

Don't Build It and They Will Come: Creating Space For Wholeness, Meaning, and Purpose in Higher Education

Proceedings from the 2006 Institute on College Student Values

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Abstract

How do students create meaning from the chaos that is college? What constitutes a space for collaborative, engaged, and emergent learning that informs and nurtures whole-person development? What principles and values inspire meaning and purpose? We discuss the importance of creating space for wholeness, meaning, and purpose in higher education, and we describe a program committed to the development of such space.

Ask many students what they would most like to get from college, and they might answer, “Out!” For some students, success in college equates with learning to beat the system—learning what they need to know to pass their classes and to receive their degrees. Such students may have suffered from various turn-offs in the traditional classroom, including feeling and being degraded by the professor, feeling discouraged, and feeling and being humiliated in front of peers. But for other students, their experiences are meaningful catalysts for lifelong learning, and opportunities to share their knowledge and to gain wisdom.¹

In higher education learners need to have space to grow—space where they feel respected, valued, challenged, where they may express their values, develop and demonstrate their leadership abilities, and where they may take responsibility for their own learning—a place for whole-person development and for gaining wisdom. Wisdom, not simply knowledge, should be a fundamental goal in higher education. As Tobin Hart (2001) says, “Wisdom serves to dynamically expand and integrate perspectives. It involves the capacity to listen and to translate the power of the intellect and the openness of the heart into appropriate form (action, attitude, etc.)” (11).

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¹ Robinson, C. (2004). *Looking into chaos: Perceptions, interactions, and strategies of disaffected male undergraduates*. PhD Dissertation: Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.

To encourage space where students may create meaning, find purpose, and gain wisdom in higher education, teachers must think about the underlying values and principles that help shape students' learning environments. In our conference session, we employed the Bailey engagement model by inviting dialogic interaction about meaning, purpose, and whole-person development in higher education. As is our practice in Bailey, we launched the dialogue with a provocative question: "How do we promote or encourage space for wholeness, meaning, purpose, and wisdom in higher education?"

Participants also responded to the question, "What are your perceptions of what constitutes a space for collaborative, engaged, and emergent learning that informs and nurtures whole-person development and expression of one's values and principles?"

Their perceptions of conditions that contributed to such a space included:

- A non-traditional physical space including moveable furniture and various out-of-classroom venues
- Open expression--collaborators who are willing to contribute to the conversation with transparency and authenticity
- Students who are willing to learn, motivated by their own interests and preferences
- Respect for others
- Dialogue
- An atmosphere of acceptance; a safe space
- Learners who listen to one another to find shared meaning
- Learners who are willing to change
- Self-organized criticality

Yet, few participants indicated that there were such spaces or practices for learning on their campuses. In higher education, we increasingly observe an emphasis on the development and thinking in students, but no commensurate emphasis on ways to assist student development or on practices that hinder student development. As an educator or administrator, one may understand the need for students to explore their learning journeys, yet be compelled to dictate the path learners must take by establishing hierarchical and rigid parameters and so-called best practices. When such parameters are removed, a shift in emphasis from *teaching* to *learning* occurs. Students' attitudes toward learning may change when they are allowed to choose their own methods of learning, as opposed to being forced to learn in ways that remove all options, and when the role of faculty members changes from expert to co-learner. Undergraduates may then take responsibility for their own learning and find meaning and purpose in their learning journeys.

A Working Model: Liberty Hyde Bailey Scholars Program at Michigan State University—
Creating a "Space" for Wholeness, Meaning, and Purpose

The Bailey Scholars Program is a 21-credit undergraduate specialization in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources that is open to all students at Michigan State University. It is peer led. Its pedagogical design is dedicated to collaborative and learner-centered learning, and its organizational design is informed by chaos and complexity theories. The Bailey Scholars Program seeks to create physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual space for scholars to practice and promote, through dialogue and critical self-reflection, engaged, collaborative learning that is co-created and co-designed. Bailey is also a place and a space where scholars may explore, express, and strengthen individual and collective values and principles, may experience deep learning, and may connect with other like-valued people who desire the same in their

college experiences. A point of emphasis in Bailey is the learning journey, and students take responsibility for their own learning journeys. The Declaration of Bailey expresses this commitment and hangs in block letters around the wall in the program's community room for all to read: "*The Bailey Scholars Program seeks to be a community of scholars dedicated to lifelong learning. All members of the community work toward providing a respectful, trusting environment where we acknowledge our interdependence and encourage personal growth.*"

Because undergraduates self-select into the program, they bring with them diverse thoughts, ethnicity, values, principles, various records of academic success, and experiences. In this diverse learning environment, scholars embrace emergence, ambiguity, and dissonance with openness, adaptability, and questioning attitudes. A rich, stimulating learning atmosphere emerges when scholars are comfortable with uncertainty and when faculty are comfortable with relinquishing control. As Hart (2001) comments, "When the quest for certainty and control is pushed to the background, the possibility of wonder returns. Wonder provides a gateway to wise insight" (11).

Together scholars explore and interpret the Bailey Five Questions: *Who am I? What do I value? How do I learn? What is my worldview? and How do these answers connect in my life, personally and professionally?* Students explore these questions in three core classes. Each core class is co-convened by faculty, but faculty members are more than just tour guides—each is on his or her own learning journey; each is a co-learner along with the students in class. Together, Bailey faculty and students design courses and co-curricular experiences together, deciding what to study, when, where, how, and, perhaps most importantly, *why* they choose to explore certain topics.

Unlike traditional classroom settings that operate on a "power over" model, Bailey practices "power with." This approach emphasizes learning from the inside-out versus the traditional outside-in model where faculty are the experts and the authority. Learners co-create their learning agendas by sharing what they are interested in learning, how they prefer to learn, and how they might implement those interests. Learners also consider the interests of their co-learners, make decisions as a group, take individual and shared responsibility for organizing learning opportunities, and individually and collectively interpret the meaningfulness of learning.

Appreciating the Bailey approach requires expanding the way one traditionally thinks about the purpose and practice of a college education. This approach to teaching and learning is not without its challenges and complexities, however. The concept of asking faculty members to relinquish power over and total responsibility for student learning, asking faculty members to engage students as equal learning partners, and giving undergraduates permission and a space to create their own learning agenda is controversial in higher education. Students, however, thrive in the program, and they report that they do better in their other classes as a result of their participation in Bailey. Students commonly complain only that they did not join the program sooner in their college careers. Students appreciate the Bailey program as a space for deep reflection and meaning. As one Bailey alumni said, "A program like Bailey serves a key role in making you think critically about life and learning, rather than to just file like sheep through the next class."

Final Thoughts

In the Bailey Scholars Program at Michigan State University, learners have an opportunity to take control and responsibility for their own learning, to be actively engaged with others while learning, and to grow in ways not possible in a traditional classroom. Bailey offers learners a space that promotes engagement, empowerment, emergence, passion for learning, and self-

directed learning. Scholars value the community, the connected learning, the family-like atmosphere, and the opportunities that Bailey offers. It is our hope that what Bailey scholars find in Bailey—learner-centered learning, spaces for emergence, self-organization, critical thinking, stretch learning, leadership opportunities, and whole-person development—may inspire teachers and administrators to transform their views and practices of teaching and learning.

How might this occur? It is important for administrators, faculty and students to be, and continue to be, involved in a national discussion on learning and engagement. Current and future discourse may encourage educators to suspend old pedagogical designs and to experiment with new ones. Only by experimentation can we hope to make the future superior to the past and to offer our students the kind of education that promotes wholeness, meaning, and purpose in the chaos of college.

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