Campus Highlight

Shaping a Culture of Well-Being: Campuses that Flourish

By Michele D. Ribeiro, interim assistant director of mental health promotion, and Ozge Akcali, assessment coordinator, counseling and psychological services, both of Oregon State University

Oregon State University received a grant from Bringing Theory to Practice that aims to create structures and practices that support flourishing.

“As an archer aims an arrow, as a carpenter carves wood, the wise shape their lives.” —The Dhammapada

It’s October 2014. Students on bikes are whizzing by on their way to classes, coffee shops are bustling, and the air is filled with clangs, bangs, and drilling noises from the construction zones that seem to be ever-present on campus. This noise stems from Oregon State University’s (OSU) attempt to accommodate its rapidly growing population. Close to the center of campus, nestled next to a Pagoda-shaped cultural center, a crane reaches fifty feet into the air over the site of a new classroom building. During the day, a distressed student begins to climb up the ladder of the crane with the intention of possibly jumping. Recognizing the situation, a security officer climbs up after him. After a conversation, the officer reaches out his hand and together they climb down to safety.

Growth on some university campuses has resulted in a challenge of limited resources to support the rising mental health issues that persist on campuses. As this trend is becoming the norm, shifting the campus mindset from problem to possibility becomes a necessity, and indeed some institutions are choosing to

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become proactive in addressing mental health issues. Thus, to support the promotion of mental health, in two courses, OSU students attend a first-year experience class entitled Creating Happiness. In two other courses, Gallup’s StrengthsQuestTM talent assessment is being administered and discussed with first-year engineering students. In two more first-year courses, journal prompts with strengths-based reflections are embedded into curricula unrelated to the course subjects, research and sexuality. This diverse set of courses and activities was the focus of the Bringing Theory to Practice grant awarded to OSU with the aim of creating structures and practices that support flourishing, specifically in our budding First Year Experience initiative.

In total, 155 first-year students participated in one of three curricular or cocurricular activities that support flourishing as outlined by Keyes (2007). The goal was to identify specific practices that could enhance flourishing, self-efficacy, optimism, life regard, and collective self-esteem in college students. The results obtained suggest that all courses that included specific strengths-based reflections resulted in students self-reporting significantly higher scores in optimism compared to control classes with no positive psychology practices. The class that utilized four journal prompts showed significant shifts in flourishing scores, and the happiness course results showed improved self-efficacy scores.

Another important finding focused on students who identify as financially struggling—OSU internal surveys suggest that these students are particularly vulnerable for mental health. Specifically, the odds of screening positively for both anxiety and depression are 450 percent greater for students who reported their current financial situation as a struggle when compared to students who reported finances are not a problem. The results of the current study showed that students who reported that “finances are a struggle” experienced a more significant increase in flourishing scores, self-esteem and optimism post-intervention compared to students who reported that “finances were tight but doing okay” and “finances were not a problem.” Thus, we learned that these activities had a positive impact on students who start with less financial advantage.

Students in the Creating Happiness course engaged with a curriculum that proposed that happiness can be self-created instead of simply experienced and that these practices should become a part of every first-year student’s experience. Although a full course on happiness may not be reasonable for all students to take, the journal prompt activity proved to be another valuable practice since it is the most versatile in terms of embedding into curricula across disciplines and year in school. The journal prompts can be found at http://counseling.oregonstate.edu/flourishing-journal-prompts.

Given that services to graduate students are limited, we also piloted, with success, a similar Creating Happiness course for graduate students in spring 2015. One eighth-year PhD student stated that, “The course provided information I really needed in life.” A master’s student shared, “Taking your course was one of the best decisions I have made so far in grad school.”

In closing, institutions have vast capacity to affect psychosocial well-being, but doing so requires intentional partnerships across academic and student affairs, particularly when trying to embed well-being into campus culture. Thus, as part of OSU’s ongoing work toward creating structures that support flourishing, Creating Happiness courses will continue to be offered each fall for first-year students and each winter or spring for graduate students. Further, all first-year orientation instructors were encouraged to use the journal prompts within their existing curriculum, which could affect approximately 1,400 students. Finally, a short online flourishing course is being developed—it will be open and free for anyone interested in identifying ways to flourish beginning in winter 2016. Although OSU’s program developments are still in the emerging stage, our commitment and spirit is strong and the campus is ready.

References


Feature

The Time Is Right to Prioritize Well-Being in Higher Education

By Paul Rogers, senior scholar, and Nance Lucas, executive director, both of the Center for the Advancement of Well-Being at George Mason University

Those of us who have spent years in higher education know that new leaders are often looking for “the next big thing.” Indeed, regional accreditation requirements often demand that universities branch into new areas to enhance quality. We want to suggest that the growth of initiatives focused on advancing the potential and well-being of individual students in higher education is actually part of a larger paradigm shift across sectors.

In government, industry, citizen groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) around the world, we increasingly see well-being-focused initiatives rising to the forefront. In 2008, Ecuador recognized “the right of the population to live in a healthy and ecologically balanced environment that guarantees sustainability and the good way of living ‘sumak kawsay’ (or Good Life),” (Ecua. Const. art. 14 § 1) and created the cabinet position of Minister of Good Living, redefining what progress and prosperity mean in that country. In 2010, United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron declared his intention to focus not just on GDP but on “general well-being,” and in October of this year, the UK declared its intention to become “a mindful nation” (MAPPG 2015). Numerous indexes have been developed that measure well-being at the national level, including Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness index and the United Nations’ World Happiness Report, among others. Harvard Business School’s strategy guru Michael Porter created a “social progress index” (Social Progress Imperative 2015) that ranks countries across three major dimensions: basic human needs, foundations of well-being, and opportunity. Numerous regional and local governments have launched their own initiatives, such as the city of Santa Monica, California’s Wellbeing Project, which aims to “harness the power of data to provide a shared understanding of our community’s strengths and needs, encouraging collaboration among city leaders, local organizations, and residents to improve our collective wellbeing” (City of Santa Monica 2015).

In business and industry, employers too are focusing on well-being, which has led to the discovery of correlations between well-being and employee engagement (Harter, Schmidt, and Keyes 2003), with subsequent impact on productivity and profitability. In many sectors, we see this influence manifested in the heightened awareness of environmental impact and corporate social responsibility.

Well-being has also moved closer to the center of the dialogue in the nonprofit sector as NGO’s have begun to investigate the relationship between practitioners’ well-being and their effectiveness in meeting basic human needs. For example, Ashoka: Innovators for the Public champions the concept of social entrepreneurship and has launched a

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well-being research project aimed at investigating the impact of “well-being practices” on leaders and organizations working in the areas of health, the environment, education, poverty alleviation, and human rights. These initiatives have special relevance to those working in very difficult areas of need where practitioner burnout is high, such as investigating human trafficking or child abuse, caring for refugees, and working in war zones.

Our view is that this emphasis on well-being across sectors shows an awareness of the need for an expanded sense of mission in these institutions. Thankfully, we also see a similar change taking place in higher education, where virtually every discipline has important contributions to make in research, teaching, and service. Of course, philosophy deserves a grand mention here given the more than two thousand years of conversation that have and continue to take place on the subject of happiness, meaning, and the well-lived life. Other disciplines in the humanities also have much to contribute to discussions of well-being, including literature, where consciousness has remained a consistent theme, religious studies, and history. The social sciences, too, have already contributed much to the cross-sector conversation, most notably in psychology, education, and economics. In sociology, the emerging subdiscipline of “public sociology” is tackling ideas related to human rights, sustainable communities, and measurement. Other contributions are coming from geography, political science, and law.

We are encouraged by the increasing amount of research being done in domains related to well-being and its translation to student populations, such as the research on mindfulness-based stress reduction (Bodenlos, Wells, Noonan, and Mayrsohn 2015) and how increasing understanding of strengths contributes to student success (Soria and Stubblefield 2014, 2015). At the institutional level, we are increasingly seeing universities around the world take on the challenge of moving beyond only measuring outcomes related to academic and career success and expanding the scope of their responsibility to include students’ well-being and their capacity to build lives of vitality, resilience, purpose, and engagement.

In the end, the purpose of a college degree is not to prepare students to have a happy life. It is about preparing them to be engaged and responsible citizens, equipping them with knowledge and skills to live their lives authentically with greater meaning and purpose. Yet, too often, students begin their college careers selecting an academic major because they want to follow someone else’s path, or they want to please everyone but themselves. It is not unusual to hear stories of graduates who land a high-paying job on Wall Street only to discover a few years later that their lives are void of passion and purpose. The time is right for all institutions of higher education to engage in this work, to encourage faculty research and teaching innovation in these areas across the disciplines, and to make it a part of our long-term strategic visions.

References


Ecuadorian Constitution. Article 14 § 1.


Sometimes, as BTtoP’s national evaluator, I wish I had a few quick data points I could rattle off when people ask me, “How do you know there’s a link between learning, civic development, and student well-being?” That would be much easier than my usual response of, “Well, that depends on the kind of evidence you want.” The thing is, evidence is a peculiar concept—there never seems to be enough, or the right kind, or the type that’s truly convincing. And yet, everyone still wants it. At Bringing Theory to Practice, we started with a hunch twelve years ago about the relationship between engaged learning, civic development, and well-being. And twelve years later, we’re still gathering the evidence to support that hunch. Because that’s the thing about evidence, or at least the kind required to take on a big, knotty question like, “How do learning, civic development, and well-being intersect?”—you’ll never really have all that you need.

But what we do know after some three hundred funded projects is that when campuses focus on learning, civic, and well-being outcomes as part of intentionally designed and implemented programs, the results are overwhelmingly positive. Because these programs often involve practices known to be among the most effective for engaging students (e.g. first-year seminars, learning communities, and service learning), that finding may not be much of a surprise. But the kind of evidence that BTtoP has encouraged points to how fruitful it can be to open the conversation about these types of practices (often referred to as “high-impact practices”) to more inclusively consider the degree to which outcomes for someone other than oneself. Only a slightly higher percentage of project reports (approximately 75 percent) indicated positive outcomes related to traditional learning outcomes, such as increased class participation, ability to analyze ideas and synthesize information, and greater academic motivation.

In an effort to deepen what we know about campus programs aimed at connecting learning, civic development, and well-being, BTtoP launched the Well-Being Initiative in 2013. In addition to funding twenty-nine campuses to implement and assess the effects of targeted programs on student well-being, the initiative also sparked a research partnership with the Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI) at Iowa State University (see http://www.psr.iastate.edu/). Preliminary findings indicate that students’ sense of flourishing is more greatly influenced by their perceptions of being in a campus environment that supports personal and social responsibility than it is their individual civic experiences. Specifically, students’
perceptions of being in a campus climate that supports the development of moral reasoning and contributing to a larger community were most associated with higher levels of flourishing among student respondents. In a nutshell, the findings suggest the need for campuses to make systemic commitments to student engagement that go beyond one-off experiences but rather are connected over time, such that engagement is pervasive and expected.

BToP also has been invested in gathering evidence of institutional change. For this, we have relied heavily on campus case studies to understand how programs are established, how faculty and staff become engaged, how resources get aligned (or realigned), and how improvements are made. In 2014–15, we commissioned seven in-depth case studies of BToP campuses to gain insights into the institutional change process. We learned, unsurprisingly, that it helps to have a dedicated leader (or leaders) on campus to shepherd conversations and keep people moving, but we also learned those leaders can come in many forms—senior administrators, deans, faculty, and student affairs professionals. Those leaders also tend to understand the importance of working across academic and student affairs and can effectively build conversations that bridge those traditional divides. These campuses also found ways to connect their grant projects to the broader goals of their institutional mission or strategic plan, such that what could have been isolated project efforts seen as “this is what we’re doing now,” could just as easily be viewed as, “this is what we’re already doing but can now do more intentionally and systemically.” We will be sharing the case studies on the BToP website so that others can learn from the successes, challenges, and innovations of these campuses.

What evidence do we have? Perhaps the best answer to that question is that for over ten years BToP has supported campuses in finding their own evidence. The very idea that campuses could collect evidence, would want to, and would share it with others has contributed significantly to the success of BToP’s research and its efforts. We have also been heartened by the overwhelming success of funded programs that have found that their participating students not only learn better, they also become better citizens and more fully developed individuals.

Maybe the truly peculiar thing about evidence is that we don’t ask enough of it. The expectations we have for evidence of programmatic success should go beyond just looking for success in one area—students’ learning or their civic development or their well-being. We should challenge the evidence to help us say something about all three. At BToP, we believe the extraordinary possibilities in higher education and for global flourishing lie at the convergence of them all, when we educate students to be critical thinkers with a sense of community who also possess the self-confidence and resilience to actually get things done.
In Brief: BTtoP News and Notes

News

It Was Great to See You at the 2016 AAC&U Annual Meeting!

Once again, we thoroughly enjoyed engaging with our ever-growing community of colleagues at AAC&U’s Annual Meeting in January—we were excited to see so many of you at our various sessions throughout the meeting. Our annual Thursday evening reception continues to be our favorite annual event—we cherish the opportunity to catch up with colleagues and friends of BTtoP, old and new. Thank you to all that stopped by for a chat or introduction. We look forward to continuing our shared work with all of you.

The Engelhard Project Celebrates Ten Years at Georgetown, Honors BTtoP Cofounders Sally Engelhard Pingree and Don Harward

As we mentioned in our last newsletter, the Engelhard Project celebrated ten years at Georgetown University in October 2015. The Engelhard Project for Connecting Life and Learning focuses on teaching to the whole student. By incorporating health and wellness issues into the classroom, the project fosters academic learning and encourages students to reflect on their own attitudes and behaviors. This engaging video (http://engelhard.georgetown.edu/) played at the event, beautifully capturing the impact of the project on Georgetown’s students, faculty, staff, and campus culture.

BTtoP Colleagues Featured in New Book on Civic Engagement Pedagogy in Community Colleges

BTtoP is thrilled to announce the release of a new book from Springer Publishing featuring BTtoP colleagues from the CUNY Kingsborough and CUNY Graduate Center campuses: Civic Engagement Pedagogy in the Community College: Theory and Practice. The volume, which includes reference to the BTtoP Demonstration Site Grant to the two campuses during the 2012-2014 funding period, “will help postsecondary educators to discover the joys and challenges of implementing theoretically grounded civic engagement projects on their campuses.” For more information on the book, visit: http://www.springer.com/us/book/9783319229447. For more information on the CUNY Kingsborough/Graduate Center grant, visit http://www.bttop.org/grants-funding/awarded-grants/brooklyns-public-scholars-civic-research-community-engaged-campus.

Travel

BTtoP Director Don Harward Returns to the University of Warsaw, Participates in Imagining America Annual Conference

BTtoP Project Director Don Harward returned to the University of Warsaw, an institution with which he serves as a visiting scholar, for a conference on the status of liberal education throughout central Europe. The conference brought together leaders and faculty from institutions that are in the midst of designing liberal education initiatives. Harward was energized to observe the positive ways their efforts borrowed from liberal education in the United States—but more importantly, he noted how US educators must learn from European colleagues as they address and resolve the core challenges to liberal education. It was inspirational to observe and support other educators championing the core of liberal education in contexts of historical repression and former non-democratic social control.

Harward also had the opportunity to participate in the October 2015 Imagining America Annual Conference, “America Will Be! The Art and Power of ‘Weaving Our We,’” hosted at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. The events specifically addressed the crises and civic issues arising from the late summer events in Baltimore, MD. Particularly stimulating was the core theme focused on the ways in which higher education (particularly the voices of the arts, design, and civic learning) can—and must—address the patterns of racial injustice and a culture of repression of the “have-nots.”
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 non-profit 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.

The Civic Series

Bringing Theory to Practice’s The Civic Series is composed of five monographs that raise questions and provide perspectives on fundamental issues about the civic mission of higher education.

Civic initiatives are ongoing in democratic societies, but only some of them become papers which invigorate the intellectual climate and promote public discussion. We believe that if each successive wave of visionary thinkers were to share their boldest ideas about the civic mission of higher education, it might contribute to theory and practice.

Transforming Undergraduate Education

This resource features chapters from twenty-four scholars, educational leaders, and practitioners, as well as ten case studies of campuses that have been recipients of Bringing Theory to Practice support. Project cofounder and director Don Harward contributed Part 1 and edited the book; national evaluator Ashley Finley authored a chapter and coedited the case studies.

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