

The Paradigm Project: A Brief Overview
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In February, 2022, Bringing Theory to Practice (BT2P) launched a multiyear initiative, the Paradigm Project, aimed at catalyzing systemic transformation in undergraduate education. The project will be the central focus of BT2P’s work in the coming years. As described below, a projected outcome will be the development of a “think-and-do-tank”: a center that would disseminate the project’s values, ideas, and models, sustain and grow the networks supporting them, and engage educational decision-makers to implement them.

The Paradigm Project seeks to catalyze systemic change on behalf of equitable, engaged, holistic education. Its change strategy braids together three efforts. It works to advance integrative **design** in undergraduate education, to transform the disparate elements, siloed roles, and partial innovations that now constitute the typical college experience into models of a more inclusive whole, greater than the sum of its parts. It works to build an effective **movement** for such change, by mobilizing grass-roots support from educators, students, and others, by organizing networks of change-making institutions, and by engaging decision-makers who have the power to realize or thwart such change. And it works to shift the **public narrative** about the purposes of higher education at a time when the dominant conversation about 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 believe the third effort—shifting the public narrative about college—is equally essential. In recent years, that conversation has focused overwhelmingly on (crucial) issues of affordability, equitable access, and degree completion. To the extent that policymakers, 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 too often default to a kind of instrumental vocationalism, one that equates the value of education solely with the ‘value-added’ of income and job mobility.

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 detached from other purposes—the flourishing of the whole person, the well-being of the community, contribution to a more just and humane society, and democratic citizenship—that give education (and work) their fullest meaning. The change we seek should be measured in improved attainment and economic opportunity. But not solely that. It also entails changing the public imagination about higher education and its future. That imagination—the shared assumptions about the purposes of college—shapes 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 all people with the skills, creativity, curiosity, empathy, and daring to meet those challenges. Creating such an academy cannot happen without a deeper, larger public narrative.

These three efforts—paradigmatic design change, movement-building, and changing the public narrative—are interdependent. Even the most brilliant educational models will remain static blueprints if they are not realized and tested through networks of collaboration and support. No

academic institution or leader can undertake the hard work (and inevitable setbacks) of systemic, equitable 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 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 won’t be positive change. It will shortchange students’ life opportunities and the capacity of higher education to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

The immediate context for this project is the current turmoil in higher education and its relationship to U.S. society. The emergencies of 2020-21 amplified long-festering problems: racial and class inequity in student access and success, languishing completion rates, rising levels of tuition and debt for students, rising levels of job precarity for faculty, declining public trust in academic institutions and the value of a college degree. An older regime of undergraduate education—one in which full-time students entered college after high school, studied with tenure-stream faculty, and graduated 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 was often too hierarchical, routinized, and exclusionary. The social compact based on that old 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. These failures had simmered for decades, but the Great Recession and the pandemic brought them to a boil.

Two aspects of this context 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 may well catalyze positive solutions. But they can just as easily reinforce the downward pressure toward racial, class, and sectoral inequality, the fragmenting of learning opportunities, 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 brought not only crisis, but also remarkable (and often unremarked) innovation; this includes:

- a growing (if still incomplete) commitment to inclusion for students of color, low-income and first-generation students, and non-traditional (working, parenting, adult) students, who together make up the new majority of college-goers;
- an enlarged (if still incomplete) understanding of personal well-being and self-authoring as not just preconditions but core goals of the college experience;
- 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 models for improving student success, including ‘guided pathways’ in the curriculum and wrap-around supports for low-income, non-traditional, and other at-risk 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 of such change-makers: consortia like the Bonner Network or the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR); 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 equity-focused 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. The creativity of the past thirty years constitutes an aggregation of beachheads, pilots, models, laboratories, and subsystems, small-to-medium-sized interventions that are significant but not systemically connected to one another. 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 curriculum from co-curriculum, faculty from staff, campus from community, 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 worsened faculty precarity, the swirling of students, and racial, class, and sectoral inequality. As students navigate this regime, many of them—maybe even most of them—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 holistic change. They stand out because they are peak experiences, not touchstones for the undergraduate journey. And access to such peak experiences is unequally available to different students from different backgrounds in different institutions.

We cannot repair the inequity, fragmentation, and transactionalism that limits students’ education without repairing the inequity, fragmentation, and transactionalism of the institutions educating them. And that repair cannot be simply piecemeal. How can we move beyond important but fragmentary innovations to forge paradigmatic change that advances the purposes of education for all students? How do we go from incremental improvements to a vision of higher education that is transformative for the whole student, reparative for the whole society, and accountable to both? How do we make that vision not a static, utopian blueprint but a 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 daunting undertaking, one that will need 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 strengths to offer. For the past twenty

years, we have contributed to the landscape of innovations described above, most notably in the areas of civic engagement, student well-being, engaged learning, the first-year experience, the integration of academic and co-curricular programming, and the inclusion of marginalized students across these areas of practice. We have built strong relationships with allies and partners in diverse arenas of educational change; our work has prioritized integration across silos, campus-wide change, and institutional collaboration. Notwithstanding our modest scale, or perhaps because of it, we have been bridge-builders and weavers. At the same time, we have focused not simply on best practices and student outcomes but on the educational purposes that inform them. 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 assessment of the current moment and BT2P's strengths and limitations. It was launched in the spring of 2022 with generous support from The Endeavor Foundation for the first half of a projected seven-year trajectory. Inaugural actions included the hiring of project staff and the creation of a [Paradigm Working Group](#), a group of nationally-known institutional leaders, innovators, and practitioners who serve as thought partners and strategic guides. As noted above, the project design braids together three strands of activity: shifting the public narrative about the purposes of college; evolving models of holistic, engaged, equitable education; and movement-building to advance such systemic change. Here's an overview of each.

First, **public narrative change**. The Paradigm Project includes a range of efforts to address the assumptions of academic stakeholders and broader publics concerning higher education: its current problems and innovations, its future prospects, its guiding purposes. These efforts involve both argument and story-telling. On the one hand, we will make the case for the project's vision—and the imperative of going beyond incrementalism to achieve it—in a variety of settings. These include a “Framework” and infographic that distill the project's values and proposals; a short, book-length manifesto, aimed at both academic and general readers, about the stakes of change and the urgency of the moment; and outreach in [journals](#), the [higher-education press](#), and [digital forums](#). On the other hand, we will disseminate stories of practices and institutions that point the way forward to new models of holistic, inclusive, engaged learning. BT2P's biweekly [Bringing It](#) newsletter already showcases these exemplars; we are planning a new season of The Way Forward podcast and serial innovation stories in mainstream media and publications.

The **integrative design** strand of the Paradigm Project is currently centered on two areas of work. First, we've launched a [cluster of 'emerging model' partnerships](#), multiyear initiatives whose goal is to develop institution-wide innovations in various areas of policy and practice. There are currently five of these partnerships involving eleven colleges and universities and two consortia, and our plan is to create several more in AY 2023-24. The partners are themselves experienced innovators, institutions that have confronted the limits of incremental change and now aim to lift their work to the next level. Each is taking on a significant challenge of educational design: how to generalize high-impact practices across the curriculum, for instance, or systematizing holistic supports for low-income, first-gen, and nontraditional students, or creating participatory decision-making in strategic planning. Such challenges tend to receive siloed attention from discrete stakeholders—curriculum committees, DEI offices, executive cabinets—with specialized decision-making power. Yet taken together, they constitute complementary pieces in a larger puzzle of integrative change. By working together as a community of practice, we believe, the partnerships can model that ‘whole greater than the sum of the parts’ to which the Paradigm Project aspires.

Alongside these betas, the Paradigm Project will pay close attention to (and seek to lift) the array of significant innovations already taking place across the academy. Dozens of institutions have developed programs and practices that advance various systemic improvements in undergraduate education. These include new models of [the first-year experience](#) and of [general education](#); curricula that [center high-impact practices](#), [wicked problems](#), and [project-based learning](#); [holistic support for historically marginalized students](#); and [inclusive forms of honors education](#), among many others. Such exemplars are not of one piece; they address diverse issues in diverse ways, and they reflect the specific assets, challenges, and missions of the institutions pursuing them. Notwithstanding this diversity—or rather because of it—they constitute a kind of emergent, distributed laboratory of change. BT2P has strong ties with many of these exemplars and growing relationships with others; still others we have admired and studied from afar. We aim to increase their collective visibility, put them in dialogue with one another, and connect them in movement-building networks, distilling and amplifying the lessons of current innovation for long-term change through working papers, research reports, public storytelling, and toolkits.

The goal of these efforts is not to distill a summative True Model of the ideal college experience. No one size will fit the needs and aspirations of all students or the values, assets, and challenges of all institutions. This heterogeneity is what makes systemic change in higher education so hard—but also provides the creative dynamism that makes it possible. The aim of the Paradigm Project is to activate that dynamism, guided by a shared commitment to holistic transformation but not a utopian blueprint for it. The narrative and design strands of the project will remain static ideals unless they contribute to a movement that can evolve a plurality of models, leverage support for them, and engage decision-makers to realize them. Such movement-building has long driven innovation in the academy: the ferment of improvements that I described earlier were fueled by campus movements for racial justice, civic engagement, student mental health, high-impact practices, and other agendas. But these have remained disconnected. The current crisis calls for an integrative movement, centered on reshaping and renewing college as a whole.

The project's **movement-building** work has four linked strategies. First, we seek to organize a network of several hundred colleges and universities, not as formal members of a consortium, but as participants in a sustained community of change-makers. As we imagine it, this network will of course include the emerging model partners and exemplars described above. But it will also include institutions whose efforts may be less advanced or even largely aspirational. What is crucial is not some minimum benchmark of progress. It is the participants' conviction that their ambitions and challenges require systemic rather than incremental change, and that such change will benefit from sustained connection with a broader movement. We envision the network as a space for relation-building, learning, and mutual aid at varying levels of intensity: list-servs, webinars, regular digital convenings, opportunities for campus site exchanges, coaching, and collaborative projects. We see it as a space for sharing, iterating, and improving ideas and practices, and as an advocacy space for engaging decision-makers—presidents, associational leaders, accreditors—to put those ideas and practices into action. And we see the network as a space of inspiration and care, a space that can offer a sense of solidarity, possibility, and even joy in the long work of change. Even more than specific benefits, this movement culture is what will enlist participants to enter in and stay in, to invest energy in the network and in turn be energized by it.

Our movement-building strategy also prioritizes outreach to higher-ed associations and consortia, stakeholders whose convening power, bandwidth, and voice play a key role in shaping policy, practice, and public debate. Even in this early phase of the Paradigm Project, we've received

welcome interest from associational leaders in such arenas as liberal education, student success, completion, board governance, and disciplinary societies. For BT2P, this engagement is crucial: it enables us to test and amplify our ideas in dialogue with influential stakeholders, to learn from their (often different) priorities, to partner with them on outreach projects and public writing, and to connect with their networks and cohorts.

A third strand of movement-building involves the creation of a series of toolkits on specific themes of systemic change. Some of these deliverables will focus on educational design: for instance, new models of general education or interdisciplinary, problem-based curricula. Others will focus on institutional reorganization: for instance, innovative calendar and credit-earning practices beyond the straitjacket of the three-credit semester course. We envision these toolkits not as exhaustive manuals with detailed recommendations, but as compact, catalytic documents, containing prompts, questions, and a small set of exemplary stories that frame directions for systemic change. On the one hand, they will distill and apply current innovations. On the other, they will serve as guides to wicked problems and threshold situations in which they are not ready-made models to implement. More fundamentally, they will convey the message that campuses cannot tweak (or cut) their way around the current turmoil.

The final element of the project's movement-building strategy—one that will require new funding—is the launch of a 'Paradigm Fellows program.' The Fellows—a rolling cohort of (stipended) faculty and staff organizers serving for two years—would serve as supports for the institutional network and liaisons to the project's associational allies, exemplars, and emerging model partnerships. They would also be an emerging cadre of change-makers, mentored by project leaders and contributing to the development of resources like the toolkits and Framework. They would come, we hope, from a diversity of sectors and faculty and staff positions, often (we assume) from participating institutions. Yet their charge would not be to advance a local project on their own campus, but to join a community of change-makers working across the different activities and issues of the Paradigm Project.

As I hope is clear, the three braids of the project—narrative change, holistic design, movement-building—are deeply interdependent. The institutional network, for instance, is at once a means of distilling and disseminating innovation and a means of movement-building. Building connections with associational stakeholders is both an opportunity for advocacy and an opportunity to shift the larger public narrative about the possibilities of big change. Effective action on each front will, we hope, advance progress in others, activating the 'virtuous cycle' of change discussed above.

The Paradigm Working Group has a keystone role to play in this integrative work. Convening monthly in virtual meetings and twice yearly in face-to-face retreats, the PWG serves as a brain trust for the project as a whole. It helps envision the 'whole greater than the sum of its parts' toward which current innovations and models point. It helps conceptualize how diverse domains of innovation—new pedagogies, curriculum redesign, institutional re-organization, campus culture change—can interact, like elements in a chemical reaction, to create something new. It helps strategize how to design movement-building networks, how to encourage campus leaders to move beyond incrementalism, how to frame effective arguments about the imperative for ambitious change. Its charge is to enable the Paradigm Project to be practical, visionary, and persuasive, all at once.

What might success in this effort look like after seven years? What will the Paradigm Project have achieved if it helps to activate such a virtuous cycle of change. Specific outcomes include:

- **publications, toolkits, and reports** that lift up examples of positive change 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 **movement 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, student support and success, 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; and
- **significant attention from, dialogue with, and partnership with educational decision-makers**, including engagement with our ideas and targeted efforts to implement them.

And if we achieve such measures of success, what comes next? Even in the most optimistic of scenarios, higher education will still be navigating an unfinished, contested process of big change. What could 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 the 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, but capable of working 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.

Yet the goal of the Paradigm Project will require more than this. It will certainly require more than some future iteration of Bringing Theory to Practice. It will take collaborative imagination and ongoing collective action on the part of faculty and staff, students and alums, educational leaders and public supporters of great education. It’s a long game, and it will take energy and patience. But I believe that beginning the work of renewal can itself be renewing and joyous.