



Taking Stock: Thoughts On the Present and Future of Bringing Theory to Practice
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(Please do not recirculate without my permission. All comments welcome.)

These thoughts come at an inflection-point for Bringing Theory to Practice. It is a pleasure to announce that The Endeavor Foundation has renewed its generous support for BTtoP with a multi-year grant for our core operations and programming; I couldn't be more grateful for the resources and trust that Endeavor has afforded us. Along with grants from the Mellon Foundation and other funds, we have secured the next chapter of our work.

At the same time, BTtoP has reached an agreement with Elon University to relocate to Elon on July 1, 2020 and begin a multi-year hosting partnership. Our decision to move was a hard one. BTtoP has long enjoyed a warm, effective relationship with the Association of American Colleges and Universities; we remain deeply grateful for the support and comradeship that AAC&U has provided, and we look forward to future collaborations. Yet we have missed everyday campus connections with faculty, staff, and especially student colleagues. We are excited to be partnering with an institution that is a national leader in engaged, integrative undergraduate education and an exemplar of civic and global learning—an institution whose values and achievements are deeply resonant with our work.

The combination of renewed funding and a new home makes this an important moment for taking stock. Here I offer an overview of key aspects of our recent work and propose key themes for future work. But let me start by reflecting on BTtoP's mission, values, and sense of calling. What distinctive contributions can Bringing Theory to Practice make to higher education? What is the work that is ours to do or that others cannot do so well without us?

Mission and calling

As our website announces, BTtoP's mission is grounded in three commitments. We believe that undergraduate education should be holistic and transformative, nurturing the guiding purposes of active and integrative learning, preparation for meaningful work, democratic citizenship, and the flourishing of the whole student. We believe that “educating the whole student” must include students of all backgrounds, interests, and educational settings. And we believe that the first two commitments require fundamental change in higher education, change that will reshape academic institutions, the student experience, and the relationship between the academy and the larger society.

I cherish two aspects of this mission language. The first is our insistence that great education has to be grounded holistically in the *purposes* of college, not simply the production of good *outcomes*. The second is our belief that this insistence on foundational purposes is not conservative or defensive. It requires radical change. This link between foundational purposes and transformational change has been in BTtoP's DNA and programming from the start. (Let me add that the covid-19 pandemic, the economic, social, and governance crises that it has exposed and amplified, and the resulting pressures on students and academic institutions only intensify my conviction that the future of higher education demands both foundational values and transformational change.)

Bringing Theory to Practice is modest in scale. We do not have the resources or the organizational bandwidth to be a national research shop or an institutional best-practice center, even on such issues as student well-being, civic engagement, and integrative liberal learning, where we are genuinely expert. Yet our focus on foundational purposes and transformational change does point to two roles that our allies and friends cannot always prioritize.

On one hand, BTtoP can serve as a kind of ethical think-tank and (if I can use an ungainly term) a 'values-tank' for undergraduate learning. We constantly seek to connect institutional practices and outcomes and the experience of students with our vision of core purposes. On the other hand, we can serve as an organizing catalyst for collaborative innovation grounded in those purposes. We don't seek to export our own, 'trademarked' models in specialized areas of practice. We do seek to bring together educators and institutions in a kind of rump caucus for deep, integrative change.

Our strategy for living these roles has evolved. Under the leadership of co-founders Don Harward and Sally Engelhard Pingree, BTtoP's convenings and books were crucial to the first role. Our grant-making, which sought to foster "campus cultures of change," was at the heart of the second. Over the past two years, we have inflected these roles in new ways. We now focus on multi-institutional collaboration rather than campus-by-campus innovation. Instead of stand-alone institutional grants, we seek to develop our network of practitioners, researchers, and campuses into an interwoven community of practice. At the same time, we aspire to amplify BTtoP's voice and values in the national conversation about the future of higher education.

Looking back

Over the past two years, BTtoP's recent work has been guided by four strategic priorities, distilled in consultation with our staff, Advisory Board, and allies and thought-partners:

- strengthening community among BTtoP's network of practitioners, researchers, and allies;
- developing multi-campus collaborative projects that meld BTtoP's established areas of leadership (such as student well-being, civic engagement, integration of academic and co-curricular life) with a systematic focus on equity and inclusion;
- 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.

These priorities informed a robust Action Plan. We have met some of its goals, while others have languished. Some emerging opportunities generated unforeseen successes. Some goals have moved forward only slowly, due to a lack of resources.

Collaborative innovation: Our Action Plan set an aspirational goal of undertaking three large ‘collaboratories’ on civic engagement, student well-being and the equity imperative, and holistic education for adult, nontraditional students. We have launched an important initiative on civic engagement, the PLACE Collaboratory, with generous support from the Mellon Foundation. We have made significant progress toward a well-being collaboratory. We have not made headway on supporting adult, new-majority students. And at the same time, we launched a small-grant program for multi-institutional projects that proved unexpectedly popular and generative for our strategy of networked innovation.

The PLACE (Partnerships for Listening and Action by Communities and Educators) Collaboratory brings together a network of academic-community partnerships involving eleven academic institutions in four cities (Los Angeles, Greensboro, Baltimore, and Newark). These partnerships use the humanities to engage ‘wicked problems’ as defined through community voice: among them, gentrification, immigrant rights, neighborhood revitalization, housing insecurity, racial justice, and climate change. They also center the participation and co-leadership of undergraduate students. The goal of PLACE is twofold: to support local projects that model engaged learning and the role of the humanities in public problem-solving; and to work as a national network that distills models for higher education as a whole. The project, in short, advances core aspects of BTtoP’s mission and collaborative theory of change.

We have also undertaken an initiative on student well-being and the equity agenda. Since its inception in 2003, BTtoP has been a voice for the centrality of well-being as an enabling condition and a core purpose of student learning. Over the past two years, we have worked to braid this longstanding priority with our commitment to equity and inclusion, offering workshops and webinars and building connections with national leaders in the fields of college health, student well-being and mental health, and diversity and inclusion. This spring we convened a group of researchers, advocates, and campus exemplars with the aim of co-creating a project on student well-being and educational equity. One outcome would be to distill, test, and disseminate research and promising practices that work to overcome stubborn disparities in student thriving (and therefore academic success) across racial, class, and other lines. Another would be to advance a vision of inclusive well-being that places student thriving at the heart of the equity agenda and educational equity at the heart of the well-being agenda. Over the next six months, we aim to work with our partners to design and launch this collaboratory, comprising a network of campus projects, the dissemination of research, and an ongoing community of practice. We are mindful that the pandemic makes this plan at once more difficult and more urgent.

Our third idea--a network of exemplary programs and colleges that offer holistic, transformative learning for nontraditional students--has languished, due to lack of funding and the institutional precarity of the partners with which we are working. The pandemic has only intensified the threats to adult-serving programs and their potential students, even as its economic effects magnify the educational needs of displaced and unemployed workers. We will stay alert to opportunities in this crucial area of student need and educational innovation.

BTtoP also launched a small-grant program, the Multi-Institutional Innovation Grants (MIGs), which proved successful beyond expectations. MIGs offered awards of up to \$7000 for partnership projects among academic institutions that advanced any of BTtoP’s core purposes. We received 95 applications involving some four hundred colleges and universities, more than twice our goal; we

stretched our budget to award 21 grants, and the quality of the proposals would have justified perhaps twice that many. Funded projects include the formation of regional networks for community engagement, digital humanities, tribal education, and social innovation; curricular collaborations among programs in such fields as applied theater and inclusive STEM education; and local partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions in civic engagement, design thinking, and other areas. The applicant pool also revealed patterns of shared interest among disparate proposals—the raw material, so to speak, for larger communities of practice—and we are now considering how to nurture such convergent areas of work. The MIG program, in sum, testified to the possibilities of, and appetite for, collaborative innovation across higher education.

Community-building and communications. Since 2003, BTtoP has awarded more than 550 grants to some 350 institutions. Our grants supported innovation and research in such areas as student thriving, civic engagement, and the de-siloing of student life and academics. They have helped to constitute a remarkable network of practitioners, researchers, and campus innovators. Yet our grantees are more deeply connected to BTtoP than to one another. It has been a key goal to evolve that hub-and-spokes formation into an active community of practice, to enhance its capacity for collective learning and change. We have made a start, but only a start.

We have pursued this goal in several ways. In summer, 2019, we offered free copies of our books—*Well-Being and Higher Education* and our five-volume *Civic Series*—and received requests for some 2500 copies (about half the inventory). We recast our conference sessions at AAC&U and other meetings from traditional panel presentations to participatory fishbowl conversations, which have proven popular and successful for outreach.

Perhaps most important, we supplemented our excellent triannual Newsletter with Bringing It, an informal, biweekly letter emailed to our listserv of primary contacts. Bringing It includes news, posts about projects and innovative work across the BTtoP network, brief discussions of books, gatherings, and current issues, and reflections from readers. Bringing It has generated much positive feedback (and much content from readers), and since launching it in summer, 2018, our contact list has grown from 2500 to nearly four thousand.

Amplifying our work and our voice. Another core priority has been to extend BTtoP's voice and reach. Here again, we have made a start, but only a start. Since 2003, our grants have yielded a rich archive of practice-wisdom and research, but that archive is spread across hundreds of granular reports and campus files. We now offer previous grantees modest supplementary funding—"AMP" grants of up to \$3000—to support publications, presentations, and campus visits that disseminate the results of their work. We have convened a Research Advisory Council and commissioned the first of a series of research and practice briefs that will curate and amplify the knowledge produced through our grants.

We are also forging alliances and partnerships with other leading national organizations and initiatives. In the area of civic and community engagement, these include Campus Compact, Imagining America, Project Pericles, the Bonner Network, Interfaith Youth Core, and Ashoka U; and BTtoP belongs to the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Action Network, an umbrella group, convened through AAC&U, that comprises these and other allies. In the area of well-being, we enjoy connections with the Network for Improvement and Innovation in College Health, the Healthy Minds Network, the Steve Fund, and the JED Foundation, and I serve on the

governance of the 20x30 Learning and Action Network, a national coalition for student health and well-being involving these and other leaders.

Yet I'd argue that BTtoP is not as visible or influential as I believe our work and mission deserve. The books published under Don Harward's editorial leadership are valued by academic practitioners (as the response to last summer's offering shows), but we have not yet established an influential presence in the roiling national conversation about the future of higher education. Amplifying our voice and vision in this "Copernican moment" of turmoil and change remains a priority.

Looking forward

Given all this—our mission, our achievements and unfinished work, our emerging community of change-makers—what priorities should guide the work of BTtoP as we launch a new chapter in a new home? I would propose focusing on three levels of activity.

First, BTtoP should continue and expand our strategy of networked innovation. The past eighteen months have only reinforced my belief in multi-institutional collaboration as a means of making and testing change in higher education. The projects in the PLACE Collaboratory will require continued focus and energy, and the network will need to distill and disseminate what we learning about community partnerships, the public humanities, and student civic agency. BTtoP will work to launch the new collaboratory on student well-being and educational equity, beginning with a two-day convening. And we have set aside resources for a new round of Multi-Institutional Innovation Grants.

Secondly, BTtoP should activate the potential for change-making latent in our grantee network and our emerging relationship with Elon. As noted above, we are commissioning a series of research and practice briefs, designed for an academic readership, that will harvest the work of our grantees. The first three are slated to focus on student well-being, civic engagement, and the integration of curricular and co-curricular programming. We also plan to undertake a social mapping analysis of past grantees and MIG proposals, looking for patterns of convergent interest that may lead to collaborative projects. We have also been struck by the widespread focus on educational redesign across the BTtoP community, an interest that the pandemic has only intensified.

Last but not least, BTtoP should devote more energy and resources to building our public visibility and voice. As we move to a new campus home, we will be redesigning our website and developing Bringing It into a blog and multimedia platform. We are working with our host partners to plan significant public programming—both digital and campus-based—that will focus on the future of liberal education in an era of recurrent crisis. At the same time, it will be urgent to work with our national allies and friends to advance our shared commitment to democratically-engaged, vibrant, holistic education, a commitment that is both threatened by the current crisis and essential to meeting it. I am convinced that coalitions like the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Action Network and initiatives the 20x30 well-being initiative--not to mention emerging academic networks around issues like racial justice, economic inequality, and climate change—hold a still-unrealized potential to influence public values and institutional change concerning higher education. BTtoP can help to activate that potential.

This sketch of themes and priorities will evolve and improve in dialogue with our staff, our Elon partners, our Advisory Board, the wider BTtoP community, and our national allies. Your ideas, suggestions, questions, and critiques are most welcome.

A concluding note

Nothing I have described—our achievements in the past two years, our aspirations for the next three—could have been accomplished without the talents and caring energy of my staff colleagues: Caitlin Salins, Mercedes Yanora, and Kate Griffin. For five years, Caitlin has given BTtoP her remarkable mix of kindness, planfulness, and competence; for the two years I've served as director, she has been the heart of our organization. Mercedes has brought not only her considerable skills in editing, research, and grant- and information-management, but an intellectual curiosity that is really inspiring. Since joining our staff as Project Coordinator for the PLACE Collaboratory, Kate has contributed her own wide experience and deep judgment not only to PLACE, but to all our work.

For both personal and professional reasons, Caitlin and Mercedes are moving on to new chapters in their own lives. With our move to Elon, I will be hiring two new staff colleagues, while Kate will continue as the PLACE coordinator and take on new responsibilities for community- and network-building. I am excited for the next chapters in Caitlin's and Mercedes' lives. But as Bringing Theory to Practice begins its own new chapter, I'm mindful that their contributions will be at the heart of any future successes we enjoy.