



MEMO
Action Plan for Bringing Theory to Practice, AY 2018-19
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November, 2018

This action plan for Year One of Bringing Theory to Practice (AY 2019) builds on general strategic priorities, developed in consultation with BTtoP's former director and co-founder, Don Harward, and other project leaders, the BTtoP staff, and the Advisory Board during my initial four months on the job. These priorities include:

- strengthening community among BTtoP's network of practitioners, researchers, and allies;
- developing multi-campus collaborative projects that meld BTtoP's established areas of leadership (student well-being, civic engagement, integration of academic and co-curricular life) with its emerging focus on equity and underserved students;
- curating and amplifying the lessons of research and practice from BTtoP-supported work;
- raising BTtoP's national visibility and influence through partnerships, publications, and new media.

With these goals in mind, I sought advice about our mission, priorities, and next steps from various sources: more than fifty respondents to an online survey, two dozen conversations with BTtoP participants and friends, discussions with our staff and Advisory Board, and our October strategic retreat. The feedback was enormously helpful. Now it's time to move forward.

Mission language

We received much advice that BTtoP develop language that compactly conveys our mission, values, and goals. Some find our mission language cumbersome. Many in our community have a positive and accurate understanding of part of our work—depending on their interests—but not necessarily a sense of the whole. There was persistent feedback that we need a pithier “elevator pitch.”

I share the sense that BTtoP would benefit from distilling language that conveys the power of our project—language that is large, direct, and concise. It can be flexible, depending on the audience we are addressing. Whether on our splash page, in a letter to a funder, or (yes) on an elevator, such language should elicit a quick nod and a desire to learn more. Academic audiences, for instance, might read something like:

Bringing Theory to Practice is grounded in three commitments. We believe that higher education should be holistic and transformative, nurturing intellectual growth, personal well-being, preparation for meaningful work, and democratic citizenship.

We believe that “educating the whole student” has to include all students, no matter their background or interests. And we believe that the first two commitments require the reshaping of higher education. BTtoP works to advance these ideals through innovative practice, research, advocacy, and institutional change.

Public forums might call for less “insider” language:

All students deserve an education that lets them to learn with joy, chart their own future, support their family and their community, and change the world. Bringing Theory to Practice works to improve and innovate higher education to deliver on that promise.

These are not meant as fixed scripts. This year we will test, revise, and use such mission language to make our case to partners, funders, and the public.

Prioritizing collaboration

One key focus will be organizing and supporting collaborative work in and beyond our current network. Since 2003, BTtoP has funded projects on hundreds of campuses, many of which have proven transformative for their institutions. Networked collaboration offers a powerful strategy for building on this success and leveraging systemic change.

We plan to support collaborative projects at two scales. First, BTtoP will aim to launch between one and three “collaboratories”: large, multi-institutional projects that develop and disseminate innovative models for core educational purposes. As detailed below, we have prioritized three project themes:

- student well-being and the equity imperative
- educating the whole adult student
- civic engagement across polarized communities

Second, BTtoP will offer small grants that support grass-roots collaborative proposals from within and beyond our network.

Explainer: what are “collaboratories”?

What do I mean by “collaboratories”? How will they be organized, governed, staffed, and funded? Why the themes prioritized above? In answering these questions, I’ve learned much from successful models of collaborative innovation in higher education—for instance, the Network for Improvement and Innovation in College Health (NIICH)—and feedback from BTtoP participants and partners.

Think of a collaboratory as a project pursued by a group of institutions, working collectively to develop, test, and disseminate practices that advance the educational purposes to which BTtoP is committed. Their duration and scale will vary, but typically they might span two academic years and comprise eight to fifteen institutions from diverse sectors. Each partner would work on the project theme in ways specific and beneficial to its campus; but the larger purpose of the projects is collective innovation and systemic change.

Exemplars like NIICH argue that it is crucial to begin such projects by agreeing on goals and defining how to measure success. It is important for partners to communicate frequently and convene once or twice a year, sharing the outcomes of campus work, reframing goals in light of new evidence, distilling research and models of best practice. It will also be crucial for the group to disseminate and “missionize” results beyond the group itself.

This model asks much from participants, and it depends on support *for* participants. Each project needs its own Principal Investigator(s) from one or two lead institutions, as well as a project manager with subject-matter familiarity and organizing skills. It needs distributed intellectual leadership from across the group. It will require significant resources: salary for the project manager, honoraria for Principal Investigators and network thought-leaders, funds for convenings, research, and public deliverables. A two-year collaboratory along these lines will need an estimated \$200,000-250,000. Bringing Theory to Practice would be responsible for external grant support; partner institutions would provide matching funds and in-kind support for the on-campus work.

BTtoP will have a complex role in these projects. We will be accountable to our funders and responsible for overseeing grants to participants. We will serve as a convener, a thought-partner, and a community organizer. Our values will inform the choice of themes; participation will draw heavily from our network; we will work with participants to define goals, distill lessons, and disseminate results. We will connect collaboratories to each other.

These roles may work differently from project to project. Sometimes (as with the well-being project below) BTtoP may directly enlist institutions from our network. Sometimes (as with the project on adult students below) we may join with pre-existing networks that share our priorities. There will surely be situations where goals, roles, and the use of deliverables require clarification or negotiation. Building relationships of trust and mutuality will be crucial to every collaboratory.

Three collaboratory proposals

Our discussions have yielded a wealth of ideas for collaborative projects. Working with staff, the Advisory Board, and others, we are prioritizing three of them, based on their educational significance, timeliness, and feasibility of eliciting participants.

Student Well-Being and the Equity Imperative

This builds on a long-time strength of BTtoP. Many campuses in our network have done pioneering work on well-being, and other field leaders—including Wake Forest University and the Network for Improvement and Innovation in College Health—have reached out to work with us. At the same time, equity researchers, advocates, and activists have made the case that underserved students experience disparities in well-being that mirror and reinforce their academic marginalization. It is time to develop theory, practice, and policy that integrate student thriving and equitable inclusion.

In December, BTtoP is hosting a Zoom meeting with practitioners and thought-leaders to set goals and enlist participants for this project. We are offering a session on this theme at AAC&U’s Annual Meeting in January, as well as a preconference workshop at AAC&U’s Diversity, Equity, and Student Success conference two months later.

Educating the Whole Adult Student

This proposal focuses on integrative, engaged learning for nontraditional students. It brings our commitment to the whole student to bear on a population who are now the invisible majority of undergraduates, their needs often ignored or misunderstood. Unlike the well-being project, it would not build participation from the existing BTtoP network, which has not paid much attention to adult learners. Through my previous work, however, I have a strong connection with a consortium of innovative adult-serving programs, the Great Colleges for the New Majority Network, whose values and practices resonate with BTtoP's mission. That network is interested in partnering on a collaboratory that would lift up adult learners' needs for holistic, integrative education, codify best practices for providing it, and research its effect on student outcomes. At a time when adults learners are put at the center of the national completion agenda—often in instrumental ways—this would be timely and important. We are working with the Great Colleges Network to set goals and seek funding.

Civic Engagement Across Polarized Communities

Civic engagement is a foundational commitment of BTtoP. This project focuses that commitment on an issue that threatens both American democracy and higher education: the current climate of social polarization. Participating institutions would pursue community partnerships and public work in and with communities that are polarized from each other and from higher education. The goal of the project is not dialogue between “red” and “blue” Americans about their differences; rather it is to build relationships that can overcome mistrust and solve problems across those differences.

Unlike the other proposals, this collaboratory would not aim to codify a set of best practices. It would literally be a “co-laboratory” exploring how academic institutions can fulfill their civic mission in, and in response to, a time of corrosive polarization. It would especially seek participants whose geography, mission, and student body make their relationship with polarized communities an everyday reality. And it would explore how students—whose lives, identities, and relationships often cross and complicate lines of polarization—can serve as leaders and change-makers. This idea has elicited widespread interest in feedback conversations, and such friends as the Bonner Network immediately come to mind as potential partners.

These projects are important and timely. They meld foundational themes of BTtoP—well-being, integrative learning, civic engagement—with a commitment to equity and inclusion. Each has elicited interest from our network. All are potentially attractive to funders but as yet unfunded. We are pursuing funding leads for all of them in the hopes of winning support for at least one.

Support for grass-roots collaborations

Our collaboratory strategy makes big bets on a few large projects. Yet it's also clear that our community is a seed-bed of many ideas for collaborative innovation. We've received pitches, for instance, to develop curricula on community organizing, to train graduate students in engaged pedagogy, and to link community engagement with career preparation, among other proposals. BTtoP needs to nurture such grass-roots creativity and collaborative innovation throughout our community, even when we lack the bandwidth and budget to support all good ideas at the level they deserve.

We have dedicated a fund for small Collaboration Grants—up to \$7000 each—for projects that advance BTtoP’s educational purposes, especially when they connect partners from different sectors. We are issuing a Request for Proposals in mid-December; applications will be due in early February and grants announced in March. We plan to award as many as fifteen Collaboration Grants for the summer of 2019 and the 2020 academic year.

Community-building and communications

Our emphasis on collaborative research and innovation coincides with—and depends on—a parallel effort to strengthen the sense of community across BTtoP. Our first fifteen years nurtured a remarkable network of grantees, practitioners, researchers, and thought-partners. They share a powerful sense of commitment with the project “hub,” but often only episodic connections to each other. We are working to “thicken” the community in different ways:

- In addition to our terrific, tri-annual Newsletter, which is disseminated through AAC&U’s e-blast system to over 60,000 in higher education, BTtoP has launched a less formal, biweekly communication, “Bringing It,” that goes to our more intimate listserv of approximately 2500. Under this rubric, we have issued a feedback survey, an infographic visualizing the achievements of our first 15 years, a sampler of past publications, and regular news and voices from the community. We plan to expand “Bringing It” into an interactive platform that includes blog posts, podcasts, and a digital sharespace for conversation and collaboration.
- Instead of traditional panel discussions, the BTtoP sessions at this year’s AAC&U Annual Meeting will be “fishbowl” discussions, designed to include attendees in interactive conversation. The sessions will focus on student well-being and the equity agenda, work and the purposes of college, and the future of BTtoP itself.

Building visibility and external partnerships

Along with “internal” community-building, we are working to enlarge our external visibility and partnerships.

- In January, we will issue a Request for Proposals for a second small-grants initiative (in addition to the Collaboration Grants). These “AMP Grants”—for “amplify, missionize, publish”—will support efforts to disseminate, publish, and increase exposure of our work through public writing, digital media, campus visits, and presentations.
- In addition to our strong relationship with AAC&U, we are forging partnerships and sometimes programmatic collaborations with a range of associations, consortia, and like-minded projects: among them, Campus Compact, the Democracy Commitment, Imagining America, and the Network for Improvement and Innovation in College Health.

Finances and fund-raising

Our most urgent action item is securing the funds to sustain our ambitions for the next two years—most of all, the launch of collaboratories—and to extend the work of Bringing Theory to Practice beyond that. We are actively engaging national foundations and other funders that support educational access and success, undergraduate liberal education, educational research, well-being,

civic engagement, digital community-building, and innovation. Our outreach includes the Lumina Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, the Teagle Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, the Milken Institute, the Emerson Collective, the Kettering Foundation, and others. In many cases, these are still preliminary, exploratory conversations; in others, we are pitching specific research and innovation projects.