Flourishing and Student Engagement

By Kathy Graff Low, Professor of Psychology, Bates College

Concern over college students’ mental health has increased over the last decade, with reports indicating that substance abuse, self-reported stress, and mood-related disorders are on the rise on campuses. Typically, research on this population has focused on mental illness and its symptoms, rather than on positive emotional states or well-being. Recently, Corey Keyes, associate professor of sociology at Emory University, has argued that mental health and mental illness are “two distinct continua.” Keyes notes that only a small portion of those who are “mentally healthy” are what he calls truly “flourishing.” In this model, “flourishing” includes social and psychological dimensions, or “eudaemonic dimensions,” that may be especially relevant for college. For example, Keyes examines as part of mental well-being such things as community involvement, personal development, and meaning in life. A study at Bates College funded by Bringing Theory to Practice has been exploring flourishing and its relation to mental health and other variables in undergraduates.

With the support of a BTtoP Program Start-up Grant in 2008, all entering first year students at Bates completed surveys and tests related to depression, flourishing, substance use, and student engagement. At entry, 69.1 percent of students were flourishing, 29.0 percent were moderately mentally healthy (neither flourishing nor languishing), and 1.9 percent were languishing. In addition, 18.9 percent of students had depression scores...
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in the clinical range, and those scores were highly correlated with languishing. Consistent with Keyes’ assertions about a dual continua model, a proportion of students who were flourishing also had depression scores in the clinical range (12.2 percent), suggesting that assessment of symptoms alone is not sufficient for determining mental health. The results suggest both more flourishing and more depression in this college sample than in other studies of high school students or adults. Further, alcohol consumption and binge drinking were not associated with poorer mental health in the sample, despite the fact that previous studies have reported a link in adult samples. Studies at institutions of various sizes and types will inform our thinking on the degree to which flourishing is common in undergraduates, and on those factors that are associated with true mental health in the college years.

How does civic or community engagement relate to flourishing at entry to college? At Bates, some aspects of student engagement, including ratings of the importance of civic and community involvement and hours of service in high school, were associated with flourishing in both the total sample and in a subset of eighty students who responded to additional questions about their high school experience. It therefore appears that, at Bates, engagement in civic or community activity is an important ingredient in flourishing as students enter college. The degree to which this is specific to the liberal arts setting or to our highly community-engaged campus is unclear. Exploration of flourishing in other institutions across years will be critical in understanding these associations.

What happens to students after the first year? In the summer of 2009, 95 students (approximately one-fourth from the original cohort) were reassessed, and were also asked about engaged learning and activities during the course of the year. In this sample, flourishing rates were about the same, but significantly more students were languishing than during first-year orientation (10.8 percent entering sophomore year versus 1.9 percent at orientation). Again, a proportion of students were flourishing despite having symptoms of depression (8.6 percent). Students who were flourishing at this assessment tended to have contributed more hours to community-engaged work during the year. Once again, alcohol use was not correlated with measures of mental health in these students beginning their second year.

The sophomore year has long been seen as a challenging time for undergraduates, and these data suggest that about one in ten students in a sample of sophomores may be languishing. Civic and community engagement are associated with more flourishing, although these data represent only a sub-sample of students. It may be that community-based learning offers a particular kind of engagement in which students explore personal strengths and weaknesses, create meaningful experiences, and connect to others in the community. Based on Keyes’ model, these experiences are likely to contribute to flourishing. Alternatively, students who are flourishing may elect to do more community-engaged work. Information collected from narratives about engaged learning indicates that students experience engagement in a variety of settings, ranging from the classroom to the dormitory to the athletic field. Almost a third of students describe a community-based experience as their most engaging activity during the first year.

Finally, preliminary analyses indicate that specific groups of students may benefit from certain activities. For example, our data suggest that community and civic engagement may have a particularly strong association with positive outcomes in students of color during the first year. In addition, being a collegiate athlete appears to be associated with more flourishing. The impact of activities like community-based learning and athletics on true mental health warrants further research on more diverse samples across educational institutions.

Overall, students at Bates appear to be flourishing. A portion of them appear to be flourishing despite symptoms of depression, suggesting that periods of negative mood may not always interfere with success in college. Finally, engagement in civic and community-based activities appears to be associated with flourishing early in the college career. Future research should explore the types of experiences that might foster flourishing in undergraduates.
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BTtoP Campus Highlight

Dickinson College:
Four Years as a Demonstration Site

Jennifer O’Brien, Project Coordinator, BTtoP

In the August 2009 issue of the BTtoP Newsletter, Ashley Finley (BTtoP national evaluator and former project evaluator and assistant professor of sociology at Dickinson) provided the most compelling “nuggets” of best practice for institutional sustainability and support that were adopted as the result of the intensive four-year project Dickinson College undertook as a Demonstration Site in 2005. In this issue, we attempt to delve deeper into the outcomes in the executive summary of the Dickinson 2010 Final Report. In this report, Finley raises one of the most simple and important questions that guides (and vexes) this type of research: “How can student learning that begins in the first year be connected across the many engaging and meaningful experiences students will have throughout their time at [Dickinson]?”

On a conference call to plan the January 2010 Bringing Theory to Practice Project Faculty Conference, Shalom Staub, assistant provost of Dickinson College, could not mask his level of excitement about the data he and his colleagues had uncovered in their fourth year as a Demonstration Site with BTtoP. It was a remarkable “one-eighty” for both Staub and the BTtoP Project from two years ago, when he had commented at an annual national cross-site meeting that he felt it would be “irresponsible” to attempt to publish outcomes data, as they were not yet significant. Dickinson has now collected four years (2005-2009) of data, comparing cohorts of first-year, sophomore, junior, and senior students for multiple dimensions of student engaged learning, alcohol use, and civic engagement, based on the students’ first-year experiences (learning communities or stand-alone first-year seminars). As the result of meeting a number of challenges that all institutions face, the team found that strategic communication, innovation, and recruitment of leaders, or “change agents,” on campus are central to ensuring intensive transformation of learning and campus cultures.

After four years of creating and conducting surveys and focus groups, finding the best incentives to keep the sample size up, and trying to tease out analyses from data that is often most compelling on the qualitative side, the Dickinson campus team has now been able to report multiple significant quantitative findings, enriched by survey and focus group qualitative data.

The major findings and corresponding analyses or caveats are:

- Students in the first-year, sophomore, and junior samples who participated in learning communities (two first-year seminar courses linked by a common theme; e.g., risk-taking, social inequality, environmental sustainability) seem to be learning in different ways (more likely to reflect on their learning experiences individually and with peers and faculty; learning was also deepened by the integration of community-based interactions and...
experiences) and engaging at deeper levels than students who were in stand-alone seminars ('engaging’ refers to engagement in their learning—academic material and the context of cocurricular experiences—at more transformative and proactive levels than students who did not participate in learning communities). Finley pointed out that the report did not imply that students who participated in learning communities learned at a deep level and students in stand-alone seminars learned at a superficial or even strategic level. Rather, these data should be used to suggest how student learning in general may be deepened at formative stages in the college career and what these habits might mean for later development.

- After participating in a learning community (versus a stand-alone first-year seminar), students showed higher rates of civic participation and more involvement in civically oriented activities. The robustness of this effect on civic behavior might be explained by the fact that learning communities overall tended to be linked by politically relevant, timely, and civically minded themes, such as social justice, social inequality, identity, sustainability, and the like. The nature of these ties may resonate with students in a way that more clearly connects them personally and emotionally to civic issues and provides opportunities for engagement.

- These levels of higher civic participation at the local community level and in civically oriented activities are sustained into the junior year for learning community students relative to students in stand-alone seminars.

- First-years, sophomores, and juniors are drinking alcohol less and less often than students who participated in stand-alone first-year seminars (not in learning communities). (See Table 2 for first-year student data.) Rather than the presumptuous suggestion that learning communities “dissuade” students from consuming alcohol or that learning communities somehow are an academic deterrent to drinking, this finding may be an artifact of the social climate created by learning communities, which may supply students with a critical source of social connections early in college that equip them to navigate drinking pressures later on or connect with a group of similar-minded peers. Finley and the BTtoP Project consistently refer to this effect as “acquiring social capital.”

While each of these findings is exciting, one piece that continues to puzzle Dickinson and other institutions in BTtoP is making sense of the mental health outcomes—one of the initial inquiry areas that led to the Project’s launch in 2002. Project participants examined various measures for stress, substance abuse, and depression since the beginning of Dickinson’s project. Findings across all variables (except alcohol, as shown above) were consistently inconclusive.

Across sites, starting in 2007, qualitative trends hinted at a different method by which mental health effects might be observed. The work of Emory University associate professor of sociology Corey Keyes on “flourishing” led the national project, including Dickinson, to begin measuring mental health not in terms of “a lack of func-

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Table 2. Differences on Alcohol Use Measures by All First-Year Cohorts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>#Drinks/Wk.</th>
<th>#Drinks/Mo.</th>
<th>Times Drink/Wk.</th>
<th>Times Drink/Mo.</th>
<th>#Drinks/Sitting</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Learning Comm. N=958</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>14.75</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>2.43</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.91)</td>
<td>(21.51)</td>
<td>(1.10)</td>
<td>(4.10)</td>
<td>(2.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand-Alone FY</td>
<td>5.68</td>
<td>21.14</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar N=1810</td>
<td>(7.18)</td>
<td>(26.24)</td>
<td>(1.22)</td>
<td>(4.82)</td>
<td>(2.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-Value</td>
<td>-5.61***</td>
<td>-5.81***</td>
<td>-5.85***</td>
<td>-5.85***</td>
<td>-4.56***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

◊ = p<.10, *=p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001, Standard deviations in parenthesis
Among the joys of working with committed and insightful colleagues and institutional leaders is the collective encouragement to look beyond the near term and its inescapable demand for attention and resolution, and to consider the more distant, as it may direct the path of the work and the character of future emphases.

A major objective for the entire BTtoP Project, and for the Leadership Coalition (begun in 2008), will be to bring together by early 2012 the theoretical and the practical strands of BTtoP’s work over the last decade (the last five years for the LC). That collection and integration will result in a unique definitive resource that will deepen the language and arguments that comprise the theoretical bases for transformative change; explore the exemplary work done by those institutions, researchers, and practitioners who are documenting the practices that succeed and that are sustainable changes; and will point to public policy and other zones of attention that will be affected where such changes, and the re-centering of liberal education, take hold.

Our plan will be to produce, by 2012, a substantial volume that pulls together multiple strands and implications of creating and sustaining a strengthened undergraduate campus culture for learning—in effect, an argument and a guide for what is likely to be transformative change at many institutions. The book will reflect what has been proposed, studied, and confirmed in both theory and practice by colleges and universities over the last few years, in particular the work of the Bringing Theory to Practice Project, the Leadership Coalition projects on college and university campuses, and selected examples from AAC&U’s LEAP project. There will also be descriptive discussions of related efforts, including those from Imagining America, the Pericles project, and the Bonner Foundation program in detailed appendices. While including a coherent and extensive discussion of theory and practice, the volume will contain multiple relevant and constructive contributions, providing dialogue and perspective from scholars, educational leaders, practitioners, and by both higher education’s champions and critics.

The project has funding support from the Christian A. Johnson Endeavour Foundation and the S. Engelhard Center. This support will allow the commissioning of invited chapters and help in the selection and composition of campus case studies. The volume will be both attentive to “theory” and to the consideration of case examples and of the “practices” that succeed.

Our intent is to pull together the work in which many of you have been engaged—reenvisioning and sustaining changes and practices that provide routes for achieving the full promise of liberal education. The nature and arguments for change, and the context and climate necessary for change, call for pervasive reconsideration of structures and actions. The book will examine the theoretical basis and the assessed effectiveness of those transformative changes to our campuses. Among the changes are greater and integrated use of pedagogies of engagement; the structural blending of the academic with student well-being and civic development as co-core purposes and outcomes of liberal education; the redefining of priorities by placing emphases on student learning and its assessment; working toward rewards that are aligned with those priorities (and others); and exploring the inhibitors to change—including institutional structures, socialization by professional associations, graduate training, etc.
The book subtitle (the full title is still in the works), “Theory That Compels and Practices That Succeed,” suggests what should occur—a woven argument with multiple implications that should hold together a range of perspectives regarding the need for and the consequences of transformative change throughout the academy, and by those publics and institutions that influence the academy.

We know that the dynamic of change may vary from the individual to the institutional level and then again at the broader national level and beyond. Is change necessary? Is there a compelling need for change? Is it small or big change that is needed? Is it gradual and additive or climactic? Do the dimensions or logic of transformative change alter the prevailing paradigm? Are we now at a moment of disequilibrium, or is there a “climate” sufficient to welcome such change? All of these and related considerations need airing and need to be woven throughout the book. For many in the audience of readers, the book will get the issues front and center and thereby become dominant parts of the academic conversation. And for other readers, the book will provide the practical models, insights, and implications of productive and sustainably successful change that can be adopted or adapted for use by individuals, institutions, and the broader academy.

So as we work together to achieve the gains of project grants, conferences, demonstration sites, campus-based research, and internal assessments, we have in mind a culminating effort regarding how those gains will be coalesced, integrated, and shared. ■

Dickinson College

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tioning,” but more through the lens of positive psychology, explaining whether these learning and civic experiences might provide “boosts” in functioning and mental health. Finley describes how the facilitation of peer networks among students in learning communities can exemplify “flourishing”: “Perhaps the strongest component of student flourishing exemplified through students’ learning community experiences was the positive development of social relationships. Students’ connections with peers and faculty were clearly a defining, satisfying, and meaningful element of this experience.” Finley’s report notes that the building of “social capital” among peers, combined with mentoring and meaningful interaction with faculty, were important aspects of “flourishing” among learning community students.

Finley also described students’ reflection on how “continuing conversations beyond the formalities of the classroom [into their learning community where they lived] and beyond the purview of the professor helped to facilitate learning and their own self-reflection.” In an era when students are much more apt to get on their iPods and cell phones after class, rather than gathering to talk in person and debrief, just how important is meaningful engagement both in and out of the classroom? And how can we best facilitate it on all of our campuses?

From the perspective of Dickinson College, “This project demonstrates that early learning experiences are powerful in their own right but need clear comple- ments that ensure a sophomore, junior and senior experience through which students can channel and be engaged beyond their first-year experience. Not every course can contain a service-learning component or even a living component. This work suggests that these aren’t necessary. The reflection students gain from interactions facilitated in learning communities and the meaningful connection to their lives that can become common currency across courses, majors, and the general education curriculum can sustain and maximize these experiences for students.”

Notes

1. Ashley Finley, “The First-Year Experience and Learning Communities at Dickinson: Findings from Four Years of Research” (working paper, December 2009). To request information about the report, please contact Ashley Finley (finley@aacu.org).


UPCOMING EVENT

The Project’s 4th National Student Conference will be held in Washington, DC, this fall 2010. Students will compose the main body of participants, while other campus constituents such as faculty, student affairs personnel, and others are invited and will be encouraged to attend. More information will soon be available on the “Current Meetings” page of the Project Web site.
Civic Engagement, Public Work, and Psychosocial Well-Being Symposium

The teams and representatives from more than forty colleges and universities attended the Civic Engagement, Public Work, and Psychosocial Well-Being Symposium, held in Washington, DC, on November 5-6, 2009, exploring the effects of civic engagement and public work on the psychosocial well-being of undergraduate students. College and university researchers, practitioners, educational leaders, and featured presenters exchanged their insights and diverse experiences with civic work and discussed how to strengthen it, and the well-being it may promote, on campus and as a field of study. A publication featuring many of the presentations and commissioned research papers from the symposium, along with others, will be forthcoming in 2010-11 under the direction of Barry Checkoway of the University of Michigan.

Leadership Coalition Follow-Up Conference

The Leadership Coalition Follow-Up Conference held in Washington, DC, on November 6-7, 2009, oriented the four-teen institutions that have most recently joined the Coalition. They join their thirty-nine institutional colleagues in receiving a planning grant from BTtoP, confirming their promise to adopt and support successful models of campus culture focused on actively engaging students in learning, evaluating their success in doing so, and addressing the full dimensions of the intellectual, emotional, and civic lives of students. Teams comprised of faculty and administration members discussed Coalition priorities and the implementation of related projects on their own campuses. Conference members recognized the continuing achievements of their fellow educators while lending insight into the ongoing challenges associated with affecting meaningful and sustainable change in higher education.

Leadership Coalition Faculty Survey

A good deal of research suggests that attention to engaging pedagogies and civic development will be vital components of the future of higher education and of the transformation of institutions within it. Yet, a familiar campus dilemma is how to increase the breadth and depth of these practices on campus amidst faculty resistance on the grounds that these pedagogies take additional (already scarce) time, are either not valued or not valued enough for tenure and promotion, and do little to advance scholarship requirements? The BTtoP Leadership Coalition Faculty Study was developed to better understand the realities of both faculty practice and thought with regard to these issues. The study gathers data from faculty of various ranks across approximately twenty BTtoP Leadership Coalition campuses about their behaviors, views, and attitudes regarding pedagogical innovation, the culture of teaching and learning at both their institution and with their discipline, and the intersection of pedagogical engagement and innovation with promotion and tenure processes. This study also addresses dimensions of faculty job satisfaction, commitment levels, and mental well-being with regard to these issues. BTtoP National Evaluator Ashley Finley will make her final report on survey results available in August 2010.

Leadership Coalition Faculty Conference

The Leadership Coalition Faculty Conference, held January 20, 2010, in Washington, DC, marked the inaugural convergence “in the same room” of first and second round Leadership Coalition institutional teams. Presenters, moderators, and the campus teams, comprised mainly of faculty, identified shared concerns and proposed solutions such as innovative reward structures and strategies to generate administrative support for institutional transformation. Those in attendance also recognized the Project’s research and the Leadership Coalition network of educators to be real and potentially culture-shifting resources to agents of change on individual campuses.

BTtoP Advisory Board Member Jonathan Metzl’s The Protest Psychosis reviewed by Chronicle of Higher Education

The Chronicle of Higher Education reviewed BTtoP Advisory Board member and director of the Program in Culture, Health, and Medicine at the University of Michigan Jonathan Metzl’s The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease. Using the medical records from the notorious Ionia asylum, Metzl explores the diagnosis and severe treatment of politically dissident African American men during the civil rights movement as a response to increasing alleged “delusional anti-whiteness.” The Chronicle highlights Metzl’s further assertion that the disproportionately frequent incarceration of African American males functionally mimics these previous efforts of containment.
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.