The Need for Translation: Bridging Society’s and Academe’s Visions of Higher Education

By Tori Haring-Smith, President, Washington & Jefferson College

There seems to be no question that some of the most basic values expressed by institutions committed to what we call a liberal arts education are currently at odds with some of the values expressed by society as a whole.

Those who work inside educational institutions tend to believe that

• Education is a process of reflection that takes time and occurs both socially and individually. We believe in the experience of both the hermit and the intellectual commune.

• Educational institutions have personalities and a wide variety of strengths. So we create curricula that are particular to our institutions and internally coherent.

• Education develops the whole, thinking person. We strive to graduate students who are able to interact respectfully and thoughtfully with individuals who differ from them in experience, aspiration, and background.

• Learning requires students to engage actively in their work, not to be passive receptacles of the teacher’s teaching. Therefore, we assess outcomes rather than inputs.

• Learning is not limited to the classroom. We use efforts like service learning and study abroad to develop citizens who can use their knowledge to propel change, effect social justice, and therefore ensure that our participatory democracy and civil society remain strong.

• Education is an investment with lifelong benefits, including the ability to live a life of changing and developing careers and be blessed with an active

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mind that is intellectually curious and entrepreneurial.

On the other hand, much of American society (as expressed in the media and in the expectations of parents, students, and policy makers) seems to look at higher education differently. Its members believe that

• Education is a product, not a process. As such, it can be accumulated as a series of “badges” or discrete “learning units” or certifications. Therefore, students increasingly compose an education that is drawn from several different institutions rather than seeing value in pursuing a carefully integrated plan of study at one institution.

• Educational institutions are largely interchangeable and vary only in cost and perceived prestige. The goal is to get the best price for the product.

• Education should be efficient and fast. If the appropriate requirements can be met in three years, that is preferable to four years spent in wider and deeper exploration.

• Education occurs individually. Therefore, asynchronous online learning differs very little in quality from small seminars.

• Attention to social aspects of learning is an ancillary luxury. Learning is not affected by the context in which it occurs—the extracurricular activities and interactions, community service, or the well-being of the student.

• Learning is limited to the classroom and best measured in terms of seat time.

• Educational institutions should reinforce or ignore a student’s values and ideology. Contact with “the other” is therefore unnecessary and challenging a student’s perspectives is not part of the educational mission. Diversity is inessential.

• Students who passively absorb the information contained in texts and lectures are being educated. There is no need for students to actively shape their own educations.

• Education is primarily an expense incurred in order to prepare one for a career.

It is important to note, however, that the educational sector and the larger society do share one very important belief: that education is transformative. One group may define transformation as an enhanced ability to get a job and the other may see it as an enhanced ability to think critically and adopt lifelong learning habits, but both groups acknowledge that a transformation exists and both prize it.

Of course, this simple comparison obscures the full spectrum of complex combinations of these two sets of values. But I hope that, like most stereotypes, both characterizations contain a kernel of truth.

Our individual institutional practices—our curricula, programs, and our policies—result from a complex negotiation between the liberal arts values we hold and wider society’s values. We embrace our own values, but must also reach out to those who have different assumptions.

For example, Washington & Jefferson College (W&J) embraces the general liberal arts values I outlined above even while we enter into conver-
sation with the values and expectations of our students and their parents. While we do our best to inculcate broad-based lifelong learning, we also describe ourselves through our short-term outcomes—the percentage of students who are admitted to medical school, law school, and other postgraduate programs or who are employed in their chosen fields immediately after graduation. Like all colleges, we speak both languages.

Even in terms of specific programs, this double vision is apparent. Our signature Magellan Program, for example, provides an opportunity for all W&J students to design their own independent summer research project based in a culture different from their own. Students must define their dream—to provide medical care to the indigenous residents of the Amazon Basin; to interview migrant workers in China; or to study fortified churches in Transylvania. They then design their own project, establish necessary contacts, and create personal and project statements along with a budget. The one requirement is that the project must be independent. Students must do it on their own so that each day they are in charge of writing the curriculum of their lives.

Students’ applications are reviewed and funded and then students embark on their explorations.

For the most part, our Magellan Scholars are blue-collar students who would never have dreamed that they could make this kind of integrated, independent experience part of their undergraduate educations. Many of them came to W&J assuming that they would return home every summer to work construction or wait tables.

This program expresses the values of liberal arts colleges by requiring students to engage actively in their educations outside of the traditional classroom. They must define the problem and design the approach to investigating it. When they encounter unanticipated problems, they must devise solutions on their own, whether it is finding transportation up the mountain after the last bus has departed or redesigning the research protocol for studying HIV in Zambia. This interaction teaches students how to read another culture and how to respect those who are different from them. It engages them in both individual and social learning, developing them holistically into global citizens with a sense of self-agency. They are transformed from the kind of students who say, “There is a problem and someone should solve it,” to people who say, “There is a problem and I will help solve it.” They become intellectual and social entrepreneurs who know how to enter the world mindfully and how to solve real-world problems through the lessons they learned in the classroom.

But the Magellan Program also responds to the financial and career-oriented values our students bring with them from the larger society. Although there is no academic credit for Magellan, it is a “tradeable” experience that can produce a resume line that distinguishes them from other job or graduate school applicants. The learning experience is also efficient, requiring only a few weeks in the summer, and it may be related to their future career. And because students receive a grant to pay for Magellan, parents understand it as a substitute for a job; it has a concrete and immediate value.

The Magellan Program at Washington & Jefferson College is but one example of how institutional curricula, programs, and policies reflect both the liberal arts values we hold and wider society’s values. While we’d like to be purists, to be crusaders for the liberal arts, we also need to be collaborators with our students—to let them embark upon an experience thinking about it in a familiar way and then discover that it has surprising outcomes. Each college must decide how we can translate from one context to another; how we do and do not compromise in order to bring theory to practice. This process of translation and negotiation is essential for the future of the liberal arts.
The core objective of the BTtoP project has been to encourage and support institutions in advancing their own plans and initiatives for transformative change—strengthening their campus culture for learning and bringing their practices, structures, programs, and attention to focus on learning and their students’ psychosocial and civic development. We recognize that institutions vary on where they are on any path of change, but bringing campus representatives together to share insights, achievements, and challenges in their own “constructions” of change has reinforced their efforts, offered a community of fellow active leaders, and inspired their work. Thanks to all who participated, the Bridging conferences have been most successful.

The January 2012 BTtoP Bridging Conference, “Bridging Institutional Divides: Practical Applications for Strengthening Campus Cultures for Learning, Civic Engagement and Psychosocial Well-being” in Washington, DC, was the second iteration of our Bridging conferences—the first, in 2007, focused on “Developing and Enhancing a Strategic Plan for Bridging Divides and Addressing the Wholeness of Student Learning and Experience.” The conference’s bridging themes addressed these patterns, as well as practical strategies for maximizing campus resources in the service of change.

We began the conference this year, however, with the recognition that “bridging” was only one of several metaphors that we use to characterize our work and the objectives of the Project. “Aligning” is also a relevant theme—for it is often more important to connect by means of complementary structure. And there is “scaffolding”—a metaphor suggesting building upon what is already in place. But while there is a nuance to each, all of them refer to a form of positive connection.

The connections can be among value sets—as is the case in President Tori Haring-Smith’s essay in this newsletter—or they can be in communication and decision routes among the multiple silos of our campus bureaucracies. They can refer to links among student and faculty expectations, and they can characterize relationships among the campus, the local community, and beyond.

But to what end do greater connections point? We argue that each of the construction metaphors suggest actions we (as faculty, students, and campus leaders) can take toward connecting. And through these actions we can affect
practices, structures, priorities, and even rewards—thereby deepening the campus culture for learning and meeting and achieving our institutional core values and objectives.

Particularly interesting (because it foreshadows the Project’s intent to provide for the coming year a concentrated attention to the complexities in understanding the nature and implications of the connection of higher learning and civic engagement to student well-being) was a major session led by Professors Kathy Low (Bates College) and Barry Checkoway (University of Michigan). They explored the question, “How can we more intentionally integrate the expectations and outcomes of the higher educational experience so that all of our students flourish…?” The analysis of well-being has, with the work of Corey Keyes at Emory University, and others, opened the exploration of “flourishing,” the eudamonic, and multiple dimensions of health, self-identity, persistence, and mindfulness.

The audience was then treated to a fascinating panel discussion among Randy Bass (Georgetown University), José Cruz (The Education Trust) and Ashley Palmer (Baylor University—and a recent Cross Scholar), focusing on the many short- and long-term challenges to higher education (demographics, technology, cost, structure, etc.)—and what strategies might most innovatively and effectively address them.

Finally, while always central voices, those from students are less often recognized. This year, a panel of students (Hannah Raskin, California State University, Chico; Jayson Porter, Millsaps College; Michelle Augustine, Department of Education (drawing upon her experience as a non-traditional-aged student); and Bermet Zhumakadyr kyzy, American University of Central Asia, Bishkek) commanded everyone’s attention with their insightful perspectives on “Student Ownership of Change in the Academy,” focusing on their individual—and transferable—experiences with change on their own campuses.

From my perspective, this conference affirmed the basic strategy the Project has adopted—to help campuses make in their own context real, sustainable, and in many cases quite bold changes that deepen their own cultures for learning and the opportunities and expectations for their students.

I took away from the excellent presentations and the vigorous discussions occurring during the conference that the predominant themes of our work do resonate: they are all about connecting people and connecting ideas. Our work is about the core features of the purposes and practices of higher learning—and of liberal education in particular—connecting the learning, the civic development, and the psychosocial well-being of students.

It is now clear to me that those who have addressed us as the Bridging Theory to Practice Project were not making a mistake—they really got it!

The 2012 Bridging Conference agenda is available online at http://www.aacu.org/bringing_theory/events/2012bridging.cfm, as well as notes from small groups and participants.
Assessment Spotlight

Academic Engagement at Montclair State University

By Valerie I. Sessa, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology

As a recipient of both a Bringing Theory to Practice program development grant and a demonstration site award, Montclair State University conducted a study, spanning three years and four hundred-plus first-year students, that sought to answer two questions: What is the relationship between the academic engagement, civic engagement, and well-being of our students? And what impact did service-learning have on these qualities?

For both grants, we employed a quasi-experimental, non-equivalent comparison group design with a pre- and post-test measuring academic attitudes and behaviors, civic attitudes and behaviors, and well-being (depression, satisfaction with life, as well as alcohol indicators). In addition, we accessed their Student Information System information to gather data on their demographics, GPAs, and credits taken. The experimental group was drawn from first-year students participating in a learning community that included service learning. The comparison group was drawn from first-years participating in traditional learning communities.

Our strongest findings have to do with academic engagement. Some students become academically engaged when exposed to the service-learning pedagogy. But there are still a number of students who remain disengaged in the service-learning class—they don’t show up, aren’t prepared, don’t hand in assignments, and may even sleep in class. Those who are academically engaged reap many benefits. They are more likely to value their education, have a higher GPA, and have taken more credits at the end of their freshman year. They tend to be more civically engaged and to have more positive attitudes toward community involvement. In addition, they also tend to have higher satisfaction with life and lower depression (along with lower alcohol usage, lower dependence on alcohol, and fewer problems with alcohol).

Still, questions remain. Why are some students engaged in the service-learning course while others are not? What would academically engage these students? And given our findings, how do we as a school help students find educational “experiences” that will help them become engaged?
In Brief: BTtoP News and Notes

BTtoP-Sponsored Distributed Seminar Leads to University of Michigan Grant

A distributed Civic Seminar grant from Bringing Theory to Practice prompted University of Michigan’s Barry Checkoway and Matthew Countryman to develop and submit their proposal “Strengthening the Scholarship of Engagement” to Michigan’s Rackham Graduate School. This innovative and interdisciplinary initiative is designed to strengthen the scholarship of engagement in the public research university, with special emphasis on the University of Michigan, and includes a short course, campus symposium, and other activities from 2011 through 2013.

Summer Institute of Civic Studies at Tufts University

The fourth annual Summer Institute of Civic Studies at Tisch College, Tufts University (http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/?pid=1096), will be held July 9-19, 2012. This intensive, two-week interdisciplinary seminar will bring together advanced graduate students, faculty, and practitioners from diverse fields of study for challenging discussions around various aspects of citizenship and the relationships among empirical evidence, ethics, and strategy. The Institute is organized by Peter Levine (director, CIRCLE, Tisch College, Tufts University—also the principal investigator of Tufts University’s BTtoP demonstration site grant) and Karol Sołtan (University of Maryland).

Announcing Civic Provocations Monograph and New Grant Opportunities

BTtoP announces the spring 2012 publication of the Civic Provocations monograph, which will include thirteen “provocations” regarding civic learning. These provocations, written by leading scholars and civic educators who attended the November 2011 BTtoP National Civic Seminar, stimulate deeper consideration of multiple aspects of the complexities surrounding civic engagement. Brief summaries and the framing questions used to structure the civic seminars that occurred on nineteen campuses in the United States and Europe during 2011 as part of the Civic Seminar Initiative are also included.

The Project will also be announcing grant support that will enable further conversations and dialogues generated by the new report A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future (the promulgation of which was supported by BTtoP). Grant support (see RFP announcement on back cover of this issue) will give further incentive to hold the campus conversations, and the provocations monograph will point to directions for further consideration and actions.

Attend Allegheny College’s “Pathway to Civility” Student Conference

On May 15-17, 2012, Allegheny College’s Center for Political Participation will host the “Pathway to Civility” conference. Following up on such research and publications as “Nastiness, Name-calling & Negativity,” this conference is particularly a response to the recent decline of civility demonstrated in the civic life of the United States—an especially damaging trend given the way it alienates younger generations from participating in the civic processes in which they were only beginning to engage.

The conference will engage students in activities “designed to enhance respectful political dialogue on college and university campuses, and to help student leaders understand the importance of civil political engagement.” More information can be found at http://sites.allegheny.edu/pathwaytocivility. BTtoP is cosponsoring $5,000 worth of support for student travel to the conference.

Allegheny College
The Bringing Theory to Practice Project (BTtoP) is an independent national effort. It is funded by the Charles Engelhard Foundation of New York, and functions in partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) in Washington, DC.

The Charles Engelhard Foundation is a New York-based foundation whose mission focuses on projects in higher and secondary education, cultural, medical, religious, wildlife, and conservation organizations.

S. Engelhard Center is a nonprofit public charitable foundation; its mission is to support projects and initiatives that affect greater and sustained commitments by educational institutions at all levels to provide effective means of addressing the intellectual, emotional, and civic development of today’s students in preparation for claiming their positive future.

First deadline
June 15, 2012

RFP available online
www.aacu.org/bringing_theory/fundingopportunities.cfm

REQUEST FOR GRANT PROPOSALS
Engaged Learning, Civic Development and Psychosocial Well-Being of College Students

Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) is an independent project in partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and supported by the S. Engelhard Center (whose major contributors include the Charles Engelhard Foundation and the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, in addition to other foundations and individuals.) The Project explores and advocates the academic community’s support of engaged learning and the relationship of such learning to student well-being and civic development.

Category I
Seminar Grants up to $1,000

Category II
Program Development Grants up to $10,000

Category III
Demonstration Site Grants up to $75,000

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