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# BTtoP Case Study: Dickinson College

## Engaging Students with Targeted Learning Strategies

### Dickinson's Roots

Dickinson College is a private liberal arts institution located in south central Pennsylvania. It was chartered in 1783 by Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia physician and one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Rush believed that the newly established country needed new institutions to ensure the hard-won freedom of its citizens.

In 1783, a struggling grammar school in Carlisle was identified to house the college that Rush envisioned. He named it after John and Mary Dickinson, one of the founding families of the new republic. Dickinson boasts that it was the first college chartered in the new United States.

Today, Dickinson educates approximately 2,340 full-time students from forty-two states and territories and forty-four nations. Its student to faculty ratio is 9:1. In response to meet its global mission, more than 50 percent of students study abroad.

### The Bringing Theory to Practice Initiative

As Dickinson was formulating its strategic plan in 2000, Joyce Bylander joined the college as Dean of Students. She arrived with interests in diversity, social justice, and campus climate. She was also involved in discussions with other leaders in higher education about best practices for *learning communities*, an innovative strategy to group students so they live and study together in common classes.

Dickinson experimented with learning communities in an attempt create first-year seminars in which students lived together. But according to Bylander, these had fallen out of favor. Some faculty complained that when students lived together in a residence hall, it sometimes “soured” the classroom experience, especially if students didn’t get along. So Dickinson moved away from linking housing to first-year classes, a hallmark of learning communities.

But then Dickinson received a Hewlett Foundation grant to focus on the issue of diversity. It created seminars that became “more purposeful,” Bylander said, “with students in clusters linked to topics of diversity, working with a couple of faculty in seminars, and living together.”

“What we learned then, and what we know even more now, is that unless you are purposeful, unless you are really intentional about the experience, just having students live next to each other doesn't deepen the learning any more than randomly placing them in housing,” she added. “You have to have activities that engage the students outside of the classroom. You have to have faculty who are willing to come into a residence hall and be part of the programming. You need social programming that

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builds the community as well as intellectual programming that moves the topics of the seminars along.”

So when Bylander learned about the Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) initiative, she recruited Shalom Staub to create new learning communities for Dickinson students. At the time, Staub was President/CEO of the Institute for Cultural Partnerships and had a background in community organization.

### The Creation of the New Learning Communities

BTtoP awarded Dickinson with two national demonstration site grants. The first was awarded in 2005 to a two-year program called the *Engaged Learning, Student Mental Health, and Civic Development Demonstration Program*. The program focused on whether and how various engaged learning strategies affect the learning and well-being of first-year students.

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The intent of the program was to use learning communities to engage students, and it was built on another earlier Dickinson program, first-year seminars. Roughly 620 freshmen each year had been assigned to one of forty-two different seminars when they first enrolled at Dickinson. But there were no corresponding dorm assignments for students that tied them to the seminars. First-year students were randomly assigned housing. As administrators in the BTtoP project thought about improving the first-year experience, they wondered how they could link the seminars. They also considered how the location of the freshmen students could affect their initial engagement on a campus.

“Early on, we were trying to wrap our own heads around what we meant by *student well-being* and *engaged student learning*,” Bylander said. “In the beginning of the project, we were focused not on student well-being but on student ill health, such as how alcohol was negatively affecting the student experience at college disproportionately. We also talked about engaged learning strategies. I saw the project as being on the forefront of the conversation about the whole student and the connection between the in and out of classroom experiences.”

The first thrust "was to focus on creating learning communities," said Staub, "and whether the intentional co-location of students in linked seminars and creating intentional learning communities of learners would affect what would happen in terms of the learning outcomes and what would happen in terms of how students behaved in their residential experience. Would they drink more or less? Would they report a greater degree of personal satisfaction with their experience or less? Would engaging in service learning in the first-year seminars, regardless of whether they were in learning communities or not, affect these same things?"

Dickinson's BTtoP project set out to enhance the relationships among a number of engaged learning

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initiatives, such as learning communities, and also service learning, experiential learning, and community service and their short- and long-term effect on student engagement, alcohol abuse, mental health, and civic engagement. The assumption was that students in learning communities would drink or binge drink less if they were more engaged with each other and their surroundings. "We felt we were onto something in creating communities of students actively engaged with each other – building community around them," Staub noted.

The new learning communities included approximately one-third of first-year students and consisted of two or three classes linked together on a related theme. The students lived on the same floor or in the same building and were grouped in their housing according to such themes as the environment, global awareness, or social justice. Students studying these concepts also participated in common activities, such as field trips.

"Instead of feeling like a complete stranger on the campus, and you don't know who you are going to talk to or who you are going to go to dinner with, or how to walk across campus and not feel totally isolated, students had a ready-made network of other like-minded students to have dinner with, walk across campus with, and talk to," Staub explained.

Residence life chose the housing for students in the seminars and hired students to work in the learning community. Initially, academic affairs recruited faculty to teach the seminars and administered the program. Faculty were given a \$1,000 stipend and financing for field trips, guest speakers, and other activities, but "what was most important at Dickinson," said Staub, "was that the faculty were given latitude within that structure."

Students in each new arriving First Year class selected six seminars they would want to take. Incoming students were then assigned to a particular FY Seminar. The faculty designed the seminar topics, which varied during the BTtoP project. "There tended to be some repeating patterns and clusters such as environment and sustainability-related seminars, social justice and human rights-related seminars, and science and society," Staub recalled.

For example, one learning community linked Staub's seminar on conflict resolution and another seminar focusing on immigration issues. Over the course of one weekend, both faculty had decided to ask students to participate in a workshop on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Students received background information and role-played one side of the issue. Then halfway through the simulation, the students switched their allegiances, switched their positions, and represented the other side.

"Students learned about perspective taking, how you see things from multiple sides," Bylander observed. "Students saw they could have just as much passion when they switched sides and that everyone's perspective had value. It was a powerful experience. We saw the path we were on made sense. We expanded the project each year to do transformative work on campus."

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## Transforming Lives

Amy Farrell taught a class called Transforming Lives: Social Justice Leaders of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries that focused on the early suffragists, W.E.B. Dubois, the Catholic Worker Movement, and Dorothy Day. Farrell, the Ann and John Curley Chair of Liberal Arts, teaches classes in American studies, women's and gender studies, and had taught in the traditional first-year seminars. When Staub put out a call to turn traditional first-year seminars into learning communities, Farrell volunteered.

She decided she wanted to work with a faculty partner and link her class to service learning "because the topic of social justice is hands-on as well as cerebral," she said. "I wanted students to have a chance to see ideas in action. I wanted to give them a chance to see that complexity of ideas. When you go to put ideas into action it is much messier than it seems at first. When we look back, we see how complicated it was to be an early suffragist or Dorothy Day. It is often impossible to anticipate the costs of the action."

During the course of the BTtoP project, Farrell worked with different faculty members in the sociology department. Her class visited Project SHARE in Carlisle, a food bank and community organization that provides classes, including cooking classes. The students also visited Viva House in Baltimore, run by followers of the Catholic Worker Movement, which sponsors meetings, reading groups, a food distribution center, and treatment centers. Students also had the opportunity to design their own service learning projects.

"I loved working with another faculty member," Farrell said. "I felt camaraderie. I really came to rely on other faculty members and them on me for problems in the classroom, for example. We observed each other, not for the personnel file but to give thoughts on how that faculty [member] was doing or to brainstorm together. I liked having other faculty to chat with who knew the students. Instead of saying, 'Mary was quiet today,' I would get their perspective. They may say, 'Oh, Mary is a quiet person. You might do this next time.' That was excellent. I feel fortunate to have done it. I also learned about community organizations I had not known before."

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## Faculty Response

This is not to say there wasn't some resistance from faculty members at the onset of the BTtoP project. For example, some asked, "Why do you have to call them learning communities?" said Bylander. Staub noted that at first there was some skepticism among faculty about the BTtoP demonstration grant itself. "They were afraid that if the pilot worked, all first-year seminars would need to be paired into learning communities," he recalled. "But they were assured that they could participate if they wanted to or not."

It turned out that every year faculty were interested in linking their seminars into learning communities, according to Staub. "They perceived them as valuable to themselves," he said. "And that

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is defined as the opportunity to work with a colleague they might not otherwise get to work with, gain new perspectives on their own material, and provide better experiences with first-year students.”

Also, faculty came to see “that living together tends to produce students who are thinking about the material with each other outside of class, so the quality of conversation tends to be better in class,” he observed. The program also provided faculty with additional resources to do more activities with their students outside of class or to bring in resources, such as guest speakers.

Staub stated that he felt one of the factors that led to the project’s success was “experimentation.” The faculty were given latitude to try different things within the project’s structure. The living-learning component also varied. Faculty could combine their seminar with as few as one or as many other seminars as they wanted. Some focused on special activities or guest speakers shared by the linked seminars. Others focused on co-teaching or cross-teaching. Some even devised assignments that required students in the two seminars to work together, bringing their multiple perspectives to a topic in common.

Dickinson confronted additional challenges in implementing the BTtoP project. Some of it came from students themselves. While freshmen arriving on campus really didn’t know the difference between learning communities and other housing options, there was some confusion. Half way through a semester, some students wondered why they were being asked to do more than others. There was some push back from parents who worried that the extra work was too much for their children. Administrators stressed to parents that the students were engaged in college-level thinking, writing, analysis, and research – all skills they would need during the rest of their college experiences.

The learning communities became institutionalized, according to Bylander, and along the way, she moved from student life to academic affairs, becoming an Associate Provost. She moved to an approach called *Campus Academic Life* rather than *Student Life*. This approach was designed to connect the class dean system, advising, the learning community program, service learning, and conflict resolution. Bylander ran the first-year seminar program and encouraged faculty to propose new courses for the learning communities.

Because of good experiences, the faculty members were then willing to share their practices and lessons and to try new courses. Staub looked “for titles of courses and topics that would create synergy,” he said.

### **Measuring Assumptions**

As the design of the BTtoP program fell into place, Staub and Bylander knew that measuring their assumptions about the effect of the project on student behavior would be critical. So they recruited Ashley Finley, an assistant professor of sociology, to work with them to design an assessment of the new demonstration project. With her assistance, Dickinson developed pre- and post-test surveys of students and a series of focus groups. The assessments became tied to the project from nearly the beginning and became longitudinal to track students during four years. The purpose of the assessments was to evaluate how student participation in the learning communities affected student learning, mental health, and civic engagement.

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Finley explained how students in the Dickinson focus groups described the effect of the project on them in *Diversity & Democracy*, a publication of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. One first-year student said that getting more involved and engaged in service learning, for example, "was definitely what defined my being. It was what measured my level of happiness." Another first-year student involved in a community service organization said, "It makes me feel a lot better to go from [what] you are learning in class to be able to go out and do something about it and feel like you're making a difference."

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According to Staub, "On the narrow issue of did students in learning communities drink less and binge drink less, we think the answer is yes. They did drink less and they did binge drink less. Some would say it wasn't statistically significant, but those of us closest to the project felt we were onto something. Creating communities of students who actively engage with each other in and out of the classroom, who built a community around an issue of significance to them, mattered."

Bylander added, "The more engaged students are, the more they fill up their time with meaningful activities. The students engaged in learning communities were less engaged in alcohol behavior." Also, while the initial project focused on issues surrounding drinking, "not necessarily well-being," said Staub, "Our own evolution of the thinking on this mirrors the discussion nationally. The language you hear now is about student wellness. But twelve years ago, drinking behaviors were talked about around binge drinking, suicidal tendencies, and extreme psychological distress issues. The whole national discussion has shifted from an illness model to a well-being model. But then we were focused on measuring illness or the absence of illness."

Yet while the issue of drinking was the initial concern, other aspects of the project also became important. Students reported that they loved having faculty work with them in their dorms and talking about subjects that mattered to them. "It deepened their intellectual life," said Bylander. "There were the relationships but also a built-in structure. They saw that faculty existed in the evenings. Students exist in the evenings. It was a much more intentional structure as opposed to a free floating structure where a board had to decide the activities they would have." Indeed, subsequent data gathered over the next two years would bear out Staub and Bylander's comments.

### **Serving Rather Than Observing**

A second BTtoP grant was used to further examine the effect of student participation in first-year student engaged learning initiatives and to examine various kinds of learning experiences beyond learning communities, such as experiential learning and non-credit residential interest clustering. A study was conducted to measure the effect of these experiences on student learning, engagement, mental health, alcohol use, and civic engagement during the short- and long-term.

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While the purpose of the study was to evaluate the engagement and well-being of Dickinson's first-year students, it was also used to examine their transitions into their second years of college and beyond. The investigators looked at what students were involved in, how they fared as they began college, and how their attitudes and behaviors changed over time.

Sarah Bair was one faculty member who saw her students' attitudes change after she joined the BTtoP project. She'd been teaching education at Dickinson but attended a faculty study group Staub organized on service learning. "Because I am in education and students do field work, I wanted to learn more about service learning, its theory and philosophy, and see if I could make the field experience more involved in service learning."

To infuse her classes with service learning, Bair decided to refocus her education classes to put more emphasis on what students were actually giving to the school districts they visited as opposed to merely observing. For example, the Social Foundations of Education class, a first-year course, was restructured so that students going into the Carlisle public schools provided one-on-one support for students or extra help with a group of students, primarily in elementary grades. "It was more hands on," said Bair.

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"The other piece," according to Bair, was that the field experience in education "was always seen as a tacked-on project," she said. "With service learning, the experience became central to my class. We spent considerably more time bringing their experience into class and informing the class. We built class discussion time and formed online groups so everyone was part of the discussion."

In Bair's second level education class, Educational Psychology, students who wanted to be certified in secondary education areas spent 20 hours per week in a school. To give back to the community, they would talk to the public school teachers about topics that were challenging to them as teachers or topics the teachers would like to have more information about but didn't have time to research. The topics were broad, such as working with students with special needs, inclusion, assessment, higher order thinking skills, and instructional strategies. They met with other education students and created Wiki pages on the topics with annotated bibliographies, lists of scholarly journals, tips for teachers, and embedded links to resources. All of the teachers were invited to join Wiki.

In the second year of the project, students who had taken Educational Psychology were linked with students from the Social Foundations class for online discussions. In this way, the second-year students served as mentors for the first-year students.

Bair said that while she does not know how the service learning experience affected retention, she does know it transformed lives. One student, for example, was so taken with her work with students with autism that she decided to pursue a special education degree. Students were engaged, according to Bair, and she felt that they came to understand issues in education they would never have known

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about if they had not gone into schools to *participate* rather than *observe*. As they read education theory about what teachers were supposed to do, they would ask, "How is that possible in the settings we have seen?" Many of the Dickinson students "did not have any idea of the diversity of students in American schools and had no experience with poverty," Bair said. "Our students would go into settings where students struggle, or in elementary schools in which 70 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch, or meet homeless students. It made their experiences so much more relevant. It increased their participation in class. It brought in real-world experiences. It made them critique what they were reading."

Bair also noted certain challenges. There was "a lot to coordinate in terms of getting faculty buy-in. Setting up the service learning program was labor intensive – getting clearance for students, arranging for all students to be finger printed. I managed five different sites and needed to give orientations at each one. It required a degree of commitment and logistics. My view was that it was worth it. But some faculty would ask if the university would support it and consider it as part of granting tenure or recognition. At Dickinson, the faculty felt supported, but these are factors that need to be considered."

### **Removing the Bridge**

Toward the conclusion of the demonstration grants, new leadership in Student Affairs was not interested in collaborative approaches between academic affairs and student life to fully support the living-learning program. "It got much harder just to do the basic work of coordinating residentially-based FY Seminar programs," Staub said. "We were doing good work with conversations about whole students," said Bylander. "We built a bridge to the academic side. We were trying to bridge the student life/academic divide. But then somebody took up the bridge. What happened was resistance from Student Life with new leadership and the college moved to a new way of organizing the residences."

Yet while the structure of the first-year programs changed, what Staub feels is most important is that current faculty in stand-alone, first-year seminars use some of the best practices from the BTtoP project. Dickinson also learned that providing faculty with resources to be used inside and outside of class made a difference. Thus, Dickinson now provides more resources to all faculty, including those in stand-alone seminars. This support can be used for guest speakers, field trips, or dinners with students – activities that were part of the BTtoP learning communities. "We have taken what we identified as best practices," Staub noted, "and we have intentionally made such experiences available to all faculty and to as many students as possible in the first-year class."

Many of the other practices in the project continued. "We overhauled our first-year residential policy," said Staub, "so that now all students live in proximity to fellow students in their first-year seminars regardless of whether they are in a learning community or not. They could be in a seminar linked to another class or in a stand-alone seminar. But even in the stand-alone seminars, we've made a shift to housing all students so that they can find each other by seminar."

For the final report of 2010, Dickinson had four years of data from students involved in the BTtoP project that indicated that students who experienced first-year learning communities appeared to thereafter learn in different ways: they were reflective and engaged in academic material and they were involved in civically-minded activities. Students seemed to be drinking less in relation to their

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peers who were not in learning communities. "Perhaps the strongest component of student flourishing exemplified through students' learning community experiences was the positive development of social relationships," said Finley in the final report. "Students' connections with peers and faculty were clearly defining, satisfying, and meaningful elements of this experience."

Since the BTtoP project ended, Staub's position continues to evolve and provides an administrative link to the past practices created in the BTtoP learning communities, such as service learning. He is now building on his experiences with the first-year seminars to focus on civic engagement. Until the last year or two, "civic engagement has been a tacit and really unexplained or unexplored dimension of what we actually do," Staub noted. "We say that we do it, but we are only now getting around to asking, 'what do we mean by it?' We have lots of pieces," he added, "but we don't have a coherent whole that embodies it."

### **Creating New Leaders of Student Engagement**

Administrators at Dickinson College state that they feel the national BTtoP initiative as a whole benefited them because it created a place in the field of higher education for people to come together from many different institutions to collectively discuss such issues as learning communities. And to further build on its experiences, Dickinson recently received a third BTtoP grant to examine leadership and its effect on student engagement. While the purpose of the earlier project was not to measure retention, the aim of this project is to improve student retention by continuing to enhance the first-year student experience through better integration of academic and student development programs and resources.

In May 2014, experts on this subject visited Dickinson for a three-day study group to explore the relationship between student well-being and academic engagement and to provide support for faculty who might be interested in initiating new, out-of-classroom experiences with their first-year seminar students. These experts included James Pawelski, Director of Education and a senior scholar in the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

The faculty study group was called First Year Academic Engagement and Excellence beyond the FY Seminar. While the previous program focused on teachers in first-year seminars, this initiative supports faculty teaching other courses taken by first-year students. Often these courses are larger with 25, 35, or 40-50 students for lab science lectures as opposed to 13-15 students in the first-year seminars. "We know that some students find it much harder to get their footings in these other classes," said Staub.

Eight faculty members who teach introductory courses in chemistry, biology, educational studies, political science, and accounting participated in the study group and worked their way through a variety of readings, such as *What the Best College Teachers Do* by Ken Bain and *Making the Most of*

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*College: Students Speak Their Minds* by Richard Light. They talked about the first-year student experience, the psychology of learning, the conditions that support engaged learning, and the relationship between student well-being and learning.

Participants identified some aspect of their courses that they wanted to rethink or revise. They met a second time in August to present their revised course plans and describe how those plans developed from the study group material. Bair participated in the summer learning forum and envisions returning to service learning for her new program in education studies, particularly with a course she is designing on contemporary education practices. "I can't say enough about Shalom and his work on this behalf," she said. "He tries a lot of different things and reaches out to faculty. If he has an initiative, I try to follow it."

Staub added, "I really think that the BTtoP project spurred institutional dialogue around connecting students' lives, which is really important because before we were treating them like we each had a separate student body. There was an academic student body and a student life body, but there is really only one. It gave us a platform to have good conversations with our colleagues about how to integrate student lives, help students integrate their own lives, and see themselves as intellectual beings. It created language, it created space, and it created incentives for those kinds of conversations to take place."