What are some other solutions, beyond affirmative action in admissions programs and asking students to perform community service to underprivileged communities, so that colleges and universities can expand access to a meaningful education?”

**Kimberly Probolus, student,
Smith College, MA**

Harward: I want to believe that there are responses to this important question that would suggest a path of prescribing and supporting remedial or transformative actions, rather than adopt the view of some current critics who present as the only alternative the dismissing or dismantling of higher education as it has developed in this country. The BTtoP Project is one effort to offer and support actions and policy changes—ones that retain and give priority to what we value and alter what should change.

Certainly affirmative action policies and other policies and practices that broaden access to higher education are crucial—as are practices and policies that focus on learning and the full development of those who gain access.

The evidence of larger proportions of overall increasing minority populations

attending institutions of higher education is positive, but the data also reveal severe declines in the enrollment of particular populations. Pockets of growth in community college attendance have occurred and measurable increases in access to places the questioner refers to as “gatekeepers of social and economic standing” have increased. Why have such gains of access not made more of a difference? Why hasn’t some increase in access obliged institutions to make fundamental changes?

Projects such as BTtoP are about reforming what “higher” education, learning, and student attainment are all about—away from myopic consideration of the gains from “seat time” in a recognized (i.e., “ranked”) institution to assessing higher education, learning, and development in all of their real dimensions—intellectual, emotive, and civic. Our strategy is to help institutions develop the structures, rewards, and priorities that transform what they do, or have been perceived to do, by encouraging, and incentivizing their focus on sustaining the changes that create the opportunities, deepen the expectations of, and reward the realization of student emancipation as “engaged independent learners—perhaps contrarians.” In doing so, in using the example of your own insights, and the committed efforts of students such as those we gathered in November, we and others work to help all institutions to offer and to champion the full promise of higher education to all who seek access—for those who seek access will want, and their families will see, the profound importance and lasting values of the outcome. ■

Bringing Theory to Practice Reflections

*Jennifer O’Brien
Project Manager, BTtoP*

In asking what can and should be learned about the four Rs, it is almost impossible not to ask ourselves what other Rs should be considered and are as important as these to truly transformative learning. Certainly, “resolve, restraint, reliability” all come instantly to mind. However, the grouping or categorization of any learning outcome or characteristic of a fully developed individual based on the first letter is a narrowly defined and perhaps futile exercise in the first place. Perhaps without those limitations, some would consider “humility,” “courage,” or even “attitude” as among the most significant topics for student learning and development. Regardless, the question really becomes what else, beyond content-based knowledge, does higher education need to be teaching and developing in students to make them flourishing and active participants in this world?

So many institutions are already at task with this question, but it seems something is getting muddled from theory to practice. What is holding us back?

Where Can YOU Take it from Here?

With all this learning and reflecting, what is the next step? Will you try to answer the question of “what is holding us back?” Or answer Professor Fost’s question from earlier in this newsletter—“Why do some students have full sails, while others merely drift?” Wherever your individual or institutional path may go from here, a few reflections from students and faculty who attended the Student Conference may spark your imagination and fortitude.

Student Reflection

“...In situations where you encounter hostility, it is easy to dismiss [their] views, to simply move on. However, it is in these situations where you can grow and affirm your passions through building mutual respect and understanding with the opposition; although you may not agree, you can be informed...focus on the individuals who are willing to engage in a productive dialogue with you. If you run into an insurmountable social obstacle, whether that be a student, staff, or faculty of the college, accept your loss and devote your energy toward your next goal. Not all of my projects and proposals have been accepted by

themselves—in much the same way that the students at the conference did. As our vision of what it means to be a faculty member continues to change, we will need to exhibit resilience as we draw on different skills and abilities in an effort to reach new (and different) students. Administrators will need similar resilience in order to guide institutions through this process in ways that honor the ‘whole person’ humanity of both faculty and students.”

James Sloat, Associate Dean for Assessment and New Initiatives, Washington & Jefferson College, PA

brings together individuals working in our Learning Center, our departments of Biology and English, our first-generation support program, Housing, Advising, and other areas on campus. The BTtoP Student Conference convinced me that the most important immediate step educators can take on campuses is to provide venues where students can speak, invent, forge new relationships, and point the way for needed reforms that will make their education more engaging for themselves and more useful for the communities of which they are a part.”

Thia Wolf, First-Year Experience Director, California State University-Chico

It is in these situations where you can grow and affirm your passions through building mutual respect and understanding with the opposition; although you may not agree, you can be informed.

the campus community. Accepting my losses and progressing in a different direction has saved me from wasted time, hurt feelings, and has allowed me to advance sustainability through a different venue.”

Erik Howard George, student, Concordia College-Moorhead, MN

Faculty Reflections

“As higher education faces new challenges and opportunities, both faculty and institutions may need to reimagine

“A few months later [after the student conference], in my day-to-day work at the university, I feel energized to take on new and larger challenges. In addition to my usual work with the FYE student staff on multiple large-scale, civically focused public events for first-year students, I have asked some student staff members to develop a program for a fall Student Mentor Conference. The themes for this conference are currently emerging from a Student Advisory Board that

From the Project:

BTtoP exists to aid and support institutions in dealing with these questions and leveraging the good work that results in the answers. We are interested in student learning, civic development, and flourishing—and the relationship of all three to one another. We are committed to building institutional capacity and sustainability for initiatives that support the integration of this learning, development, and flourishing.

We encourage your reactions and interaction by responding to the newsletter (btp@aacu.org), visiting us on Facebook, and attending conferences and events to learn with and from colleagues interested in similar work. Visit our Web page for more information on available grants and upcoming conferences. ■



**c/o Association of American
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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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