

Developing the Whole Student

How emphasizing personal development helps a college translate an ambitious mission into reality

Turning mission into reality

Like many colleges and universities, Bridgewater College identifies developing wholeness in students as its highest goal. As shown in our mission statement, we define wholeness in phrases that are also sprinkled throughout the mission statements of many of our peers:

The mission of Bridgewater College is to educate and develop the whole person. Our graduates will be equipped to become leaders, living ethical, healthy, useful, and fulfilling lives with a strong sense of personal accountability and civic responsibility. The mission is carried out in a learning community with Christian values, high standards of integrity and excellence, affirming and challenging each member.

Translating this mission into reality, however, has led us to new territory — sometimes exciting, sometimes difficult, but steadily closer to the goal we are determined to achieve. Five years ago, the faculty of Bridgewater College and I decided to emphasize the systematic development of the whole person rather than focusing only on educating in the content areas of a curriculum. To do this, the college developed what we call the Personal Development Portfolio (PDP) program. Both in program and concept, PDP is redefining the way we educate at Bridgewater College.

The nuts and bolts of PDP

The PDP program requires students to demonstrate their development in each of the following eight dimensions: academics, citizenship, cultural awareness, esthetics, ethical development, leadership, social proficiency, and wellness.

Freshmen begin this four-year program by writing and submitting to their faculty adviser an essay that details a personal plan for their development in these eight areas. Faculty advisers approve the plan, advise PDP students on how to achieve it, and work with them to document those achievements in what will become student portfolios. Each student's academic plans, co-curricular activities, leadership projects, public speaking experiences, computer skills, and service-learning activities are assessed, reflected upon, and preserved in written form. Included in the portfolio are writing samples, honors projects, and forms and letters of recommendation, all collected over the college career to document how the student is accomplishing his or her development plan.

In essence, PDP is a four-year process of refining the personal essay, increasing the number and diversity of developmental experiences, and polishing the documentation of one's portfolio—all under the direction and with the support of a faculty adviser.

In addition to the strong advising component of the PDP program throughout students' college careers, PDP groups meet as a class during the freshman year. Coursework emphasizes career planning and skills in time management, studying, and—increasingly—technology. Beyond the freshman year, PDP stresses greater involvement in internships, community service, and leadership projects as the student matures. PDP runs in sequential

By Phillip C. Stone
*President,
Bridgewater College
Bridgewater, Virginia*

*The mission is carried
out in a learning
community with
Christian values, high
standards of integrity
and excellence,
affirming and
challenging each
member.*

*From the beginning of
the sophomore year,
students have faculty
advisers in their
departments of major.*

one-hour courses: PDP 150, 250, 350, and 450. PDP 150 and 450 are required for graduation.

Because PDP 150 is the critical year for students to come on board—both from a program standpoint and conceptually—faculty with demonstrably superior mentoring skills are assigned to freshmen. The groupings are random, and PDP 150 advisers stay with their heterogeneous groups during the students' freshman year. At registration, students also consult with departmental representatives. From the beginning of the sophomore year, students have faculty advisers in their departments of major who perform both functions of registration advising and PDP advising. PDP 150 advisers receive a stipend for their PDP work.

PDP 450 requires seniors to present their portfolios to their respective departments of major. Department faculties review each senior's portfolio for breadth and depth of developmental experiences. Faculty members also interview the senior in a conversation that must demonstrate the senior's thoughtful consideration of his or her personal development in the eight dimensions of PDP.

Program consequences of PDP

PDP has spawned the birth and rebirth of other programs at Bridgewater College.

To bring more focus to the area of ethical leadership, the college started a Leadership Institute that currently operates two programs. The college initiated a High School Leadership Academy to which outstanding high school juniors are invited every summer for a weeklong leadership camp on campus. Bridgewater students participate in the Leadership Academy as group leaders—camp counselors of sorts—with significant responsibility for the high school students assigned to them.

The second initiative is a lecture series featuring guest speakers addressing Bridgewater students on aspects of leadership. Attendance at these lectures qualifies for PDP credit, so the linkage is programmed as well as conceptual. In addition there are student workshops for leaders and potential leaders conducted two weekends each year. These workshops encourage students to learn basic leadership skills and to pass them on to successive leaders in their organizations.

The college's ambitious convocation program also ties in with PDP. We invite speakers to weekly convocations on such diverse topics as preserving the oral traditions of Mayan Indians and the ethical considerations of biogenetics. Convocation attendance earns PDP credit, as does attendance at the college's endowed lectures, lyceums, theater productions, and art events. Because esthetics is one of the PDP dimensions, these programs are a natural ally to PDP.

The college's highly active service-learning program also supports PDP, particularly its citizenship dimension. Students participate in "alternate spring breaks" building houses with Habitat for Humanity, going on CROP walks (supporting hunger relief), and participating in local relief efforts with immigrant populations.

These examples are not unique to Bridgewater, but they do illustrate the deliberate way in which the college emphasizes to *every* student the importance of service, leadership, esthetic appreciation, and the other PDP dimensions. Students must consider their development in a wide range of areas and connect their participation in the college's co-curricular activities to that development.

PDP: Embracing the concept

PDP's success hinges on the strength of faculty advising. Indeed, mentoring is a better descriptor of the faculty's role in this program.

Admittedly, not all faculty embrace the shift from academic advising—with its concentration on degree requirements, classloads and choice of major—to a more personal relationship in which the student's ethical development, interpersonal skills, wellness, and even tastes are not only fair inquiries but intentional areas of focus. Some professors are uncomfortable with this role, citing lack of training, reluctance to confront personal issues, and even skepticism about the propriety of such a role.

Still other faculty view the program as a threatening shift in values from emphasis on discrete areas of substantive knowledge to the development of skills akin to those learned in "finishing schools." For example, the professors may ask, is equipping persons to become leaders (a phrase in our mission statement) better achieved by studying the lives and works of great leaders (a theoretical approach) or by learning leadership skills? And what of teaching "social proficiency," another of PDP's eight dimensions? Some faculty believe this is not in their job description.

These criticisms have been accepted and interpreted. The college reviews PDP annually and has revised it repeatedly. During the first two years of its development, PDP was discussed at almost every faculty meeting as the college further considered the program's goals and practical implications. Faculty members, along with student representatives, lead and staff the PDP Steering Committee. Currently PDP is part of the focus of the college's self-study for reaccreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Universities. Refinement is ongoing.

While faculty members have expressed mixed responses to PDP—at least partly a function of the tremendous work it demands of them—other constituents are enthusiastically supportive. Virtually without exception, parents of prospective students embrace the concept of PDP. The business community likewise craves graduates who have been challenged to think about their personal ethics, service, leadership, wellness, and ability to relate to others.

As for our students, some resist PDP as add-on work that's not relevant to their education. But many, especially the older students and PDP graduates, appreciate the nurturing they received and the systematic prodding to consider who—not just what—they want to be when they grow up. The support of these populations has directly translated into stronger admissions, retention, and job placement for graduates.

Embracing PDP is recognizing that current postmodern students require more counseling and direction than other generations have. We see all around us confusion about values, rapidly changing technology, the need to make career choices in an extraordinarily diverse workplace, and many other societal challenges. These challenges demand college graduates who are not only well-educated but can also work collaboratively, make wholesome and ethical decisions, appreciate diverse perspectives, and maintain balanced, healthy lives. These are the kind of graduates PDP is intended to develop.

We recognize that current postmodern students require more counseling and direction than other generations have.

*As faculty members
give more, they also
need to be enriched to
make them better
mentors and models.*

More work ahead

Done correctly, PDP advising is enormously time-consuming. Taking students to art galleries in regional cities, inviting PDP groups home to share an ethnic meal, attending students' debates and choral performances, meeting students individually to review their portfolios and consider how to expand them—all these tasks weigh heavily on faculty already stretched thin by full teaching loads, committee work, and scholarly pursuits. Further, as faculty members give more, they also need to be enriched to make them better mentors and models.

At issue are resources. More faculty are needed to spread the work in acceptable portions. The college is presently soliciting donor funds—\$5 million—to endow the program and support faculty development. An endowment for this program would be enormously valuable.

Though PDP has influenced many programs on campus, we have yet to realize the full potential of PDP to relate the academic (one of the eight PDP dimensions) to the co-curricular. For example, a visiting scholar who shares expertise about light should stimulate class discussions in physics, mathematics, English literature, philosophy, and religion. An art exhibit or planetarium visit should be scheduled as a tandem event. If the student who attends the lecture or art exhibit for PDP credit not only earns points in some PDP board game but is also invited to relate ideas across disciplines, then we have succeeded. We need to do even more to link the many pieces of PDP campus-wide.

Bragging rights

Done The class that graduated in 1999 was the first to participate in all four years of PDP. Although any college can point to its best and brightest and say, "Look what we did," the better test of PDP is whether it influenced the lives of freshmen who at first seem unremarkable.

Four years ago, one such freshman was a young man from Roanoke, Virginia. Although he came to Bridgewater College primarily to play basketball, that career did not materialize. During his PDP 450 senior exit interview in the business department, he specifically cited his PDP adviser and the PDP emphasis on goal-setting and time management as the key factors resulting in his college success and a meaningful choice of vocational path.

In 1995, a young woman from a small town in Pennsylvania enrolled as a freshman. Unfocused and confused about the demands of college, she almost dropped out. Instead, she began an intellectual quest that she could not have anticipated. She became involved in college organizations, accepted responsible positions of employment to finance her education, and developed herself in the eight personal dimensions articulated in the PDP program. She also became conscious of her own need to set goals and develop organizational skills. This young woman completed college with excellent recommendations for a career plus a degree of poise and self-confidence found only in mature individuals.

A model for some, not all

Since implementing our unique program in 1995, Bridgewater College has entertained a steady stream of guests hoping to replicate it to some degree at their own institutions. The PDP director and others have made national presentations for three years at meetings of the Association of American Colleges and Universities and at the National Academic Advising Association.

Though we are enthusiastic proponents of PDP, our college recognizes that not every institution will share our mission or be able, politically, to effect such a program. We are proud of Bridgewater College's mission and this unique program that supports it, and we are grateful for the dedication and patience of a campus that is embracing the politics of change.

Dr. Phillip C. Stone is president of Bridgewater College, an institution that serves nearly 1,200 full-time undergraduate students in Bridgewater, Virginia. ■