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# BTtoP Case Study: St. Lawrence University

## Making First-Year Programs Community Based

In 2000, a high quality academic experience and a strong sense of community characterized St. Lawrence University, but it also believed it had a drinking problem on campus. "Like many other private, rural, small, coed campuses located in the Northeast, not affiliated with a church, St. Lawrence seemed to have higher alcohol use," said Christine Zimmerman, Director of Institutional Research. To figure out ways to address this concern, a group of faculty, students, and staff attended a national conference and came back with a plan to establish an alcohol initiative aimed at bringing awareness to students and the university. Within three years, this focus expanded to a wellness initiative, and Catherine Crosby-Currie, a professor of psychology, became Committee Chair.

But in 2005, Dan Sullivan, then university president, thought the school could do more. He learned about the Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) initiative and brought Crosby-Currie together with Zimmerman and Ronald Flores, a professor of sociology, who ultimately crafted a proposal for funding. Their aim was to target first-year students as they arrived on campus to see if engaging them immediately in their classes and getting them more involved with the community at large would alter behavior and the pattern of campus drinking. Crosby-Currie, Zimmerman, and Flores then led the project.

### Background

St. Lawrence University was founded in 1856 in Canton, New York, in the St. Lawrence River Valley. It is named for the St. Lawrence River, which is 20 miles away bordering Canada. It began as a seminary for members of the Universalist Church, which later merged with the Unitarian faith. To prepare students for the study of theology, the institution had a preparatory department that evolved into a liberal arts university. The seminary closed in 1965, and St. Lawrence is the oldest, continuously coeducational institution of higher learning in New York State.

Today, St. Lawrence's mission is "to provide an inspiring and demanding undergraduate education in the liberal arts to students selected for their seriousness of purpose and intellectual promise." It awards a Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Master of Education, and Certificate of Advanced Studies in Educational Administration.

In 2013-2014, it had 173 full-time faculty and 34 part-time faculty with a student-faculty ratio of 12:1. Some 2,414 undergraduate and 92 graduate students had enrolled at St. Lawrence. Fifty-five percent of undergraduates were women. Nearly 12 percent of undergraduates were U.S. students of color, and nearly 8 percent were international students. Students came from 45 states and 47 nations. The retention rate from the first year to the second year was nearly 90 percent.

### Reinventing a First-Year Program

Crosby-Currie joined the St. Lawrence faculty in 1996 as an assistant professor with a PhD in community psychology. Her focus was on how the contexts in which people live affect their behavior

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and mental processes, and she was interested in the promotion of well-being and the prevention of mental health issues. She also has a law degree and became interested in the reduction of high-risk alcohol use.

Flores was Director of Service Learning at St. Lawrence in 2002. He felt service learning “was outside of the academic mainstream,” he said and wanted to create a new structure to support his program. In 2005, the BTtoP demonstration grant was announced, and it was exactly what Flores wanted to do because, he argues, “service learning is the ideal in engaged learning pedagogy. It does everything that engaged learning is supposed to do.”

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At the same time, St. Lawrence had one of the oldest living/ learning programs in the country, which was established in 1988 for students arriving on campus for the first time. The aim of this program is to help new students make successful transitions from high school to college socially and intellectually. The goal of the first St. Lawrence BTtoP project was to take a fresh look at community-based learning within the First-Year Program (FYP). With the initial BTtoP grant, Flores also became the founding director of a Center for Civic Engagement and Leadership (CCEL).

In St. Lawrence’s FYP, first-year students begin their first semesters in a team-taught interdisciplinary course, one of their four courses in the fall of their first year. They live in an area of the residence hall grouped under the umbrella of a college name with other students enrolled in the same course. While these FYP courses have themes based on different topics, the focus of the program across all FYP courses is to develop the writing, speaking, and critical thinking skills needed for college work. The class size is approximately 16 students for each professor or 32 students with 2 professors. The professors serve as their FYP students’ advisors until their sophomore year.

The initial thrust of the BTtoP initiative at St. Lawrence was to focus on one of the residential colleges that offered living, learning, and community components and the connection between the residential, the academic, and the civic. “What we

were trying to do was eliminate the silo model of education and bring all the elements of a college experience together,” Flores said. “We used pedagogies of engagement, including real world experiences; cooperative or collaborative work; reflections, such as portfolios; and a sense of ownership or responsibility with an intentionality in learning. The more you give students the freedom to express their intellect, the greater the likelihood that you will see some positive outcomes. Couple that with intensive writing and oral communication, and suddenly we had a variety of engaged pedagogies in this one college. Then we merged or partnered with the FYP.”

Flores said that, at first, some faculty worried about the service learning aspect of the program because they didn’t know what their students would be seeing “out there,” he said. “It is a decentered

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classroom and the faculty member is a learner as much as teacher. We are all trying to process what students are seeing and connect it to specific kinds of readings. Service learning is really a collaboration of equal partners so that you are not that special.”

### **How the St. Lawrence BTtoP Project Worked**

The BTtoP project started with 30 students in Brown College, named after Olympia Brown, the first African American woman to graduate from St. Lawrence. Every FYP course is in a college named after someone at the university. Brown College included two connecting residence halls, Hulett and Jencks. Flores taught his class with Elizabeth Regosin from the history department.

According to Regosin, the two had been discussing the fact that “in a liberal arts university, part of our mission is to produce engaged citizens who are lifelong learners and making a contribution to the community in which they live. Yet we felt we were not paying attention to that. We wanted to make a whole course around that idea. We decided that crucial to our paying attention to civic engagement and being good citizens was having students do community-based learning. We built an FYP around community-based learning. I had never done that before.”

In the classroom, Flores and Regosin looked at some of the basic principles of democracy, historical concepts, and aspects of leadership. In the early years, the course focused on the issues surrounding Hurricane Katrina. Students picked research projects that had to do with the responses to the hurricane and designed and organized their own conference with research presentations and panel discussions. As the course evolved, the issues changed. Classes were sometimes conducted in the residence halls.

For the CBL component, students worked in food banks, organic farms, alternative schools (such as the Little River School), Free-Will Dinners (a food bank and community education center), a children’s day care, and a school that included people of all ages with emotional and mental health challenges. They started a cyber seniors program to teach adults how to use computers. Students were assigned a CBL project based on their interests.

In one CBL project, students visited the Mohawk Reservation, which is approximately 45miles from the school. On the reservation, they worked with a Boys and Girls Club in tutoring activities and sessions that focused on nutritional foods. They worked at the Freedom School, which was a kindergarten through eighth grade school in which students learned only in the Mohawk language. But in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, the Mohawk students moved to an English-speaking-only high school, and some students had problems writing in English. So the St. Lawrence students created a transitional program for seventh and eighth graders to focus on English. At the same time, the St. Lawrence students learned the Mohawk language.

“We were teaching each other,” said Flores. “The best part was having students talk with the children. The most important thing was that St. Lawrence students got to talk and interact with the Mohawk people, and the Mohawk students got to know about college students. Many Mohawk students did not know St. Lawrence was in their area. In addition, students went into the neighboring community, returned to class, and wrote reflective journals,” said Flores. “We thought this would be a good opportunity to see if the experience of being part of an FYP with community experience would result in

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positive outcomes compared to other students with the same interests but who were not in the program."

In the journals, students reflected on their experiences in the community and connected those experiences to the materials in the classroom. Their journals were submitted electronically and served as an outlet for ongoing conversation. "We wanted them to see the connection between what was going on in the classroom and what they were experiencing in the community," Flores said. At the end of the semester, the Flores and Regosin class hosted a festival of community-based learning. It gradually included other colleges, and students gave presentations about their community-based learning projects.

In addition, part of the BTtoP funding was used to hire residential community mentors, students who served as liaisons among faculty, students engaged in CBL, and community partners. They were upper-level students or peer leaders who were paid approximately \$1,200 per semester. The grant allowed for the creation of a CBL center and part of the assistant director's salary.

In the spring semester of the first-year, students moved from the FYP course to a FY seminar. They were no longer team-taught, and the emphasis was changed to research and literacy.

### **An Intensive Site Grant**

The BTtoP project then expanded from one college to a larger group of professors. As with the original course at Brown College, students in groups of 30 to 34 took a team-taught course and lived together in the residence hall. Two professors, Jon Rosales in environmental studies and Natalia Singer in English team-taught a course on Thoreau called Thoreau Lives that was focused on simple living. The class sponsored a local lunch every fall, researched and prepared meals using local foods, and gave presentations.

St. Lawrence received additional funding from the BTtoP initiative for an intensive site grant that ran from 2007-11. Zimmerman, Flores, and Crosby-Currie were still working together. The focus remained on the first-year students but expanded on "the idea of engaged forms of pedagogy generally and across the entire first year," Crosby-Currie explained. "The timing was good," added Zimmerman. Crosby-Currie was named Associate Dean of the First Year and felt she was empowered to add more structure to the program and bring more faculty together.

"Teaching in a place like St Lawrence is highly enmeshed," Crosby-Currie said. "The networks are tight. The previous associate dean had been one of my closest friends and was supportive of the program. I took over from him in summer 2007."

In one course, students built a canoe together. The grant funded the materials and enabled students to visit a canoe builder, attend workshops, and go to a museum. A performance and communications arts professor linked with a children's theater group in one of the local schools. A professor in the biology department did a project on medicinal plants with Mohawk children. Another in creative writing worked with prisoners. In a government class, students worked with a district attorney and the public defender's office. At least 19 different departments incorporated service learning into their courses. In fact, by 2009, at least half of the first-year students were engaged in community programs.

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## Faculty Development

The programmatic aspect of the intensive site grant was faculty development. Funding was also available to continue to support the community mentor program, summer student fellowships, and attendance at national conferences.

Professors were not paid extra for faculty development. But under the original BTtoP project, Flores created a faculty associates program, whereby a faculty member joined the Center for Civic Learning and Engagement and was paid approximately \$1,500 for training to learn about engaged pedagogy and \$250 to teach the course twice. These were regular courses within the departments in which community-based learning was integrated.

Pedagogy teams also allowed faculty members to choose engaged forms of learning they wanted to learn more about. These featured readings, guest speakers, dinners, discussion groups, and learning communities. "We focused on reflective journaling, for example," said Crosby-Currie, "and community-based learning, activism and advocacy, and the decentered classroom in which students were involved in project-based learning. But what happened was that the faculty found this too confining," she added. "It was difficult for them to find the time to put into the faculty development. We got small numbers of faculty involved. It was pretty clear by the first year that this just was not going to work. What we needed to do was find another way to cultivate faculty who wanted to experiment with some of these pedagogies and help them to figure out how to do that. We turned it around and it became faculty talking to faculty."

For example, at a lunch one faculty member would talk about community-based learning, and any faculty could come and discuss what worked and what didn't. They were given materials they could use. There was also a session on reflective journaling hosted by the team using it. "We actually had good turnouts at these sessions with 15 of the 35 faculty in the program attending," Crosby-Currie said. "It worked much more because it was faculty teaching faculty. This works for our program much more because at St. Lawrence, faculty members talk with each other about teaching all the time. It is part of the culture. Instead of trying to create an artificial structure on top of the faculty experience, we took what we were doing and created settings that enabled the discussion to happen." Zimmerman added that by widening the focus of the sessions to include more approaches, "it also gave them freedom to explore multiple things and not just one."

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### Reiff College

Patti Frazer Lock, Cummings Professor of Mathematics, was inspired by the BTtoP workshops. "I was teaching mathematics, and many of these ideas were a change for me," she said. She formed a team

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with John Pezdek in the development office and Joe Marsh, then the head hockey coach, who wanted to connect with students in a different way. In fall 2008, they offered an FYP course called *Having an Impact: Leadership, Teamwork, and Motivation*.

The course was offered as part of Reiff College, named after a government professor at the university. The students in the Frazer Lock course lived together. Then, as was true with all FYP colleges, there were course-related dinners with students, a gathering of parents in the dorm during family weekend, and meetings with college assistants. "Because of the residential aspect, the class very quickly had a different feel," said Frazer Lock. "Students knew each other so well. We did group work so they would get to know each other quickly and make connections."

All FYP courses accentuated reading, speaking, and some research. The goal was to prepare students for college-level writing. Another focus of the course was the transition to college and helping students to get to know the university resources, such as the writing center. The class studied leadership and game theory and participated in business simulation games, role-playing on making decisions, and some math. "One of the ideas that came completely out of the BTtoP workshops was to have a community-based learning component," said Frazer Lock. "CBL was nowhere on our horizon until we went to one of these workshops. People were talking about the power of having students out in community and the impact on students."

Students completed two hours of service learning per week. The students in Reiff College also worked at farms and food banks, with mentally- or physically-challenged individuals of all ages, in a battered women's office, in a Boys and Girls Club nearby, and at a horse farm with emotionally disturbed children. "The county is relatively poor," noted Frazer Lock, "so there was no lack of agencies saying they needed help."

Every three weeks, the Reiff College faculty asked students to write and describe what they were doing, what their reactions were, and what they were learning. "It became clear that this was critically important," said Reiff. "We also asked them to step outside their work areas and discuss what the group dynamics were like and what they were observing at the place."

Reiff College also joined the festival of community-based learning with other FYP colleges. Groups of 35 to 50 students formed smaller groups of 2-10 students and presented creative summaries of what they had learned. These ranged from poster presentations, to slide presentations, to oral presentations with video. Students found a variety of ways to describe what they learned, and this idea also grew out of the original BTtoP workshops.

In addition, as was true of all FYPs, faculty members acted as academic advisors. "I was doing this when my own kids were going to college," said Frazer Lock. "I was aware of how hard a transition it is for students. I wanted to find a way to be sure no one fell through the cracks academically or emotionally. I wanted to find a way to keep track of that."

So the team devised advising letters. One was a letter of introduction before the first class in which students wrote a paragraph or two about themselves. The second was a personality test that was administered in class. The third asked for a response to how the semester was going in terms of dorm life and extracurricular activities. Were students happy? Were they being productive? "Writing the

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responses forced them to reflect on whether they were working up to their potentials and were engaged; the responses let us know if there were any serious problems,” said Frazer Lock. “If there was a problem, we would contact the resident assistants, for example, or we would have a conversation with the student.”

The fourth letter asked the students to look to the future before they selected their classes for the next semester or declared their majors. The idea was to get them to think more strategically. The fifth letter was at the end of the course and asked students for personal assessments and to reflect back on their participation in the course. Were they engaged or not? How successful was the course from their perspective? Frazer Lock and her team then gave a workshop for other faculty on how to link advising with the use of letters.

The team-taught the class for four years with 50 students per semester or 200 students during the time the course was offered. Frazer Lock said it affected students “in profound ways.” The idea was adopted by faculty teaching in many FYPs after the workshop because it was so powerful.

### Measuring Impact

The first BTtoP grant at St. Lawrence was designed as “a non-equivalent comparison group design,” Crosby-Currie said, that included an experimental group (Brown College described above) and a comparison group of similar first-year students. Both groups were tracked over their four years. Flores, Crosby-Currie, and Zimmerman developed survey instruments and analyzed data to compare the students in the BTtoP classes, including Brown College, with other students.

What they discovered was that there was “not much movement” in the trend toward drinking. They did see a higher percentage of first-year students coming into their first years of college who were not drinking. “But overall, our drinking level remained high and pretty stable,” said Zimmerman, who noted that the number of students actually assessed was small.

At first, other measurement outcomes “plummeted,” Flores said. “It was kind of depressing.” Measurements dropped related to leadership, the ability to make a difference, civic engagement, and responses to questions about whether or not students believed engagement in social problems or social justice was important. On further analysis of the data and student responses, the evaluation team concluded that students were going out to the community and facing resistance. Their confidence slipped with the reality of what they were seeing. “Our students were at first deflated,” said Crosby-Currie, “but they really had a more realistic vision that it was not easy to change the world.”

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though they were at first discouraged, they gained a more realistic vision. Students were required to complete only one semester of community service, but the evaluations showed that many stayed involved with their organizations as volunteers.

“When the students saw how hard it was to make change, they went through a period of disillusionment,” added Regosin. “They saw that working out in the community was hard. But what grew out of this realization was a commitment to civic engagement.”

The second four-year grant included a longitudinal study to observe the students during their four years at St. Lawrence to help faculty infuse their classes in the first year with engaged forms of

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pedagogy. The first-year class was surveyed as they came to college, in their first-year classes, again in the sophomore year, and then in the senior year. “We were looking to see what kinds of pedagogy they were exposed to in their first-year program,” added Crosby-Curry, “and how that related to their outcomes later on.”

She felt that St. Lawrence was chosen for the BTtoP study aspect because “we had the ability to do the entire first-year class,” she said. “There was no self-selection. The idea was to survey all the students across the class and to try to infuse the engaged forms of pedagogy across the whole program so that students would be exposed to something, although it varied, in all of their classes. St. Lawrence was primed to do that. We were able to target the entire first-year class.”

In the first BTtoP project, Zimmerman studied retention and graduate rates, comparing the students in Brown College to the students in the comparison group. In 2005, the first year of the grant, the retention rates for Brown students from freshman to sophomore year outperformed the matched comparison group (97 percent versus 88 percent respectively). In the second year, the retention rates for the two groups were 97 percent and 94 percent respectively. The six-year graduation rates were 93 percent and 78

percent respectively.

Zimmerman noted that retention rate comparisons were not possible for the intensive site grant. “All students were exposed to various degrees of engaged pedagogy,” Zimmerman explained. “FYP instructors employed more than one type of engaged pedagogy.”

### **Sustaining Impact**

Today, 68 percent of students at St. Lawrence participate in volunteer work or community service, and St. Lawrence now has a Center for Collegiate Volunteerism. Crosby-Curry left her position as associate dean when the grant period ended. “At that point, the engaged forms of pedagogy in the FYP were now the norm. It is hard to know if it was a trend we were already seeing or because of the grant. But it might not have taken off as it did, particularly with the community-based learning. The grant allowed

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us to create a community mentor position that is now funded by the university and hasn't gone away. We now have a group of students very committed to working with community partners. Without the grant, we would not have been able to do that."

Crosby-Currie and Zimmerman noted that the St. Lawrence faculty benefited from the BTtoP grant because it allowed them to do things they had wanted to do in their courses. "Sustainability also became part of the conversation as St. Lawrence later restructured its budget," said Crosby-Currie. "The university now puts more money into field trips, for example, and special projects. There is now an understanding that there are funds for faculty to use."

Crosby-Currie and Zimmerman added that the intensive site grant was awarded as the economic recession hit and St. Lawrence, like other schools, was cutting budgets. Because of the grant "we were able to fund things, such as field trips, faculty development, and special projects," said Crosby-Currie. "A lot of things we did, we wouldn't have been able to do without the grant." She added that while "engaged forms of pedagogy are more the norm than 10 years ago, it is hard to know to what extent change occurred because of broader cultural changes in higher education. George Kuh's study of high-impact practices, for example, was also in play elsewhere in higher education. And the new faculty members coming into the university are more aware that you should not didactically lecture students." Flores and Regosin continue to discuss the success they had with community-based learning practices at workshops at St. Lawrence and at national conferences. They wrote a chapter for the book, *The Learning Portfolio: Reflective Practice for Improving Student Learning*, by John Zubizarreta, in which they described learning journals.

Flores left St. Lawrence in 2009 and went to Connecticut College. He continues to apply much of what he learned from the BTtoP project to his work there. He now has a community-based learning project with a different Native American group. When the BTtoP grant ended at St. Lawrence, the center he founded was renamed the Center for Civic Engagement and continued without the focus on leadership. Student Life absorbed the leadership program, but the community-based component of the program and service learning stayed together in the center. "What was most important was the connection between the community-based program and the first-year program," Flores said. "And that stays healthy to this day."

Crosby-Currie, now chair of psychology, believes individual faculty members such as Regosin were forever changed by the BTtoP grant. Regosin remained committed to community-based learning through the grant period and beyond. "The community-based learning program grew at St. Lawrence," she said, "I stayed with CBL as well. I just think the engagement of students who are involved in community-based learning is so much greater than other students on campus."

Thus, she has included community-based learning in her classes every year since 2005, she now supervises multiple independent students working in the community. In addition to her students, she now does her own volunteer work in prisons that includes a book club for prisoners. She continues the festival of community-based learning that started in her class with Flores every semester. "It was a direct outgrowth of the BTtoP project," she said, "an unintended consequence."

In the first-year program, students still live in common residences although since the grant ended, St. Lawrence has experimented with alternative structures. A single faculty member might teach a class,

for example. Or two FYP colleges may be taught by single faculty member and do activities together, such as watch a movie, attend a guest speaker event, or have a discussion. These are referred to as *dating colleges*.

"What we took away was the power of a particular faculty member to inspire students," Crosby-Currie added. "Ron Flores was a force of nature. He really inspired his first-year students to want to be involved in the community and make a difference. So while we couldn't find numbers in focus groups and interviews, we could see the impact that Ron had on students. He inspired them to want to be more socially aware, he made them uncomfortable in a good way, and he challenged them and their preconceptions. At first, they didn't like the fact that he made the world much more complicated than they wanted it to be. But they grew to understand it was good for them."

Frazer Lock said she believes the BTtoP project affected retention. "I think the first year is a key time for students. If we can help them be connected those first two weeks – make friends, make connections – it makes everything easier. It makes it easier for them to make new friends, to learn about clubs and sports or whatever they are interested in. BTtoP helped all of us think much more explicitly and concretely about this." The BTtoP project also "dramatically affected my mathematics teaching as well," she added. "I do more group work and activities. I minimize lectures and try to be creative."

Regosin noted that the BTtoP project, "changed my role as a teacher; it changed the way I thought about teaching. It challenged me to think about civic engagement and to think about its impact. As a historian, it made me feel that the value of what I was teaching had such an important impact on the way the students live in the world today. It made me think about the kind of teacher I wanted to be. And it became important to me that I was in the community as well. So it had a lot of unintended good consequences," she said. "The culture changed on the campus. Everyone talks about doing CBL. Whether or not they actually do it, it is something people are mindful of, and its significance is important. That grows out of that experience with the BTtoP project. I changed as a teacher, but I don't think you go into that kind of grant thinking that is going to happen. You are going to measure students and see what the outcomes are, but actually you are fundamentally changing the way human beings live in the world."

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