



## The Paradigm Project: A Brief Overview

©David Scobey, Director, Bringing Theory to Practice (February, 2022)  
(This is a condensation of a more detailed project plan.)

Bringing Theory to Practice (BT2P) is launching a multiyear initiative, the Paradigm Project, aimed at catalyzing systemic transformation in undergraduate education. We intend it to be the central focus of BT2P’s work in the coming years. As described below, a culminating outcome would be the development of a “think-and-do-tank”: a center that would work ongoingly to disseminate the values, ideas, and models of the project, to sustain and grow the networks supporting them, and to engage educational decision-makers to implement them.

The project seeks to advance systemic change in undergraduate education by braiding together three efforts. It will work to advance holistic change in the **design** of undergraduate education, bringing together educators, students, institutional leaders, and non-academic stakeholders to transmute the discrete elements, siloed roles, and partial innovations that now constitute the typical college experience into models of a new whole, greater than the aggregate of its parts. It will work to build an effective **movement** for integrative change, by mobilizing grass-roots support from educators, students, alumni, and others, by creating networks of exemplars and evangelists, and by engaging decision-makers who have the power to realize or thwart such change. And it will work to shift the **national conversation** about the purposes of higher education at a time when the dominant public understanding of those purposes has shrunk.

It may seem obvious why a project aimed at systemic change in undergraduate education should focus on design innovation and the building of support networks. Let me speak to why we view the third effort—shifting the public narrative about college—as equally essential. In recent years, that conversation has focused overwhelmingly on (important) issues of affordability, equitable access, and especially degree completion. To the extent that policy-makers, funders, and public thought-leaders pay attention to innovative teaching practices, new curricula, or learning outcomes, these are largely understood as means for increasing access and success. Rarely does the public conversation ask, ‘completion or innovation or outcomes for what end?’ And when the question of purposes does get posed, the answers default to a kind of instrumental vocationalism, one that equates the value of education with the ‘value-added’ of income and job mobility.

To be clear, BT2P sees the democratization of access and attainment as an essential goal of positive change, and we share the view that education for work is a core purpose of college. But we believe that students’ aspirations for a degree and a job are devalued when they are deracinated from other, cognate purposes—the full flourishing of the person, the well-being of the community, democratic citizenship, contribution to the public good—that give education (and work) their fullest meaning. The change that we seek to catalyze must mean more than higher attainment, improved outcomes, and the dissemination of improvements. It means changing the public imagination about higher education and its future. It is that imagination—the shared, taken-for-granted assumptions about the purposes of college—that shape what is possible or legitimate in educational policy and practice. We

envision an academy that is equal to the challenges faced by our society, our democracy, and our planet, and that educates people with the skills, creativity, curiosity, empathy, and daring to meet them. Creating such an academy cannot happen without a deeper, larger public narrative.

These three efforts—design change, movement-building, and changing the national conversation—are interdependent. Even the most brilliant design concepts will remain static blueprints if they are not realized and tested through networks of support. No academic institution or leader will undertake the hard work (and inevitable setbacks) of systemic innovation without grassroots buy-in from educators and students and without the support of a legitimizing public narrative. If these three efforts are braided together, they offer the possibility of activating a ‘virtuous cycle’ of big change. Without such interwoven efforts, big change will still come—for we are at an inflection-point where it is unavoidable—but it will not be positive change. It will shortchange our students and the academy’s capacity to bring our gifts fully to bear on the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The immediate context for this project is the current turmoil in higher education. The emergencies of 2020-21 amplified problems that had long festered in higher education: racial and class disparities in student access and success, languishing completion rates, rising levels of tuition and student debt, rising levels of job precarity for faculty, declining public trust in academic institutions and the value of a college degree. An older undergraduate regime—full-time students entering college after high school, studying with tenure-stream faculty, graduating four years later—had grown exhausted and increasingly false. Its curriculum of general education and disciplinary majors often seemed disconnected from students’ lives and needs; its pedagogy, too hierarchical and routinized. The social compact based on that regime, the belief that college could underwrite the democratizing of the American Dream, had withered in the face of mounting student debt, student swirling, and class and racial disparities in student success. The need to grapple with these failures had simmered for decades, but the Great Recession and the pandemic brought it to a boil.

Two aspects of the current moment have guided the design and scope of the Paradigm Project. First, although big change is inevitable, its outcome is not determined. The crises confronting higher education might catalyze positive solutions. But they can just as easily reinforce the downward pressure toward educational fragmentation, sectoral inequality, disinvestment, and the dominance of instrumental vocationalism. There is no returning to the old paradigm, but the future remains up for grabs.

But the second point is more promising. Even in this period of turmoil—especially now—higher education possesses a deep reservoir of creativity and resilience. The past several decades have witnessed not only crisis, but also remarkable (and under-appreciated) innovation:

- a growing (if still incomplete) commitment to racial and class equity, and inclusion for students of color, low-income and first-generation students, and ‘non-traditional’ (working, parenting, adult) students, who together constitute the new majority of college-goers;
- an enlarged (if still incomplete) understanding of personal thriving and support as a precondition and a purpose of undergraduate education;
- the development of pedagogies focused on active, integrative, inclusive learning (sometimes called the shift from an “instructional paradigm” to a “learning paradigm”)
- the growth of a robust national movement for community and civic engagement;

- the proliferation of new interdisciplinary fields commensurate with a richer understanding of human identities, social relations, and the physical world;
- the codification of ‘high-impact practices,’ both curricular and co-curricular, that are shown to deepen student engagement;
- the emergence of competency-based and digital platforms for learning;
- and the design of more effective supports for student success, including such models as ‘guided pathways’ for community-college and transfer students and wrap-around supports for low-income, non-traditional, and other historically marginalized students.

These innovations and improvements were advanced by faculty, staff, students, and administrators organizing institutional, scholarly, and activist networks across (and often against) the disciplinary and professional silos of the old regime. There are myriad examples: consortia like the Bonner Network or the Council on Undergraduate Research; national associations like the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U); student-success initiatives like the University Innovation Alliance; campus mental-health advocates like Active Minds; hubs of engaged research like the University of Michigan’s National Center for Institutional Diversity. The storms of academic crisis, in other words, coincided with a ferment of creative change.

This reality confounds the stereotype of an academy mired in inertia and incapable of innovation. Higher education does not require ‘disruptive innovation,’ whether from a technological magic bullet or an imported market strategy. What it does need is to mobilize and integrate the energies of change, to bring them to critical mass. For the creativity of the past thirty years constitutes an aggregation of beachheads, pilots, models, laboratories, and subsystems: significant small-to-medium-sized interventions that remain disconnected. Innovation has largely taken place in siloed offices and networks, boxed within older curricular and pedagogical regimes and institutional ecosystems. It is constrained by a logic that separates curricular from co-curricular experiences, faculty from staff roles, campus from community spaces, cognitive from emotional development, academic success from personal well-being, general education from specialized major, discipline from discipline, semester course from semester course, campus from campus, sector from sector. And that regime of segregations has only grown more fragmented as the current crisis has increased faculty adjunctification, student swirling, and other ‘unbundling’ practices. Of course many students find opportunities for transformative experiences: a career-changing internship, an inspiring mentor, a great research capstone, a student-led creative project or activist campaign. But these do not constitute systemic change. They stand out because they are peak experiences, not touchstones for the whole undergraduate journey. And access to peak experiences is unequally available to different students in different institutions.

We cannot repair the fragmentation, inequality, and transactionalism that limits students’ education without repairing the fragmentation, inequality, and transactionalism of the institutions educating them. And that repair cannot simply be piecemeal. How can higher education further positive, systemic change in the face of the current crisis? How can change-makers move beyond real but partial innovations to forge new models and ecosystems that advance the guiding purposes of education for all students? How do we go from a jigsaw-like ensemble of improvements to a vision of higher education as emancipatory for the whole student, reparative and transformative for the whole society, and accountable to both? How do we make these designs and visions not a static, utopian blueprint but a guide and catalyst for action? And how do we start now, when the stakes of change are large and the need for it urgent? That is the ambition of the Paradigm Project.

It's a huge undertaking, one that will require energy, creativity, and collaboration from a wide range of institutions, change-makers, and publics. Bringing Theory to Practice is lean in scale and resources. Yet—in concert with others—we have some valuable strengths to offer. We have made important contributions to the landscape of innovations described above, especially in the ‘regions’ of civic engagement, student well-being, engaged learning, the first-year experience, the integration of academic and co-curricular programming, and the inclusion of historically marginalized students across these areas of practice. We have strong relationships with allies and partners in diverse arenas of educational change. Indeed our work has been integrative, focused on connections across themes and programs, campus-wide change, and inter-institutional collaboration. Despite our modest scale—or perhaps because of it—we have been bridge-builders and weavers. At the same time, we focus not simply on best practices and learning outcomes but also on the educational purposes that inform them. Perhaps because we lack the bandwidth to serve as subject matter experts in particular areas, BT2P has tended to be a voice of holistic ethical and pedagogical reflection, a voice for values that are more often assumed than examined by educational change-makers. Without such a dialogue between practices and purposes, we believe, change is possible but not holistic, systemic change.

The Paradigm Project grew out of this analysis of the current moment and BT2P's strengths and limitations. As noted above, the project design and strategy braid together three strands of activity: shifting the public narrative about the purposes of college; integrative design of new models of holistic education; and movement-building to advance systemic change. We envision that work unfolding over seven years, roughly organized in three phases. Public narrative change will take center stage in the first phase; design labs and integrative design will be a focus during the middle; advocacy and the persuasion of decision-makers will be a primary task of the final phase. Yet all three strands are active and interactive throughout the project, each informing and strengthening the others and advancing the project as a whole. Let me offer a brief sketch of each strand.

The project will pursue a public influence campaign, making the case in diverse settings that college must be committed not simply to credential attainment and job readiness—as important as these are—but also to the core purposes of active, holistic learning, preparation for democratic citizenship, meaningful preparation for work, and the flourishing of the whole person. We will argue that higher education must be committed to overcoming the racial, class, and sectoral inequalities that deny such an education to most students. And we will argue that such an education requires new practices and institutional regimes that transcend the siloed, fragmented logic of current academic institutions and practices. This campaign will include a compact, book-length manifesto, written for both higher-ed and public audiences, that lays out our vision, the urgency of the moment, and the social, civic, and environmental stakes of big change. We will also seek endorsements for a “statement of commitments” from public and academic leaders, as well as grass-roots educators, students, and alums. We will aim to publicize and advance the project in higher-ed venues like the *Chronicle*, public-affairs publications like *The Atlantic*, and other media platforms.

The design strand of the project links three activities. We will harvest existing, cutting-edge innovations and best practices in domain-specific ‘field scans,’ authored by stipended researchers. We envision as many as ten or twelve, focused on both educational practices and the institutional regimes governing them. The goal is not an encyclopedic account of current innovations. It is to highlight work that represents ‘seedlings’ or ‘germ cells’ of systemic change: practices that link racial equity with student thriving, for instance, or supports for nontraditional students, or alternative models of the faculty role. All the scans will be completed in the first phase of the project.

Alongside the scans (and informed by them), we will launch a small set of design labs, geographically focused test cases that weave together innovations in pedagogy, curriculum, student support, organizational decision-making, and public engagement. Their aim is to model and clarify the practices, resources, and organizational changes needed to advance systemic change. We envision perhaps four or five labs, diverse in setting and shape. One could be an innovative college or university; another, a state system interested in holistic educational change; still another, a rural or metropolitan region with strong institutional partnerships. The variety will help to avoid “one-size-fits-all” solutions. Yet all the labs will need to begin with a track record of innovation and an interest in moving beyond discrete programmatic achievements. They are betas for transformation.

At the heart of the design work is the paradigm working group (PWG), charged with the keystone task of envisioning that ‘whole greater than its parts’ on which everything else depends. The PWG will meet, talk, and think together throughout all phases of the Paradigm Project—convening virtually perhaps once a month and in person perhaps twice a year—and it will have a guiding role in all strands of the project’s ‘braid.’ It will incorporate the results of the field scans and design labs, but its work must be more than simply aggregative. It will have to conceptualize how diverse areas of innovation—new pedagogies, curriculum redesign, institutional re-organization, role and culture change—can interact, like elements in a chemical reaction, to create something new. Its members must be cross-domain thinkers, capable of engaging the sweep of issues, barriers, and possibilities facing undergraduate education and compounding them into ideas and practices that are larger than the sum of their expertise. They will need to be practical, visionary, and eloquent all at once.

The goal of the Paradigm Project is not to craft the most powerful narrative or utopian design of the college experience, but to advance positive, systemic change. The narrative and design strands of the braid will remain static ideals unless they contribute to a movement that can leverage support for such change and engage decision-makers to realize it. The ferment of ‘middle-sized’ innovations in the academy was itself the result of movements for racial inclusion and equity, civic engagement, social innovation, student mental health, experiential learning, and other important agendas. But these have remained disconnected. Especially now, systemic change requires a movement that takes on undergraduate education as a whole.

The project’s movement-building strategy comprises three sets of activities. First, we will work to mobilize grass-roots support among educators, students, and alums, enlisting their endorsement of our statement of commitments and inviting their participation in advocacy to realize it. Second, drawing on the field scans, the design labs, and our allies, we will work to organize networks of exemplars (leaders and local projects) and to produce resources (toolkits, consulting materials, and other deliverables) that offer models and practical guidance for integrative change. Finally, we will engage educational decision-makers, bringing new thinking, new resources, and grass-roots pressure to bear on stakeholders and influencers who possess the power to realize or thwart positive change. These decision-makers include higher-ed associations, institutional board members and executive administrators, state system leaders, the higher-ed press, and policy and public intellectuals in and out of the academy.

The work I’ve summarized here is designed to generate a linked set of deliverables, ideas, proposals, relationships, and actions—outcomes that can work together to create more holistic models of undergraduate education and a virtuous cycle of change. Such outcomes include:

- **publications and reports** (e.g., the field scans, the statement of commitments, and the manifesto) that document current innovations and offer proposals of holistic education
- underlying these deliverables, an effective **public language** that garners attention to our values, ideas, and vision in academic and national discussions
- a **community of support** among educators, students, and alums, evident in grass-roots attachment to our work and mobilized networks of advocates and practitioners
- the development of **multiple, diverse models** of holistic education, embodying new ideas about faculty/staff roles, curriculum, pedagogy, institutional organization, and regional or multi-institutional collaboration
- a critical mass of **exemplars and experimental initiatives**, both individual institutions and regional or multi-institutional collaborations, linked in cohorts and networks of action
- **significant attention from, dialogue with, and partnership with educational decision-makers**, including serious engagement with our models and ideas and targeted efforts to implement them

This array of outcomes is complex, and the larger goal they are meant to advance—systemic change on behalf of holistic education—is necessarily a collective enterprise. Bringing Theory to Practice will serve as the organizational lead of the Paradigm Project, and our project plan includes new staff to support it: a project manager to help guide the overall portfolio of work, a research curator to staff the field scans and design labs; a publications editor; and a “chief storyteller” to help oversee communications strategy and public messaging. But there are also key leadership roles for non-staff participants: the paradigm working group, the authors (and research assistants) of the field scans, the leads (and assistants) of the design labs. And beyond these stipended roles, the project will require the creativity and buy-in of thought-partners, endorsers, and networks of support. We aim to enlist not only our friends and allies in the work of educational change, but also others—including skeptics—with whom we have yet to work. The need for positive change is urgent; we hope that the vision of the project serves as an invitation to join in, not despite but because of the daunting challenges of the moment.

And if we can achieve a measure of success, what comes next? Even in the best of circumstances, higher education will still be navigating an unfinished, contested process of change. What might this project put in place to build on its work, once the funds and working groups have sunsetted? We envision the creation—or rather, the evolution of BT2P into—a center that advances our goals of holistic education and systemic change: a ‘think-and-do’ tank that would combine public writing and advocacy, research, consulting, and the development and dissemination of resources and tools. It would be compact in organization and governance, while at the same time (and as a consequence) capable of working widely and flexibly across higher education. It could serve as a hub for on-the-ground networks and partnerships. It could work with national associations and state systems to develop and disseminate new educational and institutional practices. It could support research, retreats, consulting, and publication projects aimed at advancing new thinking and influencing the public narrative about the purposes of higher education.

I have laid out here as full a summary of the goals and strategies of the Paradigm Project as possible. At the same time, I am mindful that this project design is aspirational. Reality will complicate and obstruct our plans in ways that we cannot foresee—especially given the larger context of turmoil and crisis that makes this work so urgent. It will be imperative to continually reflect on and adjust to the challenges that we confront in real life and real time.