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Peer Review

# Engaged Learning through Curriculum Infusion

By: Joan B. Riley and Mindy McWilliams

Georgetown University's Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) demonstration project, Connecting the Safety Net to the Heart of the Academic Environment, addresses student depression, alcohol and substance abuse, and other student health and wellness issues through various forms of engaged learning, including community-based learning, to reach students on a personal level. Georgetown's unique focus is on a pedagogy called *curriculum infusion*, which brings real-life college health issues into the curriculum of academic courses through readings, guest speakers and discussions, and class assignments.

The success of curriculum infusion depends on the intrinsic connections that can be made between a course's intellectual content and the health issues. When curriculum infusion is successful, students go beyond merely absorbing information by integrating reflections on how these health issues apply to college students, or to groups they work with in community-based learning components of their courses, with the academic content of their courses, across a wide range of disciplines. Our objective is that the engaged pedagogies of curriculum infusion and community-based learning will achieve the following goals:

- To increase Georgetown students' awareness of and reflection upon issues of college mental health and wellness in ways that enhance and reinforce the intellectual content of their courses

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- To strengthen the campus Safety Net by training faculty and teaching assistants to be alert to trouble signs in their students, to approach students effectively, and to know where to direct students for help
- To create relationships among campus health providers and students through guest lectures and discussions so that students will feel comfortable approaching these professionals for their personal needs

After four semesters piloting our project, seventeen Georgetown faculty have implemented curriculum infusion in what we refer to as Engelhard Courses, some in combination with community-based learning (The disciplines represented are anthropology, biology, English, mathematics, nursing and health studies, philosophy, performing arts, psychology, business, foreign service, and theology.) In addition, thirteen graduate student teaching assistants and three undergraduate teaching assistants were trained in campus Safety Net procedures and served as assistants in these Engelhard Courses. Five campus health professionals conducted the Safety Net trainings and collaborated with faculty to implement curriculum infusion in their courses. The leadership team is a cross-campus collaboration of student affairs, curriculum development, assessment, community-based learning staff, and faculty (see sidebar).

Most significant, perhaps, is this project's broad reach among our student body. In four semesters, nearly 1,200 Georgetown undergraduates have taken one or more courses infused with mental health components. In addition to completing required readings and engaging in conversation with guest speakers, students have written reflection papers relating the classroom topics of mental health to their lives and have responded to quantitative surveys. Focus groups of students from these Engelhard Courses revealed that they experience a more personal connection with their professors, that they appreciate the time and space in an academic classroom to hear and think about student health issues, and that their thinking and attitudes toward these issues have changed. One student characterized his experience this way: "It made my relationship

to my professor more personal. He made it personal. He told us how it affected his family. He cared about us, rather than wanting to indoctrinate us." Another student said that "this expanded my horizons" about what was healthy, wellness-promoting, and normal.

## **Selected Engelhard Courses: A Diversity of Disciplines and Approaches**

### ***Introduction to Math Modeling***

Professor Jim Sandefur of the Mathematics Department has offered this course to nonscience majors for more than twenty years. He has designed the course to delve into the mathematics of the everyday world, such as problems with the elimination of caffeine or alcohol from the body, the sustainable management of renewable resources, and managing lottery winnings. As an Engelhard Faculty Fellow, Sandefur dedicated two course modules to the student health topics of alcohol and weight control. After three semesters teaching this way, with graded assignments and guest speakers for each topic, Sandefur is convinced that he is reaching students, improving their knowledge about the effects of alcohol and food consumption, and providing them the tools for making informed choices. Reflection papers from his students confirm this view. Students reflect on their eating and drinking habits, reveal how little they know about the effects of alcohol and unhealthy eating, and express changes in their attitudes and behaviors regarding consumption choices.

### ***Responsibility, Resilience, and Self-Respect***

Professor Alisa Carse has taught philosophy courses with a community-based learning (CBL) component for a number of years. Her desire to support her students' work in Washington, DC communities, along with her compassion for her students as flourishing human beings, motivated her to combine curriculum infusion with community-based learning. Her aim was to breathe life into the philosophical content of the course while developing students' moral reflection about their experiences at their CBL sites and encouraging them to contemplate the moral and psychological challenges they were witnessing in the communities with which they were working. Carse arranged for

voluntary weekly debriefing sessions with Patrick Kilcarr, director of the Center for Personal Development at Georgetown, creating a time and place for her students to discuss the personal challenges they were experiencing at their CBL sites. According to Carse, the “infusion effect” was powerful, as evidenced by intense student engagement in the course, “beautiful written work,” and the fact that, while the tenor of the class remained high, at least eight of eighteen students shared with her that they sought mental health support during the semester. Carse will next apply a similar model by extending curriculum infusion into her 250-student Introductory Ethics course.

### ***Acting I***

In her many years of teaching acting, Professor Karen Berman had noticed that the theater population seemed especially vulnerable when it came to depression and other mental health issues. For this reason, she chose to address mental health concerns in her beginning acting class through an exercise where students create scenes based on typical college pressures. On the day the scenes were performed, Phil Meilman, director of Georgetown’s Counseling and Psychiatric Services, attended class and contributed to the class discussion from his unique professional perspective. He shared statistics about how often mental health issues occur nationally and on the Georgetown campus and provided problem-solving measures and resources to assist students. In their reflection papers, students wrote how the experience “surprisingly raised my awareness about potential college issues that myself or my peers could face,” how the “presentations were very thought provoking and stimulating,” and how important it was to learn about the campus counseling resources available to them.

### ***Existentialism***

In his philosophy course on existentialism, Professor William Blattner collaborated with Kilcarr to combine student health and wellness information with concepts central to the study of existentialism. Existentialist writings deal front and center with issues of depression, anxiety, stress, suicidality, alienation, and loneliness, so the curriculum infusion model offered by the Engelhard Project was a natural fit for this course. Early on,

students read Dostoyevsky, Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Professor Blattner created two new course activities for students to engage more deeply with the health and well-being issues uncovered by these readings. In the first assignment, students wrote and exchanged anonymous letters on sources of confusion in their lives and significant decisions that they make. Professor Blattner was struck by the magnitude of loneliness, alienation, depression, anxiety, sexual assault, and sexual confusion that surfaced in these letters. The second new activity involved the collaboration of Kilcarr, who, after class discussion on Dostoyevsky, talked to the class about depression, anxiety, stress, alcoholism, and other associated psychological challenges and disorders. His presentation provided students with a richer vocabulary with which to talk about Dostoyevsky and connected the extreme versions of the characters' psychological disorders with the milder (or at least less literary) challenges students face.

### **Integrative Nature of Georgetown's Curriculum Infusion Project**

These Engelhard Course stories illustrate successful aspects of the Georgetown University BTtoP project. Preliminary findings based on two hundred written student reflections, eighty end-of-course surveys, and focus groups with student and faculty participants indicate that the classroom integration of theoretical concepts with the real-world experiences facing students on issues of mental health and well-being has yielded positive outcomes for faculty, staff, and most importantly, for our students.

Benefits to student participants include increased awareness of issues of personal well-being and relevant campus resources; positive changes in attitudes and behaviors; including becoming less judgmental about peers facing mental health issues; improved communication with faculty; and a new appreciation of faculty interest in their lives. There is also strong evidence that the program increases their engagement with the academic material. As Professor Blattner puts it, "After the curriculum infusion module, in addition to all the other benefits, they are just doing better philosophy."

Engelhard Faculty Fellows benefit through increased awareness of and sensitivity to the complex and challenging issues faced by students in their daily lives. They also experience greater connections to and improved rapport with their students as they develop a common language for discussing these topics. Significantly, faculty report improved student engagement with course materials, as evidenced by class participation and conceptual clarity in students' written work.

BTtoP expands and strengthens Georgetown's Safety Net by promoting knowledge about health resources offered by the university, helping to normalize the campus conversation around issues of mental health, and reducing student inhibitions about seeking help. As BTtoP faculty and students share their knowledge and insights with community members outside the project, they create a beneficial and integrative multiplier effect across the Georgetown campus.

To inform faculty about BTtoP and its benefits, our project was included in new faculty orientation and as a course offering in the annual Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship's summer institute. It was also featured in Georgetown's new Apprenticeship in Teaching program for graduate students.

At Georgetown, we have only just begun the process of uncovering the potential that integrating campus resources into academic courses holds. Looking ahead, key questions that we must address include how best to support faculty involved with this pedagogy, how to recruit new faculty, how to balance campus health professionals' roles inside and outside the classroom, and how BTtoP will change behavior and campus culture over time.

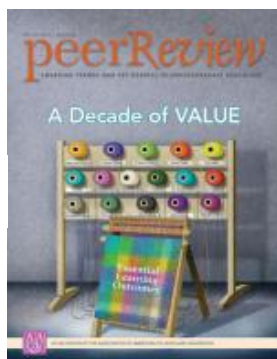
Georgetown is reaping the benefits of this integrative program and curricular approach at the levels of individual student learning and course content and at the university level through the collaboration and integration of academic faculty and professional health staff. Confident in the benefits to the quality of campus life that the BTtoP project has already conferred, we continue our efforts toward goals that are fully consistent with

and supportive of Georgetown's core mission of educating the whole person.

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