Campus Highlight

St. Lawrence University: Links Between Faculty Goals and Pedagogy and First-Year Student Engagement and Well-Being

By Cathy Crosby-Currie, Associate Professor of Psychology, St. Lawrence University; Christine Zimmerman, Director of Institutional Research, St. Lawrence University

Faculty and administrators spend much energy evaluating the effectiveness of teaching. However, these evaluations usually focus on students’ classroom learning and academic skill development. Less often do we attempt to explore how our learning goals and classroom pedagogy relate to other aspects of our students’ lives—their academic engagement, their civic development, and their psychosocial well-being. Bringing Theory to Practice provided us the opportunity to engage in that exploration with first-year students at St. Lawrence University.

Our BTtoP project concentrated on faculty development for those teaching within our required first-year course sequence—a fall living-learning course (FYP) taught by an interdisciplinary faculty team followed by a spring research seminar (FYS). One focus of our research was the link between the goals and activities faculty implemented in their FYP and FYS courses and the engagement, civic development, and well-being of two cohorts of students at the end of their first year.

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FYP and FYS faculty completed an inventory of their learning goals and course activities at the end of each semester from fall 2008 to spring 2010; all faculty completed the inventory in the fall and about 75 percent in the spring. First-year students completed our in-house College Success Questionnaire (CSQ), administered in all FYS courses in the late spring; approximately 85 percent participated each year for a total sample of 1,022 students from the classes of 2012 and 2013. The CSQ measured a variety of constructs including civic development, flourishing, and substance use, as well as academic engagement. Principal components analysis, a data reduction technique, revealed some reliable patterns in responding, and we were able to summarize the faculty learning goals and the academic engagement scale within a set of themes.

Our regression analyses revealed that the faculty’s learning goals were connected to students’ engagement and civic development. Specifically, we found that a greater emphasis by FYP and FYS faculty on an appreciation of positionality or understanding different ways of knowing related to students’ social justice attitudes at the end of their first year. Similarly, more emphasis on developing civic awareness was significantly related to students’ greater political awareness, and more emphasis on the application of subject matter knowledge was significantly related to students’ engaging in more integration and application of their coursework.

Faculty goals in turn were related to the specific pedagogy they employed in their FYP and FYS courses. Students were more likely to find themselves engaging in advocacy and activism projects if their faculty emphasized civic identity development, positionality appreciation, knowledge application, and development of goals and plans for their education. Students were also more likely to find themselves engaging in community-based learning if their faculty emphasized the goals of developing a civic identity, understanding ways of knowing, and appreciating different learning contexts, and if their faculty deemphasized the goal of gaining subject matter knowledge. In contrast, emphasis on gaining subject-matter knowledge was positively related to the use of more didactic pedagogy, such as lecturing.

Classroom pedagogies were then related to students’ engagement, civic development, and well-being at the end of the first year. Students who experienced more small-group work reported higher levels of flourishing and found their coursework overall more worthwhile. In addition, students who were asked to connect their learning to current events were more likely to integrate and apply their learning as well as invest more effort in their courses. Community-based learning was not significantly related to student outcomes, but we did find that non-course-related volunteering was strongly related to students’ civic development at the end of the first year, suggesting that engagement with the community, even outside the context of classes, can be a positive experience for first-year students.

One consistent finding regarding pedagogy and student outcomes was in a negative direction. Students who experienced more didactic pedagogy in the FYP and FYS were less likely to report integrating and applying learning across courses and talking with peers about coursework outside class. They were also less likely to report that they planned to engage in civic action in the future.

We know that multiple aspects of the college experience affect our students’ engagement and well-being, and some of these, such as a culture of high-risk alcohol use, can do so negatively. Our data revealed that students who reported consuming greater amounts of alcohol over the week were less invested in their coursework. They also reported greater negative academic consequences as a result of their drinking, suggesting that their reduced academic engagement was connected to their drinking. On the other
hand, marijuana use, while related to more drinking and negative consequences from that drinking, was not itself negatively related to engagement or well-being and was even positively related to social justice and diversity attitudes as well as grades.

Although we found only one specific pedagogy (small group work) directly related to flourishing, we did find that greater academic engagement—specifically, more investment in coursework, more active participation in classes, and a civic identity more influenced by classroom experiences—was significantly related to higher levels of flourishing. Combined with the findings above, these results suggest that faculty’s goals and their chosen pedagogies, even in just one-quarter of a student’s semester course load, have the potential to promote and sustain student engagement and that engagement might then help them to flourish through the first year.

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One important dimension of the ongoing work of BTtoP is that of learning in what ways the many liberal education initiatives taking place in areas of the world beyond the US and Canada reflect shared objectives, values, and practices with those exhibited by colleges and universities here.

Over the last decade, in particular, initiatives in the Netherlands, China, Germany, France, Russia, Slovakia, and Poland have provided insights regarding liberal education which we in the US could “import,” refraining from the judgment that what is occurring elsewhere is but a reflection of what has occurred here (i.e., that liberal education elsewhere must be parasitic on our histories and institutional trajectories).

This lesson was clearly brought home to me this spring as I spent three weeks with the newly formed College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLASs) at the University of Warsaw in Poland. Founded by the revered scholar Jerzy Axer and influenced by a cohort of dedicated faculty and students (all of them new to liberal education), CLASs is the culmination of over fifteen years of progressive planning and practices of liberal education. The program will receive official status in September 2012, when liberal education (which was unknown to Warsaw throughout its history as one of the most prestigious universities in Poland) will be recognized as a fully incorporated “faculty” of liberal education, offering BA, MA, and PhD degrees and supported financially as one of the major units of the university.

In Poland my duties included teaching a seminar on civic values and liberal education—attended by a mix of BA and MA students. For the seminar, students developed their own brief “provocations”—reflections and analyses emerging from their discussions and readings. The resulting papers were remarkably insightful, especially so remembering that in addition to finding liberal education novel, the students crafted their provocations in English—a second (and for some a third or fourth) language. High expectations and full student involvement were the norm—unique dimensions of the standard university experience and, for most of the students involved, why they thought liberal education was special!

Mikolaj Skowronek completed the first year of her two year MA program in liberal education (she is simultaneously completing her law degree, which in Poland is an undergraduate program). While her passion has been the art and music of Afro-Brazilian culture, her provocation argues for radical change to traditional higher education in Poland—her thesis being that current university and BA structures must change to be more inclusive of liberal education if the university is to have any influence on students becoming more civically responsible and autonomous individuals.

Pawel Siechowicz completes his BA in liberal education this year (in much of Europe, the BA is a three-year degree) with a concentration in economics. His provocation unpacks what it means for higher education in Poland to be respon-
sible for preparing the country’s “elites.” The mission statement of the University of Warsaw indicates that “the university’s civic mission is to develop such elites for Poland as will employ in their activity the force of argument and not the argument of force.” But the meaning of “elite” has shifted, he argues. During Poland’s suffering under and emergence from Soviet domination, it was the intellectual elites who covertly led the people through their writing and braving the risk of speaking. Now being an elite connotes “being wealthy and having an absence of civic interest.” How could, or must, that be changed (influenced) by liberal education?

Katarzyna Kowalska is completing her MA in liberal education with an appreciation of how she can use the critiques of product marketing to promote contemporary art as a significant contribution to Polish values and culture. She writes of liberal education as a “mode of being”—picking up on the work of Leo Strauss. She champions an expansion of the academic and intellectual to be inclusive of the affective and the development of character. Her argument resonates with the objective of liberal education to nurture a community attentive to all dimensions of being human.

Joanna Mazur (a second year BA student) submitted what might be considered a very short story. Her theme, developed in an extraordinarily artful piece, suggests that “the purpose of liberal education is in the travel—and not in the destination.” About to make a decision whether to achieve the BA credential with a final requirement or to skip it, she considers and then makes her decision, explaining why she does so to university friends calling her on her cell phone.

What I learned from these students, and what I believe we all learn from liberal education initiatives “from away,” is both timely and significant. We ask ourselves now, and once again, “Is liberal education for everyone, or for an elite—regardless of how defined? Is the credential the objective? Can major, complex institutions change? Why do so many students perceive their educational experience to be empty? Why is engaged involvement with liberal education and its high expectations such a positive, in fact dramatic, experience for those who participate?”

These could be questions not from Warsaw, but from Washington—not from men and women who are the first generation beyond Soviet control, but from men and women diminished by the claim that higher education, even liberal education, at its high cost, must be all about job preparation.

These four student provocations are available on our website at http://www.aacu.org/bringing_theory/UWarsawProv.cfm. Please consider their views and let us know whether you share similar or contrary perspectives.
Our BTtoP demonstration site project aims to examine the relationship among civic participation, civic attitudes, and psychosocial well-being throughout college, and up to one year after graduation. We utilized an accelerated, multi-cohort longitudinal design, where recruitment efforts were geared towards all undergraduate students. We have administered a survey four times (fall 2010, spring 2011, fall 2011, and spring 2012), concluding our active data collection period. Of the 744 participants initially surveyed, we retained 347 participants over time, including 71 alumni.

Based on data from the first two survey administrations, disengaged students generally showed low levels of engagement in all forms that we measured, although they still held strong civic values overall. Politically engaged students’ activities were primarily related to politics and information seeking, such as getting out the vote, seeking news information, and discussing news with peers. Curriculum-based engagement was characterized by enrollment in at least one curriculum-based civic activity and generally taking a leadership role in those activities. Students involved in social change/extracurricular engagement perceived their activities as aimed at social change and almost exclusively engaged outside of formal curricular activities. Current engagement in one or more domains was related to higher flourishing scores (Keyes, 2002), but no particular type of engagement was associated with a higher score than the others.

Additional findings from the first year suggest that students who recently engaged in civic activities, most notably activities perceived to be focused on social change, had significantly better scores on indicators of psychosocial well-being (e.g., connection with others, intrinsic motivation toward learning, strategies for managing stress). Furthermore, students who were engaged only for the first semester did not show a lasting psychosocial benefit, and students who had lower socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to become highly engaged. Moreover, we found that the students who were civically engaged through courses did not necessarily experience better psychosocial outcomes unless they viewed the activities as aimed at social change.

This research is informing student programming and outreach strategies that acknowledge students’ diverse needs and interests. In the future, we would like to assess how changes in civic engagement over time relate to changes in psychosocial well-being. Specifically, we would like to further explore how stability and change in engagement typology and potential trajectories of engagement are associated with psychosocial well-being.

References:
**In Brief: BTtoP News and Notes**

**BTtoP Holds Psychosocial Well-Being Discussion in New York**
On May 11, 2012, scholars and practitioners from the fields of education, medicine, and psychology met to consider the state of undergraduate student psychosocial well-being and related practices and research. The gathering was a first step in a strategic direction to focus greater attention on the psychosocial well-being aspect of BTtoP’s work. BTtoP spent the last year deepening its understanding of, and engagement in, the complex world of defining, encouraging, and supporting the civic mission of higher education—and will continue to do so through publications and integration of the topic in conferences. Hopefully this meeting will set off a similar pattern of attention and interest throughout higher education in the area of student psychosocial well-being.

**Record Number of Grant Proposals Submitted for BTtoP’s First RFP Deadline**
BTtoP received a record 201 proposals at the June 15 deadline, the first in the 2012–2014 funding period. Institutions from across the nation submitted Category I: Seminar; Category II: Program Development; and Category III: Demonstration Site grant proposals addressing engaged learning, civic engagement and development, and the psychosocial well-being of college students.

Award announcements can be found on “Press Releases” page of the Project’s website (http://www.aacu.org/bringing_theory/press_releases.cfm); descriptions of funded projects are also available under the “Campus Grants” section of the website.

For information regarding applying for grants under upcoming quarterly deadlines, visit BTtoP’s “Funding Opportunities” page.

**Allegheny College’s Pathway to Civility Conference**
On May 15–16, 2012, Project Director Don Harward and Project Manager Jennifer O’Brien attended the Center for Political Participation at Allegheny College’s “Pathway to Civility” conference (http://sites.allegeny.edu/pathwaytocivility/conference-details/).

This conference was particularly a response to the recent decline of civility demonstrated in the civic life of the United States—an especially damaging trend given its contribution to the alienation of younger generations from civic processes with which they were only beginning to engage. The conference engaged students in activities “designed to enhance respectful political dialogue on college and university campuses, and to help student leaders understand the importance of civil political engagement.” Especially powerful were brief, facilitated roundtable discussions highlighting various current topics of civic interest.

**AAC&U Joins RISE to Recruit Campuses for Spring 2013 Administration of PSRI**
Following a successful Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI) pilot administration in 2012, AAC&U, BTtoP’s longstanding partner, is joining with the Research Institute for Studies in Education (RISE) at Iowa State University to recruit campuses for a spring 2013 administration of the inventory, (https://iastate.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_0PPHNovV5zCrCqo.)

The PSRI is a campus climate survey developed through AAC&U’s Core Commitments initiative to capture respondents’ impressions of the extent to which their campus is educating students around five key dimensions of personal and social responsibility: striving for excellence, cultivating academic integrity, contributing to a larger community, taking seriously the perspectives of others, and developing competence in ethical and moral reasoning and action. For more information please visit the website or e-mail psri@iastate.edu.
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.