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From the Student Perspective: How Consulting Increases Student Responsibility and Confidence

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FROM THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

How Consulting Increases Student Responsibility and Confidence



Erica Seaborne, an English major who graduated from Bryn Mawr in 2009, spent four semesters as a TLI Student Consultant working with faculty members in different departments at the College. In the following set of reflections, Erica emphasizes the sense of responsibility she developed as a Student Consultant and how that has influenced her life and work experiences since graduating.

When I took on the role of Student Consultant through the TLI, I expected it to be challenging—working with professors, getting out traditional roles of student and professor. But I also thought that I would learn a lot. After just two semesters, I noticed a new confidence in myself, and an awareness of my impact of my own education. In Fall 2008, I wrote:

Participation in TLI has really made me feel more responsible for my own education. I no longer think that professors are responsible for having all the answers and making a class perfect and wonderful to suite my own needs. It is up to the entire community to make learning spaces function, so that means students have just as much responsibility as professors.

During my partnerships with two very different faculty members teaching very different classes, I saw myself move from a student who, like so many others, complains but doesn't do anything about my dissatisfaction, to one who takes responsibility for my learning. In a meeting of Student Consultants, I said:

As students, we complain about a lot of things. We can always find something to complain about [whether it be] our classes or our professors. It's really nice to see people doing something about that complaining or with the problems and dealing with them in a positive way, instead of just saying, "Ahh, my professor sucks! What am I going to do?" Doing this [work as a Student Consultant] has helped me as a student to approach some of my professors in my classes. I had an experience this semester that I didn't like, but I was able to go to the professor and say, "These are my problems, and these are things that I wish could be different," and she really listened to me and tried. And I wouldn't have done that otherwise.

At the same time that I developed this sense of responsibility for my own educational experience, I also began to think about the importance of considering the diverse experiences of other students in my classes and what they bring. In Fall 2008 I wrote:

Doing this work helped me to think about how to function in class when you have students coming from all different backgrounds and planning to

go very different places in their lives. I think it helped me to realize that you can't take any students as a blank slate. There is so much behind students and what they're bringing into the college.

My developing a sense of my own responsibility as a student to myself and to others helped me clarify how an awareness of responsibility should inform all college classrooms. When I was working with a professor in Fall 2008 on how to develop more culturally responsive classrooms, I said:

Both professors and students need to realize that they come into the classroom with a certain responsibility, if it is going to be a culturally responsive classroom — to be open to each other, to allow one another to sit in uncomfortable positions and sort of deal with that instead of backing away from it. And I think when I first learned about culturally responsive teaching in an education class, I thought of it as culturally sensitive. But being a Student Consultant has made me take responsibility for my own education, and that's how I think came to think of culturally responsive teaching as more being about responsibility.

I was fortunate in that the faculty member with whom I worked that semester invited me to take up just the kind of responsibility I had come to see as essential, by asking for my help in creating a syllabus. Reflecting on the opportunity I had to work with him, I wrote in Spring 2009:

Toward the end of the semester, my professor and I agreed that I would help him in planning for a new course that he was going to be teaching the following semester. After several planning meetings with just him, myself and the TA for the class, he decided that it would be fun and interesting to invite some other students to participate in the discussion. For an hour over lunch, three other students and I talked with the professor about interesting assignments to plan for, how much or how little reading to assign, what it would be like teaching a new class to a small group of seniors from several different majors, and just what, in general, goes into planning for a course. We were all really excited to be involved in that sort of process, and found that the more honest and frank we were, the more creative and excited the professor had the freedom to be. At the end of the conversation, the professor said, "Wouldn't it be great if all classes were planned this way?" And, in fact, it would. Allowing students to enter into a dialogue with professors about the classes they teach gives a sense of responsibility and contribution to all involved. I think this lunch epitomizes the goals that [the TLI] is working toward, and how students can become more active in their own education and increase the feeling of community in a learning environment. It also shows how the student consultant role can be expanded to include more than just those who actually wear the title, and how any student input can be a great resource for professors.

Looking back on my years of working with the TLI, I admire how the work of the Teaching and Learning Initiative serves to foster a sense of community not only within a classroom, but also on campus, and between students and professors. In the fall of my senior year, I said:

One of the reasons that I would never give this is up is that I've gained so many connections with professors and with students that I never would have met before. It's cool - you see your professor around campus, and they introduce you to another professor, and you just keep building off these great connections. And I think I've really stepped up and become part of my classes in a different way, and I know that's because of student consulting.

Since graduating from Bryn Mawr College I have made the scary and intimidating leap into the working world. I recently accepted a position at a well-known nonprofit organization in Philadelphia, and the feelings of nervousness and trepidation I felt leading up to my first day in the office brought me back to my very first meeting of Student Consultants. What do I have to offer this established organization? Will I be able to provide something new and different? What is the importance of my perspective?

As a Student Consultant, it took me some time to find the answers to these questions for myself, and there were many times when I doubted that I would, or even could. But today, the lessons that I learned in those four semesters are still with me, and I went into my first day with great confidence in everything that I know and everything that I am. I know that wherever I go and whatever I do, I have a responsibility to express my thoughts, my experiences, and my voice. It is the combination of our voices that creates a community — a place where everyone is valued, there is shared responsibility, and growth and change are made possible.