Campus Highlight

Ripples in Campus Culture: State University of New York College at Cortland

J. Richard Kendrick, Jr., director, Institute for Civic Engagement

The State University of New York (SUNY) College at Cortland, a medium-sized four-year residential college in central New York, has been fortunate to participate in the BTtoP project for five years. We received a Leadership Coalition grant in 2009 and a Demonstration Site grant for 2010–2012. We have long been committed to transformational learning, and participation in BTtoP is helping us to institutionalize that commitment in a new strategic plan.

Setting the stage for our campus’s commitment to engaged learning, our new strategic plan emphasizes transformative learning experiences and student well-being. At the same time that the plan was being developed, the President’s Leadership Coalition for Student Engagement was formed, which influenced the SUNY Cortland Faculty Senate to strengthen connections between that strategic plan and our faculty handbook’s reappointment, continuing appointment, and promotions policies. The SUNY Cortland President’s Cabinet and the Faculty Senate also endorsed our President’s Recognition for Engaged Learning and Leadership designations for Service-Learning and Undergraduate Research, which will be noted on students’ transcripts. Other programs are developing similar recognitions to encourage student participation in transformative educational experiences.

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SUNY Cortland
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In this context, a new program was developed by one of our Demonstration Site grant team members, Amy Shellman (assistant professor, Parks, Recreation, and Leisure Studies), along with the director of the Center for Environmental and Outdoor Education, Rob Rubendall. The program is called Trail Blazers (a nod to the college’s red dragon mascot, Blaze). Incoming first-year students spent six days in August in a hands-on Adirondack wilderness experience at the college’s outdoor education facility in Raquette Lake, NY. Shellman is still engaged in evaluating the impact of this program, but one student has already alluded to enhanced well-being by commenting that, “This trip taught me how to persevere. I never would have thought I’d be able to climb two mountains, learn how to canoe, and do a high ropes course.”

Additionally, John Suarez (coordinator, Office of Service-Learning) is partnering with Dean of Education Andrea Lachance and Director of Field Experience and School Partnerships Doug Wieczorek to develop a service-learning program that will provide support for area schools. This program, “Explore,” places teacher education candidates in education-related service-learning experiences during their first and second semesters. To help support students, it incorporates professional development workshops that focus on developing dispositions of well-being.

Cortland’s work also has an international dimension. Last February, at a conference in Morocco for Moroccan higher education faculty, staff, and students who are advancing civic education and engagement, Richard Kendrick (BTtoP Demonstration Site team leader) led a two-day workshop with Syracuse University colleague Julia Ganson (Middle East and North Africa Program Manager, Maxwell School of Executive Education). This semester, Cortland hosted a Moroccan Fulbright scholar who is learning how SUNY Cortland implements its commitment to transformational education.

In August, 2012, President Erik Bitterbaum and SUNY Chancellor Nancy Zimpher promoted the college’s and the SUNY system’s dedication to transformational learning experiences. Richard Kendrick spoke on behalf of the Leadership Coalition to highlight involvement in the Bringing Theory to Practice project. But last year’s most gratifying moment occurred on April 18, 2012, when the Middle States Reaccreditation team read its report to the campus community, highlighting our participation in Bringing Theory to Practice as one indication of the campus’ commitment to transfor-
Many in higher education have a critical understanding of the forces rapidly changing our institutions. Yet critique does not often lead to productive action. We propose that a politics of public work can generate hope and build our capacity for making change in higher education and beyond.

Today, it is common for public and civic institutions—whether government, schools, colleges, or nonprofits—to conceive of citizens as customers pursuing their own narrow interests. In contrast, the concept of public work highlights what can be called “world building,” to borrow a term coined by the late political theorist Hannah Arendt. World building refers to the role of citizens as cocreators, rather than simply participants, of the world we share in common.

Public work can be defined as self-organized efforts by a mix of people who create goods, material or symbolic, whose civic value is determined through an ongoing process of deliberation. It has roots in communal labor practices around the world that create and sustain “the commons”—shared resources of all kinds, from fisheries to wells, schools to public arts. The public work framework also draws from social movements like the black freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Finally, public work highlights civic dimensions of many kinds of work, invisible in conventional approaches to civic engagement—citizen teacher, citizen businessperson, citizen health professional, as well as “civil servants” who see themselves as citizens.

Northern Arizona University

In the recent Civic Studies* monograph edited by Peter Levine (Tisch College
Civic Politics
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at Tufts University) and Karol Sołtan (University of Maryland), we present two case studies of public work, including one on the large scale curricular innovations at Northern Arizona University (NAU). Over the last several years, a group of organizers at NAU has sought to build democratic centers of power—enabling environments—by establishing new coalitions and alliances. Key to the work has been strategies to re-empower faculty through curricular change that develops the democratic agency of faculty and students alike. Two such efforts, the First Year Learning Initiative and the Action Research Teams, are described below.

In three years, the First Year Learning Initiative (FYLI) completed work on nearly sixty courses that enroll 96 percent of first-year students at NAU. These courses have a broad reach across all NAU colleges and disciplines, from the biological sciences to business. Course completion rates of students enrolled in FYLI courses were significantly increased as a result of deep collaborative work with faculty and initiative organizers. Faculty are engaged in deeply dialogic one-on-one meetings to develop the course, and course coordinators in turn collaborate with colleagues to uncover and expand the use of effective pedagogies and practices. (See www.nau.edu/fyli for more information and assessment results.)

ARTs (Action Research Teams) is one of the largest programs of action research, civic agency, and public work in the country. The teams are grounded in collaborative work among leaders in the Community, Culture, and Environment Program; the First Year Seminar Program, where it connects with FYLI; and the Masters of Arts in Sustainable Communities Program. The program includes faculty from departments as diverse as education, biology, philosophy, and criminology. Each year, over 550 new first-year students join fellow students from previous years to conduct action research in conjunction with local community organizations doing the political work to create more democratic, just, and sustainable communities. They work on many issues, from youth empowerment and school reform to green economic development and immigration (see www.nau.edu/CRAFTS for more information and assessment results).

Through their civic agency and public work, the ARTs have been effective in increasing retention among key NAU student populations. For instance, the retention rate for minority students who complete First Year Seminars with ARTs (FYSeminar-ARTs) sections with a grade of C or better is 16 percent higher than the retention rate for non-FYSeminar-ARTs minority students.

Agents, not objects, of change
Higher education exercises invisible power in many ways: creating credentialized knowledge; diffusing conceptual frameworks that structure work practices; conveying meanings of citizenship. Indeed, colleges and universities can be seen as anchoring institutions of citizenship. In this time of dramatic change in the educational landscape, some colleges and universities will play key roles in creating a different approach to educational transformation. These will be the “democracy’s colleges” of the twenty-first century, to use a term from land-grant college history to suggest institutions with strong civic identities grounded in the life of places. They will show how educators can move from the defensive to become agents and architects, not objects, of change.

*To download the full Civic Studies monograph (January, 2014) for free, see http://www.aacu.org/bringing_theory/CivicSeries.cfm#CS. To purchase copies for $10 (bulk discounts available) see http://secure2.aacu.org/store/detail.aspx?id=BTPCIVIC3.
The October 7, 2013, issue of *Time* magazine featured a cover story on the crises in higher education—“higher education has never been more expensive—or seemingly less demanding.” The claim is strikingly similar to the nearly ubiquitous judgment that the costs are far too high and outstrip perceived value; institutions have failed in having students learn (generally and particularly items of historical or political fact); and higher education is failing in preparing sufficient numbers of future members of the twenty-first-century work force.

The prescribed recommendations usually include:

1. Significantly reduce costs—possibly through a three-year rather than a four-year Baccalaureate, and through the use of online courses;
2. Significantly strengthen the expectation that students gain more (e.g., higher scores on common examinations) from what is called “general education”—though what this means is not at all clear, and is likely incompatible with recommendation (1); and
3. Significantly increase completion rates and improve the training of graduates for jobs in a contemporary economy—also unclear if it confuses training with education, and is likely incompatible with recommendation (2).

These recommendations may be well-intended, but the analysis must go deeper. What the crises call for is significant transformative change—change that leads to the bold reassertion and realization of higher education’s unique, complex mission.

With the placement of additives to a body of water, a “tipping point” is reached and a transformative change occurs—for example, it goes from fresh to salt water. Its new form resembles in many ways the previous condition, but a change has occurred to its core chemistry. It is transformed.

**Change in higher education would be valued were it repeated, like ripples, throughout all of the institutional surfaces.**

The core chemistry of higher education is transformed if and when the academy and those beyond it understand how a campus’s culture for learning is inextricably linked to multiple and progressive opportunities for engaged learning; the expectation that such engagement should occur for every student; the connection and cultivation of those learning experiences to broad and deep civic understanding and action; and the recognition that those elements of the institution’s commitment to higher learning and to its civic expression are fully bound up in treating students as whole learners—persons whose well-being is an objective of the opportunities and encouragement we as educators provide.

This means a transformation in how faculty see and express their basic responsibilities as educators and how students welcome and adopt the expectation of challenging and demanding involvement in their education. It means replacing institutional structures that artificially segment and restrict parts of a whole with integration and common objectives, and altering financial priorities and reward structures so as to provide the conditions needed to reach a tipping point, to have change occur and persist.

**Metaphors of change in higher education**

Among the metaphors used to explain properties of transformative change are several that refer to hydrodynamic properties. Each expresses a kernel of importance in understanding change in higher education, but each by itself is inadequate in capturing the dynamic of change. Ripples of change spread from a point of energy—concentric circles of influence across a wide stretch. Change in higher education would be valued were it repeated, like ripples, throughout all of the institutional surfaces. But the image of ripples suggests evenness of influence and that is unlikely in an educational institution. Moreover, ripples of change (as opposed to a devastating tsunami of change) suggest eventual diminution—so the surface returns to being placid or in stasis. Ripples do, however, connote breadth of change and that change can be (continued on page 6)
carried by nudge-like undulations—or in waves. But it remains on the surface.

Gravitational forces generating tidal change do affect deeply—changes occur on multiple levels, vertical as well as horizontal. But the change doesn’t last; reversion to the original condition suggests little or no progress.

The water’s source determines the extent and quality of change. The metaphorical equivalents of springs (the water’s source) are the people and culture of the campus committed to change. They are resourceful—faculty, staff, and students—and it is by their efforts that change occurs. As Parker Palmer argues in Transformative Conversations (2013), “transformation in higher education must come from within—and coming from within will be the result only of a re-commitment to core values of purpose for education and why one is an educator.”

For nearly twelve years BTtoP has been championing transformative change. Each of these hydrodynamic metaphors suggest at least one dimension of such change—transformational change must be broad, affecting the width of the campus culture; it must be deep, affecting the layers of the culture; it must be progressive, altering positively the core chemistry of the campus; and it must spring from inside the institution, from the true resources of the campus—its mission, people, and culture.

We have established that engaged learning is the means by which the objectives of civic engagement and well-being can be greater realized. This essay is intentionally theoretical, but our interest in bringing theory to practice is a constant consideration, and we know it is for you too. If you haven’t had a chance, I would encourage a glimpse at Transforming Undergraduate Education, the major volume BTtoP published with chapters from twenty-four scholars, educational leaders, and practitioners as well as ten case studies of campuses that have been recipients of BTtoP support for examples of practical applications (https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442206748). All royalties are returned to BTtoP to help fund more campus grants.
In Brief: BTtoP News and Notes

News

Peter Levine’s We Are the Ones that We Have Been Waiting For

In We Are the Ones that We Have Been Waiting For (Oxford University Press), Civic Studies co-editor, longtime BTtoP grantee, and renowned civic scholar Peter Levine writes on emerging civic theory and practice. Levine presents vigorously argued and rigorously researched strategies for effective and pervasive civic engagement—a practical guide for civic renewal in the face of widespread civic alienation, persistent market and institutional failure, and intense social problems.

BTtoP Session and Reception at AAC&U’s Annual Meeting, January 23–24, 2014

BTtoP’s annual Thursday evening reception at the AAC&U Annual Meeting provided an opportunity to catch up with colleagues and friends of the Project. It was well attended and the energy invigorating—thank you to all that stopped by!

BTtoP and the S. Engelhard Center’s Friday morning session moderated by Project Director Don Harward featured a lively discussion among BTtoP colleagues Brandon Busteed (executive director, Gallup Education), Amanda Hyberger (QEP director and associate professor, Chattanooga State Community College), Nigel Boyle (associate dean for Global and Local Programs, Pitzer College), and Kimberly Ferguson (dean of students, Spelman College) and the audience regarding well-being and higher education. It was a pleasure to engage with all that sat in—old and new. The excitement about this work is truly inspiring—we hope you’ll stay connected as our well-being initiatives move forward.

2012-2014 Funded Projects and Opportunities

BTtoP has funded over 150 grants under the 2012–2014 RFP to date, and there is one more funding deadline remaining. We invite proposals for Seminar Grants (up to $1,000) to fund projects that will promote engaged learning, civic development and engagement, and psychosocial well-being of college and university students. Please submit proposals by Friday, March 14, 2014. Examples of funded projects and complete information about the 2012–2014 cycle of funding is available at BTtoP.org. For information regarding applying for grants under upcoming quarterly deadlines, visit BTtoP’s “Funding Opportunities” page.

Collaborations/Travels

BTtoP Director Don Harward Travels to the University of Warsaw as Visiting Scholar

BTtoP Director Don Harward traveled to the University of Warsaw in November 2013 in a returning appointment as a visiting scholar. Harward worked collaboratively within the Artes Liberales (the faculty of liberal education within the University of Warsaw), which is developing a multi-phased ten-year plan to incorporate liberal education as a core of Poland’s leading research university—in the BA, MA (already present), and PhD (a new addition). Aspects of the plan include program design (including participatory action research and a set of civic themes connected to interdisciplinary programs), leadership, financing, and strategies.

The Civic Series

Civic Studies, the third monograph in BTtoP’s Civic Series and edited by Peter Levine and Karol Sołtan, was released in January.

To download the full Civic Studies monograph (January, 2014) for free, see http://www.aacu.org/bringing_theory/CivicSeries.cfm#CS. To purchase copies for $10 (bulk discounts available) see http://secure2.aacu.org/store/detail.aspx?id=BTPCIVIC3.

For more information on The Civic Series, visit the Civic Series page at BTtoP.org.
Publications Available
By Bringing Theory to Practice

Civic Studies
Edited by Peter Levine and Karol Edward Sołtan

*Civic Studies*, the third monograph in *The Civic Series*, is composed of nine scholarly but accessible essays written by scholars from diverse disciplines and nationalities who address such questions as, “What should good citizens know and do? What scholarly knowledge is useful to citizens?”

Transforming Undergraduate Education

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

For more information: www.aacu.org/bringing_theory/publications.cfm