Perspectives on Education: The Missing and the Mission

William C. Levin
Bridgewater State College

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol8/iss2/6

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
It is Christmas time in a small town in mid-America during World War II. George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart played the character in Frank Capra’s now classic 1946 film *It’s a Wonderful Life*) has for years run the local savings and loan since his father’s death. He still hopes for the exotic and adventurous travel that he dreamed of when he was young, but now he is trapped by the responsibilities of his life. He has a wife and children, a large drafty house, and thousands of details to attend to in the operation of his business. But when an envelope full of cash intended for deposit is lost, the savings and loan is threatened and George Bailey sees his life coming to nothing. Despondent, he decides to jump into the river, only to be saved by his guardian angel, Clarence Odbody (played by Henry Travers). Clarence gets the clever idea of granting George Bailey’s wish “that I’d never been born.” Together they tour the town seeing what it would be like if George had never lived to influence the lives of others.

Sometimes we are called upon to justify ourselves, to evaluate how we have spent the time and breath given us. I have been thinking about these things because recently we took it upon ourselves at Bridgewater to do the institutional equivalent of a life review in our evaluation of the college’s mission. Perhaps the celebration of our 150th year as an institution of higher learning has brought on the institutional equivalent of a mid-life crisis. But even without this significant marker in our history Bridgewater would be reviewing its mission, for as anyone who has been conscious during the last few years knows, conditions in the Commonwealth have been changing so rapidly and profoundly that we all are forced to take stock.

Be assured that no institution can have taken more seriously than we have the need to examine what it has done in the past, and can and ought to do in the future. We have tried to cumulate the story and statistics of Bridgewater’s history and accomplishments, knowing the result would fill volumes, but that it could never tell the whole story of the life of this place. On the other end of the scale of detail, we are refining our mission statement. It is a demanding project because it is limited to a compact and carefully crafted few sentences designed to make clear precisely how we value education, preparation for life and careers, and the needs of our region and the wider communities to which we are responsible.

In addition we sponsored and hosted a two-day national conference sponsored by Bridgewater State and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities in which the only subject was the missions of colleges like ours. Experts from around the country made presentations and led workshops on shaping and fulfilling mission, and our own administrators, staff, and faculty were central to the process. A book summarizing the work of the conference will be published. Clearly we are taking seriously the task of defining our mission.

Having taken part in much of this effort, I cannot escape the feeling, however, that there is still a place for what I would like to call “Odbody’s technique for life review.” What would the region look like if Bridgewater State College had not been here? We could begin by citing the data for the increased earnings rates and tax payments generated by our graduates, the high percent of them who stay in the area to work and raise families, and the provision of educated citizens who attract businesses to the Commonwealth and bring knowledge and responsible citizenship to local communities. These are true, but to me, less compelling than the individual stories of the difference Bridgewater has made. Let me sketch a few for you, and though I identify them by first name, each stands for many others whose experiences they share.
This year I had a visit from Jean, a former student who attended Bridgewater in the early 1970s. She was the first in her family to attend college and, like many Bridgewater students, worked summer and part-time jobs to pay for her education. She took five years (including some evening courses) to finish, but graduated with honors and now is in charge of a state housing program. She also told me about a friend of hers who graduated the same year and manages a nursing home for a large company. Neither woman had been raised with the idea that she would get to go to college, nor a sense of herself as competent in administration or business. Would either have gotten where they are today if Bridgewater had not been available? They say no.

Another student who I have gotten to know well over the years, Robert, has become a wonderful high school teacher, and has sent many of his best students on to Bridgewater to learn to be teachers. Would the community he teaches in have one less excellent teacher now without Bridgewater? Everyone in his family had previously gone to work in a local factory. He knows the value of the work they do, but this is a

"One of the major priorities for state colleges and universities for the 1990s has to be the definition of a clear and concise mission to indicate their role among competing institutions of higher education."

Dr. Allan W. Ostar
President, American Association of State Colleges and Universities

man who says he was born to teach. He claims that without Bridgewater he would not have a job about which he is so passionate.

Lastly, there is Maureen, a woman I interviewed recently for a study of “non-traditional” students at Bridgewater. Just after high school she got married and worked in a medical lab (a job she hated) while her husband finished college. When they got divorced the children were in their early teens. She wanted to prepare herself to do something for the rest of her life that she would look forward to in the morning, rather than dread. Since she pieced together enough support from her ex-husband, family, and part-time work to go to Bridgewater, it should be no surprise that she would insist on getting nothing but “As.” This would have been unlikely without a Bridgewater nearby. I am as convinced of it as she is.

You will have to take my word for the fact that I could go on and on like this, and my colleagues could take over when I ran out of stories. The process of evaluating the mission of the college is as frustrating as trying to make sense of one’s life. We have been here so long and done so many things. But when I think of Bridgewater as the sum total of the difference we have made, then our mission can be told in the thousands of stories like the one Frank Capra told for George Bailey. I hope they all get told by the people for whom Bridgewater has made a difference.