
BTtoP Case Study: The University of Nebraska-Lincoln

How a Certificate and a Deck of Cards Led to Deeper Civic Engagement

In 2008, Nancy Mitchell became involved with the revision of the general education curriculum at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She had been on the faculty in the College of Journalism and Mass Communications and was Chair of the Academic Planning Committee. Once the university faculty approved the revisions, she became Director of General Education, also known as Achievement-Centered Education or ACE.¹

ACE was based on the Essential Learning Outcomes developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities: knowledge of human cultures and the physical and practical worlds, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and the integration and application of knowledge. ACE made civic learning part of the expected learning outcomes for every UNL student. Mitchell, however, wanted to find additional ways to strengthen and reinforce the civic component of the new general education learning outcomes.

Meanwhile, Linda Major worked in student affairs and directed civic engagement. She wanted to broaden the scope of civic engagement and link it to the new general education plan. Because of her research and practice in preventing substance abuse on the campus and in the community, Major was also interested in promoting the psychosocial well-being of students by using general education as a vehicle for advancing civic engagement and wellness simultaneously. She felt that the more students were engaged, the less likely they would be to exhibit behaviors that would harm them.

To put their ideas into practice, Mitchell and Major applied for Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) funding. The BTtoP grant led to the creation of a new Certificate for Civic Engagement, additional civic discussions on campus, and an initiative called *Dine, Dialogue, and Pass it On*. All three programs resulted in greater civic engagement on the UNL campus.

Background

With more than 25,000 students, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is the largest, comprehensive, public university in the state. Approximately 80 percent of students are enrolled in undergraduate programs, and about 13 percent of undergraduates are underrepresented minority students (a figure that has been steadily increasing). The university's civic mission stems from its foundation as a land-grant institution in 1869. Its charter states that the university has "a special state-wide responsibility to serve the needs of Nebraska and its citizens." It is this sense of civic duty that fueled the creation of the programs for civic engagement that were enhanced by BTtoP funding.

Crafting a Certificate in Civic Engagement

When UNL embarked on its first BTtoP initiative, it already had administrators who were philosophically attuned to service and civic projects and an infrastructure in place to advance such programs. Juan Franco, for example, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, joined the university in 2006 with a doctorate in counseling and guidance and research experience in mental health. Under his leadership, UNL became involved in Campus Compact, a national organization that promotes student engagement and service learning. He was looking for additional ways for students to become involved

in the civic mission of the university and thus more deeply engaged in their educational experiences. “UNL already had strong service learning and leadership elements in place,” he is quoted as saying on the UNL website. “I wanted to expand that to engage students who have deep interest in doing good things for others.”

In addition, the BTtoP grant inspired Franco to establish a Center for Civic Engagement to serve as an umbrella for new initiatives. Linda Major was named Director, and Kris Baack, Director for Leadership Development and Linda Moody, Director for Service-Learning, were reassigned to join the new organization. What UNL wanted to do next, “was to make learning more cohesive and coherent for

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With the BTtoP funding, a group of faculty and staff who represented different divisions and perspectives began to meet in 2010 to find ways to increase the civic engagement of students. At first, the group talked about creating a minor in civic engagement. The argument against this plan was that the program would be housed in one department of a college. The group wanted a program that would cross all departments and “represent the whole student experience, not just academic or co-curricular,” Major explained. “And we wanted it to be a meaningful experience.” Mitchell argued, “a certificate would be something that could be transcribed, and students could say, ‘I’ve done this.’ We know that Millennials like this.”

Creating a certificate, however, proved to be a challenge. “At our campus, there were no certificates that could come from the university level,” Mitchell said. “They were tied to departments. We didn’t want to tie it to a department. We wanted to make it something that was available to the whole campus. So we had to create procedures to do it and get buy-in from everyone.” The plan was to use existing courses in academic departments throughout the campus and other experiences, such as service learning, leadership development, and political science.

Students would study particular values that the faculty and staff identified as key. Mitchell and Majors first got it sanctioned by the Academic Planning Committee.

But that wasn’t enough. It turned out they also had to submit the plan for the certificate to the Board of Regents and the Nebraska Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education. The legislature declared that certificates were “the purview of community colleges,” said Mitchell. UNL was told, “we couldn’t offer a certificate unless ‘the preponderance of courses was beyond the associate degree level.’” According to Major, the certificate criteria needed to be modified. The process of establishing the certificate and getting it approved consumed most of the first two years of the initial BTtoP grant project.

How the Certificate in Civic Engagement Evolved

Students began enrolling in the new Certificate in Civic Engagement in the spring of 2012. Civic engagement is defined in the certificate as “working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community through both political and non-political processes.”

At first enrollment in the program was limited to 30 students each semester, and it takes a minimum of two years to complete. Students from any major can participate, and they can complete the certificate without additional cost or time to graduation. Participating students are encouraged to explore whether or not their existing co-curricular experience aligns with the purpose of the outside the classroom requirement. Students who transfer to UNL are eligible as are those who decide later in their academic careers that they want to become more active citizens.

Initially, the certificate included more courses at the 100 and 200 levels. Today, students must complete four courses: one drawn from the ACE requirements at the 100 and 200 levels and three at the 300 and 400 levels. The courses can be any that have personal and social responsibility as a designated learning outcome or that examine diversity and cultural appreciation. The designated courses are flagged as CE courses and are then connected to academic outcomes and student life experiences to develop a lifelong habit of civic engagement.

The certificate is grounded in six values, and each value has an outcome. The values are grouped in a civic engagement rubric. At each of three checkpoints, students reflect on the values. Values include the following: civic identity and commitment, leadership within civic contexts, diversity of communities and culture, civic communication, analysis of knowledge, and action within civic contexts. Students begin their work with orientation sessions and have three checkpoints and a reflection session.

The program also includes the development of a culminating portfolio or a final project that connects the students’ experiences and learning. The final projects must address community need. For example, one student who finished the certificate in the spring of 2014 was interested in leadership with middle school students. For her final project, she developed an eight-week, sixteen-hour course on leadership for middle school students.

Another student interested in international affairs wanted to help domestic students who studied abroad. He created a developmental scale that students could look at and learn from as they experienced different cultures. An engineering student who was interested in biking connected with a local nonprofit group that makes bikes available for low-income individuals. “For me it has been very exciting to see how the students can pull it all together and come up with things that make such a difference,” said Baack. “They do reflective journaling, and their final reflections and final projects are interesting and exciting.”

Finally, the Center for Civic Engagement works with certificate students to continue community engagement. “My job is to help students integrate their passion, their academic learning, and their service,” said Baack. “The service is not based on hours but on getting them involved so they can

understand that in the real world; we don't silo our lives. I tell students, 'You are a global citizen' all the time."

Making a Difference

Those involved in the creation and implementation of the certificate are enthusiastic about the way it has developed. "It is exciting to see students realize that they can combine their passion, their academics, and their service," Baack observed. "It is making a world of difference for them. And the people in the community of Lincoln have said they love knowing that students have good solid values because they are giving back and putting what they learn into practice."

Mitchell, who is now Director of Undergraduate Programs, said that students involved in the certificate program "have gained a lot because of personal attention, and it has helped them connect their civic and social responsibilities to their classes and their interests. It coincided with a lot of the work and the emphasis that Bringing Theory to Practice has on civic engagement. There is huge emphasis on retention of students and increasing enrollment and retention," she added. "If we know this is a high-impact practice, it is bound to be good for those reasons. But the primary reason is helping students gain some civic piece of their education. What is the value of our type of institution? To help students develop not only knowledge that they need for jobs, but also to be active citizens, citizen leaders. I think these types of experiences enrich education for the students."

Mitchell said that now "one of the challenges for the certificate is scaling up. We want many people to use this." And at the end of the initial BTtoP grant, UNL received further funding to continue with civic discussions on campus. Individuals from the Lincoln community visited campus and talked about the role of the university in civic life.

Dine, Dialogue, and Pass it On

According to Nancy Mitchell, unrest on the UNL campus highlighted the need for more education about race and diversity within the context of on-going discussions around community engagement and the role of the university in the community. Like other large universities, UNL found it had a cultural gap between rural and urban students, according to Andre Fortune, former Director of the Jackie Gaughan Multicultural Center. "We started seeing things on campus," he added. "I think it is common with a lot of predominately white institutions, particularly large institutions like we have where there are a lot of students coming from very homogenous backgrounds. When they come here, there is cultural shock in a number of different ways.

Fortune continued, "This is also true for underrepresented students coming from urban areas and used

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to diversity and feeling a sense of isolation and loneliness. I don't want to over generalize, but we have some students who come from rural areas where they don't have racial diversity, and for them this is a very new experience. Other students don't have the same religious beliefs. We were thinking, 'where could we have long-lasting impact?'"

June Griffin was likewise interested in improving the climate for students of color and in providing faculty training on serving underserved populations. She is an associate professor of practice in the English Department and the faculty coordinator of a learning community involving more than 500 first- and second-year students who receive need- and merit-based scholarships. She noted, "there were incidents on our campus that sparked greater [racial] tension. But there have been similar events all across the country."

So following UNL's earlier civic efforts, "we gathered people from across the campus," said Mitchell, "some faculty, and staff from Student Orientation, Student Affairs, Learning Communities, Civic Engagement, the Women's Center, and the Recreation Center. We said, 'If we had \$10,000, how could we best spend it? We have to accomplish something about well-being and something that ties to diversity. How could we do this?'" An advisory committee was formed. "Our first thought was that we wanted to include students on the committee," said Mitchell, "but we decided not to. We wanted to provide training."

The thinking was that there might be greater impact if UNL invested in faculty and staff. With her interest in how to talk about diversity on campus, Griffin joined the group of people interested in the same issue, and approximately 20 people served on the initial BTtoP committee. These programs included advising, Greek life, learning communities, housing, student clubs, faculty, and staff. "We were initially coming up with ideas about 'How do we get people together to have conversations and how do we promote them?'"

The advisory committee developed a series of workshops in which faculty and staff could have challenging conversations and be comfortable. "We didn't want what happens in our workshop to stay in the workshop," Fortune said. "We wanted to pass it on and be share." So following a lecture on campus by Shelly Tochluk, author of *Witnessing Whiteness: The Need to Talk about Race and How to Do It*, the committee decided the first focus should be "how to educate faculty and staff to handle uncomfortable moments in class," said Major.

Mitchell said that earlier experience with BTtoP "influenced how we think about being inclusive in terms of leadership. It takes a long time to get things off the ground. But you can have people sit around and say, 'If we have \$10,000, how can we best spend it?' One person said, 'It is the faculty that needs to get more sensitive.' Another said, 'And the staff.' Then someone said, 'No one wants to come to diversity training. You have to make it fun.'" The committee felt that people would come to workshops that served food. Then someone suggested using cards to springboard discussions. Fortune attended a conference on race and diversity in Texas and heard speakers from the University of Texas, Dallas talk about the use of cards with probing questions that sparked conversations.

The UNL group adopted this idea and came up with its own questions. "This was a small way we could start to have discussions on campus to address diversity and to make people feel more comfortable," Mitchell said. The new BTtoP program was called Dine, Dialogue, and Pass it On.

The advisory committee broke into smaller groups to come up with 52 different questions or prompts on issues of discrimination and different types of oppression. The questions initially reflected what was happening on campus. “We listened to students,” said Fortune, whose own research is on underrepresented populations and their engagement in higher education. “As Director of the Multicultural Center, I hear every day about the experiences of our underrepresented populations and what has actually happened to them.”

Committee members were asked about their own experiences and to reflect on those, which led to further discussion. The purpose of the pass-it-on aspect of the program was to train individuals who could facilitate discussions with students, whether they were instructors, mentors, tutors, or staff.

The final questions were printed on a deck of cards with the Nebraska logo and the title of the program, Dine, Dialogue, and Pass it On, on one side. On the other side were questions such as the following: Recall a time when you were a minority in a group. How did you feel? Why are conversations about diversity important? Describe a holiday, tradition, or festival that your family celebrates every year. What role does faith or culture play in this celebration? “The questions do go beyond racial diversity,” said Mitchell. “We have questions about physical abilities, religion, and gender. Some questions are easy. Some are harder.”

Next, the advisory committee contacted other faculty and staff they thought might be interested in the conversations, and some people were nominated. University communications to faculty and staff explained the project and invited volunteers. Ultimately, six workshops were held, and participants chose one of the three, two-hour sessions. Each session was limited to 30 participants. The sessions started with icebreakers, and ground rules were established, such as being respectful of the opinions and comments of others. Participants were encouraged to challenge ideas and beliefs while avoiding personal attacks. Participants could skip a card drawn but were asked to reflect on why they did so. Finally, if someone was offended during the conversation, participants would attempt to repair the harm. Fortune said the point was to have conversations “in safe places but also brave places.”

Passing it On

According to Mitchell, the people who attended the workshops said, “‘Oh, this is such a great thing.’ Then they took a deck of cards and used them with their own groups. Or others used them to start a meeting to get to know each other better.” Major stated that with the BTtoP project, she “appreciated the opportunity to be brought together with other like-minded colleagues. Convening people serves a purpose.”

Griffin believes that students or facilitators still need to be prepared or trained before using the cards. So she started passing it on by using the cards with faculty involved in learning communities or those interested in working with diverse student populations. “Some faculty want to help students feel more welcome,” she said. “Or they want to know what to say when things happen nationally or locally.” In turn, some faculty now use the cards in their courses, and the cards are used by student mentors.

The cards have also been used by the staff of the Multicultural Center even though the staff is presumed to be culturally competent. Fortune noted, “We still have opportunities for increasing our

cultural competence. I take a card at the beginning or end of a staff meeting. We are developing skills and sharing those skills with other people.”

The cards have caught on. UNL has had requests for the cards from the University of Nevada at Reno, the City University of New York, and the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Fortune noted that people ask if they can take the cards to other instructors, County Extension Offices, and key leaders in the county.

The BTtoP grant enabled the committee to purchase several hundred decks so there are still cards to use in the future, and UNL now plans to institutionalize the program. Dine, Dialogue, and Pass it On will become part of the Multicultural Center “for the foreseeable future,” said Fortune. “The center is planning a reunion of about 100 people to come back and share how they passed it on. Even if they haven’t, they might hear ideas from others.”

Additionally, Dine, Dialogue, and Pass it On is slated to be integrated as part of ongoing programming institutionally and integrated into everyday activities with new students, enrollment leaders, and undergraduates. According to Fortune, the next step is to expand the training to student populations and offer the program during one and a half hour workshops instead of two-hour sessions and in the evening. Graduate assistants will be trained as facilitators. The center is working with student focus groups to see how to get students to come to workshops.

Finally, to Mitchell, the impact of the BTtoP project “is the recognition of working together and seeing the student as a whole person. What has been really rewarding is to value partners across the institution. Working across the university to help students has had a big impact on how I approach things. I think now of leading projects to be inclusive.”

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ⁱ Learn more about UNL’s Achievement-Centered Education (ACE) learning outcomes [here](#). Initially commissioned and developed for Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP), this case study was slightly adapted for Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement (CLDE).