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# The Paradigm Project:

## A Call for Radical Renewal of Higher Education

By David Scobey



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### In Short

- Higher education is in a moment of systemic crisis; the next 20 years will bring significant change, but the nature of that change is still up for grabs.
- Higher education also contains wellsprings of creativity and innovation in support of engaged, equitable, holistic learning, but these are siloed and piecemeal.
- Positive, systemic change is possible if educators, educational leaders, students, alums, and public allies can collaborate to develop new models, build a movement, and change the public narrative about the purposes of college.
- Bringing Theory to Practice has launched the Paradigm Project to build such models and organize that movement.

**“What will be the way forward for higher education? Will the downward spiral simply happen to us, or can educators and students organize, not to defend an unsatisfactory and declining status quo, but to imagine and build something new and better?”**

## THE STAKES OF CHANGE

This article offers a call and an invitation. It calls for a radical renewal of American undergraduate education. It invites you to take part in a project—really, to help build a movement—aimed at catalyzing that renewal. I will describe the project below. But first let me speak to the current context that makes such an effort necessary and the vision on which it’s based.

If the recent past has taught us anything, it’s that the academy finds itself at an inflection-point. Change—big change—is coming. Higher education confronts crises of precarity, of legitimacy, and of purpose. The stakes of change are high, and so is the urgency of the moment. Twenty years from now, I believe, college education will be very different for most students—for students attending all but the wealthiest institutions. But the shape of that future is still up for grabs. There is no standing still; the options are to make change or be changed. The question that faculty, staff, students, and our public allies face is, what kind of change do we want? And what can we do about it?

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Many forces point toward a downward spiral, driven by several decades of crisis. There is deepening racial and class inequality among students; worsening material security for many students, staff, faculty, and institutions; the atomization (“unbundling”) of academic programs and the student experience; a growing focus on short-term job credentials; and declining public confidence in the value of a college degree. An older picture of the undergraduate experience—one in which recent high schoolers study with tenure-track professors and graduate 4 years later—has become increasingly false. The social compact based on that picture, the faith that college could underwrite the American Dream, has withered in the face of increasing tuition, student debt, and stop-out rates. The emergencies of the past 2 years—the reckoning with American racism, the pandemic and its suffering, the threats to democracy—have brought these simmering crises to a boil. Faculty, staff, and students are exhausted and demoralized. And all this points to a future in which—beyond the protective walls of selective institutions—learning gets reduced to training in an academy of diminished resources and public trust.

But that’s not the whole story. The era of crisis has also been one of creativity. The development of digital tools and online learning comes immediately to mind—with good reason. But these can distract attention from a host of other innovations and improvements: the spread of interdisciplinary fields from neuroscience to queer studies, the institutionalization of high-impact practices like undergraduate research and experiential learning, novel support strategies for student success, novel assessment practices like e-portfolios, emerging (if incomplete) commitments

to racial equity, student well-being, and civic engagement. These innovations and improvements were advanced by faculty, staff, students, and administrators organizing institutional, scholarly, and activist networks across and often against the disciplinary and professional silos of the old regime. They challenge the conventional view that higher education is incapable of change. They are beachheads of possibility: glimpses of an alternative academy that enables all students to flourish and meet the challenges of our society, our democracy, and our planet.

But “beachheads” and “glimpses” are not big change. There’s an asymmetry between the stories I have just sketched: the crisis is systemic, but the innovations are piecemeal. They are largely boxed in institutions that silo academic learning from student well-being, faculty from staff, campus from community, discipline from discipline, semester from semester. This regime of segregations has only grown more fragmented as student swirling, faculty contingency, and racial, class, and sectoral inequity have deepened. Meanwhile, more immediate threats—COVID-19, the campus mental health emergency, attacks on academic freedom—consume nearly all our energy. It can feel impossible to organize a strategic response to the systemic crisis, to do anything more than hold the line for our students, ourselves, and the pieces of progress we have achieved. That experience of exhaustion is all too real. But I want to suggest that it exaggerates the immovability of the current moment. The turmoil we are living through is not evidence of the inertia of higher education, but of the inexorability of change. Even under conditions of exhaustion and demoralization—especially now—there is an opportunity to break open old models.

What will be the way forward for higher education? Will the downward spiral simply happen to us, or can educators and students organize, not to defend an unsatisfactory and declining status quo, but to imagine and build something new and better? In this moment, higher education does not need disruptive innovation, the intervention of some external technology or market strategy. It needs to bring its own creative energies to critical mass. It needs radical renewal.

Bringing Theory to Practice (BT2P) has launched an initiative—the Paradigm Project—to advance such renewal. Since 2003, BT2P has advanced radical change in undergraduate education, grounded in what we believe to be the guiding purposes of undergraduate education. The Paradigm Project aims to


take that goal to the next level: to go from piecemeal innovation to systemic transformation. It aims to bring together a community of change-makers—faculty and staff, students and alums, institutional leaders and public allies—to develop new models of holistic, engaged, equitable education and to help organize a movement that can realize them. In what follows, I sketch key elements of the vision and strategy with which I believe that change can begin.

## WHAT DO ALL STUDENTS DESERVE?

What kind of education do all students deserve—whatever their background, interest, area of study, or place of study? What is it that we hope every student can experience and achieve in college?

When these questions get posed in current debates about higher education, the answers tend to focus on two challenges: low completion rates and anemic learning outcomes. And yes: there’s no doubt these require urgent action. Students cannot gain the full benefit of college without attaining their degree and demonstrating improved knowledge and skills in the process. But what’s often lost in the public conversation is that graduation rates and learning outcomes are only the benchmarks—not the goals—of great education. Rarely is it asked, “Completion and outcomes to what end?” What purposes do they serve?

When this question of purposes does get posed, the dominant public narrative nearly always gives the same answer: the value of education lies in its “value-added” to income and job mobility. And yes: there’s no doubt great education has to address students’ economic and occupational needs and goals. *But never solely that.* Students deserve an education in which—as in their actual lives—economic needs and goals are inseparable from personal, family, community, civic, and even spiritual needs and goals. Students’ aspirations for a degree and a job are devalued when these become disengaged from other purposes that give education (and work) their fullest meaning: intellectual growth, emotional thriving, family and community bonds, civic and community participation, and the ongoing shaping of a life of efficacy and meaning. Great education offers students the opportunity to braid these purposes together. Every student deserves such a braided, purpose-rich education, whether it’s the community college student studying health-tech or the ethnic studies major envisioning a career in social work or the biologist planning for a



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doctorate. The dominant public narrative about the purposes of college, then, with its overweening focus of jobs and credentials, is not false so much as partial—so partial that it shrinks even the meaning of jobs and credentials. We cannot chart a positive way forward unless we unshrink that narrative.

What would such a purpose-rich education look like? I know that readers will have their own, wide-ranging answers. Mine starts with four assumptions. First, I believe that—viewed from the perspective of institutional design—such an education should weave together “liberal,” “experiential,” and “practical” learning. It should connect curricular, cocurricular, and community experiences: within and beyond traditional learning spaces like classrooms and labs, within and beyond digital learning spaces, and within and beyond the campus. Second, such an education—viewed from the perspective of the student’s growth—should be both (inwardly) emancipatory and (outwardly) engaged. It should nurture the full development of the person ethically, emotionally, and cognitively, while preparing students for meaningful and sustaining work, for contributing to community life, and for building a diverse democracy. Third, it should be essentially grounded in equity: committed to undoing the barriers and harms that keep higher education from welcoming all students and committed to undoing those same barriers and harms across the larger society. And finally, it should privilege the voice and agency of students themselves in shaping and assessing their own education. I realize that these

are high-level assumptions; they do not offer guidance to a host of questions about educational practices, institutional policies, and campus culture that would need to be hashed out through experimentation and discussion. They are intended as an invitation to that ongoing, collaborative work.

Many undergraduates, perhaps most, experience glimmers of such a great education: a thrilling course, a captivating research project, a career-defining internship, an inspiring mentor, a student-led activist campaign, a space of campus life where they are welcomed and changed. It’s one of the true joys of working in higher education to contribute to such peak experiences. Many faculty, staff, and administrators devote great effort to augmenting them: expanding paths to high-impact practices, making our pedagogies more inclusive and welcoming, creating workarounds to bureaucratic barriers. Yet peak experiences stand out precisely because they *are* peak experiences, not touchstones for the whole undergraduate journey. Incrementalism does not bring students much closer to an integrated experience. It leaves largely intact the system of segregations within which peak experiences are exceptional. It leaves largely intact the structures of racial, class, and sectoral inequity that deny such experiences to many students.

We cannot repair the inequity, fragmentation, and transactionalism that diminish students’ education without repairing the inequity, fragmentation, and transactionalism of the



institutions educating them. This will require more than launching experimental degrees or innovation labs (although these are a good start). It means creating new organizational structures for setting priorities and making decisions, as well as developing new norms for who sits at the tables setting those priorities and making those decisions. It means revising responsibilities and expectations for faculty and staff and jettisoning some current responsibilities and expectations. Systemic change cannot proceed by accretion, by adding new duties (and workload) to the existing regime. Nor can it proceed with the expectation of vast new infusions of money. We will need to reorganize how we work, aligning the everyday labor of education with the purposes of education.

Let's be honest: this will involve difficult negotiations, fear of loss, and genuine loss. As a faculty member, I love to teach U.S. cultural history, but I believe that the needs of the future curriculum will lessen (not erase) my opportunity to do so. I also believe that an institution less organized around such divisions—between disciplines, between faculty and staff—will deepen student learning, deepen campus community, and reduce the transaction costs that deaden the joy of our work.

How then do we pursue this double project of educational and institutional renewal? How can we do so in a context that seems only to portend negative change? The Paradigm Project is an effort to answer this challenge.

## THE PARADIGM PROJECT

BT2P launched the project in spring 2022 with initial support from The Endeavor Foundation for what we see as a 7-year plan of action. It braids together three efforts, all of them necessary, we believe, to advancing systemic change. I will sketch each briefly, but you can read a more detailed account of the Paradigm Project (<https://bttop.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Paradigm-Project-Overview-June-2022-.pdf>) on the BT2P website (<https://bttop.org/>).

The first strand is integrative design. The project is working to distill new educational models that draw on current and emerging innovations but transmute them into new wholes, greater than the sum of their parts. It will lift up and connect

exemplary practices in such areas as racial equity, student well-being, civic and community engagement, high-impact practices, active and inclusive pedagogies, and alternative credit-earning and calendar practices. (We have begun to publish stories of such exemplars in BT2P's biweekly newsletter, *Bringing It* [<https://bttop.org/bringing-it/>].) We are also developing a series of multiyear initiatives—partnerships with institutions or consortia—aimed at distilling and assessing “emerging models” of integrative change. These partnerships, involving institutions with various missions, faculties, and student bodies, are pursuing transformative innovations in such areas as interdisciplinary curricular design, the melding of liberal and experiential learning, the centering of community engagement and student well-being across the student experience, and holistic models for supporting low-income and adult, working undergraduates. The emerging models are at once diverse and complementary in their themes, and the Paradigm Project will, we hope, connect them in a community of practice and amplify their work in networks of change-makers. Finally we have convened a Paradigm Working Group ([https://mcusercontent.com/3e17b0e4428348084fc4375e1/files/2d0a4a64-7234-34a5-efb0-59c80d001101/Paradigm\\_Working\\_Group\\_Bios.pdf](https://mcusercontent.com/3e17b0e4428348084fc4375e1/files/2d0a4a64-7234-34a5-efb0-59c80d001101/Paradigm_Working_Group_Bios.pdf)) of academic leaders and thought-partners to help distill the larger paradigm-shift toward which these exemplars and emerging models point. Our goal in this design work is not to craft some singular utopian blueprint. It is to propose varied models of holistic, engaged, inclusive learning, grounded in a shared vision of the purposes of education.

Such visioning and programmatic design are essential to change, but they are not sufficient. They need to be braided with an effort to shift the larger public conversation about the purposes and future of higher education, for that conversation determines what purposes are legitimate and what future is imaginable. Enlarging the public narrative is the second strand of the Paradigm Project. Writings like this article, aimed largely at engaging and mobilizing fellow educators, are of course central to that effort. But the project will also engage public and academic audiences through various platforms: a concise manifesto book, op-eds in the public affairs and higher-education press, stories of exemplary change-makers in podcasts and online publications. We will

create toolkits and other deliverables with which to prompt discussion and build advocacy networks. Across all of this work, we will make the case for a vision of college that interweaves credential attainment and education for work with active learning, the flourishing of the whole person, and enabling students to contribute to democratic public life and community well-being. We will call for a relentless commitment to overcoming the racial, class, and institutional inequalities that deny such a braided, purpose-rich education to most students. And we will emphasize that such education requires new practices and policies that transcend the siloed, fragmented logic of current institutions.

The third strand of the braid is movement-building: an effort to leverage support for new paradigms and engage decision makers to realize them. The ferment of innovation that I described above was itself the result of movements across the academy: for racial justice, civic engagement, student mental health, experiential learning, and other important goals. But these have remained disconnected. Especially now, systemic change requires a movement that takes on undergraduate education as a whole. The Paradigm Project will work to enlist educators, students, and alums in advocacy networks. We will seek alliances with key stakeholders like national higher-education associations, issue-based consortia, and research projects. And we will work to bring new thinking, new resources, and grassroots voices to bear on decision makers and influencers who possess the power to realize or thwart positive change.

These efforts—integrative design, narrative change, and movement-building—are interdependent. Even the most creative innovations will remain static blueprints or stand-alone successes if they are not tested and improved in networks of support. Even the most visionary leader cannot take on institutional change without grassroots buy-in from educators and students and the permission structure of a legitimizing public narrative. If the three efforts can be braided together, they offer the possibility of activating a

“virtuous cycle” of big change. That will take collaborative innovation and collective action on the part of faculty and staff, students and alums, educational leaders and public supporters of great education. It’s a long game, and it will take energy and patience. But I believe that the work of renewal can also be renewing and joyous.

## AN INVITATION

This article, as I wrote at the start, is a call and an invitation. Even if you disagree with the argument it offers—especially if you do—let me invite you to learn more about the Paradigm Project by visiting the BT2P website. Let me urge you to share your thoughts about this article or the project at [scobey@btop.org](mailto:scobey@btop.org). If your institution, your networks, or your own experience exemplifies aspects of the positive change the academy needs, let me ask you to share your stories; BT2P understands that we need to learn from exemplars across the landscape of higher education.

Equally important, let me invite you to organize your own discussions and change networks focused around the questions I posed to myself in writing this article:

- What are the core purposes (not just the outcomes or benchmarks) of great education?
- What should such a purpose-rich education look like?
- What kind of educational experience do you believe all students deserve?
- What changes in campus practice and institutional structure would it take to offer that education to all students?

Whether your answers align with those in this article, I hope you will agree that these are urgent questions at a time of turmoil and inexorable change. They deserve collaborative reflection and collective action. If you think the Paradigm Project is offering a fruitful way forward, please join us. 