The Evidence to Date: Highlights from the BTtoP Retrieval Conference

By Ashley Finley, National Evaluator, Bringing Theory to Practice; Senior Director of Assessment and Research, AAC&U

This past June, fifty-five representatives from a wide range of BTtoP-funded campuses gathered in Washington, DC, to engage in discussions to literally “retrieve” what we know about the connections between engaged learning, civic engagement, and the psychosocial well-being of students, and what happens when institutions implement initiatives aimed at strengthening these relationships. The conference was developed to highlight both the breadth and depth of empirical evidence that has been gathered among BTtoP schools working across all levels of funding and at various points over the past seven years of BTtoP campus support. In advance of the conference, participants were asked to submit summaries of their knowledge to date, including empirical evidence based upon research and evaluation, lessons learned from implementation, and effective strategies for sustaining the work.

The conference was organized around a series of guiding questions to address the state of knowledge with regard to specific linkages among the BTtoP core dimensions of learning, civic development, and well-being. Invited panelists kicked off each session by presenting reflections on their own campus work, critical findings, and provocations for continued discussion in small groups led by facilitators to encourage participants to consider the evidence already gathered in particular areas. The conference concluded with a large group discussion focused on strategies for continuing campus work through sustainability efforts. Reviewed strategies involved making use of evidence, developing conversations on campus, and engaging multiple campus stakeholders in decision making and

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An important highlight of the Retrieval Conference was the keynote presentation, titled “Creating Flourishing Lives,” delivered by Corey Keyes, associate professor of sociology at Emory University. Over the last several years, Dr. Keyes’ research has been adopted by many BTtoP-funded campuses and as part of BTtoP’s national work through the use of the Keyes “flourishing scale.” The conference provided participants an opportunity to hear directly from Dr. Keyes about his national (and international) research on flourishing. In short, flourishing is a state of positive emotion in one’s life, positive daily functioning, and positive social relationships. The flourishing concept and its associated standardized scale provide a more complex and robust descriptor for what happens to students when they participate in not only engaged learning experiences but also experiences in which they can apply learning experiences with civic issues, contexts, and community members. Keyes’ presentation walked participants from the origins of the flourishing construct, rooted in the Aristotelian concept of eudemonia or “wellness,” to the application of this work to better understand contemporary constructions of mental “health.” Because mental health today is primarily defined in terms of mental illness, we lack sufficient indicators to fully capture more nuanced states of mental wellness in American society, and particularly on college campuses. Keyes’ presentation provided a foundation from which participants could better understand how flourishing helps define the psychosocial well-being of students and the connection of this concept to students’ learning and civic experiences.

As with all BTtoP gatherings, the greatest highlight was the convening of many passionate people in one space over a couple of days to share their wisdom and energy for improving student learning, deepening students’ civic engagement, and supporting students’ psychosocial well-being. The Retrieval Conference employed that collective knowledge and goodwill to understand that we are learning a good deal on our campuses from BTtoP-funded initiatives but that there remain many rich opportunities for learning more. Campus evidence summaries submitted by conference participants can be found on the Bringing Theory to Practice website (http://www.aacu.org/bringing_theory/index.cfm). The generative spirit of the Retrieval Conference has also encouraged the development of the “Assessment Spotlight” as an ongoing part of the BTtoP newsletter. We encourage campuses to submit what they are learning from campus assessments so that we can continue to deepen the knowledge of our national learning community.
Heritage University (HU) is a nonprofit, independent, non-denominational accredited institution of higher education offering undergraduate and graduate education that serves anyone with the talent and drive to pursue a degree, regardless of economics, culture, or geographic location. Our motto is “Knowledge Brings Us Together,” and our mission is to provide quality, accessible higher education to multicultural populations that have been educationally isolated.

In taking on the task of Bringing Theory to Practice, we focused on the transformation learning outcomes identified as PIER (Perspective-Taking; Identity; Emotional Competence; and Resilience) by the College Outcomes Project to frame our initial inquiry to see how students saw their experience at HU. Our BTtoP Committee, made up of faculty, administrators, and student service staff members, developed basic definitions for the PIER items to aid students. We had a prompt with a likert (1-4) scale for response and an additional writing prompt related to each element of PIER. Several faculty used classroom opportunities to conduct the survey, allowing students to write and reflect as individuals and then as a group. The themes and the quotes that evolved from the systematic research method of Grounded Theory provided ways of connecting with and influencing the revision of the overall Heritage University Goals. The next step would be to develop a process to further assist faculty in assessing the university goals in terms of bringing theory to practice and to make student voices a strong component of this process.

Student stories revealed multiple needs but also strengths and effective strategies being used by individual students and the institution. Faculty reading these reflections immediately expressed an even stronger appreciation for the need to keep student voices in the forefront of our decision making and daily practice. Some of the themes that emerged from the student stories focused on the way that the university works to understand the students’ perspectives and to develop a strong community of diverse learners. Coping strategies and personal connections, with a real person (whether faculty or staff), were key to the students feeling supported throughout their educational program. Here is a sampling of some of the student comments lifted from the survey:

“I have support of peers.”
“I feel validated as a student and a human being.”
“I survived; therefore, I can now help others do the same.”
“Before coming to Heritage, I always kept my emotions inside, not letting any-
Heritage University

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body know how I was feeling, especially my significant other. I could never show her how I felt and never showed a tear. Now that I have been coming here, it has let me be comfortable with myself. I know we are not robots, and it is okay to show we have problems.”

We soon came to realize the essential relationship between the university’s goals, our insights into assessment, and the faculty/student services connection. Our recommendation for future work would be to develop an assessment system to ensure that our university goals reach their full potential. We also must ensure that student voices are an integral part of those assessments. We created a closer working relationship between faculty and student services, along with the inclusion of student voices, in developing advocacy processes. Our new dean of students was recently hired because of her strong background in counseling—a consideration that arose in part from our committee efforts. This year Heritage embarked on a campus-wide training through The Pacific Institute (TPI) that helps University faculty and staff develop a more constructive work climate. This training will be extended to students beginning fall 2012. It is the BTtoP committee’s hope that the Heritage University Teaching and Learning Center will be able to pick up the task of capturing student stories and voices to ensure they are continually infused in the HU decision-making process. Among the strategies the Center for Intercultural Learning and Teaching (CILT) recommends to faculty in order to encourage the building of rapport, opportunities for intercultural communication, and opportunities for students to personally connect with key concepts in the curriculum is the sharing of students’ stories. The collection of student stories through periodic focus groups regarding students’ experiences and motivations as they work for success at Heritage could serve the same three purposes at an institutional level. These stories could become an integral part of faculty development work and the team planning efforts being undertaken by faculty working with student services staff.

Assessment Highlight
SUNY Cortland

By Amy Shellman, PhD, Assistant Professor, Recreation, Parks and Leisure Studies Department

As a recipient of a Bringing Theory to Practice demonstration site award, SUNY Cortland’s primary objectives have been to assess the effect of high-impact learning practices, such as civic engagement and service learning, on the psychosocial well-being of students.

Using a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design, the Transformational Learning Assessment was administered during the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 academic years. Specific outcomes assessed included perspective-taking, identity, emotional competence, resilience, and flourishing. Data collection began in fall 2010 and will continue through spring 2012 and beyond. Courses were targeted based on specific attributes, (e.g., designated as service-learning, learning communities for first-year students, etc.) and students were invited to complete the survey at the beginning and end of their course.

Comparable courses that were similar in content but which did not require service or were not part of a specific learning community were used for comparison purposes. Preliminary results from the 2010-2011 academic year indicated that the students surveyed at SUNY Cortland have a relatively high level of psychosocial well-being on the dimensions specified previously. Focus group interviews conducted on courses utilizing high-impact learning practices supported the role of such practices in helping students develop their perspective of others and themselves, and helped students identify personal strengths.
We live in challenging times. In a country composed of those who define ourselves by our work, our money and status, and our autonomy, we continue to face record levels of unemployment and underemployment, widening economic and social inequity, and a governing structure that many feel neither effectively responds to the needs of those it governs nor allows for an environment in which those governed can effectively fulfill their own needs. But our challenge is to help define our circumstances rather than be defined by them. What we do now determines not only who we will become as individuals, but what we will become as a society.

So your intrepid recent college graduate would like to make the argument that, as I stared grimly into the darkening abyss that was the 2009 US job market and considered my employment options and the merits of subterranean hometown dwellings, solely such a conviction was present in my mind. And even if I cannot deem myself so unerringly principled, I will at least flatter myself in saying that I try to be an interesting person, and as such I insist on engaging with those persons and pursuits that I find interesting in the sense of being challenging or unique—which is really why I have been with BTtoP (handling grants, conferences, technological initiatives, our just-published book, all manners of correspondence, copying, collating, box-moving, etc.) for over two years. Interesting times produce and require interesting people. Since it seems we are doomed to live in interesting times, we find ourselves well-positioned here.

If you follow the news, you’ll probably agree that we as a society face significant, nearly existential, challenges, and since you’re reading our newsletter, you’ll likely allow that education is an integral part of a functioning democratic society. Like Churchill, I believe that democracy, however flawed, is still the best system of governance we have and it cannot function without citizens who are educated to make reasonable, strategic, and empathetic judgments. I judge the failure of the US to communicate with itself and to maximize the public good to be, on some level, a failure of education.

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what is truly valuable within and to them. In this way, for so many, formal education has become an obligation instead of an opportunity.

As I survey the enormity of the problems within higher education and society and suspect that my mind and experience have revealed relatively little to me, I am honored to work with those who can see further. Those who compose and contribute to the Project have dedicated years of their lives, and in some cases the majority of their careers, to the idea that the student should be treated as a whole person; a person with varied and complex needs; a person who can be a contributing member of a whole democratic society. So it is obvious that the Bringing Theory to Practice Project promotes far more than good education (which is worthy by itself). By educating whole people, the Project promotes a Good Society.

Beyond the merit of our mission, I am perhaps most grateful that Project has put me around Good People (playfully referred to as “the Family”). One cannot seek anything so ideal directly; such a good must be approached gradually with humbler ends in mind. So I’ve also found that one does not find individuals and groups whom one enjoys, respects, and can learn from by seeking them out, but one does tend to discover them by engaging in worthwhile pursuits. As we run toward some light on the horizon, we inadvertently but inevitably intersect with those who are travelling roughly parallel. When we do, we must have the sense to realize the shared trajectory, to introduce ourselves and run together a while, for company and speed as we span the distance.

At the January 25, 2012, Annual Meeting of AAC&U, A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future will be presented and promulgated. It is the product of a year-long study and collaborative effort by AAC&U, the Department of Education, and the Global Perspective Institute, as well as many educational associations and sponsors of civic engagement. The primary authorship of the report has been achieved by Caryn McTighe Musil and Larry A. Braskamp.

Bringing Theory to Practice has been represented, among many others, in the creation of the report by its director, Don Harward; by BTtoP Board members David Scobey, Carol Geary Schneider, Ashley Finley, and Caryn McTighe Musil; by BTtoP Leadership Coalition presidents Richard Guarasci, Theodore Long, and Kenneth Ruscio; and by BTtoP Civic Seminar participants Richard Battistoni, Robert Bringle, Ira Harkavy, Peter Levine, John Saltmarsh, and Brian Murphy.

The Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, on which both I and AAC&U President Carol Geary Schneider served, consulted with many educational leaders and practitioners and staff members from the Department of Education for more than a full year prior to the release of A Crucible Moment. Those meetings resulted in the report’s recommendations, which are designed to re-center civic learning within higher education’s overall mission and catalyze strategic actions to make civic learning a key part of every college student’s educational experience.

The production and dissemination of the report and its strategic recommendations for actions in 2012 are being made possible by a grant from the BTtoP Project to AAC&U under the Project’s support for civic learning initiatives. This support is part of multiple steps of action and support that will be developed by BTtoP in collaboration with the national civic seminar participating institutions and associations during the period of 2012-2014. These initiatives are occurring as a result of generous grants from the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation and the S. Engelhard Center.

The first of these initiatives will be
the publication of a monograph this spring consisting of twelve “provocations” regarding the civic and civic learning. The brief provocations, written by leading scholars and civic educators who attended the BTtoP national Civic Seminar, November 3-5, 2011, stimulate deeper consideration of multiple aspects of the complexities surrounding civic engagement, and the

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civic mission of higher education in an open and democratic society. Brief summaries (and the framing questions they used to structure the seminars) from the nineteen civic seminars that occurred on campuses in the United States and Europe during 2011 are also included. Together, the provocations and summaries serve as effective companions to the conversations and dialogues which will be generated on numerous campuses by the *Crucible* report—and they will point to directions for the positive consequences the report may have.

The provocations composing the monograph were originally presented to stimulate discussion and deeper analysis of the civic during the national Civic Seminar held at the Aspen Wye River Conference, November 3-5, 2011.

• “Why Now (Consider) the Civic? Because This Is a ‘Copernican’ Moment”—David Scobey, The New School
• “Why Now (Consider) the Civic? Because of the Relevant Evidence and What Follows if We Fail to Act Now”—Carol G. Schneider, AAC&U
• “Why Now (Consider) the Civic? Because the Civic Is at the Core of the Very Meaning of Learning”—D.W. Harward, BTtoP
• “Civic Learning”—Barry Checkoway, University of Michigan
• “Civic Research”—Michelle Fine, City University of New York, Graduate Center
• “Civic Studies as an Academic Discipline”—Peter Levine, CIRCLE at Tufts University
• “Creating the Democratically Engaged University”—Matthew Hartley, University of Pennsylvania
• “Civility and Discourse”—Daniel Shea, Allegheny College
• “Is the Civic a Culturally Dependent Concept? Are Democratic Practices?”—Richard Detweiler, the Great Lakes Colleges Association
• “A Report to the Nation: A Crucible Moment—The Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement National Task Force Report”—Caryn McTighe Musil, AAC&U

• “Diversity and Demographic Engagement”—Matthew Countryman, University of Michigan
• “What of the Civic Should Be Exported? What Should Be Imported?”—Samuel Abraham, Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts, Slovakia
• “The Eudaemonic and the Civic”—Corey Keyes, Emory University

The provocations are brief, accessible, and stimulate discussion and consideration of the current attention to civic learning, the encouragement of diverse forms of civic engagement, and the greater realization of the civic mission of our individual institutions and of higher education more broadly understood.

“Provocations in Support of Civic Learning and the Civic Mission of Higher Education: A Monograph,” is to be published Spring 2012 by the Bringing Theory to Practice Project.
In Brief:
BTtoP News and Notes

Look for BTtoP's Fourth Round of Funding for 2012-2014

We are pleased to announce our fourth round of funding covering projects that will begin in 2012-2014. The request for proposals (RFP) outlining submission standards will be available March 15, 2012, for projects that will be first funded by July 1, 2012. Submission deadlines will be specified in the RFP.

September 23-24 Dinner and Strategic Meeting and BTtoP Decennial Report

BTtoP celebrated a decade of support and accomplishments with a dinner and strategic meeting on September 23-24, 2011. The Friday evening gathering provided an opportunity to thank friends and colleagues for their support, involvement, and encouragement over the past decade of BTtoP work.

The Saturday strategic meeting was an opportunity to look ahead—to gain from the contributions and perspectives of the scholars, practitioners, administrators, and students gathered to not only reflect on what has been achieved as a Project, but also to determine what were seen as current and relevant realities facing the Project’s continued growth and scope of work in encouraging and sustaining transformational changes—changes that have confirmable positive implications for the learning, psychosocial development, and civic engagement of students.

A “decennial report” created for the meeting highlights the history and achievements of the national Project over the past decade and is available for viewing online and a transcript/summary of the meeting will soon be available.

Bringing Theory to Practice Publishes New Book on Transforming Undergraduate Education

Drawing on ten years of Project publications, conferences, and other scholarship, Transforming Undergraduate Education: Theory that Compels and Practices that Succeed (edited by Director Don Harward; case studies edited by National Evaluator Ashley Finley) was released by Rowman & Littlefield publishers in November 2011. Copies are now available for purchase. Twenty-four authors and coauthors of chapters and ten case studies document the need for, the nature of, and the practices that result in transformative change.

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.