Feature

To Manage Risks, Focus on Academic Mission

By Paula Vene Smith, Professor of English, Grinnell College

Today’s climate of media scrutiny, reduced public funding, and unprecedented legal exposure requires leaders in higher education to pay serious attention to issues of risk. Knowing their institution could be damaged by any number of potential incidents and hazards, some college leaders have grown curious about what risk management can offer.

Comprehensive (or “enterprise”) risk management is a model for identifying risks by category—whether the risk involves finances, strategic aims, day-to-day operations, compliance, or reputation—and then creating plans to rank and address them.

Unfortunately, because of its roots in the corporate world, enterprise risk management may neglect academic values that are all-important to an institution of higher education. Take the example of student safety. A professional risk manager might approach this issue primarily in terms of compliance and finances, with outcomes measured by how much a safety violation could cost.

But college leaders who share the ideals of Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) want to ensure that even the most practical decisions are guided by a...
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core academic purpose, to advance learning and discovery in a context of student well-being and civic engagement.

Without minimizing the financial side, these leaders will frame the risk quite differently. They’ll start with the premise that a college education offers learning activities—science experiments, study abroad, art studio work—which, by their nature, can place students at risk.

Hands-on learning can offer invaluable insights and skills, yet the concomitant dangers may threaten another part of our mission—namely to promote students’ well-being, beginning with their physical safety. Finding a way to resolve this tension between two elements we value (an immersive, sometimes hazardous learning environment versus our commitment to student well-being) offers the truest guide for developing a plan to mitigate risk without compromising educational quality.

Given the connection between risk and academic mission, it makes sense for the president and senior staff, in partnership with elected faculty leaders, to discuss the institution’s top risks and how to approach them. Keeping the mission central, an academic framework of risk management better serves the specialized context of liberal education.

Grinnell College in Iowa has developed such a model through the Purposeful Risk Engagement Project (PREP). The 2013–14 pilot study launched a “campus tour of risk” to heighten risk awareness among faculty, staff, and students and to identify top areas for action. Risk action plans ranged from adding disability services to strengthening data security. All risks were evaluated according to their effects on the academic mission.

One top risk that emerged was student attrition. While Grinnell’s graduation rates far exceed the national average, they are lower than those of some peer institutions—and to fulfill our academic mission, we would like an even higher number of entering students to thrive on campus and complete their college education at Grinnell. Identifying student retention as a top risk has led to several policy changes and new initiatives, including a creative project on community-building and social integration that recently received a 2015–2017 Category II Well-Being Research Grant from Bringing Theory to Practice.

To extend the benefits to other institutions, lessons learned from PREP have been published in University Business Magazine, Inside Higher Ed, and elsewhere. Drawing upon the work at Grinnell and similar programs at other liberal arts colleges, Engaging Risk: A Guide for College Leaders was published in 2015 by Rowman and Littlefield (Smith 2015b).

At many universities and colleges, risk management is delegated to the business office, where it can be handled in a way that resembles corporate risk management. But this approach may not do full justice to the special context of an academic mission.

In June 2015, when Inside Higher Ed ran an article on the expanding role of chief business officers, oversight of risk management was specifically mentioned (Ayers and Goldstein 2015). Advice for new business officers included the suggestion to learn about majors and programs—but it is even more important for those who handle risk management to understand shared governance and the academic mission.

Those with direct knowledge of the educational process—who understand what it means to advance learning and discovery, to foster student well-being and civic engagement—are in the best position to weigh the dangers to a college. It’s therefore crucial for leaders with academic experience, including elected officers of the faculty as well as provosts and deans, to take an active role when institutional risks are evaluated and addressed.

References


Campus Highlight

The Ripple Effect Learning Community at Western Carolina University

By Lane Perry, Director of the Center for Service Learning; Zach Rumble, Graduate Assistant in the Center for Service Learning; Cyndy Caravelis, Associate Professor of Criminology; David Onder, Director of Assessment; and Glenda Hensley, Director of the Office of the First-Year Experience—all of Western Carolina University.

In 1966, Robert F. Kennedy delivered a seminal commencement speech at the University of Cape Town that included this message, which is still relevant today: “It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance [emphasis added].”

This message serves as the cornerstone of the Ripple Effect Learning Community (RELC). We believe that before individuals can stand up for what they believe in, they must first determine what it is that they care enough about to do something about in this world—this is the departure point for the RELC experience. As a Carnegie Community Engaged classified university, Western Carolina University (WCU) is a place where individual and collective student talent abounds. Raw talent, while a valuable resource, must be cultivated in order to be fully realized. At WCU, the mission focuses on “improve[ing] individual lives and enhance[ing] economic and community development in our region, state, and nation through engaged learning opportunities.” WCU seeks to develop student talent through community engagement as it is core to WCU’s strategic plan and is an integral aspect of the student experience. The seed-funding offered by BTtoP did exactly what it was designed to do—it served as the much needed infusion of resources to liberate the RELC idea and provide the space to bring the program to life.

The RELC seeks to identify and support first-year students at WCU who are interested in exploring the depths of their own heart and mind in juxtaposition with the challenges and opportunities that exist within their community. Building upon the tenets of Hesse and Gandhi, RELC aims to provide educational experiences that prepare students to identify what they truly love about the world and ultimately be the change they want to see in it. Through the disciplinary lenses of social entrepreneurship and social justice, RELC facilitates examinations into historical and current cases in conjunction with theories of social change.

The RELC experience includes the following initiatives delivered as an interdisciplinary model:

- Pre-Semester Engagement Retreat
- Community Engagement Project
- Learning Communities
- Critical Reflection

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The RELC’s overarching goals for students are the following:

• Working collaboratively with community partners, students construct a plan to pursue an intended solution to an identified community-based issue.
• Through reflection, students clarify their sense of direction and personal values.
• As a result of participation in the RELC, students develop a sense of self and sense of preferences/purpose as it relates to social and personal responsibilities.

In a study of participants in the first offering of the RELC program (n=21), the cohort obtained higher fall-to-fall retention rates (90 percent) and higher first-year GPAs (m=3.23) when compared to their counterparts represented in a control group. Additionally, using the Critical Reflection Questionnaire (Kember et al. 2000), it was evident that students in the RELC program are more likely to critically reflect (e.g., questioning the way others do something and determining a better way; to think over what has been done and consider alternatives) on their course experiences than some of their control group counterparts.

Finally, community engagement was measured in line with ‘preference approach’ offered by Payne (2000). Simply framed, the Community Service Involvement Preference Inventory measures students’ preferred approach to engagement with the community on the following scale:

• Exploration – apprehensive of new experiences, unsure how best to help others, tend to be involved due to self-satisfaction of helping, and commitment is short-term/convenient.
• Affiliation – inclination for service involvement is primarily peer-based, recognition is an incentive, shorter duration, and interpersonal interactions provide safe, buffered environment.
• Experimentation – centered on personal challenge, understanding the needs of those served is dominant, and long-term charge leads to clearer insight into needs of community.
• Assimilation – reflects lifelong commitment to service, deeper understanding of the needs of those served parallels a personal investment to long-term commitments, and makes lifestyle decisions based on being a responsible citizen.

Participants in the RELC program saw statistically significant decreases in their preference of an exploration approach to engagement, and while not statistically significant, there was a clear increase in RELC participants’ preference in the assimilation approach to engagement, potentially indicating a long-term commitment to civic and community engagement. One student succinctly noted, “The RELC helped me strengthen myself and my ideas of the world around me. RELC made it possible for a conversation with a refugee to unveil my personal drive and my ‘why.’”

Now in its third year, and with nearly 80 students having completed the program, the RELC has served as an essential resource for WCU’s campus. The program has been offered in fall 2013, 2014, and 2015 and reframed as the Catamount Gap: Convergence Learning Community over the 2015 summer. The RELC continues to grow and is currently preparing to increase its impact through WCU’s new Learning Community Model in fall 2016. For more information on the RELC, visit: http://www.wcu.edu/learn/academic-success/first-year-experience/learning-communities/le05-the-ripple-effect.asp.

References


Two years ago in this Director’s column, I offered my perspective on the nature of change in higher education and the supportive role that Bringing Theory to Practice offers to colleges and universities.

That perspective used the metaphor of how a disturbance, an energy source, generates and propagates waves—the image of the pebble disturbing the pool; the gravitational pull on tidal waves; the earthquake energy resulting in the Tsunami. The essay contended that, “Change in higher education would be valued [even achieved] were it repeated like ripples or waves throughout all of the institution’s surfaces.” Moreover, if the energy source were to actually generate waves of change in the institution, it would have to affect the width and multiple layers of the campus culture—“all its surfaces”—and must have sprung from the resources of the campus—its history, people and culture—and most certainly from what that institution understands as its purpose—both as an individual institution and as a part of the enterprise of higher education.

So for any institution addressing change, there is the consideration of its full promise or greater purpose—and how, or whether, any ripples or waves of change, even if broad and deep at that institution, will realize it?

For us at BTtoP, these two themes—(1) campus change must be sourced internally in order to generate “waves” of influence; and (2) the objective of that change is for the institution (and thereby, for higher education) to realize its full and greater purposes—are connected!

Supporting that connection is at the heart of our work. We have extended more than 500 grants to over 300 colleges and universities of all types as they initiate ways to realize one or more dimensions of their greater purpose: providing opportunities for deep and profound learning and discovery; instilling a valued connection to civic engagement; providing necessary preparation for meaningful life choices, including work; and engendering the full manifestation and facilitation of opportunities attending to the well-being of its constituents.

The waves of change that a campus generates have measurable strengths and affects. On many campuses, the energy builds an ascendant and pervasive set of waves—and those changes are retained in the campus culture. But on too many others, an initial wave comes to a calm and ripple-less end.

From the hundreds of reports from our grant recipients, the factors influencing whether a wave builds or dissipates are many. However, what we learn from those grant reports is the importance of a collective strategy from without that could effectively reinforce a campus’s internally spawned change—a strategy that would augment and further an institution or organization’s wave action, that reinforce it, extend, and confirm it, and even vitalize it.

We believe that such a strategy will be found in bringing together a “community” of practices and practitioners committed in their own work to realizing higher education’s greater purposes. We are confident that building and enabling such a supportive community may be, for many, the necessary condition for campus change to persist.

Much of the work of BTtoP has been building toward a community of practice, partially generated by case studies, by gathering those who have initiated projects, and by gathering scholars and practitioners contributing to BTtoP publications.

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practice and practitioners. We intend to do so.

Moving forward, BTtoP is committing to advancing such a collective strategy—one that involves current colleagues and friends and invites new ones. We intend to both advocate for and support actions in the interest of advancing the greater purposes of higher education, providing a community for the cultivation among participants of the strength and effectiveness of their own individual voices....

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Campus Spotlight

Sustaining Student Civic Engagement and Well-Being at Chattanooga State Community College

BTtoP Grant Principal Investigator: Amanda Hyberger, QEP
Director and Associate Professor of Music

Chattanooga State Community College received a BTtoP Well-Being Initiative Grant to support a vision of building a culture of responsibility and civic engagement on campus that leads to student well-being, centered in strong work-ethic development. A workshop was designed for incoming freshman to provide students the opportunity to discuss concerns for college success, connect to campus support resources, learn more about career pathways, and connect with local business partners through guest speakers and service-learning. Grounded in e-portfolio development and reflection, this workshop was expected to increase student connection to their peers, to campus and the larger community, as well as to academic and career goals.

A requirement from the Tennessee Board of Regents to develop a completion strategy in the 2014–15 academic year led to this work becoming a significant factor in shifting campus-wide focus from the number of students enrolled in the college to the quality of the student experience, including heightened concern for individual well-being, engagement, and relationship building. Instead of merely designing more workshops, a complete redesign of the freshman success course run in the fall of 2014. This redesign became the campus-wide model for all the freshman success courses for fall 2015. Prior to 2015, the freshman success course was seen as a developmental support course. Housed in one division and taught mainly by adjunct professors not always well integrated into the campus community themselves, this course was not serving the needs of the majority of students.

As Chattanooga State has been moving from an “access” to “success” agenda, several assessment tools have helped to develop a better understanding of the needs of the student population and their perception of college and experiences on campus. Results from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), the Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI), and an internal Self-Reflection Inventory, as well as student e-portfolio reflections, have helped to inform college decision makers.

Through the foundational work of the BTtoP grant project (as well as participation in AAC&U’s Roadmap project: http://www.aacu.org/roadmap), Chattanooga State was recently awarded the Department of Education Title III Strengthening Institutions Program grant that brings in $450,000 per year for 5 years (for a total of $2.25 million) to continue the work.
In Brief: BTtoP News and Notes

News

BTtoP Awards Fifteen Additional Category 1 Well-Being Seminar Grants

BTtoP is proud to announce fourteen $1,000 Well-Being Seminar Grants awarded in February to institutions in the United States, Canada, and Slovakia. The newly awarded institutional projects, chosen from a group of forty-five proposals, represent a wide range of timely and important dimensions of well-being and higher education, including conversations on building well-being into advising, addressing the well-being of first-generation students, and examining how campus well-being is linked to community engagement. Read more: http://www.bttop.org/grants-funding/category-1-seminar-mini-and-student-grants.

BTtoP National Evaluator Ashley Finley Co-Authors Chapter in Intersectionality in Action


BTtoP Research Featured in Change Magazine

BTtoP National Evaluator Ashley Finley discusses BTtoP’s research over the past twelve years in a piece from the March/April issue of Change magazine, “Well-Being: An Essential Outcome for Higher Education”. The article discusses the importance of centralizing student well-being for delivering on the full promise of higher education and discusses national and campus-based research connecting student learning and particular learning experiences with students’ increased sense of purpose and flourishing. Read more: http://www.changemag.org/.

BTtoP-Partnered Research Featured in Journal of College Character

BTtoP National Evaluator Ashley Finley co-authored the article “Perceptions of Campus Climates for Civic Learning as Predictors of College Students’ Mental Health,” which appeared in the February 2016 issue of the Journal of College Character. The piece describes a collaborative study by BTtoP and PSRI (Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory, housed at Iowa State University) exploring whether three broad areas promoted students’ mental health: perceptions of the campus climate related to civic learning, experiences on campus, and civic engagement. Read more: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2194587X.2015.1125367. Requests for full text of the article can be addressed to the authors.

Bring It to the Table Documentary Highlights Civility and Citizenship

Bring It to The Table is a new civic engagement project and documentary film that will resonate on college and university campuses this upcoming election season. The project’s goals are to spark conversation about civil discourse, teach good listening, and model ways to have healthy, robust debates about today’s pressing social issues. Filmmaker Julie Winokur notes that, “I wanted to create a film that would inspire people to bridge the divide and talk openly about tough issues such as immigration, economic inequality, racism, reproductive rights, and climate change. Bring It is a story of citizenship and civility. It’s a celebration of the diversity that makes America… America.” To order a DVD, purchase online campus streaming, or to book an in-person presentation with Winokur, visit: www.bringit2thetable.org.

Travels

BTtoP Director Don Harward Delivers Keynote at Summit in Vancouver, BC

The Canadian Mental Health Association’s “Healthy Minds/Healthy Campuses” summit, titled “Cultivating a Campus Culture of Well-being with Intention: Aligning Policies, Practices and Core Mission,” took place March 2016, in Vancouver. The event brought together campus stakeholders from across British Columbia to advance collective action on campus mental health and substance use. BTtoP Director Harward was invited by colleagues at Simon Fraser University to deliver one of the event keynote presentations: “Well-Being and Higher Education: A Strategy for Change and the Realization of Education’s Greater Purposes.” For more information please visit: https://healthycampuses.ca/summit/2016/
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.

Coming this Summer from Bringing Theory to Practice

Well-Being and Higher Education: A Strategy for Change and the Realization of Education’s Greater Purposes

Well-Being and Higher Education is a book about well-being and its multiple connections to higher education—and why those connections matter. The thirty-eight piece (essays and provocations) volume responds to the current landscape of challenges higher education faces today and the need to preserve and revive the institution’s role to look beyond itself to a greater good.

For more information: www.bttop.org/resources/publications