



**Project Statement:
The Way Forward: Higher Education in a Time of Crisis**

©David Scobey, Director, Bringing Theory to Practice (September, 2020)

The purpose of The Way Forward project is to encourage creative educational responses to the current set of crises facing American society and American higher education. It will begin with two linked initiatives. During 2020-21, BT2P will launch a podcast, a series of open-ended conversations with educational thought-leaders and innovators about the best paths for education change in a time of crisis. At the same time, in fall 2020, BT2P will issue a Request for Proposals for a new round of our Multi-Institutional Innovation Grants (MIGs), inviting collaborative projects that bring the core values and best practices of undergraduate education to bear on the current crises and the need for change.

Covid-19 is the precipitating crisis of this moment. Colleges and universities face the excruciating challenge of sustaining their educational mission and institutional continuity while protecting the health of students, faculty, staff, and their surrounding communities. The pandemic has disrupted institutional and pedagogical practices in the short run; long-term change seems all but inevitable.

But Covid-19 is not a stand-alone emergency. It can't be disentangled from a knot of other crises: systemic racism, whose enduring harm led to national protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder; the economic collapse brought on by the pandemic; deepening inequality, intensified by the Great Recession and the pandemic; and the accelerating catastrophe of climate change. The health emergency is an episode in a period of crisis that began before 2020 and will continue after.

As many educators and academic leaders have argued, the emergency that colleges and universities face should be understood within that larger crisis. The nexus of the pandemic, white supremacy, economic precarity, growing inequality, and climate change has turbo-charged a set of challenges that higher education was already facing: racial and class disparities in student access and success, rising levels of tuition and debt, languishing graduation rates, and declining public trust in academic institutions and the value of a college degree. Higher education was heading toward a reckoning on these issues. It's upon us now.

This larger threat profile has made it all the more urgent for colleges and universities to respond to the immediate emergency in real time. But if emergency management has been necessary, it's not sufficient. The scale and inexorability of the problems we face mean that, one way or another, higher education will be changed. And if all we do is manage the immediate crisis, then the crisis will manage that change. Our first-order responses—budgetary, technological, pedagogical—will lay down a path-dependency that will shape the future of institutions, teaching and learning, and student opportunities.

The Way Forward seeks to chart a different path: to shape change in the face of crisis, rather than letting crisis-driven change shape us. It's animated by three ideas. First, the idea that, left to its own energies, crisis management will push us toward the decomposition of academic communities and institutions, growing inequality across academic sectors, the thinning-out of teacher-student connections, and the ascendance of instrumental notions of the goals of college. Second, the idea that higher education harbors important resources for meeting the crisis--not only its core values and best practices, but also its untapped reservoirs of creativity, and innovation. In this moment of reckoning with our failures, we will also need to renew and rely on our strengths. And finally, the idea that responding proactively to the crisis will require us to rethink our vision of the goals of higher education. It will impose on us the responsibility—and the opportunity—to help prepare our students to confront the threats to their future. To a significant degree, the crisis itself must become our core curriculum.

How should we change higher ed, and educate our students, to meet this era of crisis, and not simply endure it? How do we shift—in the powerful phrase of Elaine Maimon, president emerita of Governors State University—“from triage to transformation”? The Way Forward aims to help catalyze answers to these questions by engaging educators in public conversation and collaborative action. The podcast will, I hope, invite voices like Maimon's—and those of many other leaders and thinkers—to grapple collectively with the best paths forward. The grant program will, I hope, enlist innovative collaborations to test those paths in practice.

This Program Statement is of course an initial overview; there are important problems to resolve concerning how and with whom to pursue the initiative. But I hope its aim is clear: to contribute to the urgent, collective project of envisioning the way forward for higher education in the face of a set of crises that demand radical, purposeful change.