BTtoP Project Strategic Planning: 2012-2014

By Jennifer O’Brien, Project Manager and Coordinator of Strategic Planning and Development

In 2012, BTtoP will celebrate its first landmark anniversary—it will be ten years old. This anniversary brings the project to a moment of transition—transition, but not necessarily change. BTtoP is preparing for transition by using this period to confirm a number of its key features such as its core mission and structure, leadership and colleagues, scope of national presence, and which programmatic initiatives are most likely to propel forward its work with allies.

As a national project BTtoP has undergone continual strategic thinking, but has not paused to develop a full process of strategic planning—this seems to be a good time to do so. In that vein, few structured evaluative practices are in place internally to determine the quality of the current work and the scope of future work. With transitions occurring over the next few years—potentially affecting the mission, personnel, leadership, etc.—we will be developing an outline of plans for strategic initiatives and internal evaluation for 2012–2014 which will provide a navigation point for the core project team (and others who will be involved) to progress through the transition period to a confident future.

Why do we include you, our readers and colleagues, in an exploration of strategic thinking here? Because of your good work, dedication, and encouragement that have continually inspired the project’s progress and your achievements over the last ten years. We hope you will continue to inform the character and direction of the project’s work throughout and beyond the transition.

The BTtoP Project now enjoys a national and international reputation as a supportive ally and resource as institutions craft (continued on page 2)
their own deepened campus culture for learning—one that expects and delivers a context in which students can have a truly liberating and transforming experience, and that is valuable in itself and valuable in its utility—what “higher” education can mean and be.

You may want to read the summary documents of the first ten years of BTtoP’s work and strategic direction on our BTtoP website at http://www.aacu.org/bringing_theory.

With approximately ten years of research, multiple conferences, and studies from hundreds of BTtoP grant-supported college and university projects and programs, we have gathered a preponderance of results, both quantitative and qualitative, confirming the project’s original hypothesis that engaged learning, civic development, and the student’s psychosocial well-being are inseparable and mutually reinforcing. And when institutional intentionality is given to each of these dimensions or core purposes, making each a priority, then the campus culture is transformed and it becomes, or is confirmed as, a context for students to gain what is often promised but less frequently made possible—a profound, enduring, and, for many students, transforming higher educational experience.

But what of this work will (or should) go forward as next steps for BTtoP? And how should it go forward?

The challenges for 2012 and beyond, and the external conditions that affect decisions, will be different than they were in 2002 or 2010. How will BTtoP use strategic planning initiatives and the support and good will of the current leadership, partners, institutional allies, and funders to build plans, structure, and a clear vision of how we might bridge what has already been achieved to the possible achievements of the next five, ten, or twenty years of work?

At the front end of this transition period will be a day-long meeting in the fall which will feature conversations about the project’s work moving forward. This event will provide an opportunity to celebrate the successes and rewards of the project’s work to date, but also a moment of reflection and gaze to the future using the insights and perspectives of those gathered to inform and suggest directions moving forward. A framing document, much of which is constituted by the language in this article, will explore the major arenas that connect the project’s work and substance: a focus on mission; a discussion of leadership; an examination of current and future resources and fund development; internal and external examination through evaluation plans; a review of communication structures; an exploration of programming; and finally, a time map of events that will highlight opportunities for each of the topics in this document to be explored.

In addition to the planning meeting in the fall, the project has already taken steps forward in evaluating current work and programs. We are initiating an evaluation “keyword project” that will use software to find patterns and repetitions in language found in grant proposals and reports. An analysis of this data will provide an opportunity for the project to review common areas of focus, most commonly used language and definitions, and common challenges and successes by funded grant projects. They will inform the creation and focus of a potential request for proposals for 2012-2014.

We look forward to the continued robust involvement of all BTtoP grantees, colleagues, and allies to date—and to adding many more. Our strategic thinking is primarily with you in mind, and we invite your thoughts and insights. We depend on them! http://www.facebook.com/pages/Bringing-Theory-to-Practice/127249067308090.
At California State University (CSU), Chico, we employ a civic teaching strategy across the first-year curriculum called Public Sphere Pedagogy (PSP). PSP makes use of a research sequence in some sections of five first-year courses\(^1\) to introduce students to public purposes for reading, writing, and investigating contemporary issues. Students conduct research not only to write papers or make classroom presentations. They also study contemporary issues in order to enter a designed public sphere that brings them, their research, and participating faculty, staff, administrators, and community members into dialogue.

Our oldest example of PSP is the CSU, Chico Town Hall, which began in fall 2006 in a handful of first-year writing courses. The Town Hall rapidly grew from 180 participants to more than 700 participants. In 2009 it moved from the Department of English to the Department of Political Science, where it now resides as an embedded feature of multiple sections in the required course on American Government.

The Town Hall begins with a plenary that includes a welcome from the university president and an address by a student keynote speaker. From the plenary, groups emerge to discuss a wide range of issues in “breakout” sessions of twenty-five to thirty participants. These sessions bring students into contact with many members of the campus and community through discussion of the issues students have researched. The final hour of the Town Hall is spent in “roundtables”—discussions focused on “next steps” and action plans among eight to nine students and a “consultant,” often a community member, with expertise in the issue the students have studied.

Our research on the Town Hall has included surveys focused on BTtoP questions about students’ academic and civic engagement and well-being; case studies and classroom ethnographies; focus groups; narrative analysis of students’ written reflections; four-year surveys to test for long-term effects; and retention studies conducted by our Office of Institutional Research. This short article summarizes findings from a recent case study and from our first retention study (on students from fall 2006).

**Case Study Example:** A first-year student participated in the Town Hall in fall 2010. She began the semester uninterested in the required Political Science course, reporting to the classroom researcher that she found many of

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\(^1\) Political Science, Communication Studies, Economics, English and the First-Year Seminar

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the assignments extremely difficult and “pointless.” Prior to the Town Hall, she believed she would find the event uninteresting, although she showed growing interest in her public issue: funding for K-12 Education. Following the Town Hall, the student reported multiple differences in her self-view and her behaviors. She expressed an emerging interest in politics and in voting. She informed the researcher that she had not only learned how to employ research methods, but that she could apply them to inform herself on key issues and that she now imagined herself as someone who might engage in political conversations with her parents—a sign of her emerging adult identity. In describing herself, she used words such as “proactive” and “involved,” characteristics she did not see herself as possessing when the semester began.

Our case studies results help us to chart the characteristics of a change process we have noted in survey results. To understand the impact of the Town Hall beyond the level of case study and survey data, we turned to our Office of Institutional Research for an analysis of retention results.

**Persistence Study**: In this study, we looked at persistence rates across four years of college for first-year students in Town Hall sections vs. non-Town Hall sections of the Academic Writing course in the fall 2006 cohort. Across all four years, the persistence rate of students enrolled in the Town Hall during their first year is significantly higher than for students who did not experience a Town Hall. A z-test for two proportions was used to determine the significance of the difference between the persistence rates of the two populations. In all years, the difference in retention between the two populations occurs at a probability level that is less than 1 percent attributable to chance.

Our mixed-method approach to researching the Town Hall allows us to say with confidence that this pedagogical approach is a high-impact practice that should be continued on our campus and disseminated as a model to other campuses. The Town Hall has earned the approval of the American Democracy Project, which lists it as a “signature civic pedagogy”; it is considered by our campus president a distinguishing feature of a CSU, Chico education.
From the Director

Planning for the Culminating National Civic Seminar

Donald W. Harward, Project Director, Bringing Theory to Practice

This spring, nineteen colleges and universities planned and offered extensive civic seminars. With a diverse group of campus and community members, each seminar examined the meaning and extent of its own institution’s civic mission and the civic mission of higher education at large. These “distributed” civic seminars were sponsored by BTtoP as part of its mission to understand and support the core purposes of liberal education and their interdependency, with the result of deepening and transforming campus cultures for learning.

In mid-June, those who facilitated the distributed seminars and participants from each of them met in Washington, DC, to share what was learned and to plan a culminating civic seminar to occur November 3-5, 2011, at the Aspen Wye River Conference Center in Maryland.

The November culminating seminar has the objective of producing and widely distributing (the scope is both national and international) a set of “products”—actionable steps, research, models of programmatic initiatives, access to support, encouragement of “fields” of civic inquiry and study through new journals and publications, social networking options, and other steps—each directed to understanding and strengthening the civic mission of our institutions, singularly and collectively.

The challenge now is how to structure the November seminar so that it will meet those objectives.

There are three distinct strands that will be woven together in the Seminar initiative. The first has to do with the perception that this (currently) is a Copernican moment—that transformative changes are occurring and that the civic, its meaning, and its relationship to higher education are undergoing change—change that we can direct if we choose to do so, but is likely to require new openings for new steps and conversations. The second is the perception generated by a thought experiment: “What if we fail to direct change and the patterns (social, economic, and educational) we are seeing now—where in, say, thirty years will we be? What will characterize the civic and civility? What will characterize learning? Who will be in our institutions? What will their civic mission (if any) be?” The shared perception is that if such a thought experiment were to occur, desperate and negative conclusions would be drawn. No one would find them acceptable, which is why we should be attending now to directing change!

The third strand is a conceptual one. The civic (what it has meant and implied across generations and cultures) is an inseparable aspect of the triad linking higher learning, the well-being of the learner, and the civic awareness and engagement of the learner. Higher learning does not occur or exist without those related components and cannot be understood or promoted without attention to each and their relatedness. So attention to change and to the implications for the civic is the same discussion as the consideration of what it means to champion higher learning—specifically liberal education. Championing the civic is championing the positioning of learning and liberal education at the center.

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These strands, along with the insights and creativity of those who will participate, suggest the format for the November seminar. It is an important and promising moment.

We look forward to providing access to the culminating seminar discussions and recommendations.
**In Brief: BTtoP News and Notes**

**BTtoP Manuscript to be Published October 2011**

The BTtoP book *Transforming Undergraduate Education: Theory that Compels; Practices that Succeed*, edited by director Don Harward, will be published by Rowman & Littlefield in October 2011. The volume suggests what can and should occur—a woven argument with multiple implications that hold together a range of perspectives regarding the need for and the consequences of transformative change throughout the academy and those publics and institutions that influence the academy. While a network of connecting evidence and argument are emphasized, many of the contributions are written by those who have strong and experienced voices regarding change, its direction, and the practices that will need to be sustained if any lasting gains are to be made. Those voices express varying perspectives—and those perspectives are punctuated with selected case examples and best practices. Further announcements forthcoming.

**Bridging Conference, January 24-25, 2012, Washington DC**


The purpose of this working conference is to bring together BTtoP grantees and colleagues to examine strategies for addressing patterns of campus divide and separation that restrain the full expression of the core purposes of our institutional missions. These patterns include the separation of academic affairs and student affairs; the alignment of institutional mission and actual practice; and the compartmentalization of student experiences into unique events rather than as integrated pathways toward student learning and development.

For more information and to register, visit the conference webpage at...

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**Assessment Spotlight**

**Franklin College**

By David Brailow, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the College

Franklin College is conducting a research project to study how service-learning, when implemented in an intensive format and carefully integrated with course content and reflection practices, affects student engagement, well-being, and success. The experimental group is the Franklin First Scholars, our first-generation college student project funded by the Walmart College Success Award. The Franklin First cohort was brought to campus for a three-day intensive service-learning experience prior to the fall. The instrument used in the study combines BTtoP toolkit and Flourishing Quality of Life questions with questions from the Wabash National Study and our own first-year survey.

Franklin First Scholars retained from fall to spring at a slightly higher rate than the rest of the freshman cohort or other first-generation students, and early indications are that this will hold for the coming fall. Academic performance on average was somewhat weaker than both comparison groups. However, Franklin First Scholars scored significantly better than both groups on important indicators of student well-being: coping and adaptation, self-efficacy, positive growth and change, social adjustment, autonomy, feelings of self-worth, and behaviors related to alcohol and drug use.

Our preliminary conclusion is that the intensive service-learning experience, along with the other elements of the Franklin First program, have given participating students greater resilience than other first-generation students in the face of the academic and social challenges many first-year students encounter. ■
Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation Makes $700,000 Grant to BTtoP for 2012-2014

We are honored to announce that CAJEF President Julie Johnson Kidd has extended a multi-year grant of $700,000 to BTtoP in order to support the Civic Seminar initiative and to enable the Project to explore more thoroughly the relation of student flourishing and well-being to the positive psycho-social features of a campus culture.

Georgetown Holds “Institute for the Study of Engaged Learning”

June 20th marked the first annual “Institute for the Study of Engaged Learning” at Georgetown University. The event brought together faculty and student affairs staff from across campus to join in a facilitated discussion around the engagement of Georgetown students’ learning through various pedagogies and classroom practices. Also part of the discussion was the way in which these practices might impact the re-envisioning of general education and the collective goals (or outcomes) of these pedagogical efforts. There was a strong focus on developing a sustained dialogue around student learning and teaching practices.

Georgetown’s event was a great example of how to engage faculty energy and perspective in order to ask the difficult questions that are necessary to advance institutional work around student learning and success. Even though answering those questions is arduous and on-going, to more carefully involve faculty in the process of inquiry is more than half the battle. The institute was sponsored by the Engelhard Endowment for Engaged Learning.

Montclair State University Names Award in Honor of Sally Engelhard Pingree

Montclair State University has established a new non-monetary award to recognize professors who have made significant contributions to improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. The award, housed within the Research Academy for University Learning, is named after Sally Engelhard Pingree, president of the S. Engelhard Center and trustee of the Charles Engelhard Foundation, in honor of her leadership contributions in higher education reform.

Call for Assessment Spotlight Contributors!

You have seen in this issue the newest feature of the BTtoP Newsletter, the “Assessment Spotlight” column. Each issue, we will feature brief, evidence-based highlights from BTtoP grantees on the relationships among engaged learning, civic development, and psychosocial well-being.

If you are interested in sharing pieces of your campus assessment ‘story’ or a recent and important advancement in your research with peers and colleagues, send it our way in the form of 200 words or less (Obrien@aacu.org). Franklin College’s contribution in this newsletter is a great example.

We look forward to highlighting your experiences and hope to continue to build a robust assessment learning community dedicated to collecting and disseminating evidence and best practices.

In Brief: BTtoP News and Notes (continued from page 6)


In the Next Issue—Spring 2012

› National Civic Seminar Initiative Report
› Campus Highlight
› Assessment Spotlight
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.