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Peer Review

Terms of Engagement

By: Richard H. Hersh

The Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) project came into being out of concern for the camouflaged but significant and increasing prevalence of students abusing alcohol and other drugs, experiencing too much stress, suffering from depression, and attempting suicide, and the corrosive effects of these problems on the purposes and outcomes of what is supposed to be a liberating education. The project's purpose is to make sure these issues are no longer relegated to the margins of campus life, hidden in counseling offices, and segregated from the traditionally but narrowly understood intellectual life associated with "higher" education.

This issue has been referred to by student development professionals metaphorically as a time bomb and has taken on a new, grim reality. The tragedy at Virginia Tech was a horrific way for the country to learn that emotional *and* mental health are and should be central educational concerns on college and university campuses. It is all the more reason that BTtoP's work to date needs to be taken seriously and understood as context for the much-needed expansion of dialogue and research required if undergraduate education is to be successful.

Through conferences, papers, and small research projects, the BTtoP initiative has been inordinately successful in raising campus consciousness nationwide about the inextricable links between emotional and intellectual health and the means and ends of higher education. The ubiquitous phrase *life of the mind* must now encompass a far wider sense of meaning-making if we are to help students develop a strong sense of self, a resiliency

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that enables them to face the ups and downs of modern life, and a yearning for and capacity to learn from different people, cultures, and ideas.

The Right Kind of Engagement

BTtoP's starting hypothesis that student engagement is a key variable in promoting stronger and healthier learning was a logical beginning, but the situation has turned out to be more complex. Further research suggested that while engagement worked well for many students, some of the most stressed and depressed students were also heavily engaged. For students who were lonely, disengaged, alienated, or feeling lost in their own meaning-making quandary, the amount and quality of engagement, normally understood to mean some combination of active participation in classes, social life, and community service, is best understood by absence of engagement.

As the articles in this issue of *Peer Review* attest, campuses are employing a variety of strategies to engage students meaningfully. To date, little effect has been shown from these interventions for at least two reasons. First, because the research has—until recently—had to rely on student volunteers, positive effects, if found, may be a function of self-selection—students who volunteer for enriched engagement activities are often those who are least in need of them. Unless much larger research projects on single campuses and across many similar campuses can control for this self-selection bias, we will learn little. Second, the concept of *engagement* usually refers to a well-defined intervention over a relatively short time, such as a community-service project linked to one's first-year seminar or residential-living situation. In short, the notion of engagement is often narrowly bounded. Developmental psychology tells us that the BTtoP's desired outcomes require far more time, as much as if not more than four or five college years, and a far more extensive and intensive set of experiences, including appropriately linked reflective components, for there to be a significant educational effect. What we are talking about here is a quality of change we refer to as *transformational*.

The terms of engagement need to be expanded not only to encompass the broader ends BTtoP has so nicely elaborated as

central but also to understand that the means for reaching such ends through pedagogy and curricula (in and out of class) are both collective and cumulative. By this I mean that the campus culture itself is a teacher in that its collective and cumulative effects, by chance or design, are what make the ultimate difference in the kinds of outcomes we most value, such as critical thinking, good writing, ethical development, ego strength, and perspective taking. Students do not fully learn any of these things in one or a few classes dedicated to such outcomes, just as they cannot master a college major in one or a few courses. Positive outcomes are developed over time through hundreds or thousands of engagements far more purposefully planned than is the case now.

In this sense, the terms of engagement are multiple; they require the involvement of all the faculty as well as administrators, staff, and students. They require pedagogy and curriculum over four or more years that are far more coherent horizontally and vertically and that span departments and disciplines. In short, the kinds of learning we all espouse as liberating require an immersion in a culture far more publicly demanding of such learning and far more shared by those who recruit for and run the institution. This requires a campus culture radically different from the naive, freedom-of-choice academic rhetoric used now to rationalize a system of higher education that ultimately victimizes students by allowing them extraordinary freedom of choice, as if the students alone know best what is educationally good for them. Meaning-making is somewhat akin to learning how to swim—one learns best by not being pushed into the deep end.

Dangerous Freedom

Students come to college today having been poorly served by immersion in what I have labeled a national culture of neglect that has asked them more than ever before to rely on themselves and their peers for nurturing and wisdom. They have been informed more by television and the Internet than by the wisdom of parents, teachers, and other caring, mentoring adults. Cell phoning and e-mailing are not the equivalent of face-to-face interaction.

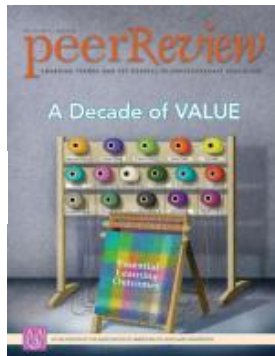
Students coming to campuses are given even greater freedom in the name of learning from failure and an increasingly reified notion of consumer choice: They can choose from empty-calorie fast-food restaurants in glorious student centers or select from a seemingly infinite menu of courses, connected or not. As for advising, students can solicit advice from an adviser, if available, while they seek class schedule signatures or visit a counselor if and when they can get an appointment. Moreover, with the freedom students are given, they need only devote relatively little time to complete thin academic assignments in return for which they receive inflated grades.

BTtoP's goals are to be lauded, and the project's ability to raise consciousness nationally for its ends is its strength. But if we are to take the BTtoP agenda seriously, as we must, if we really value the kind of learning for which the academy has made monopolistic claim, our terms of engagement have to change.

Richard H. Hersh is the codirector of the Collegiate Learning Assessment Project and former president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges and Trinity College (Hartford, Connecticut).

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AAC&U
1818 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
information@aacu.org
(202) 387-3760
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