DONALD W. HARWARD

Engaged Learning and the
Bringing Theory to Practice

REGRETTABLY, most of us committed to liberal education agree that the outcomes of an undergraduate liberal education are not widely understood or valued by the general public. While the college degree is universally recognized as the key to economic and social mobility, what lies behind that credential—the educational experience, its full value and its purposes—is more or less ignored. In general, in the popular imagination, undergraduate education is a commodity: students and their families are customers, faculty are service providers, and institutions compete to provide accommodations. Specific attention to the full purposes of liberal education is even less focused; and in light of that, it is now rarely considered a necessary element of undergraduate education.
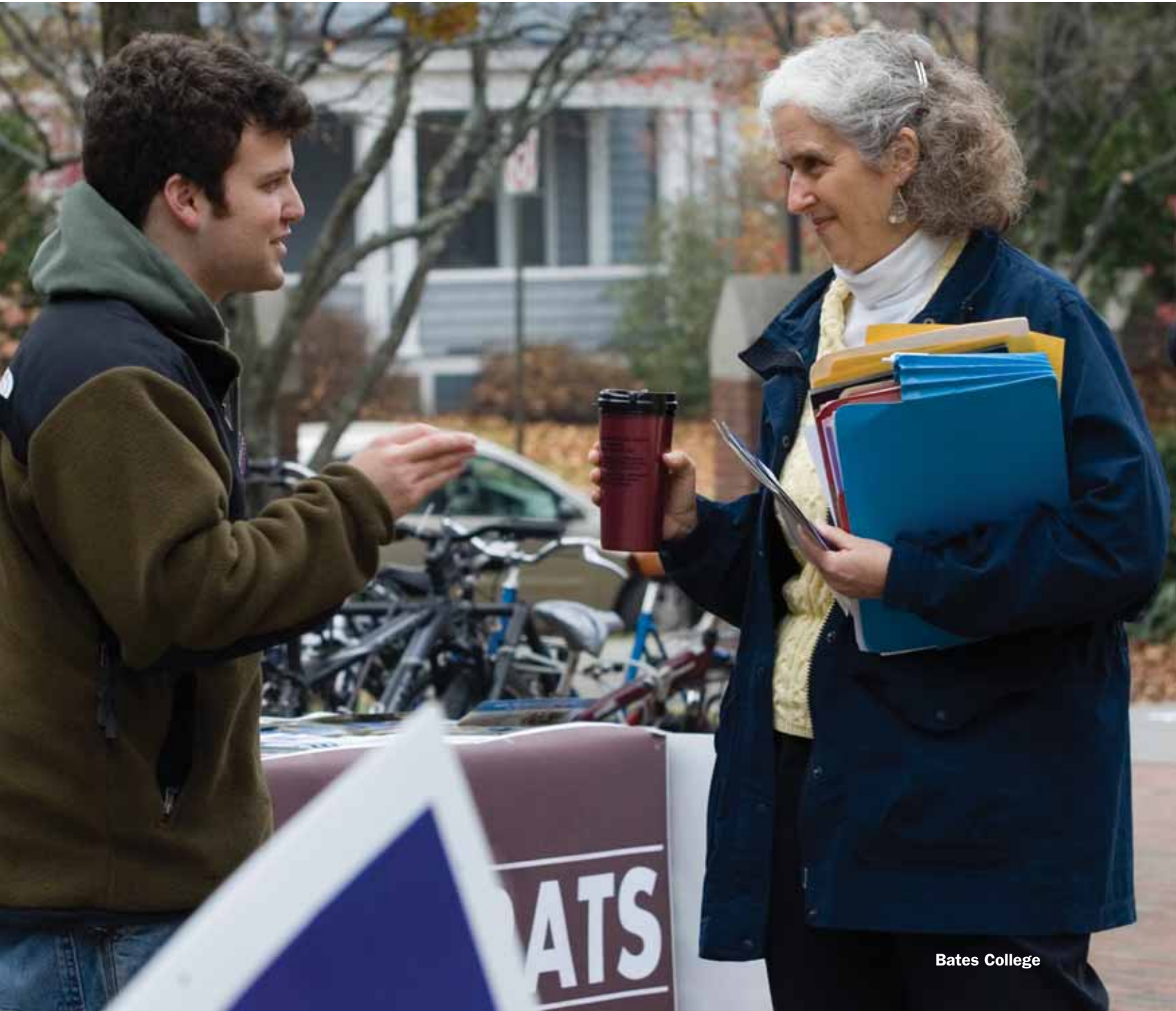
Because of its neglect of the core purposes of liberal education, the academy itself bears some responsibility for popular misperceptions—or, lamentably, ignorance of what liberal education promises.

There has been, and remains, a "triad" of interrelated core purposes for liberal education: the *epistemic* (coming to know, discovery, and the advancing of knowledge and understanding); the *eudemonic* (the fuller realization of the learner, the actualizing of the person's potential—classically to achieve individual well-being and happiness); and the *civic* (the understanding that learning puts the learner in relation to what is other, to community and its diversity in the broadest sense, as well as the responsibility that comes from sustaining

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DONALD W. HARWARD, *president emeritus of Bates College, is director of the Bringing Theory to Practice project.*

Core Purposes of Liberal Education

the community and the civic qualities that make both open inquiry and self-realization possible).

On one level, we have lost track of this complexity—focusing in the academy only on the epistemic. On another level, we have hardly attended to the issue of purpose at all. The gaining and transfer of knowledge and discovery, the "epistemic" purpose of liberal education, has been emphasized at the expense of the other core purposes—namely, fostering self-discovery and well-being, and establishing the relationship between knowledge and responsibility for what is beyond self, the "civic" purpose. While other institutions, such as church or the family, and other educational or training experiences certainly can separately contribute to a dimension of this triad of core purposes, liberal education is unique in that it contributes to achieving all three purposes and reveals their interdependency.

St. Lawrence University

These core purposes determined the original missions of the many colleges and universities that were founded to provide a liberal education. These institutions forged a de facto social contract. For its part, the college or university was expected to contribute to what is known, to teach and discover, to serve as a positive and reinforcing context for the emotional and moral development of young adults, and to encourage greater responsibility for the common good. In return, society supported both the institution and the conditions of liberty required to sustain open inquiry. Although some colleges and universities may no longer define their missions in terms of the three core purposes of liberal education, the great preponderance of institutions still do. It is not clear, however, that these institutions actually give priority to the practices that instantiate the core purposes. Nor is it clear they recognize that the intentional development of all three interrelated purposes results in confirmable outcomes affecting the full development of students.

In recent years, much excellent work has been devoted to the assessment of learning outcomes. This work helps to establish whether and how the epistemic purpose of liberal education is being achieved. However, the scope of assessment should not be restricted to a single aspect of liberal education. Attention to each of the core purposes—the epistemic, the eudemonic, and the civic—is necessary to achieve the full promise of liberal education. The Bringing Theory to Practice project is about demonstrating that, as they are actualized in particular educational practices, all three core purposes produce outcomes—effects and affects, including behavioral results or consequences as well as dispositional patterns, attitudes, and inclinations—that can be documented and studied.

Student disengagement

The Bringing Theory to Practice project was founded on the premise of a connection between the widespread misunderstanding, devaluation, and neglect of the core purposes of undergraduate liberal education, on the one hand, and certain patterns of disengagement exhibited by a significant and growing number of students, on the other.[1] Multiple-year national data show that, even excepting students who drop out of school, 40 to 60 percent of all

adolescents are "chronically disengaged" from their academic experiences (Blum and Libby 2004). This student disengagement is expressed in a variety of ways, from drug and alcohol abuse to cheating, from nonclinical forms of depression to suicide attempts.

More than 30 percent of students abuse alcohol, for example; nearly half of these are repeat abusers whose objective is to disengage completely by becoming "wasted" to the point of passing out. Indeed, over the past decade or so, campuses nationwide have reported dramatic increases in binge drinking. "Students [are] often stuporous in class, if they get there at all," explains Hara Estroff Marano, editor of *Psychology Today* and member of the Bringing Thoery to Practice advisory board. "The heaviest drinking occurs on weekends, beginning Thursday, but the effects increasingly hang over the whole week." After counseling many students, Paul Joffe, a psychologist at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, has concluded that "at bottom binge drinking is a quest for authenticity and intensity of experience. It gives young people something all their own to talk about, and sharing stories about the path to passing out is often a primary purpose. It's an inverted world in which drinking to oblivion (disengagement) is the way to feel connected and alive" (Marano 2004).

While it may be the most visible expression of student disengagement, alcohol abuse is among a host of behavioral and mental health issues affecting undergraduates. Somewhat less visible, for example, is the rising incidence of depression among college students. Studies generated by the University of Kansas Counseling Center suggest that, nationwide, over 40 percent of undergraduates report at least one incident of depression sufficient to interrupt their academic work. "Psychological distress is rampant on college campuses," says Marano. "It takes a variety of forms: anxiety and depression—which are increasingly regarded as two faces of the same coin—binge drinking and substance abuse, self-mutilation and other forms of self-disconnection." According to Steven Hyman, provost of Harvard University and former director of the National Institute of Mental Health, psychological

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distress is now so widespread among students that it is "interfering with the core mission of the university" (Marano 2004).

Overall, the response of colleges and universities to student disengagement has been partial, focused on enforcement or treatment; rarely have institutions seen the possibility of addressing these issues of disengagement through the outcomes of specific forms of undergraduate learning. Awareness of the problem has often led to institutional concern for liability and, in some cases, to the dismissal of students who acknowledge experiencing psychological distress. Only rarely does awareness lead to campus-wide consideration of the gaps between academic purposes, expectations, and practices—gaps that impede student learning, health, and civic engagement. At most institutions, where attention to students' mental health is relegated to counseling professionals and where the academic aspect of students' lives is disconnected from the social and developmental aspects, faculty and administrators may be unaware of the full extent of the problem, and of the possibility of addressing the manifestations of student well-being and civic development through academic experiences.

Engaged learning

The development of the "whole person" has traditionally been the goal of liberal education; however, on most campuses today, the "whole person" is fractured into discrete parts. Students themselves are expected to integrate, cumulatively and developmentally, what institutional structures and operations formally divide. By compartmentalizing students' intellectual, emotional, and ethical lives, colleges and universities dichotomize the various facets of learning. This paradigm of compartmentalized learning is extended to campus life: faculty take care of the intellect, student-services staff and coaches handle the rest. Accordingly, the classroom is regarded as the exclusive setting for "real" learning, which is seen as wholly separate and different from what takes place elsewhere.

The Bringing Theory to Practice project began with the hunch that engaged learning is the key to reintegrating the epistemic, eudemonic,

and civic purposes of liberal education. That is, we believed that by engaging students, by involving them in demanding service-learning and community-based research experiences, the academy could force them to consider their own privilege; challenge their assumptions of entitlement and self-indulgence; help them recognize that learning has implications for action and use; help them develop skills and habits of resiliency; and make them aware of their responsibilities to the larger community. And further, we believed that, with these gains, students would be more likely to transfer academic engagement to greater personal well-being and to deeper civic engagement.

It may seem quixotic to describe learning as a transformative activity. Many students, faculty, and staff may see no connection between their lives and the problems facing the community, the nation, and the world. They may not feel responsible for others. The many students

Emory University

who today participate in volunteer programs may fail to take action to address the problems they seek temporarily to relieve. In fact, volunteering may reinforce preconceptions and stereotypic beliefs held by students. As D. Tad Roach, headmaster of St. Andrew's School in Delaware, puts it, "students may volunteer in a soup kitchen, and accumulate hundreds of hours of volunteer service; but if service is not linked with learning, they are likely to understand nothing about the systemic socio-economic conditions that lead to poverty. And they are, thereby, unprepared to address the desperate need for change."

We have identified service learning and community-based research as exemplars because they require active involvement by students and they have the greatest potential to transform attitudes, behaviors, and dispositions. Quite distinct from volunteerism, both forms of engaged learning require academic intensity. They entail greater expectations for students, pushing them beyond the classroom and beyond the model of learning as the passive receipt of information. And both forms of engaged learning can lead students to take greater responsibility for their learning and for its connection to both their individual development and their civic lives. Students come to recognize that not all learning occurs in the classroom, and that not all teachers are faculty.

In truth, the Bringing Theory to Practice project was founded on more than just a hunch. All of us in higher education have seen the transformative potential of engaged learning. We know, for example, that when students are engaged, when someone else is counting on them, the incidence and frequency of abusive behaviors and depression decrease. We also know that students themselves report increased confidence and a positive sense of self-value as results of experiences that take them "out of the bubble" of their school or collegiate life and into the community. Students who experience engaged learning in contexts where they are expected to contribute, and where their contributions are valued, tell us of their greater satisfaction with their education, their personal choices, and their futures. The documentation of these outcomes and their replicability are among the objectives of the project's research.

In fact, part of what the project hopes to document is how findings confirm the now

accepted (but, regrettably, less often practiced) view that these are forms of learning and pedagogies (in comparison to traditional emphasis on lecturing as a means of information transfer) that more effectively assure student retention of what is learned and more effectively aid student development of higher critical skills of analysis and synthesis. To this extent, the project will not only be documenting the linkage of outcomes and core purposes of liberal education; it will also be reinforcing educational practices that are more effective in realizing knowledge acquisition and intellectual development. Engaged learning appears to be the normative condition for multiple types of development—cognitive, emotional, moral, and civic. The project explores how the commitment to understanding a topic with significant connection beyond the learner, obliging the learner to put her own views and preconceptions in judgment, makes a positive difference to students' intellectual development, to their sense of empowerment, and to their civic lives.

The sources of the "hunch" the Bringing Theory to Practice project was founded to explore are hardly new. Aristotle and Dewey, among many others, began with similar assumptions about the links among the core triad of educational purposes—the necessity of the pursuit of knowledge, the pursuit of self-realization, and the pursuit of justice. They too believed that realizing these interrelated purposes would result in particular forms of moral development and social action. What we would identify as liberal education was, on the classical model, focused on a public community purpose, namely good citizenship— the understanding that individuals were realized or actualized in the context of community. And it was the Enlightenment that encouraged the grounding of learning, knowledge, and discovery in replication, evidence, and the nonauthoritarian bases for any claims to know. These historical strands became linked elements in describing the sustaining core purposes of liberal education. In translating our hunch into a set of testable hypotheses, we recognized that not all relationships are causal, that discernible effects are distinguishable from likely affects, and that the relationships may be additive or even symbiotic. Nonetheless, concrete evidence is needed to substantiate the effects and affects of actualizing

Georgetown University

the core purposes of liberal education. The Bringing Theory to Practice project is supporting ongoing research that seeks to document outcomes and to justify the changes in educational practices required to make engaged learning normative.

The key role of faculty

Faculty are viewed by students as the primary agents of transformation on campus, and they are the group students respect the most. Thus, faculty are perhaps the only group on campus with the authority and the educational responsibility to confront the proximate conditions of self-indulgence and the withdrawal of students from the challenges of engagement. For this reason, the Bringing Theory to Practice project is attempting to demonstrate that, through their teaching and their expectations, faculty can affect students' choices and behaviors, as well as students' emotional and civic development.

Faculty are not counselors or therapists. Appropriately, they recognize that the provision

of mental health services is beyond their expertise. But faculty are often aware of the crises their students experience. They are very likely to notice when individual students are incapacitated by depression or abusive behaviors, and they are concerned about these problems. Most faculty recognize that they have considerable influence on the choices and behaviors of young adults, and most want to help create positive contexts for learning and for student choices. If faculty do not actively encourage the full integration of students' lives, if they elect to address the issues through grading alone and to relegate all other responsibilities to student affairs staff, then the current conditions of disengagement will continue to prevail.

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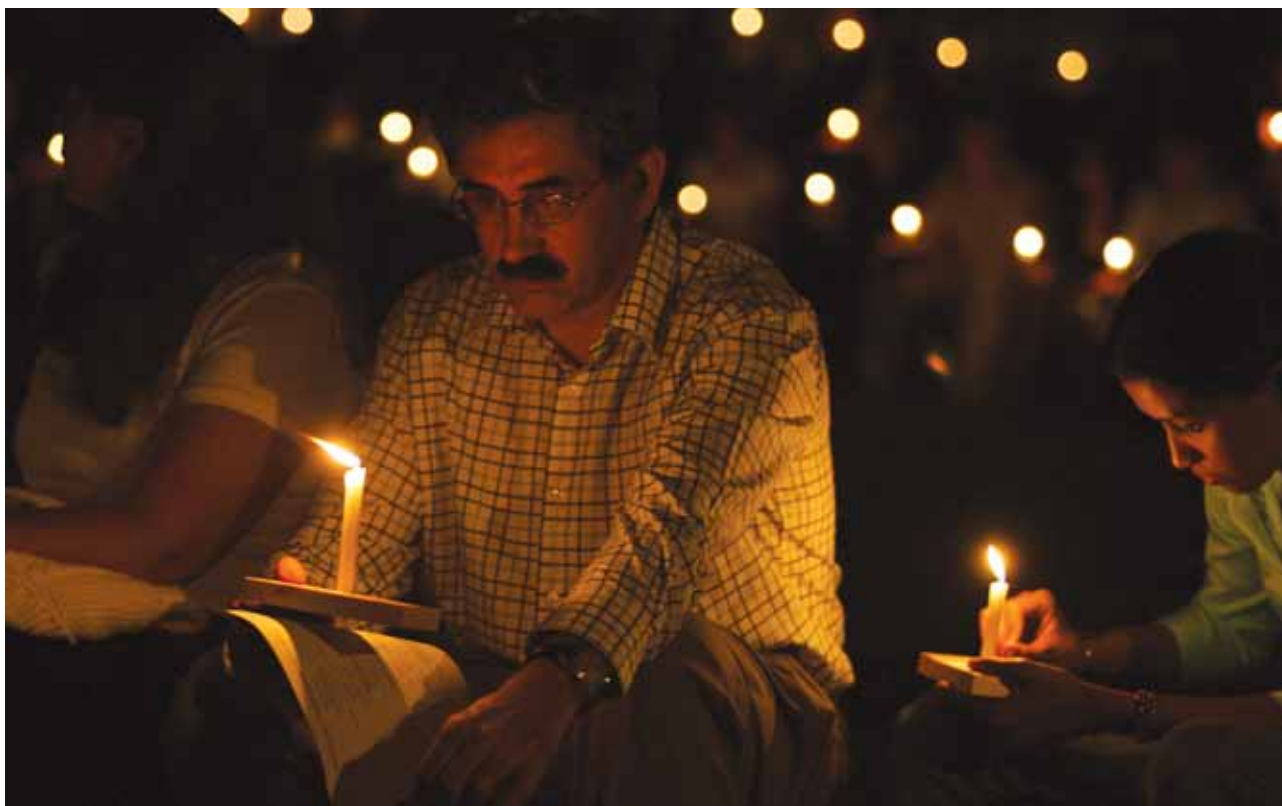
The Bringing Theory to Practice project

Developed jointly by the Charles Engelhard Foundation and the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the Bringing Theory to Practice project was designed to encourage colleges and universities to revisit or review the core purposes of liberal education and to assess their students' achievement of the full range of related outcomes. Such an effort can reveal the need for a significant redirection of energies and resources or for broad cultural changes. Most significantly, it can result in changed student expectations.

In addition to providing support for specific campus programs, the project, now in its fourth year, supports research on the connection of certain forms of engaged learning to student health and well-being, and to the complexity and depth of students' civic development. To date, over two hundred colleges and universities have been linked to aspects of the project, and forty institutions have received grant support for their programmatic or research work. Project research is currently focused on seven institutions that are serving as national demonstration sites (see p.13).

Bates College

Campus Demonstration Sites

The Bringing Theory to Practice project has awarded grants to seven campus demonstration sites. Each of these institutions is being funded to develop and evaluate new strategies to get students more engaged with their learning, and in so doing, improve their health and civic engagement.

Barnard College

Identity, Community and Belonging: Engaged Learning and Engaged Living for Mental Health: A Demonstration Project
This project targets two groups of students who are often more vulnerable to the challenges of depression and disengagement: transfers and sophomores. It includes an academic seminar exploring the concepts of community, identity, and belonging as well as three distinct civic engagement living/learning communities.

Dickinson College

Student Impact Assessment of Engaged Learning Initiatives
This multiyear study of the effects of student participation in an expanding learning communities program seeks to examine whether variously structured learning experiences—classroom-based, service learning, outdoor experiential learning, and a non-credit learning community organized around community service—yield different impacts on student learning, mental health, and civic engagement.

Emory University

Sophomore Year at Emory Living and Learning Experience: An Interdisciplinary Seminar Course/Internship in Addiction and Depression
In order for students to appreciate the complexities of addiction and depression in the world and in their own lives, this model seminar course/internship experience in the new Second Year at Emory Residence Hall integrates several successful but so far distinct campus programs and uses problem- and research-based approaches grounded in the interdisciplinary context of the history, science, and impacts of these issues in society.

Georgetown University

Connecting the Safety Net to the Heart of the Academic Environment: Curriculum Infusion of Mental Health Issues into Lower-Division Courses
This project focuses on "curriculum infusion"—the blending of college health issues into the curriculum content of academic courses to positively affect student attitudes and behaviors. Bringing these important health issues into the academic environment enables them to be addressed with intellectual seriousness and free from the fear of social stigma in targeted curriculum modules across a wide spectrum of lower-division general education courses.

Morgan State University

SHARED (Students Helping and Receiving Educational Development) Experiences
This program expands Morgan State University students' involvement in ongoing community-based research and program development in Southwest Baltimore and in the development and implementation of initiatives to promote student and community well-being and prevent substance use and depression.

St. Lawrence University

The St. Lawrence University Center for Civic Engagement and Leadership: Creating Opportunities for Agency and Intentionality in Student Learning Experiences
This intensive living–learning program employs the best practices of engaged learning pedagogies and assesses their impacts on civic engagement, depression, and alcohol abuse among students through primary data collection using multiple methods over a three-year period, coupled with secondary analysis of existing student databases.

Syracuse University

SAGE (Self-Assess, Grow, Educate) Options
Through rigorous evaluation, this project seeks to demonstrate the association between curricular and cocurricular student engagement as effective prevention strategies that address the roots of depression and substance abuse—indications of interpersonal and intrapersonal disengagement.

For more information, please visit the project Web site at www.aacu.org/bringing_theory.

Barnard College

Getting at purposes through an examination of possible outcomes is a complex task; it is exceedingly difficult to isolate the epistemic purpose and to determine effectiveness in creating and measuring learning outcomes. The Bringing Theory to Practice project is focused on very specific forms of pedagogy and learning that already are important elements of many undergraduate liberal education programs—namely, service learning and community-based research. These particular forms of engaged learning encourage students to examine how concepts translate into practice, how they expect and value greater personal involvement from students, and how they oblige students to link action and understanding.

The project is currently studying the possible effects and likely affects produced by engaged learning experiences that are expected, intensive, and valued elements of the undergraduate experience. We are gathering evidence—both testimonial and empirical—of outcomes that link engaged learning to behavioral choices and to student development. And we are learning how faculty and administrators who are involved across many campuses can begin to structure a "learning community" of their own affecting directional change at their own institutions. The provisional evidence supports the initial premise of the Bringing

Theory to Practice project: the core purposes of liberal education can be realized through particular forms of engaged learning that affect the health, behaviors, and well-being of students and foster civic responsibility.

Even as the research goes forward, the project is encouraging campuses to continue, or to initiate, conversations about the purposes of liberal education and about the institutional means available for achieving them. This effective strategy already has led several campuses to reexamine the extent to which they are defining and actualizing their own sense of quality, and the extent to which they are pursuing services and activities that are driven by perceived "market" demands. Additionally, the project has supported the efforts of individual campuses to better understand the actual behaviors and patterns of experience chosen by their specific populations of students, and to assess those data within the context of national studies.

The overarching aim of the Bringing Theory to Practice project is to help colleges and universities deliver on the full promise of a quality undergraduate education by orienting their campus practices to the achievement of the three interrelated core purposes of liberal education. The project encourages institutions to create and support learning contexts that

enable student transformation and, where current practices do not succeed in creating such contexts, the project argues for change. In creating and sustaining contexts for engagement, faculty must be supported, valued, and rewarded for experimenting with new and emerging pedagogies. This work is complex and often difficult; however, faculty frequently find such experimentation to be among the most intellectually, emotionally, and morally satisfying dimensions of teaching—especially when they are supported culturally and institutionally.

The faculty members and professional administrators involved in the project have demonstrated their strong commitment to the students on their own campuses. They have been willing to act somewhat counter to prevailing campus cultures by seriously considering how the very heart of their institutions—the faculty, dominant pedagogies, and the curriculum—can positively and holistically affect the lives of their students. Through their involvement in the project, faculty and administrators alike have found the reinforcing rationale and evidence for strengthening the academic experience in ways that more directly involve students, that expect more from them, that take them out of the classroom, and that involve them in experiencing and understanding the relation of what they study to issues and responsibilities rooted outside of themselves. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, *with the author's name on the subject line.*

REFERENCES
Blum, R. W., and H. Libby. 2004. Executive summary. *Journal of School Health* 74 (7): 229–32.
Marano, H. 2004. A nation of wimps. *Psychology Today* 37 (6): 58–70.

NOTE
1. In April 2005, the Bringing Theory to Practice project supported a major research study, completed by Lynn Swaner, that examines both the theoretical levels and the available empirical research regarding the linkages among forms of engaged learning, forms of depression and substance abuse, and the civic development of students. An abridgment of the review is published in this issue of *Liberal Education*.

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

Announcing funding support during 2007–10 for the study, practice, and institutionalization of forms of engaged learning, and their relation to outcomes affecting student well-being and student civic development.

Categories of support, funding levels, and proposal deadlines:

Category I
Mini-Grants and Student Programming Grants
Up to $2,500; rolling application and award deadlines; matching support not required. Separate mini-grants from an institution for separate projects are permitted.

Category II
Program or Research Start-up ("Initiative") Grants
Institutions are awarded up to $10,000 of total grant; may be renewable. Matching support is expected; rolling application and award deadlines.

Category III
Demonstration Site Grants
Institutions are awarded up to $45,000 a year for two years; total grants of $90,000. May be renewable. Matching support required; application deadline: April 1, 2007.

Category IV
Intensive Site Grants
Institutions awarded up to a total of $250,000 over three years. May be renewable. Matching support required; application deadline: April 15, 2007.

Before submitting proposals in any category, please review information, announcements, and publications available online at www.bringingtheorytopractice.org. For additional information, contact Jennifer O'Brien, program associate of the Bringing Theory to Practice project, at obrien@aacu.org.

FEATURED TOPIC