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Profile: John Bardo, Vice President of Academic Affairs

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Being satisfied or pleased with one’s life, surroundings, relationships, and status is an important part of self-definition. But although satisfaction and the self-image that it produces is at the core of our identity, we pay little attention to those aspects of life that enhance feelings of optimism, pleasure, and being right with the world. Most people know that being satisfied is a critical ingredient to a well adjusted life, but few are able to define with any precision what factors bring about satisfaction.

Elucidating the mysteries of human satisfaction is a key element of the work of Dr. John Bardo, who this fall assumed the position of academic vice-president of the College. Trained as a sociologist with a Ph.D. from Ohio State University, Dr. Bardo has spent more than seventeen years exploring the questions of how and why people become satisfied with various aspects of their lives. In particular, Dr. Bardo has become one of the most prominent experts in the field of community satisfaction, which seeks to define what conditions in towns and cities lead to personal satisfaction. He has done extensive research in a variety of cities from Knoxville, Tennessee and Wichita, Kansas to Hemel-Hempstead, England and Istanbul, Turkey.

Hemel-Hempstead is the setting of Dr. Bardo’s most detailed research project. Built after World War II, thirty miles north of London, as a so-called “new town”, Hemel-Hempstead was hailed as a successful example of modern urban planning. Because of this reputation, he set out to determine what factors had contributed to this success. After extensive interviewing and compilation of questionnaires, he targeted social networks such as extended family structures, friends and neighbors, economic class, and gender as the key variables in defining community satisfaction. Since that initial research project, Dr. Bardo has returned periodically to Hemel-Hempstead to expand upon his research and make comparisons over time. Furthermore, his research has led to important community discussions about ways of strengthening the climate of satisfaction.

Most recently, Dr. Bardo and his wife traveled to Istanbul, Turkey, on a NATO grant to conduct similar research on community satisfaction in a less developed part of the world. The Bardos quickly realized that the ingredients of community satisfaction in Istanbul were quite different from those in Hemel-Hempstead. To their surprise, they found that better living conditions did not necessarily lead to higher levels of satisfaction. They discovered that poor residents of Istanbul were less troubled by the crowded, noisy, polluted life of the city than the wealthy, who expected more out of life.

Throughout his work, Dr. Bardo has attempted to link community satisfaction to the larger theory of symbolic interactionism. In layman’s terms, symbolic interactionism is a reflective theory that seeks to understand human behavior in terms of self-definition. As he states, we are products of what we think others think we are.

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Community satisfaction is thus not only a series of quantifiable elements that are articulated by the residents of one town or city, they are also the results of the personal perceptions that the residents have of themselves in relation to their neighbors, friends, and family members. In John Bardo’s view, symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective that can unlock many of the doors to understanding ourselves.

One of Dr. Bardo’s current research projects draws on the colleges developing a positive institutional image,’ and, ‘How can institutions of higher learning maximize their level of satisfaction?’ A volume published by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and edited by Dr. Bardo, addresses a broad range of issues relating to how public colleges and universities can stake out a unique role in higher education and respond better to the changing character of student life and community needs. Dr. Bardo’s most recently published papers discuss marketing principles in public higher education. His extensive experience in determining how communities can provide the proper setting for personal satisfaction should prove useful in his studies of academia. Dr. Bardo hopes to be able to propose new ways of enhancing self-image, creating dynamic vibrant learning environments, and developing centers of education that contribute to the general character of satisfaction in towns or cities where colleges and universities are located.

Dr. Bardo has found that a number of the satisfaction variables that strengthen the academic climate are present at Bridgewater State. He has found a culture of caring and shared values among the college faculty, and was pleasantly surprised to find little evidence of faculty divisiveness. Despite the onslaught of economic woes and the general uncertainty that has gripped the college, Dr. Bardo is gratified to see that the level of community spirit appears to be high at Bridgewater.

Bridgewater’s new academic vice-president has clearly been successful in balancing the roles of administrator and scholar. During these difficult times, it is gratifying to know that the academic life of the college has been entrusted to a man whose research has focused on defining the qualities that make institutions better places for living and learning. We wish Dr. Bardo well and hope that his tenure as academic vice-president will lead to a time in which Bridgewater maximizes its level of satisfaction.