



Call to Community: A Letter from the Director of Bringing Theory to Practice
August 17, 2018

Dear friends of BTtoP,

As Bringing Theory to Practice begins its next chapter of work (and I end my first month as Director), I wanted to offer some early thoughts about the project—and to ask your help. In the coming weeks, our staff—Caitlin Salins, Mercedes Yanora, and I—will be sending you a series of brief communications about the past and future of BTtoP, including an infographic of our first fifteen years of work, information on our new Advisory Board, and links to our publications. Most importantly, we will be seeking your ideas and hopes for the project. For now, let me start with my own.

Like many of you, I've long been involved with Bringing Theory to Practice. My home institutions for the past two decades—the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, Bates College, and The New School—took on projects supported by BTtoP grants. I've given talks and presented research at BTtoP convenings. I'm proud to have contributed to three of our books with essays on civic engagement, the well-being of adult students, and the current turmoil in higher education.

But (perhaps like many of you) I didn't realize the full reach of Bringing Theory to Practice. Since its launch in 2003, BTtoP has given nearly six hundred grants to 359 institutions. It has assembled a far-flung network of faculty, staff, and institutional leaders into a kind of informal national laboratory, committed to renewing the core purposes of undergraduate education. Many campuses have developed innovative models of integrative learning, civic and community engagement, and support for student well-being; and we have published seven books on these themes. Indeed, BTtoP's success in weaving these core purposes together through practice, research, and publication may constitute the project's most important achievement. In making all of this happen, Don Harward and co-founder Sally Engelhard Pingree have forged a remarkable legacy. Let me begin by thanking them for their leadership and vision. It's a joy to build on their work.

If you're reading this message, you're already part of that story. It may be that you worked on projects supported by BTtoP grants, contributed to BTtoP's books or newsletter, or attended our panels and meetings. Maybe you were interested in the research or drawn to our commitment to holistic, transformative learning. Maybe you were simply curious. Whatever your connection to Bringing Theory to Practice, I hope that it will be sustained and deepened as we enter the next chapter of the project. Let me thank you for your engagement. And let me ask for more.

For I believe that Bringing Theory to Practice is at an inflection point, one that will depend on you. We have the opportunity to build on the successes of our first chapter, to pursue its unfinished work, and to take on new goals and strategies. The key to that opportunity, I'm convinced, is developing our rich network of campuses, researchers, and practitioners into a true community of practice, as deeply tied to one another as they are to the "hub" of BTtoP. What could such a community of practice look like?

- It would offer regular convenings, campus-to-campus visits, and digital platforms through which we think, talk, and work together.
- It would harvest and lift up the research and practice-wisdom from across the BTtoP network. Our publications have begun that work of curation; if we (and the larger higher-ed public) are to fully learn from what our campuses have done, this needs to be completed.
- It would (I want to propose) prioritize a small array of multi-institutional projects, bringing together veteran and new participants around issues central to our goals of transformative learning and institutional change. Such "collaboratories" would braid our core vision of holistic education for the "whole student" with a commitment to equity, inclusion, and success for all students.

To some degree, this call for collaboration and community-building is a matter of necessity. Although Bringing Theory to Practice continues to enjoy sustaining support from our funders, we won't be able to deploy the scale of resources that underwrote past RFP's and the hundreds of campus-based projects they supported. But the challenge of having less is also a call—and an opportunity—to build the social capital of our network. The ongoing vitality of Bringing Theory to Practice will depend on our capacity to weave a "we" out of our shared commitments, the work we've achieved, and the work that remains unfinished.

And this is all the more urgent because we face a second inflection point as well, much larger than BTtoP's transition. It's no secret that higher education is going through a time of turmoil. Over the next decade, our work will be changing, for better or worse. And most days it's hard not to feel that "worse" is winning. From the largest flagship to the smallest liberal-arts college, institutions face shrinking resources. Student debt is intolerably high; completion rates, unacceptably low. These issues disproportionately harm minority, low-income, first-generation, immigrant, and adult working students. They disproportionately stress the public universities and community colleges where the majority of students enroll. They disproportionately burden the adjunct and contract faculty who teach the majority of college courses. And beneath all these crises lies a loss of faith in higher education as a public good. Our national conversation increasingly defaults to an instrumental model of workforce training, aimed at feeding the short-term needs of the labor market.

All of which is inimical to the mission and values of Bringing Theory to Practice. We cannot pursue our mission, I believe, without challenging the dominant, instrumental narrative. We cannot advance our values without taking on the crises that erode them: persistent inequity, growing precarity for students

and teachers, the hollowing-out of educational priorities, the “unbundling” of academic communities. For me, BTtoP has always been a *radical* project in both meanings of the word: it is rooted in the core purposes of higher education, and it seeks to catalyze transformational change to advance those purposes. That commitment to both the foundations and the transformation of higher education has never been more necessary. As Bringing Theory to Practice enters its next chapter, I believe that we have a role to play—along with many other educators and students—in a movement to reclaim, renew, and reshape higher education.

Whether you agree with these thoughts or not—even more so, if you don’t—I ask that you weigh in with your own ideas, concerns, and hopes for Bringing Theory to Practice. Our “we” has to begin by thinking and talking together. How would you define the mission and goals of the project? What should its next chapter look like? How do we connect colleagues from many different institutions, sectors, regions, fields, and campus roles? What should we do together?

Already, in discussions with many friends of our project, I’ve heard suggestive and inspiring answers. One long-time participant argued that BTtoP must be not just a “community of practice” but a “community of courage,” offering protection for radical change-work in the academy. Another mused that it could serve as a kind of “innovation lab” for educators committed to liberal education. Others proposed initiatives on the training of graduate students in engaged pedagogy, on the well-being needs of marginalized students, and the redesign of high-impact practices for working adults.

Caitlin, Mercedes, and I have our own ideas as well. But first of all, we want to hear yours. In the coming weeks, we will be sending out a brief, open-ended survey to get your feedback about BTtoP. In the meantime, I invite you to write me (at scobey@bttop.org) with your questions, concerns, dissents, and suggestions.

One last thought. Much of this letter has concerned the challenges, opportunities, and constraints that make our coming together as a community so imperative. But it is the joy of community—the energy that we give one another in collaborating on important work—that enables us to take on those challenges and opportunities and constraints. I hope that Bringing Theory to Practice can nourish such joy.

Warmly,
David
Director, Bringing Theory to Practice