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What Are Student-Faculty Partnerships?

Our Guiding Principles and Definition

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Partnerships are based on respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility between students and faculty. These qualities of relationship emerge when we are able to bring students' insights into discussions about learning and teaching practice in meaningful ways—ways that make teaching and learning more engaging and effective for students and for ourselves. In our own teaching and in the partnership work we have studied, we have found that respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility are fostered when we draw on students' insights not only through collecting their responses to our courses but also through working with them to study and design teaching and learning together. So what do we mean by working with students in this way?

We begin this chapter with a discussion of the three principles that guide our vision of student-faculty partnerships, and we move from that discussion into our definition of student-faculty partnership. We then offer a brief story that illustrates what is possible when students and faculty engage in partnership. We conclude this chapter by reflecting on the ways in which our notion of partnership may seem radical—even countercultural—within many higher education institutions; however, this work is not without precedent. With this foundation established, we hope you can move through the subsequent chapters of the book with a clear vision of student-faculty partnership.

Guiding Principles for Student-Faculty Partnerships

All practice is guided explicitly or implicitly by underlying principles: they are the spoken or unspoken commitments according to which we act. We have come to believe that student-faculty partnerships rooted in the principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility are most powerful and efficacious. Each of these principles is foundational to genuine relationships of any kind, and each is particularly important in working within and, in some cases, against the traditional roles students and faculty are expected to assume in higher education. All three of them require and inspire trust, attention, and responsiveness. They embody what Delpit (1988) has described as listening not only with "open eyes and ears but also open hearts and minds" (p. 298), and they lead to informed action and interaction.

You are likely to have your own associations with each of these terms, so we spend a little time next explaining what we understand by respect, reciprocity, and responsibility, particularly within the context of student-faculty partnerships.

Respect

Respect is an attitude. It entails taking seriously and valuing what someone else or multiple others bring to an encounter. It demands openness and receptivity, it calls for willingness to consider experiences or perspectives that are different from our own, and it often requires a withholding of judgment. In our research, student partners frequently comment on the centrality of respect to their collaborative work with faculty; for instance, one student advises faculty to "be as open as you possibly can. The key to these types of exchanges is respect, honesty, and an ability to expose yourself to new and different perspectives."

Partnership is built on and through communication. Therefore, this first principle is foundational to pedagogical partnerships because, as one student asserted, "You can't have good communication without respect. If I don't respect you, we can't communicate" (Sanon et al., 2001, p. 119). Since dialogue is important in any partnership, you need to establish respect between yourself and those with whom you work, through the expression and reception of open eyes, ears, hearts, and minds. While we advocate that everyone entering a partnership bring an attitude of respect, we have found that it takes time to build trust in practice. The structures and norms of higher education do not necessarily foster the kind of respect that makes student-faculty collaboration into genuine partnership work, so we urge you to take the time to nurture trust and respect.

Some manifestations of respect that you will see in the chapters of this book include the explicit and regular acknowledgment of the different perspectives students and faculty bring to this work. There are examples that make it clear that while student and faculty experiences, perspectives, and even goals are sometimes different, each is taken into consideration and valued. Respect also informs the structures that support the active and engaged participation of both students and faculty members: the examples of partnership in this book illustrate the range of ways that partners and programs create forums and projects that enable students and faculty to contribute in meaningful but different ways to exploring and developing pedagogical practice.

Reciprocity

There is a close connection between respect and reciprocity, the second of our principles. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2000) asserts, "Respect: To get it, you must give it" (p. 22). Likewise, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) argue that teacher-student relationships "have to be respectful, and the respect must be in both directions" (p. 53). However, while respect is an attitude, reciprocity is a way of interacting. It is a process of balanced give-and-take; there is equity in what is exchanged and how it is exchanged. Therefore, what this principle embodies is the mutual exchange that is key to student-faculty partnerships. As we state in multiple places in this book, we are not suggesting that students and faculty get and give exactly the same things in pedagogical partnerships. Indeed, partnerships invite faculty and students to share differing experiences and perspectives; those differences are part of what can make partnerships so rich and diverse.

The most basic manifestation of reciprocity in partnerships occurs when students offer their experiences of, and perspectives on, what it is like to be a learner in a course while faculty offer their experiences of, and perspectives on, teaching that course. As the examples and statements we include throughout the book illustrate, when these distinct yet valid sets of experiences and perspectives are shared, partners have the potential to deepen understanding and improve teaching and learning. Reciprocity also involves students taking on some responsibility for teaching and faculty re-envisaging themselves not only as teachers, but also as learners alongside their students.

A general example might help illustrate this principle. In a discussion among a group of students and a faculty member about revising a course syllabus, one student might explain how she experienced a particular assignment, noting how the framing question piqued her curiosity but that the grading rubric seemed to limit her creativity in responding to the assignment. Another student might have a different take on this, highlighting different aspects of the assignment and how they worked for him. A third student might agree with some points the first student made and some points the second student made, but have yet a third angle to share. The faculty member could explain what she had in mind with the assignment, the pedagogical rationale for it, and why she designed it as she did. In this exchange, each would gain insight into the others' perspectives, and the result might be that the faculty member affirms some aspects of the assignment and revises other aspects. The students develop a better sense of what is involved in crafting course assignments—an understanding that increases their capacities as students, with potential for future benefit. At the same time, the faculty member learns from students' perspectives that there are alternative approaches to inviting students to demonstrate their learning in this course, and which approaches students seem to value more and why.

Responsibility

Our third principle is both a prerequisite for, and an outcome of, student-faculty partnerships. One faculty member captured the connections between reciprocity and responsibility this way: "Participating in this project gave me a sense of students being able and wanting to take certain pedagogical responsibility, and the counter of that is me taking a learning responsibility." In this recognition we see the give and take of reciprocity and we also see how partnership work changes student and faculty orientation toward responsibility. Students now have some responsibility for pedagogy and faculty share some responsibility for learning.

Reliability and trustworthiness, on both the student side and the faculty side, are essential if partnerships are to develop productively. At the same time, we find that participating in student-faculty partnerships prompts both students and faculty to be more responsible and responsive. In our research we have heard over and over the student refrain that collaborative work with faculty makes them realize that "it is up to the entire community to make learning spaces function, so that means students have just as much responsibility as professors." As we will discuss in detail in Chapter 5, faculty who work in partnership with students typically have a similar reaction, often redefining their understanding of their responsibilities to the students they are teaching.

When both students and faculty take more responsibility for the educational project, teaching and learning become "community property" (Shulman, 2004a), with students recognized as active members of that community and collaborative partners equally invested in the common effort to engage in, and support, learning.

So What Exactly Do We Mean by Partnership?

Partnership is a slippery term to define (Harrison et al., 2003), and student-faculty partnership might be particularly so because of the vast diversity within higher education. However, Bird and Koirala (2002) identify four key qualities of meaningful partnerships that are closely related to the principles we offered in the previous section and that also inform our definition: (1) trust and respect, (2) shared power, (3) shared risks, and (4) shared learning. These qualities are not always present in college and university classrooms, but we believe that they can be cultivated and nurtured in ways that both constitute partnership and allow student-faculty collaboration to develop.

Partnerships rarely emerge suddenly in full bloom; instead, they grow and ripen over time as we engage with students. We invite students to think about the teaching and learning process. We solicit student feedback and then use that information to change our teaching. We create spaces in class for students to step into the role of the teacher by leading discussions or presenting their research. We challenge students to work together to solve complex problems or to make sense of difficult texts, while we listen carefully and watch, providing guidance or asking questions to help students avoid dead-ends and to focus on central issues. These practices, and many more, imply a degree of student engagement and activity focused on learning and teaching. However, they may or may not involve students collaborating with faculty as partners, or achieve the respect, reciprocity, and responsibility as we define them above, or reflect the qualities of meaningful partnership that Bird and Koirala (2002) identify.

We define student-faculty partnership as a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis. This definition stands in contrast to the student-as-consumer model that has become increasingly prevalent in higher education. It also departs from the traditional "sage-on-the-stage" model of teaching. Partnership, as we define it, positions both students and faculty as learners as well as teachers; it brings different but comparably valuable forms of expertise to bear on the educational process. In this way, partnership redefines the roles of student and faculty not only in relation to one another but also in relation to the institutions within which we work. Partnership redefines processes and therefore our approach to analysis, pedagogical practice, and research in ways that emphasize affirmation as well as create opportunities for change.

We want to be clear, though, that when we talk of partnership (particularly when we use terms like "shared power"), we do not mean that faculty and students are the same. Hildyard and colleagues point out that "many participatory projects rest on the dubious assumption that simply identifying different 'stakeholders' and getting them around the table will result in a consensus being reached that is 'fair' to all." They argue that "such an assumption only holds, however, if all the actors involved are deemed to have equal bargaining power (which they do not)" (Hildyard et al., 2001, p. 69). In student-faculty collaborations, we need to acknowledge that our roles, expertise, responsibilities, and status are different. And they should be. Partnership does not require a false equivalency, but it does mean that the perspectives and contributions made by partners are equally valued and respected and that all participants have an equivalent opportunity to contribute. We spend many years developing and honing our scholarly expertise. Likewise, students spend many years experiencing and, in some cases, analyzing learning that might or might not be optimal and engaging. Partnership brings these forms of experience and expertise into dialogue in ways that inform and support more intentional action. One faculty member who participated in a partnership program explained her understanding of this approach in these terms:

> I think when most faculty hear of a program in which students are involved as commentators and collaborators, they assume that the program is giving the students unfettered authority or equality in the teaching process. But I realize now that taking student contributions seriously DOES NOT mean blindly or directly following their opinions and suggestions, but rather taking them seriously, carefully reflecting on and analyzing them, and then addressing the core concerns behind them in a way that is consistent with my overall goals and values.

So while we recognize that the partnership model we advocate represents a significant shift in attitude and approach, and in some contexts, perhaps a dramatic shift, we also want to emphasize that studying and designing teaching and learning in partnership with students does not mean that we simply turn the responsibility for conceptualizing curricular and pedagogical approaches over to students, nor does it suggest we should always do everything they recommend to us. Rather, it means that we engage in a more complex set of relationships involving genuine dialogue with students. Otherwise, we are in danger of what Cleaver describes as "swinging from one untenable position (we know best) to an equally untenable and damaging one (they know best)" (Cleaver, 2001, p. 47).

According to our guiding principles and definition, partnership involves negotiation through which we listen to students but also articulate our own expertise, perspectives, and commitments. It includes making collaborative and transparent decisions about changing our practices in some instances and not in others and developing mutual respect for the individual and shared rationales behind these choices. Indeed, it means changing our practices when appropriate, but also reaffirming, with the benefit of students' differently informed perspectives, what is already working well. Sometimes it means following where students lead, perhaps to places we may not have imagined or been to before. In all of these cases, respect and reciprocity are integral to the learning process: we share our perspectives and commitments and listen openly to students' insights, they share theirs and listen to ours, and in the exchange, we all become wiser.

How Radical Is the Notion of Student-Faculty Partnership?

The qualities of student-faculty relationships that we are describing might sound quite unfamiliar or even fanciful to some readers. Each of us has been told: "That might work with your students, but I cannot see it happening with mine." While we do not promise that partnership will be easy or comfortable (at least not at first), we are convinced it is possible—and desirable—across contexts in higher education. Initiating partnerships, however, requires stepping out of traditional roles, something that always is a challenge both to imagine and to do. In many instances, faculty take sole responsibility for creating and teaching courses. This orientation is often experienced by faculty in a largely positive way, enacting our professional obligations and honoring academic freedom. However, this approach also means that students are completely outside the course planning and teaching process.

In essence, students are primarily responsible for proceeding through the pre-planned weeks of the curriculum, regardless of whether they know why they are doing what they are doing. While some students may be quite active and engaged in this environment, others float along, adrift in their education, because that is often what they think we expect of them (Arum and Roska, 2010; Mann, 2008). Students may choose not to complete the reading or speak up in class. They may do the minimum they can get away with, and then complain about the (sometimes generous) grade they receive. Too often faculty and schools unintentionally convey these low expectations to students, and students who feel voiceless, passive, and disempowered then act that way (Green and Popovich, 2012). Indeed, many of our pedagogical assumptions and practices may be contributing to a sense of disengagement. Sambell and colleagues conclude that in many higher education classrooms "our approaches seem to suggest that students are 'problems' or lacking in some way," requiring us to structure and dictate their every action in a highly detailed syllabus (Sambell et al., 2012, p. 149). This is a cycle that alienates both students and faculty from each other, as well as from the shared task that brings us together in the first place.

The experiences we bring to higher education also create distance between faculty and students. In some ways, that distance is hard earned. Faculty have spent years pursuing graduate studies, and sometimes decades after that honing our craft, to become disciplinary experts. Students are not our peers in knowledge, skills, or learning, so it is no surprise that we see them as the recipients, the beneficiaries, of our scholarly achievements. This leads to a situation in which students are considered the people we teach *to*, not the people we are in class *with*. At the same time, students often come to university after years of being taught to be relatively passive learners. In many cases, they have been rewarded for following a prescribed curriculum that prepares them to successfully pass a standardized test that then gives them access to the next high-stakes exam. In many contexts, schooling is a slog, not an opportunity to explore, to learn, and to grow.

We envision partnership as creating the conditions for curiosity and common inquiry, breaking down the barriers that often distance students from faculty. While that might seem radical to some, student-faculty partnerships are not a new phenomenon in education. A century ago John Dewey championed schools where students would have a stronger voice in their own learning experiences (Dewey, 1916). Since then, many theorists and reformers have advocated similar or even more radical ideas (Bovill, 2013b), and students have sometimes asserted their desire to contribute to curricular and institutional decision making. Indeed, some of today's faculty and academic staff were, not so long ago, among those students who cried out for a more engaged and engaging university.

Although student-faculty partnerships are not entirely new or novel, they are outside the norm at many colleges and universities. We believe that this situation needs to change. Even in a climate when both time and money are all too rare, we believe that flexible, sustainable, and often simple practices of partnership can transform students, faculty, and institutions, helping all of us to achieve our aspirations for higher education. While breaking old habits and shifting established culture can be difficult for students and faculty, our current practices are socially constructed, not inevitable. They have developed over time, and they will continue to change as students, faculty, and education evolve. Indeed, the growth of free, online education is just one example to suggest that under the right circumstances many students will voluntarily study challenging material for no extrinsic reward. Research consistently demonstrates that students will work hard and engage deeply when they experience learning as personally meaningful (Schlechty, 2011; Nygaard et al., 2013). To tap into that motivation and engagement, we need to move away from the isolation fostered by our traditional roles as students and faculty. Instead, we can strive to act as partners, equally invested in the common goal of learning. Embracing change like this requires openness to what Shulman (2004b) has called "visions of the possible" that can inspire our thinking and practice, even when such visions might be offering just a glimpse of a distant horizon.

One Vision of the Possible

To give you a quick sense of what participant experiences within some of these programs can look like and what partnerships can lead to, we will offer a brief story that we see as an illustration of the transformative potential of an institutionally supported student-faculty partnership. This story unfolds within the context of Bryn Mawr College's Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program, which we introduced in the Preface. In this program, participating faculty and students meet throughout the semester to discuss what they are learning through their partnerships, how their understandings of teaching and learning are being clarified or challenged, and the ways in which they might be reaffirming or revising pedagogical approaches in the classrooms under study. In this and other forums the program provides, teachers not only learn about themselves as teachers, students learn about themselves as learners.

In one meeting of SaLT participants, a student reflected on her experience and shared with the group how her first semester as a consultant changed her orientation toward teaching and learning:

> When I was writing the last paper I had [in a particular class], I found myself looking at the prompt and thinking more. The professor wasn't necessarily explicit about making connections, but I found myself being able to look at what the assignment was and being more able to decipher what the professor was emphasizing and what they were looking for. I think I ended up writing a better paper as a result. And it was sort of interesting to realize that I don't think I would have thought of this last semester; I would have just answered the question. Whereas this was more like, what is the intent behind the questions, and why are these questions set up as they are?

This student attributed her critical, active approach toward learning to her consulting partnership with a faculty member. After hearing this student speak, a faculty member mused, "The kind of reflective understanding that the student consultant gets through her work with a faculty member isn't inert; it makes her a much better learner."

While that story is about a particular student in a specific context, it suggests possibilities for diverse students at many different types of institutions. This student's story highlights how she became a better student—more reflective and better prepared for her own academic work—through her conversations with her faculty partner, and how this then altered how she approached work for other classes. She became a more actively engaged learner through partnership, and she carried that active engagement beyond her partnership.

All of us can recall students like this. These students are so engaged with their studies that they truly make the work their own. They might be common or rare on your campus, but they are everywhere. They don't just answer our questions, they ask their own (often better) questions—and then they relentlessly pursue answers. Many other students we quote throughout the book illustrate how this passion and engagement can be kindled. Such engagement is the fundamental goal of student-faculty partnerships and, as the story above illustrates, is also fostered by them. We believe this collaborative work leads to a radical shift in teaching; rather than faculty and students facing each other across a room in a combative manner, we are sitting on the same side of the desk, working together to pursue the common goal of learning and development.

Throughout the chapters in this book, we include stories like this, as well as shorter reflections from participants in student-faculty partnerships, to give you a sense of how faculty and students experience this kind of respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. As we state in our Preface, our inclusion of so many faculty and student voices reflects our commitment to participatory dialogue and shared meaning making. The quotes are also consistent with our core belief that we create meaning through sharing stories, as well as engaging in systematic and intentional study (Shadiow, 2013).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have articulated our core beliefs about the transformative potential of student-faculty partnerships. We emphasize that in partnership students and faculty make distinct contributions that are equally valued in the pursuit of common goals. What each brings to the partnership—the experiences, expertise, and perspectives—is respected and valued and drawn upon as students and faculty together explore, affirm, and, where appropriate, revise curricular and pedagogical approaches. In this discussion we have attempted to balance what we mean by partnership and what we do not mean, what we advocate and what we do not, and both the contextual constraints we all face and the historical precursors of such an approach.

Our discussion thus far may have raised questions for you, or perhaps you have come to this text with a number of questions. In the next chapter, we address many of the questions we are regularly asked, and we hope our responses prepare you to read about some concrete examples of student-faculty partnerships, which we present in Chapters 3 and 4.