WEAVING THE CAMPUS SAFETY NET BY INTEGRATING STUDENT HEALTH ISSUES INTO THE CURRICULUM

Georgetown University has developed an innovative approach to addressing student health and wellness issues through curriculum infusion—a collaborative pedagogy that introduces real-life health issues faced by college students into their academic courses.

By Todd A. Olson and Joan B. Riley

T'S FRIDAY NIGHT just before midnight on our compact, residential campus in Washington, D.C. Our students are active in many ways. Hundreds are roaming the campus and the neighborhood, looking for parties and other social connections. Many more are studying and working on academic projects in our libraries or residence halls. Others are gathered in small groups in rooms and apartments, watching movies, playing games online, and talking about new ideas and old friends and the latest news. Dozens of students are by themselves—some comfortably relaxing, others struggling with a range of issues and adjustments.

What guides our students in making decisions about their activities and responses on a night like this? What role do the "adults" on the campus play in shaping, supporting, and challenging those decisions and caring for those students? What can student affairs educators, classroom faculty, and academic administrators do to shape these Friday nights in a positive way? These are questions that we care about deeply at Georgetown. Our engagement with an innovative project, the Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) project, funded by the Charles Engelhard Foundation in partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities, has provided us with some valuable insights and answers.

The 1998 report Powerful Partnerships from the American Association for Higher Education, the American College Personnel Association, and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators begins with a striking principle: "Learning is fundamentally about making and maintaining connections" (p. 3). Belief in this principle has led our team at Georgetown to seek out ways to connect various aspects of our students' lives. Too often, students see the rich academic learning they pursue in the classroom and laboratory as separate from their daily life experience as young adults. This disconnect is played out on our campus through unwise choices about alcohol use and personal behavior and through a lack of awareness of campus health (especially mental health) resources.

At Georgetown, we have long talked about the safety net we try to weave—the set of people and services that provides a way of catching those students who might stumble and fall, both in terms of maintaining their own mental and physical health and in terms of their impact on the campus community. The core of our safety net resides with our student affairs staff in health and counseling areas, in residence life, and in our vice president's office. Colleagues from our academic deans' offices have collaborated with us about students of concern, and a core group of faculty members has participated in the conversation as well. At our university, we have always sought approaches that invite faculty members into the roles of teacher and advisor in a way that includes student health struggles and challenges. Teams of student affairs educators have presented Safety Net Training to academic departments and groups of faculty and academic administrators. The
staff in our counseling service regularly consults with faculty. We are very much aware that the optimal role for faculty does not have an on-off switch; it is not a matter of faculty avoiding student health issues entirely or taking full responsibility for those issues. Progress in this area begins with presenting the faculty with options for student engagement that respect boundaries and do not require excessive faculty time or acquisition of specialized health promotion skills.

THE DISTINCTIVE FEATURE of our Bringing Theory to Practice (BToP) approach is that faculty members and student health educators collaborate to make explicit links between the academic course content and students' lived experiences and struggles. This collaboration takes the form of course modules, at least three hours in length, in which students are invited to explore these connections between the personal and the intellectual. While these modules represent only one component of the course, both faculty and students report that the connections made in these curriculum infusion modules have a positive impact throughout the entire course.

Georgetown's BToP objective is to promote the following goals:

- To raise students' awareness of and reflection on wellness and mental health issues in a manner that enhances and reinforces the intellectual content of their courses
- To foster relationships between students and campus health providers in order to increase students' comfort levels about accessing resources for their personal needs
- To strengthen the campus safety net by enabling faculty and teaching assistants to recognize trouble signs in their students, to approach students effectively in regard to health issues, and to know where to direct students for help

Our BToP project seeks to address student health and wellness issues, including depression and substance abuse, by employing curriculum infusion. This pedagogy introduces real-life health issues faced by college students into the curriculum of their academic courses through class assignments, guest speakers, and readings, thus providing links between issues of personal well-being and theoretical course concepts. The undergraduate courses in which this occurs, known here as Engelhard courses, span academic disciplines and have included anthropology, biology, English, mathematics, nursing, philosophy, psychology, business, foreign service, human science, and theology.

Georgetown's BToP project has had a broad reach. During the last five semesters, more than 2,000 undergraduates have taken Engelhard courses infused with mental health components. They have written reflection papers that relate wellness topics to their own life experiences as students and have also engaged in discussions with guest lecturers and completed required readings on wellness.

Existentialism, a course offered in the philosophy department, illustrates the benefits that can flow from curriculum infusion. The writings of Dostoevsky, Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche deal extensively with themes of loneliness, alienation, stress, anxiety, depression, and suicide, providing an environment that is conducive to the BToP approach to wellness issues. William Blattner, an Engelhard Faculty Fellow, introduced two new components into his syllabus to facilitate students' deeper engagement with the issues of well-being that are addressed in his course readings. In the first, students wrote and exchanged anonymous letters describing challenges to their well-being and the sense of stability that they faced in their own life. The second component was a collaboration with Patrick Kilcarr, who directs Georgetown's Center for Personal Development. Following a discussion of Dostoevsky, Kilcarr spoke to the class about psychological disorders, including anxiety, stress, alcohol abuse, depression, and suicide. Blattner acquired a greater awareness and appreciation of the range and depth of health concerns with which his students dealt on a daily basis, and the students developed more intense and personal connections to the issues and themes raised in the course materials. This is only one example of the courses we have modified as a result of the BToP project; for more course examples, visit http://cndls.georgetown.edu/view/about/engelhard.html.

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Todd Olson and Joan Riley are members of the Engelhard Project team at Georgetown University. The project Connecting Life and Learning: Engaging the Whole Person Through the Integration of Academics and Student Affairs is part of a national project, Bringing Theory to Practice, that addresses student mental health and wellness through various forms of engaged learning.

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SEVERAL FACTORS have been instrumental in the success of our BTtoP approach. The vision of the multidisciplinary project team was critical in identifying the issues to be addressed and in making a compelling case for addressing them. The faculty members who volunteered to serve as Englehard Faculty Fellows modified their courses and joined in this new intellectual adventure. They took risks and moved beyond their teaching comfort zone. The campus administrators who envisioned and supported the BTtoP project stepped out of their routine ways of thinking about student health, civic engagement, and how to structure programs and services. Finally, the students who found themselves in Englehard courses responded with openness and curiosity and engaged the issues in thoughtful ways.

Based on students’ reflection papers and surveys as well as focus groups conducted with both faculty and students, this integrative approach has yielded positive outcomes for members of the Georgetown community, especially the students. One wrote, “This was a unique class in that its objective was not just to educate, but to improve the lives of us, the students.” Students who have taken Englehard courses have benefited from heightened awareness of personal issues of well-being in their (and their peers’) lives and of campus resources available to them. Said one, “I have gained insights into getting help and now know where to go. This presentation made me realize that the challenges and issues I faced were not exclusive to me and that many other students had the same difficulties.” Another stated, “I am more inclined to ask for help with my situation rather than sit back and let it consume me.” Students report positive changes in attitudes and behaviors: “This made me think more carefully about the choices I make every day. I now think about how my decisions will ultimately affect my goals, my grades, my relationships and my goals for the future.” Students in Englehard courses also report improved communication with faculty and an increased appreciation of faculty interest in their lives. One such student wrote, “It is refreshing to take a class whose professors and structure actually care about the individual students and their needs and health.”

Englehard Faculty Fellows have benefited from increased awareness of and appreciation for the challenging and complex issues their students face in their daily lives. One fellow stated, “Simply knowing what supports exist enables me to listen responsibly and act as a bridge between students and help.” These faculty members also enjoy improved rapport with their students and report improved student engagement with course materials, as indicated by greater conceptual clarity in student writing and increased class participation. In a typical comment, one faculty member stated, “Students applied course concepts with deeper and more meaningful writing.” Another faculty member added, “The relationship [that developed and prevailed in her Englehard course] resulted in greater respect between the faculty and students and among the students themselves.”

As a Jesuit institution, Georgetown embraces the core value of educating the whole person—paying serious attention to all aspects of each student’s personal growth and learning. By promoting knowledge about university health resources, by lowering students’ inhibitions about accessing those resources, and by normalizing and promoting campus conversations about mental health issues, the BTtoP project helps to expand and strengthen Georgetown’s safety net. At the same time, our students engage in intellectual explorations with new depth and energy. The BTtoP project provides us with one concrete and practical way of translating Georgetown’s core values into practice on our campus for the benefit of faculty and students alike.

Notes
The Bringing Theory to Practice project is sponsored by the Charles Englehard Foundation of New York City and has been developed in partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities. It explores and advocates the academic community’s support of engaged learning and the relationship of such learning to student health and civic development.