
BTtoP Case Study: The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

A Residential College Program to Prepare Students for Life

In 2005, Terri Kapsalis was teaching a course at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) called *The Wandering Uterus: Journey through Gender and Medicine*. Though she was a teacher of painting and critical studies, she found that her students were fascinated by topics that had to do with health, medicine, and gender. “I saw a desire to do more peer mentoring, more peer education than I thought we were giving students the opportunity to do,” she said. “They would tell me how much they shared what they learned in the class with others. Some of them were resident assistants and would go back to their halls and lead informal workshops. They were sharing with their parents and siblings. They were hungry for leadership and the opportunity to educate others.”

Out of that course came an online, community publication. Students identified subjects they were passionate about and then developed ideas for educating their peers. Based on her experiences with her course, Kapsalis met with staff members in the offices of academic administration and student affairs and told them that she saw the possibility for collaboration between the two divisions. At the same time, Joe Behen, a clinical psychologist at SAIC, became involved with national organizations studying student health and learned about the Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) initiative. SAIC decided to participate, and Kapsalis became involved in the project from the beginning.

Background and History

The roots of SAIC go back to 1866 when it was established as the Chicago Academy of Design to provide education in studio arts and exhibition opportunities for students. It became the Chicago Academy of Fine Art in 1879, and the name was changed to the Art Institute of Chicago in 1882. The school and a museum moved into a building designed for the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Today, SAIC adjoins the renowned Art Institute of Chicago in the center of the city on Michigan Avenue, and the two entities comprise the largest school-museum campus in the United States.

SAIC began conferring the Bachelor of Art degree in 1936 and now offers nationally accredited undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, and graduate programs. It provides an interdisciplinary approach to art and design so that students can develop creative and critical abilities and receive liberal arts educations.

SAIC was named the most influential art college in the United States in a National Arts Journalism Survey conducted by Columbia University. And *U.S. News and World Report* ranked it as one of the top three graduate fine arts programs in the nation. The artists who have studied there include Georgia O’Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg, Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, Ivan Albright, Ed Paschke, LeRoy Neiman, and Cynthia Rowley.

Evolving Student Life

By fall 2014, 2,780 undergraduate students and 739 graduate students were enrolled at SAIC and represented 54 countries; 30 percent of the student body is international. The student racial composition is Asian: 11 percent, Black or African American: 3 percent, Hispanic or Latino: 8 percent,

White: 42 percent, multiethnic: 2 percent, and race/ethnicity unknown: nearly 4 percent. The female to male ratio is 71:29. Students are taught by 158 full-time faculty and 540 part-time faculty. SAIC's graduation rate is 60 percent.

To accommodate a growing student population, SAIC opened its first residence hall in 1993 and today provides three dorms for students. Kapsalis described these high-rise dorms as a "vertical urban campus. This is different from a lot of other schools," she said, adding that high-rise dorms in a city "can be an alienating place to be for students."

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In fact, some administrators and staff had already identified critical problems they saw among the first-year students arriving on SAIC's campus. Some were common issues for 18-year-olds who were adjusting to a new school, different city, and varied routine. But also, at the time SAIC's dorms did not have any food service, and some faculty observed that students seemed to be having a hard time taking care of themselves. Some were not sleeping, or they arrived at a morning class after grabbing a cupcake and soda from a vending machine for breakfast. "We all identified food and nutrition as a serious problem," Kapsalis said. "The students were living in the Loop, or downtown Chicago, essentially without food service. That was one problem we identified, and we thought could have a curricular and student affairs tie in."

Meanwhile, Behen, now Executive Director of SAIC's Wellness Clinic, observed an increasing incidence of mental health issues among students. Some suffered from depression and others from anxiety. Some required hospitalization during the semester. While the issue of the mental health of college students has received increasing attention on campuses nationwide, Behen felt that what he was seeing at SAIC was more pronounced and in greater numbers, which subsequent national surveys confirmed.

"Mental health issues occur because of a variety of reasons," said Debbie Martin, Dean of Student Life. "There are subjective and objective links between creativity and mental illness. Also, we are an urban institution. We are a credit, no credit, and interdisciplinary institution. We might draw a student who perhaps has struggled in more traditional settings, and it appears that SAIC is a less traditional setting."

For example, the school does not have majors or letter grades. But Felice Dublon, Vice President, said that the school's critique system puts pressure on students in different ways. She said that SAIC increasingly saw "a connection between psycho/social well-being, learning, and civic engagement as well because we are a community of artists and scholars, and so much of what we do centers around the critique process in which students tell each other about each other's work. That's very different than taking a math test and getting it graded by the teacher and getting it back. You are exposing all your ideas and thoughts to each other; this makes them possibly very vulnerable."

So when Kapsalis first went to the offices of academic administration and student affairs, she said she found administrators excited about the idea of trying to connect with SAIC students in deeper ways. “They felt some of the routine programs in dorms weren’t getting the student involvement that they wanted,” she said.

Meanwhile, Behen felt that BTtoP’s initiative to promote engaged learning “was a good fit” for the school. And to better meet student needs, SAIC administrators decided that they wanted to look at the first-year population. “Eighty-five percent of first-year students live in residence halls,” said Martin. “We thought the residential setting would be a good place to address these issues and through the academic experience look at the overall well-being of our students.”

As administrators and staff brainstormed for ways to address these issues, “we developed the idea of creating a Residential College,” added Kapsalis. “It was a group idea. The feeling was if we could tie some of the living experiences to the classroom experiences it would better help support students.”

Building on an Existing Program

SAIC established a Residential College as a pilot program in 2006-07 and then as a demonstration project for the BTtoP initiative during the next two years. The pilot project included two classes in the residence hall with approximately thirty students per semester. The demonstration project later included approximately sixty students in six classes for each of the next two years.

According to Dublon, students took classes together in a residence hall and received enhanced programming that allowed them to make connections between the school and the city of Chicago. “They had targeted academic advising,” she said, “and concentrated programming around sustainability, artistic practice, healthy living, and community-building through collaboration.”

The Residential College was structured around SAIC’s long-running Research Studio, a required first-year course in which students examine different art media. The course helps them decide what their interests are, what they want their majors to be, and what content they want to focus on. It also helps students examine the way artists develop ideas, collect material for their work, and do field research.

The Residential College expanded the Research Studio and created sections that met for one, six-hour session each week compared to other sections that met for three hours. The Residential College lasted two semesters each year of the project. Some students initially had one professor for both semesters; in subsequent years, the year was split with one teacher each semester.

According to Lora Lode, an assistant adjunct professor of contemporary practices, the goal of the Residential College was to make the freshman experience “a more vibrant and dynamic experience by making it more holistic by involvement not only with the school at large, but also with the communities of Chicago – to extend it beyond the classroom doors to look at issues of health, wellness, and well-being,” she said. “We were creating the big picture of what it is like for the young student artist to come to the dorm experience and to come to Chicago for the first time and really looking at a sustainable way to begin and continue an art practice,” she said.

At the core of this BTtoP project was a mission to promote civic engagement and community-based

work. This is “very much contemporary art now,” Lode added. “Public practice is one genre of work that people are doing now, particularly in Chicago. It made sense to focus on this. It was happening at upper levels of the institution but not in the first year. This was an opportunity to bring some of that in from the beginning.”

Further thinking that fed into the creation of the Residential College, added Kapsalis, was that student-generated design projects were the most successful. “This is obvious from an art school perspective,” she said, “but not necessarily key to what was happening at other liberal arts colleges. When students design and create from the very beginning, they are very invested.”

How the Residential College Built Community

The RC, as it became known, was created with six faculty sections; the students in the sections all lived in the same residence hall and attended the Research Studio class within the residence hall. The faculty members were largely handpicked, according to Paul Coffey who was Dean at the time. “They were people who warmed to students,” he said, “who were compassionate to student conditions.”

During the first semester, the curriculum was focused on building community within the classroom and within the SAIC school community and the life experiences of the students. It was used to build community in the residences as students adjusted to being in Chicago. For example, workshops focused on wellness, time management, and relaxation.

At a fall retreat at Ox-Bow, an artist’s residency in Saugatuck, Michigan, students learned about art as well as the lives of the visiting artists. They also participated in community-building exercises, including a Hopes and Fears workshop with a clinical psychologist in which they spoke about their own personal development and their initial experiences at SAIC. The faculty later addressed some of the student concerns throughout the semester. “It helped me see the residential college as more of a community instead of just a class,” said one student. “It felt good to be in a community of artists.”

With the RC came greater involvement of academic advisors who were part of student affairs. These had been part-time positions, but with the RC, the advisors had a smaller population and were able to visit students more frequently. Upper-class students became peer mentors, partnered with faculty members, served as sounding boards for the freshmen, and helped them navigate the school.

Kyle Andrew O’Connell, for example, was a senior resident assistant in the RC during the 2008-09 school year. Two resident assistants reported to him, and each managed students on one floor of the RC. To him, “the Residential College was trying to create a cohesive experience between the classroom and the living environment so that there would be no separation between the way students would think about themselves as students in the classroom and the way they would think of themselves in the residence hall.” For many students, he added, these concepts often seem separate.

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What he particularly liked about the role of the resident assistants in the RC was the way they helped bridge "the faculty gap" with students. Resident assistants participated in classes, sat in on critiques of artwork, and talked to students about problem solving. Because of this involvement, O'Connell felt that students in the RC came to see the resident assistants "as credible resources who did more than tell them where to put their paperwork," he said. "They began to see RAs as practicing knowledge and more directly using knowledge. There are always a handful of students who talk about their work. But this was a broad way to get to everybody."

Activities to Focus on Wellness

The first academic programs in the RC addressed food and issues of health and wellness. "Looking at food in art is a natural tie in – examining how food is used in art, historical paintings, and modern works," noted Lode. But the RC took it a step further to examine concepts of wellness and the access an individual has to good food.

Students formed teams and were given meal challenges. Teams included a salad team, a main course team, and a dessert team. Students worked with whatever ingredients they were given and created plans with or without stoves. They had to draw from what they knew, from family recipes, or from research. They had to improvise based on what was there. "It breaks down a lot of barriers," said Christa Marie Donner, faculty member. "They have to talk to each other, figure out what to do. It gives them a sense of accomplishment. It helps them think about how they take care of themselves."

The RC also brought in Tara Lane, an alumna and award-winning artist and chef. She introduced students to different spices, salts, and items that had strange textures. Working completely in the dark, students tasted and smelled the spices, wrote down their associations and memories, and put them into categories. "It brought out personal stories that helped them to connect to each other," said Donner. "It also helped them think beyond the obvious of collecting things."

Students visited farmers markets in the city. They were given small amounts of cash and working in small groups were responsible for coming back and cooking a fresh food dish to share with other students on the floor. "We would have these feasts," Kapsalis explained. "They were wonderfully fun. It got students into the city, out of their dorms, learning about the resources, and learning about the flavors of fresh food."

In Lode's class, students made meals together and discussed the concept of wellness, the importance of the health of food, and the need for green spaces. Students visited a philosopher artist named Ken Dunn who operates a Resource Center in Chicago, a creative re-use warehouse of salvaged goods that he makes available at low costs to artists. Students talked about re-use and how artists use a variety of

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materials in their work. Students were also introduced to others artists who were engaged in social issues. For example, artist Mark Dioness talked with students about how he uses art to explore the environment or look at archeology and how he labels and organizes items.

During winter break, Martin said students read Bruce Mau's *Massive Change*, which addresses the use of art and design to improve the world. This was "to demarcate the shift between a focus on internal community and a focus out," she said.

An Outward Focus on Community Projects

The second semester focused on student engagement with the communities and resources in Chicago to build connections outside of the classroom. Activities included guided tours of exhibits at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, visits to art galleries, and dinners with alumni who talked about their lives as practicing artists.

Donner brought her experience in the past to focus on the community aspects of the RC. She'd once worked with teenagers engaged in "social practice projects," she said. "My work isn't made hermetically in my studio. I do things such as go out and interview people and talk with them, have conversations with people outside of our community. If my work is just based on my own experience, it can only go so far. I do projects that involve collaborating with other groups."

For example, her past experience included a residency program in collaboration with teenagers. "The artists had to collaborate and in the process learn about their own work and then contribute whatever skills they had," she said. "Students and artists created multimedia projects together. This work was a good fit for the community aspect of the BTtoP project because it is a great way to do creative research and go out of context of the school, go to other communities, and get to know other kinds of people in other kinds of situations."

So Donner identified a Chicago nursing home that was near one of the train lines accessible to SAIC students. Students traveled off campus to interview the residents, or the residents interviewed them. Together, they worked on online publications and gave the residents copies as well. One publication centered on drawings of themselves in the year 2040. They talked about what their props would be and what costumes would look like. "It created deep empathy," Donner said. "You had students who were very fearful of intergenerational exchanges at the outset who then had these interesting awakenings."

Donner observed that at first students felt they were meeting with strangers, but when they returned, they got to know the seniors better. Some thought particular residents couldn't communicate, but they just had to figure out how to do so. "Once that happened, it was life changing," she said. "Students wrote about their experiences on the train or created comics or drawings. One year, there was a discussion around bingo, so students created a bingo game designed specifically for the residents with all the game pieces. At another time, students collected recipes and made a cookbook. Each year was different."

Faculty members gave students in the RC a number of community choices based on their own contacts. Students would vote, rally, and advocate for a particular group. For example, Lode worked with an

organization called Food not Bombs. SAIC students designed silk-screened bags that were used for food distribution. Other projects led SAIC students to work with children's classes at Homan Square in the economically challenged North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago and the soup kitchen at the Jane Addams Hull House Museum. Students built benches at a city farm and designed a storefront.

Every month there was a faculty meeting of those engaged in the RC community projects. "We would go over the projects and ask each other for feedback, brainstorm ideas, and share tactics," said Donner. "That was so valuable. We got to know other faculty, even people teaching for years. It was amazing to share with each other instead of secretly doing our own thing. Someone would say, 'I really want to do something with a disabled community or the Chinese American population.' Everybody had different connections. Others would make suggestions. I still talk to those people and share ideas even though we don't have the RC structure anymore."

The Challenges for the RC

The RC was not without its challenges. "It was so labor intensive," noted Dublon. When it first started, "there were many things to fit in: retreats, opportunities to collaborate with a gallery space," added Donner. "At first, it seemed that it was way too much. The project was auxiliary to an existing class that was already packed with not enough time." Thus, Donner recommended that in the future, other people, "just start simple. What are the key things that would make a difference? Otherwise people get burnt out."

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And while the point of the RC was to have students live and study together, "They were together a lot," observed Kapsalis. "When it worked, it worked astoundingly well. If a class started at 9 a.m. and a student wasn't there, a couple of students would trot off to her room and get her. There was this sense of accountability and a sense of responsibility for each other. Students would hang out together outside of class and cook together. But when it didn't work, it looked like students meandering in to class at 9:30 a.m. in their PJs, annoyed with each other. There were fights with roommates that would then continue into class."

After two years of living and learning together in the dorm, some of the groups were pulled out of the RC grouping. Administrators said they found that the success of the project was not hindered by students not living together.

It was also hard to sustain the ongoing community projects. Faculty moved on, organization staff members shifted, interests changed. "But while there were a lot of kinks to work out," added Donner, "having a faculty community is crucial and helped us not to feel like we were cramming things in. We shared what was working and what wasn't. Building community among faculty is critical."

From a student affairs perspective, O'Connell noted that one key component turned out to be different

than expected. When students signed up for classes, they were asked if the RC was something they were interested in and they said yes. But the information they had about the program and the changes and experiences of coming to college made it difficult for them to get a sense of what they were choosing. "It would be a different program if they elected to do this in junior and senior year," he said.

Others noted that as the project went on, concerns were raised about litigation resulting from the preparation of food on campus. While the programs were popular and universally applauded, the faculty and staff learned about the restrictions of preparing food in a classroom or in the dorms and the regulations that prohibited certain activities, such as potlucks. Administrators became concerned about allergies to certain foods, such as peanuts. So by the end, many of the cooking experiences had to be curtailed.

Fostering School Community

SAIC saw that what was so successful in the Residential College was academic advising in which academic affairs was integrated with student affairs.

The BTtoP project officially ended in 2011. Martin said SAIC always had "the intention to look for interventions that we could then scale up to the entire population. We saw that with the RC, we had a population of students who were getting a different level of attention than the other residential students. There was a partnership with academic advisors. There was a partnership with the resident hall staff. There were all of these resources spent on these students. We wanted to see what would be the most effective changes we could make for the entire freshman class. The BTtoP project allowed us to develop some systems to make broader scale changes."

So when the project was over, the first-year program assumed the curricular aspects of the project, and student affairs and resident halls assumed other parts. With these changes, SAIC saw that what was "so successful in the Residential College was academic advising in which academic affairs was integrated with student affairs," added Dublon. "Integrated advising is now part of what we do here so advisors are in the classroom with the students during the first year. They go on field trips with the students. They are part of the critique process with the students." Martin also believes that as a result of the BTtoP project, the academic advising system in student affairs was enhanced. SAIC continues to use peer mentors with freshmen but now includes sophomores as well.

"I was really impressed by the true collaboration of the different arenas," Kapsalis said. "People have different approaches, different training. But what happened was that student affairs learned from us and we learned from student affairs. I noticed shifts in RA programs and student affairs programs following the work we did together. I saw faculty being aware and more sensitive to the kind of life and residential challenges that the students had. That was one of the great things that came out." Lode noted the effect of the faculty collaboration. "We had incredible meetings with other faculty," she said. "The group influenced me. It was collegial with everyone sharing ideas. This experience is good for the students."

Faculty members still use some of the BTtoP academic techniques, such as workshops to build

community and foster conversations. On the student affairs side, other activities continue, such as taking students to a food market and addressing the issues of stress and nutrition in a more holistic way.

In the last two years, SAIC developed a Student Center with funding from artist LeRoy Neiman. The BTtoP project led to the awareness of the need for more community spaces for students. The center includes student galleries and space for events and programs. There is now a food service, not a cafeteria, where students can get healthy meals.

Since the project ended, Lode says she continues to teach courses in a way that starts foundationally with a premise similar to the community-based practices developed in the BTtoP project: “respect for each other, being open to ideas, engaging students. It happens most in the beginning of a class,” she said. “It is simple. But the starting point is listening to students instead of talking to them. The BTtoP experience changed the classroom setting and set the tone for other classes.”

Kyle O’Connell graduated from SAIC and worked in graphic design for two years. He is now back at SAIC as Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions and brings the experiences he had as a resident assistant in the RC with him.

What has stayed with Donner? “I learned some things, dropped things, and other things have become part of my teaching. For example, when taking attendance, instead of checking to see who is there, I have a question of the day related to what we will be talking about. It is a way for each person to say something. If we are going to talk about collection, I ask, ‘What is something you collected as a kid?’ Everybody says something. You find out something about them, which is important especially in a school this size where a lot of the students don’t know each other, don’t know each other’s names. We have this in the morning. Everybody looks forward to it. Students don’t want to miss the questions or be late. They want to be there.”

Martin notes that, as at other colleges, health remains one of the top reasons students take leaves of absence. But she felt that learning ways to improve the well-being of students ultimately affected SAIC's retention. According to the project reports, the retention rate for students in the RC who began as freshman in the fall of 2007 was 84 percent compared to the overall freshman rate of 73 percent. By the fall of 2012, freshman to sophomore retention for all students was 81 percent, and Martin believes the rate has continued to increase. Martin said it is hard to measure the effect of the RC program “because the population was small.” She added, “But we have dramatically improved retention since 2007 for our first-year students from freshman to sophomore year. It is a variety of things. We’ve looked at who is coming in, for example. But academic advising has had a huge impact

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on this, and we strengthened that through BTtoP. We became educated as a population.”

For Paul Coffey, who is now Vice Provost, the BTtoP project, “built a culture of expectations and demands.” SAIC is now involved more as an institution with other Chicago organizations, such as the Early College Program and the Bridge Program with the Chicago Public Schools. “What we are doing now we couldn’t have done if we hadn’t had the BTtoP experience,” he said.

As SAIC was ending its initial participation in BTtoP, Walter E. Massey was named the new president and, according to Coffey, has expanded the links to Chicago that the BTtoP grant initiated. Meanwhile, Behen, already known in his field, is a national expert on the health and well-being of students. He stated the BTtoP project ultimately led to SAIC’s participation in the National College Depression Partnership, the Healthy Minds Initiative, and a suicide prevention grant.

In fact, SAIC recently was awarded distinctions that administrators say can be indirectly linked back to participation in the BTtoP project. It received a JedCampus Seal, for example, in recognition from the Jed Foundation for its comprehensive mental health and suicide prevention program. In September 2014, SAIC was selected by NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education to participate in a national initiative on civic learning and democratic engagement. Beginning in 2015, it will participate in a Spencer grant to examine better ways to identify potential students coming to art schools.

Felice Dublon concluded that BTtoP “sparked hunches for seeds of change. There are projects going on now at the school that no one would attach to Bringing Theory to Practice. But I know that it was the hunch that sparked the seed. If we were to do an in-depth analysis of what is happening here today, so much of it can go back to either the actual grant or the new way of thinking. It remains for me an organizing framework for student learning.”

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