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# BTtoP Case Study: California State University, Chico

## Town Hall Meetings and Great Debates Lead to Public Sphere Pedagogy

Inspired by a new university President's message to his campus, a group of faculty in the English Department at CSU, Chico piloted a revision to a few sections of the standard, required first-year writing course. The President, Dr. Paul Zingg, had urged the campus to consider its responsibility to educate students for civic participation. The faculty—Drs. Jill Swiencicki, Chris Fosen and Thia Wolf—took his charge seriously and developed a “civic literacies” version of the writing course in response. The plan for the course placed reading and writing about civic participation at heart of every major assignment. Students in this course would read excerpts from Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* and Terry Tempest Williams' *The Open Space of Democracy*. They would choose public issues that concerned them, research and write about those issues, apply models of civic participation as possible solutions to civic ills, and discuss their ideas in class.

As the faculty developed and discussed the course design, they wondered how best to engage students deeply with the assignment sequence. Why would students *want* to do this work? Their answer to this question was to develop and embed a Town Hall Meeting as a culminating event in the course. Students could go public with their research—sharing it across course sections, discussing it with faculty, administrators and community members who were new to them, and considering the implications of coming to understand public problems with an emphasis on imagining what might be done to address them.

Funding for the first Town Hall was provided by a small system grant obtained by the First-Year Experience Program (FYE), where Wolf served as director. In partnership with the Dean of Undergraduate Education, William Loker, FYE turned to the Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) Project as a likely source of seed funding to increase and improve the Town Hall Meeting, as well as assess its impact on students. BTtoP's values and goals “dovetailed nicely with the things we were thinking of doing,” said Loker, whose office is in charge of not only the First-Year Experience Program, but also campus-wide development of civic engagement. CSU, Chico began its BTtoP grant-funded project in 2007.

### Background

Chico State opened in 1889 as the Chico State Normal School on what was once a cherry-orchard. It was one of the first institutions of postsecondary education in the state and served northern California. It then became Chico State Teachers College in 1921. All teachers colleges in California became state colleges in 1935. In 1972, the college became California State University, Chico. The university is now commonly called Chico State and offers more than 100 undergraduate majors and options. Today, its campus sits on 119 acres in downtown Chico, 90 miles north of Sacramento. In addition, Chico State boasts a 1,050-acre farm and a 3,950-acre ecological reserve. In fall 2014, there were

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16,251 full-time equivalent students. Ninety-five percent of the student population comes from California.

### **Enhancing the First-Year Experience**

The Town Hall Meeting initiated by the composition faculty in the English Department quickly became part of the university's First-Year Experience Program about a year before the BTtoP program at Chico State began. The First-Year Experience Program was looking for such a project to revitalize its own mission. Before this, "all the program consisted of was the first-year seminar, which was an introduction to university life," said Wolf, who is also professor of English studies, "common nationally to orienting students to college."

"But when I took on the position of Director of the First-Year Experience in January 2006, I wanted to revisit the campus vision and mission statement. We had a new president, Paul J. Zingg, who was speaking consistently about the importance of civic education." Wolf saw developing the Town Hall pilot program as a response to the President's call for greater civic engagement.

What Loker found appealing about the possibility of the BTtoP project "was the focus on student well-being," he said. "We had had some incidents on campus regarding alcohol consumption that led to deaths and a hazing event that led to a death in a fraternity. There was a real deep-seated feeling on our campus about student well-being and about the relationship between a sense of academic disengagement and some of those problems we were seeing. We saw some of the behavioral issues as consequences of a lack of academic engagement. At that time, we talked about behavioral issues as opposed to lack of well-being. The initial call for the proposal talked about well-being and that resonated."

In 2007, when Chico State received its two-year BTtoP demonstration site grant, Wolf thought Chico State would use it for two things: "One was to support and further investigate the Town Hall. The other was to redesign the university 101 class, the Freshman Seminar, so it would have a stronger civic component and be more appealing to students."

The Freshman Seminar, begun in the late 1980s, was designed to put faculty and student services professionals in the course. "But the academic content and context was unclear," Wolf noted. "That remained a problem." So with the BTtoP initiative in mind, the faculty talked about the purposes of the Freshman Seminar and how to redesign it. Yet this effort was less successful than Wolf hoped.

"The 101 redesign didn't work," she said. "It did not improve engagement. We created something called On the Creek, where students would participate in removing invasive plants. The campus is bisected by Chico Creek, and it extends through neighborhoods. We had picked several locations where students would work with community members to help restore native habitats. Prior to doing that, they had a lecture series on the meaning of the creek in the area. They had a field experience with representatives from the Maidu Tribe who have an agreement with the university that they can

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come onto campus and harvest plants from the creek side that they use in traditional ways such as in basket making. A representative met with students and showed them traditional ways of doing things using natural materials. All of that sounds just great.”

“The problem, clear to me now,” Wolf noted, “is that 18 year olds are not really set up for being lectured to for long periods of time, especially in areas where they haven’t yet learned something. They phased out. It was not a productive experience. There were terrific lectures. But students, in being brand new, couldn’t understand why they were sitting through these lectures, and they didn’t fully understand the connection we were hoping they would make with their new home.”

However, the early Town Hall Meeting program received positive reviews from students. The number of students participating in the event more than doubled from the fall to spring semester from 120 to 300 students. More teachers signed on, and student academic engagement increased.

Students said that they felt taken seriously by the faculty, administrators, and community members who came to talk with them about their research. “Eighteen year olds are legal adults,” said Wolf, “but they don’t feel like adults. So to be treated in this way was remarkable to them. They said ‘more schools should be like this.’”

Wolf realized the BTtoP program was needed to sustain the Town Hall, and she wanted to do more research on it. “We wanted to think about the larger landscape,” she said. “We had done something that mattered to students. We were reaching a few hundred students. We wanted to reach all students. We wanted to provide them with work early in their college careers that would help them to identify as successful college students and to realize that they belonged here and were also participating community members and citizens.”

With an entering first-year class of 2,500 to 2,700 students, Wolf had her work cut out for her. “I am charged with improving the experiences of those students,” said Wolf. “My notion was that things would be better for them all the way down the line if they had a really good first year. That is what all first-year directors hope.” Expanding the Town Halls with BTtoP funding seemed to be the answer, and the first BTtoP grant was used to support the Town Hall Meeting program.

### **Expanding the Town Hall Meeting Program**

When it started in 2006, the Town Hall Meeting program had already received a small grant from the CSU Chancellor’s office as part of a Civic Learning Institute. Loker said that seed money, “paid off in terms of an ability to scale up that effort more quickly than we would have been able to do otherwise.”

This meant that students could continue to research and write on public policy issues of importance to them. In addition, the program “created an event or a space, what we called a *public sphere*, for students to present their research and writing,” said Loker. “The writing ceased to be only for a student or professor and became part of a public dialogue about larger issues,” he added. “Eventually what would happen is that we would talk to students about what they were interested in researching and come up with a list of ten or twelve topics. Students would choose one of those.”

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The Town Hall Meetings also included individuals from the community who had an interest in a topic. For example, if students were writing about homelessness, those who provided services to the homeless would meet with students. Or, if students were writing about education reform in kindergarten through grade 12, teachers or the superintendent would visit the class. Experts, community members, or other faculty on the campus who had policy or content expertise would attend classes. Students would then present their ideas and enter dialogues with these experts.

“That gave students a sense of importance to their work that far exceeded writing another paper for a teacher,” said Loker. “So they took the process more seriously. It also enabled them to try on, in a non-threatening environment, the adult role in a legitimate participatory civic dialogue. Most of them were not accustomed to doing that.”

In 2008, Chico State reported the results of the First-Year Assessment Survey of students who participated in the BTtoP project. The survey examined their academic engagement, well-being and emotional health, and alcohol and drug use. The overall conclusion among administrators was that students who experienced the Town Hall were indeed more civically engaged. “It was more pronounced,” said Wolf. “You could see a difference in their civic profiles. Students were happier.” With the BTtoP funding, Chico State started to use the Corey Keyes Flourishing Scale, which is used to show that people with certain attitudes and habits are more positive about their lives.

In the Town Hall Meeting program, students were asked to write reflections of their experiences. According to Wolf, they described their transformations before and after Town Hall Meeting events. As one student said, “Now I understand why my parents like to have these kinds of conversations. I didn’t expect this to be so interesting.”

### **A Move to Political Science**

In 2009, the initial BTtoP funding ended, and for a variety of reasons, including staffing issues, the English department decided it did not want to continue the program. So the political science department took over the Town Hall Meeting program and moved it into an introductory American government course.

Chico State received its second, two-year BTtoP grant in 2010, and the funding helped to provide further assessment of the project. The Town Hall Meeting quickly grew from 300 to 400 students per semester, to 600 to 800 per semester, to nearly 900 students per semester. As the scale of the events grew, so did the need for coordination. Teaching assistants and student assistants were assigned to work with the political science faculty. “We took a more serious approach to assessment, which required staff,” noted Loker.

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The political science department realized it needed someone to coordinate the project and to recruit community members to serve as moderators and consultants. Ellie Clifford Ertle, a faculty member in political science, volunteered. She is now Director of Civic Engagement and faculty coordinator of the Town Hall Meeting program, and she teaches one of the sections. "I had been doing civic engagement in my courses for a while," she explained. "So hearing about a broader scale experience seemed to be the right thing for students. I wanted to get more involved."

Ertle worked with a team of faculty members who looked at what was expected and how to modify their courses and design a common assignment sequence. "We thought it really important for students to have interaction with community members who were experts and could be consultants in the area," she said, talking about how students could use their ideas to drive policy. "My role was to recruit people to come in from the various areas, work with faculty to develop the assignment stream, develop policy areas, and pull together regular meetings of all the faculty who are teaching the Town Hall Meeting during the semester to talk about pedagogy and logistics." She then served as a liaison between the faculty team and the event team, which is part of the First-Year Experience Program.

Diana Dwyre, a professor of political science, signed up to teach American government with the Town Hall component and continues to teach it still. Every fall, she has 400 students in the Town Hall Meeting section of the American government course.

"At the beginning, we all thought it great to have this civic engagement project," she said. "But we weren't sure how to make it happen. After the first round, we realized the most important thing we could do was to integrate the Town Hall Meeting with what we've already been teaching for decades. We know how to teach American government, but we needed to integrate this project into it so they were not two components. Integration of the topics we are studying in the class and the assignments and the activities around Town Hall has been what has evolved. We realized that the first semester. You can't just tack it on. That was a big discovery." Faculty had meetings about how best to implement the project and shared their experiences about how to incorporate the material with the assignments and the lectures "so it is seamless," Dwyre said.

The emphasis in the program also shifted, according to Loker. The composition classes were focused on the writing process and the research. The political science faculty focused on the content of the course. "Many political science faculty knew the public policy issues themselves and thought clearly about what students could realistically be expected to do and how to be prepared to participate in a democratic process," he said.

The size of the program is limited by the university's available space. Generally, three to five faculty teach 600 to 800 students. Together, the students and faculty choose topics, according to Dwyre. Some topics consistently emerge as issues of interest to students and faculty alike, such as human trafficking.

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Others topics come and go, such as sexual crime on campus, gender identity policy issues, youth mental health, food safety, climate change, water policy, and gun violence.

Some of the community members involved in the courses have included members of the city council, the mayor, public service employees of the city and county governments, law enforcement officials, educators, the district attorney, political activists trying to implement policy, and leaders of non-profit organizations. Ertle noted that it was not hard to recruit community members. “For the most part, people were really excited,” she said. “What I have found is that community members are looking for opportunities to interact with students in this positive way. Most of them come back every semester.”

Students in the classes follow certain guidelines. Three or four assignments are related to their projects, but one assignment is identical across the classes. This is the assignment they bring to the Town Hall Meeting called the *talking points assignment*. Students come prepared to talk about their research, have the same expectations, and know what to bring.

The Town Hall Meeting takes place approximately three-fourths of the way through the semester. Students meet first in a large auditorium with guest speakers. One student keynote speaker, who has experienced the Town Hall in a past semester, addresses the group. Then students break out into groups of twenty-five based on their topics. At the end, students meet in groups of nine to ten to create action plans to answer the question *What can you do to make difference?* For their final papers, students write about their experiences, their topics, and what they as individuals can do. Dwyer noted, “We do have survey data for all the years. We ask them to fill it out within a week of class. Those results are amazing to read.”

Dwyer believes that the project has had a big impact on students. “We know we have higher levels of retention particularly among minority students,” she said. “But one of the things that I didn’t expect was the improvement in writing skills. It is something we have not assessed. We don’t have the time or the money, but all of us notice it. In almost every case, you see marked, visible improvement. And these are freshmen. We hear over and over again, ‘I never had to write a paper.’ As much as it is a lot of work, the students are working very hard to do the Town Hall. But we don’t appear to have people avoiding it. One of questions that we ask them to write about in their last paper is *What did you learn?* Sometimes I cry when I read those. They are sincerely talking about the things we want them to learn.”

“We also find students who participate in the program rate higher on the Keyes Flourishing Scale,” Dwyer noted. “There is an increase in well-being. We track institutional data, and have found that students who participate in Town Hall Meetings are more likely to persist in college, and we are beginning to see initial results that they also graduate at higher rates.”

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In addition, Wolf discovered that the Town Hall Meeting is a change event for students. “All of a sudden they see themselves as both community members and adult participants in civic space. That is important for those of us who believe in the public responsibilities of higher education.”

### Chico’s Great Debates

Meanwhile, another public event was underway at Chico State. As the first BTtoP grant was winding down in 2009, the City of Chico contacted the university. According to Wolf, the assistant city manager said, “We don’t feel community members attending city meetings understand public civic discourse. People come to city meetings and rant without providing useful dialogue. Can you help us?”

The city officials were put in touch with the Department of Communications Arts and Sciences. Zach Justus, an assistant professor of communications, added that the city’s concern arose as the debate about national health care was underway. The Chico City Manager was worried about the level of civility nationally and locally. He further asked, Justus noted, “Is there something we can do to model civility locally?”

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The Chico Great Debate program was born, Justus became coordinator, and the First-Year Experience Program became co-sponsor with BTtoP funding. In the Great Debates, students in introductory oral communication classes are given an umbrella topic to research. A committee of students, faculty members, and city representatives picks the topic each semester. These are usually current hot topics in the City of Chico; the hot topics debated since spring 2010 include the following: privatization and the role of government, diversity and discrimination, mental health, and water and agriculture policy.

During one twelve-hour day, students from all the classes converge in the Chico City Council Chambers, the Old Municipal Building, and the Chico City Plaza for the Great Debate. Students present platforms, give group presentations, discuss their research findings, and engage in debates all around the same topic. Audience members participate at various levels. Student work is visually displayed in the city buildings and on the plaza outside of City Hall.

In addition, Justus worked with members of the Democrat and Republican parties to get them on board. “The idea is to train the next generation of civic actors to engage more civilly,” said Justus. This is long term to show people how to have a conversation.”

The assessment results are overwhelming positive, according to Justus. “At the start of the semester, some students say, ‘I don’t understand why this is important. This isn’t my major.’ But after the Great Debate, they don’t ask those questions. They see the relationship among policy making, civic engagement, and oral communication.”

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Each semester, the project involves 1,600-2,000 students. Justus also points out that “students show significant movement in the Keyes Flourishing Scale. They show gains in civic and academic engagement. Students provide written responses, and those are positive as well. There are no comparative data because there is 100 percent participation.”

In the last two years, Chico State has formed a partnership with nearby Butte College, a community college in Oroville, which also sends students to participate in the Great Debate. Butte likewise reports “a higher level of student success, which means they enroll in a course the next semester and they are more likely to stay in school,” said Justus. “Chico will continue to track this and see if it affects transfer rates.”

The faculty members involved in the Great Debate include full-time faculty, adjunct faculty, and teaching assistants at both institutions. “I tremendously admire the faculty who have committed to doing this kind of work,” said Loker. “It is additional work for faculty to prepare students for these big events and to participate themselves. There is a lot of coordination that has to occur across sections.”

The two programs, the Town Hall Meeting and the Great Debates, are both part of the First-Year Experience Program. A goal of that program is to reach every student with one or both experiences.

The two programs have come to represent *public sphere pedagogy* at Chico State. In a 2014 issue of *Diversity and Democracy*, a publication of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, Wolf defined public sphere pedagogy as “a teaching approach that moves students’ usual work of research and writing into public arenas for dialogue and action planning.”

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#### **The Effect of Public Sphere Pedagogy on Students**

Loker argues that the Town Hall and Chico Great Debate are strategies that any college or university can implement. “It is not that expensive,” he said, “and actually we’ve done financial analysis, and one of the main impacts of the Town Hall and Great Debate is that they increase retention. We measure it. In groups of students for which we controlled for their GPAs, entering SAT scores, and other measures such as gender, students who experience the Town Hall and Great Debate persist at rates of 5-8 percent higher than those who do not have these experiences.”

“Persistence is an important measure of student success,” Loker notes, “There is a significant financial impact for the university that more than pays what we are investing in students. This is part of the whole discussion of high-impact practices and why they are worth supporting. Because even though they cost money, they have a higher pay off than what they cost. Unfortunately, we would like to say it leads to higher graduation rates. We can’t yet say that with a lot of confidence. But certainly, students who would otherwise drop out are staying in school.”

In fact, in Fall 2013, Lori M. Weber, a professor in the political science department, published a paper on Chico State’s public sphere pedagogy called “The Town Hall Meeting and the Chico Great Debate

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Programs: Assessing the Effect on Students' Civic Dispositions and Success." In the article, she summarizes the data gathered during the BTtoP projects. Beginning in 2009, students were surveyed following the Town Hall Meeting event in their introductory American Government courses. Students report "a greater likelihood of future political activity and find influencing the political structure more important than students who are not in the program."

Students surveyed each semester following their Chico Great Debate experiences reported increased levels of academic engagement. These students also found that participating in community action programs and becoming community leaders were *very important or essential* compared to students surveyed who were not in the program. But as Wolf noticed, this effect was even more evident when students were surveyed four years later. "We have seen an uptick in student well-being when students go through these events," said Wolf. "But it is more pronounced four years later. The Town Hall students have better well-being than students who don't have this experience."

According to Weber, graduating seniors surveyed in 2012 and 2013 who participated in the Town Hall Meeting program reported "a higher level of political discussion, as well as enhanced community efficacy and a greater sense of well-being, compared to students not in the program." Also, 66 percent of the students who participated in the Town Hall Meeting program in the past "felt they can make a big or a moderate impact in their communities."

Further, Weber noted that as of Spring 2013, more than 15 percent of students surveyed were in both programs. Based on the Keyes Flourishing Scale, Chico State students in both programs were flourishing and had enhanced well-being compared to those not in the program. One student, who had been "uninspired and disenchanted," according to Wolf, ended up saying "I was wrong. I had no idea my fellow students had so many ideas." He became a keynote speaker at a Town Hall Meeting, went on to earn a master's degree, and now lectures in history at Chico State.

### **The Effect of Public Sphere Pedagogy on Faculty and Community**

The programs also appear to affect faculty. Dwyre said that one of the "best things for me has been that I feel much more comfortable challenging students. I know they can do it. I was surprised the first couple of times around. But they just do it. They improve. They work hard at it. They take it seriously. They get better."

Ertle added that the programs have "reinvigorated me and kept me in teaching. I enjoy my teaching, but this has provided me an opportunity to feel connected in a way I hadn't been. It is pretty siloed in higher education. This is a collaborative experience with fellow faculty members that I didn't have before, and I've had a chance to interact with my students in a different way. It is more project-based. It has helped to shape my other teaching."

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Because of his work with the Great Debate project, in 2014 Justus was named outstanding alumni by the Cross Examination Debate Association. The program was also featured in a paper published by the Kettering Foundation. Justus has spoken at conferences nationwide, and other faculty members have published articles about their experiences in *Liberal Education*. For example, an article on the Town Hall Meeting appeared in *Liberal Education* in 2011.

### **Sustaining Impact**

“I feel fortunate to have been a part of this,” Wolf said. “The program started in an office with a computer and no printer. The big challenge we face has been to keep up with the work we created. Everything grew organically.” After the grant ended, the political science department continued with the Town Hall Meetings. It received funding from the Provost to help fund the teaching assistants and from the First-Year Experience Program to run events. “Support from Bringing Theory to Practice made us credible,” said Wolf. “The BTtoP staff came to see an event. This mattered to our Provost. Their ongoing support –belief in us – helped us on our own campus.”

Representatives from national organizations, such as the American Association of Colleges and Universities and the Association of State Colleges and Universities, likewise have visited Chico State to examine public sphere pedagogy. Chico State now provides day-long VIP experiences for visitors from other campuses and programs on the day of any Town Hall Meeting or Chico Great Debate.

Word of the success of the programs has spread, and other colleges are adopting public sphere pedagogy and using the Town Hall and/or the Great Debate formats. Nearby Butte College, for example, now participates in both projects. Chabot Community College; Shasta Community College; and the University of Nevada, Reno, adopted the Chico Great Debate model for their campuses. Pierce Community College; California State University, Fullerton; California State University, Los Angeles; and Cleveland State University have adopted the Town Hall Meeting model. In addition, Wolf has been working with the Shenandoah University in Virginia, which developed a faculty-focused Town Hall to work on GE reform and instituted a Town Hall as a key event for multiple courses in GE. California State University, San Marcos, is in the process of adopting the programs.

To widen its sphere, the First-Year Experience Program created a webinar that was distributed to a number of CSU campuses and created web sites featuring the projects that students have developed. The program also started a Civic Engagement Forum in which students from a variety of classes can present their work. Some are students who report on what they have done since the Town Hall Meeting.

Loker said that the BTtoP projects have “shaped the way I think about teaching and learning. Thia Wolf has been the intellectual author of a lot of this work, and I have learned a lot from working with Thia about the educational process and how to make that more effective. We also had the support of the President who thought it part of the identity of universities like ours. We are a public university and so we have to be responsible to the public good. One of the public goods of education is preparing students to be active participants in a democratic society. I think he sees that.”

“BTtoP’s financial support was absolutely critical to our success,” he said. “Equally critical has been the intellectual community that BTtoP has fostered. People across the country are thinking about the same

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issues. It is so gratifying to go to meetings with those folks, and talk about those issues, and learn and share ideas. It is an excellent intellectual community.”

Justus noted that the Great Debates have also “improved our relationship with city government.” As Wolf noted, “We are a university situated right downtown. The programs have given the community an opportunity to intentionally and systematically meet our students and understand what a great influence they are on our community. Often we hear negative stories, but here is an opportunity for the community to get to know our students in a positive way and for our students to feel they matter, are connected, and should be connected to a community. It is really exciting.”