

Bethel University

Even without the arrival of the January Thaw, things are heating up in the Town of Bethel as organizers meet to plan courses for a pop-up college known as Bethel University (<http://betheluniversityvt.org/>). A pop-up college is a variation on the pop-up store, a short-term sales space that has gained popularity across the U.S. in recent years. (VLCT's home town of Montpelier features a pop-up solar energy store art gallery.) In Bethel University's case, anyone can volunteer to teach a course on any topic, and anyone can take courses for free. So far, courses are only offered during the month of March.

In 2015, only the second year of its existence, the BU teaching crew increased to 52 "professors" who offered 42 courses ranging from auto mechanics to bread baking, from conversational French to basics of photography, from easy sourdough bread to introduction to tarot. The university received nearly 420 course registrations, with people coming from 37 towns in Vermont and beyond. Statistically, 92 percent of the participants said they learned new information and 75 percent learned about local businesses, and 100 percent of its professors said they felt more connected to the community.

Bethel University is a truly community effort. All of its courses are free of charge, ensuring that anyone can participate. BU is organized entirely by volunteers and its venues are offered for free by the Town of Bethel, its schools, the Bethel Public Library, and other organizations or individuals.

"The month of March was chosen primarily because of the encroaching onset of cabin fever," says BU organizer Rebecca Stone. "We've talked a lot about whether to expand and have no concrete plans for that at the moment. Our team seems to agree that there's something special (and manageable for volunteers) about having a big, short burst of energy with all the classes concentrated in March." That said, there's been a lot of interest in offering other classes throughout the year, or doing a second semester in the summer or fall. "That could happen someday," she adds.

The idea of the pop-up university evolved as a way to help Bethel recover from Irene, the August 2011 tropical storm that so devastated the town. The Bethel Revitalization Initiative, BU's parent organization, actively solicited ideas from townspeople as to what they would like to see happen as part of the recovery efforts. Kirk White, Founder and Chair of the Bethel Revitalization Initiative, says they erected poster boards around town and at community events that asked *What Do You Imagine For Bethel?* "We held a Community Forward Initiative where we gathered representatives from as many town clubs, groups, organizations, and official committees to envision ideas," he says. "Two of the most common responses were having classes in town and using town hall and other spaces more. From this, the idea for Bethel University was born."

BRI's unofficial mission statement is to initiate, instigate, and support creative ways to help Bethel solve problems and revitalize the community. "In that regard," continues White, "we are only loosely organized; ... tasks and responsibilities are taken up by volunteers as fits their skills, interest, and available time. In that way, Bethel University is a 'do-ocracy,' which is defined as 'an organizational structure in which individuals choose roles and tasks for themselves and execute them.' Responsibilities attach to people who do the work, rather than elected or selected officials."

BU organizers recently realized that the pop-up university model could be a platform to serve other community groups or initiatives that are looking for a way to educate the community, “specifically, a ready-made registration platform, system, and listserve through which we could help other groups offer classes – conservation classes on Green Up Day, for example, or if the fire dept. needed to train more volunteers,” says Rebecca Stone. “Again, [we have] no concrete plans to do that, but this is an ever-evolving project,” she adds.

So far, courses have been determined completely by what people want to teach. Each year BU organizers have informally asked people what they’d like to take, and then they publicize that information. It’s a passive way of encouraging people to step up and offer to teach those classes.

Printing costs are among the few expenses not covered by volunteer workers and the generosity of teachers, and they are covered by small grants and donations from local sponsors.

Both Stone and White agree that BU has had benefits for Bethel beyond anything they could have imagined, and they just keep, er, *popping up*. “I keep hearing of more people who’ve moved to the community in part because they were excited about BU, or now know how to get involved in the community because of BU,” says Stone. And now, a few other Vermont towns that learned of BU have contacted them, expressing interest in starting their own community colleges.

Think you’d like to teach a BU course this March? It’s not too late to offer your services. Just contact BU at <http://betheluniversityvt.org/contact/>.

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