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# From the Student Perspective: Reflections on Seven Core Principles of Facilitating Faculty-Student Partnerships within an Educational Initiative

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## **FROM THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: REFLECTIONS ON SEVEN CORE PRINCIPLES OF FACILITATING FACULTY- STUDENT PARTNERSHIPS WITHIN AN EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVE**

### **Margaret A. Powers**

*Margaret A. Powers attended Bryn Mawr College as an undergraduate from 2006-2010. She completed a major in Psychology and a minor in Educational Studies. Currently, Margaret is a graduate student at American University where she is getting her masters in International Training and Education and pursuing her interests in early childhood education and educational technology.*

During the four years that I attended Bryn Mawr College as an undergraduate, I worked in multiple roles through the various branches of the Teaching and Learning Initiative (TLI). I was a participant, meaning that I partnered with different staff members on campus in reciprocal teaching and learning relationships (e.g., I taught Italian and my partner taught me to cook); a co-teacher of courses for staff members interested in developing their computing skills, coordinator of staff-student partnerships; student consultant to participating faculty members; and summer intern. As my four years working with the TLI came to a close, I began to reflect more deeply on exactly what factors make the Initiative function, what makes it a success. The multiple roles I had taken on allowed me to consider this question from a multifaceted perspective. I was able to think back over all of the observations I made and the conclusions I reached as I constantly reflected on my experiences during my undergraduate career. I then examined how these ideas could apply in other contexts or with other educational initiatives. Through consultation with other participants and coordinators in the TLI and through on-going self-reflection, I have concluded that there are seven core principles that are needed to make the TLI, and other initiatives like it, successful.

These seven principles are:

1. Meet people where they are
2. Engage in constant communication and active listening
3. Set goals
4. Utilize affirmations
5. Have a collaborative and reciprocal partnership framework
6. Embed continual learning and research, and
7. Self-define and respect time.

In providing an overview of how each principle is defined and a broader discussion of the importance and power of these principles for educational initiatives, I will focus on how these principles manifest in partnerships between faculty members and undergraduate students, illustrating how I see teaching and learning together in higher education.

## **1. Meet People Where They Are**

Ideally, the first step for any new initiative is to create a foundation of openness and trust that meets each individual where he or she is at and does not label or restrict applicants on the basis of their backgrounds, experiences, or achievements. The key is to accept each participant as an individual instead of a statistic, an asset, or an opportunity for the program. If people are welcomed into a unique community, one that can act almost as a family, where interpersonal relations are consciously constructed to allow for difference and where relationships have the time and space to grow into meaningful connections, participants will have opportunities to feel empowered and valued. Accepting difference means not only acknowledging the diversity that people bring to the initiative but also naming those differences and openly entering into dialogue about them so that each person can begin to hear and understand what it may be like to hold a different role in that community and what types of various experiences each participant is walking in with. For example, in the TLI ‘difference’ is defined as an opportunity and coordinators in the initiative work to remove or help participants avoid making judgments about whether certain types of knowledge are more important than others, fostering a community interested in both teaching and learning instead of grading and categorizing. A critical difference that exists between faculty and student participants is the unique perspective they each bring based on their standardized role (i.e., teacher and student) and the associated difference in power and authority those roles connote.

In order for faculty-student partnerships to be effective, student consultants need to understand the importance of meeting faculty where they are and need to use this principle as a foundation for their partnership. One of the challenges in this process is managing the assumptions and expectations students may bring to a partnership about what faculty are looking to gain, how much time and effort they are putting into a course, and how much concern faculty do or do not have for the students in their courses. The student consultant handbook that all consultants receive and conversations with past consultants really help guide students in thinking through their assumptions and expectations before meeting with their faculty partners for the first time. These sources of input provide students with the opportunity to work to set assumptions and expectations aside so that they do not cloud students’ abilities to meet faculty where they are. Instead, student consultants are encouraged and empowered to openly discuss questions, concerns, and goals with faculty partners and to be active observers in the classroom so that students and faculty can work at a level and pace that is best for their individual partnership. At times, the goals and pace of work in the partnership may need to be adjusted as fluctuations occur in the workload of the semester and as the dynamics of a classroom change.

As faculty begin to implement new pedagogical approaches or explore different classroom practices, students have to adapt their expectations and ideas about how a professor’s classroom will or should change and how much a professor could or should work to adjust his or her practices based on how students in the class react and how the professor manages these new

changes. This process of meeting a person where he or she is and continuing to update and adapt goals, expectations, and assumptions can also cause shifts in the power dynamic of the relationship. While the overarching authority in the partnership may be assumed to lie with the professor due to standard differences in student-faculty roles, as time continues student consultants often have the opportunity to share the authority and power in the partnership as their faculty partners begin to value the consultant's expertise as a student and as consultants begin to realize the impact of their observations and ideas in effecting classroom change.

Meeting people where they are at gives participants the freedom to create and work in spaces that they can define for themselves without the limits of standards or the pressure of achievement-based evaluation. One of the most important values of the TLI is the commitment to appreciating each person's humanity. By allowing participants to express these feelings and share these experiences, and by supporting the development of relationships based on meeting people where they are and moving forward from there, the TLI creates a space that is woven together by each individual, not only as a participant in the program, but as a person who is appreciated and recognized for her lived experiences. This brings people closer together and connects them in a unique way. By allowing for that time and creating that space together, we can then have a foundation for even deeper conversations about more sensitive topics (e.g., class barriers at an elite liberal arts college).

## **2. Engage in Constant Communication and Active Listening**

For an initiative like the TLI to function, there needs to be constant communication among and between participants and program coordinators. People need to feel invited and encouraged to communicate about anything from an idea, to a suggestion, a question, or a concern so that potential issues do not become explosive or foster fears that develop into barriers to program growth. The TLI helps to establish open pathways for communication paired with an expectation of active listening by offering participants basic guidelines at the beginning of each semester about their partnerships and by holding weekly reflection meetings that model these types of expressive exchanges. This allows participants to have a framework that they can take back to their partners as they begin to build trust and respect for one another and experience the impact of both consciously listening and learning from others' experiences and from communicating their own.

When student consultants meet with their faculty partners for the first time, active listening allows students to hear not just the general theme of what a professor is saying (e.g., I would like to create more of class community) but also the tones in which things are said and potential areas that could use further clarification and fleshing out. For example, in an initial meeting with one of my faculty partners I heard him voice some concern about how effective he felt his partnership with me could be. Observing both the concern in his voice and his hesitation with the topic, I realized that I would need to meet his concern by communicating as clearly as possible what each of our assumptions, expectations, and goals were for the partnership and giving our relationship time to develop. I was able to use the weekly partnership meetings to discuss my concerns about potential barriers to developing a productive relationship with my partner and to brainstorm the best ways to communicate how our partnership could grow and develop over time. This process was successful in fostering the development of a productive partnership.

Through open communication and active listening, participants can learn to set their assumptions aside and simply listen to what their partners are saying, without looking to match what they hear with preconceived notions or fit the other person inside a predefined box. The true power of the TLI comes from the fact that we not only ask participants to enter into our programs and learn to place value on their individuality, to use their agency to develop new relationships and define ever-changing roles, to listen and communicate but to do all of this with another person and then be open to the meaningful exchange that can occur when two people communicate in this way.

### **3. Set Goals**

By creating goals, participants in an initiative have clear and concrete objectives that they can strive towards. In the TLI, participants are guided through this goal-setting process from day one, starting with an orientation and an initial partnership meeting, so that there is always an aim and something definite that partners are hoping to get from their involvement, as well as a distinct pathway that they can begin to travel together. Goal setting also allows for an intrinsic reason and feeling of celebration at the close of a semester or partnership because goals provide definitive benchmarks for what has been accomplished or at least explored and examined. These celebrations are vital to producing new energy and revitalizing an initiative to support continual growth and development. In a sense, goal setting becomes a renewable resource that helps participants and coordinators set criteria for themselves and the programs that can help measure the impact and importance of the initiative.

When students and faculty first meet to discuss their partnerships and the course the student will be observing, both participants are asked to take time to discuss their goals. Faculty members outline their goals for what they hope to do (e.g., explore different types of classroom interactions such as group work or student-led lessons) or change (e.g., the type of classroom environment or the class structure) over the course of the semester and students express their own goals for working with the faculty member and growing in their role as consultants. In addition to goals for the class itself, each partner may share hopes and ideas about how they would like to grow personally from participating in the TLI and how their knowledge of teaching and learning may grow and change through the partnership. These goals and hopes are revisited continually throughout the semester so that there is room for development and change. A professor may realize that her or his particular class needs support in using technology, which may not have been a goal she or he originally articulated, and a student consultant may discover that she is interested in learning more about how the professor creates lesson plans and ask to observe that process. Over time, partners grow more comfortable sharing these hopes and goals and can really work together to make meaningful progress in achieving their goals and fulfilling their hopes for the partnership, both pedagogically and personally.

Goal setting is a shared activity that then creates a shared motivation between participants to teach, learn, and work together to become collaborators. By having joint goals, participants become a team that must learn to negotiate and coordinate ideas. This process facilitates the creation of a new space in which the partnership can flourish and grow, where they can, together, define the time that is put into their partnership – a space for personal sharing and mutual exchange. In the TLI, this creates a unique opportunity for students and faculty to generate joint

goals and expectations and it opens up new pathways of access and possibility between partners and campus departments and across conventional barriers to collegiality and collaboration.

Without the encouragement and challenge created by goal setting to continue pushing boundaries and overcome accepted definitions of roles, the TLI could easily become a stagnant initiative that never moves beyond the progress it has currently made. Instead, each participant is supported and empowered to personally challenge her or his own ideas about teaching and learning and to be continually re-envisioning how things could be with her or his partner and on a college campus.

#### **4. Utilize Affirmations**

Another fundamental commitment needed for any educational initiative that strives to support faculty-student partnerships is to make a consistent and conscious effort to utilize affirmations and generate positive reinforcement. This facilitates the creation of safe, open spaces where everyone can feel like a valued member of the community. The TLI works to recognize each person's contribution to TLI programs and to individual partnerships. The hope is to foster the idea that taking the time to say thank you, to appreciate a job well done, or to recognize the effort and energy participants put forth, is extremely important and something everyone should be involved in. Commending and recognizing participants can open up a new way of thinking about communication and personal recognition. Supporting the use of affirmations can be particularly refreshing on a college campus where goals are typically more achievement based and positive reinforcement usually comes in the form of grades, a paycheck, or a published article instead of memorable person-to-person accolades.

One place that affirmations can consistently be found in faculty-student partnerships is in the observation notes that student consultants take of a faculty members' course. While consultants take notes with the goal of recording what is happening during the class and with the purpose of highlighting areas of potential growth or specific topics a professor is interested in focusing on, affirmations are also included in the notes. Students make a conscious effort to not simply view the class from a deficit perspective and ask "What is not working?" or "What could change?" but they also look for what is working well and take the time to record those practices and occurrences and explicitly affirm them for their faculty partners. This type of feedback is helpful so that faculty members do not become overwhelmed with only critical feedback and so that faculty can take the time to recognize what they are already doing well and the successes they have in each class.

These successes are also reinforced at the end of the semester, when students and faculty meet to review what happened during the course of the semester, what goals they achieved together, and the ways in which they supported one another in becoming better teachers and learners. Students also write a letter to their faculty partner, which reviews the changes and developments that occurred over the semester, including how various goals were met and states areas for future growth. This letter serves as a concrete product acknowledging all that each partner has accomplished and creates space for continued development by suggesting additional ideas for faculty to consider as they continue teaching.

The commitment to consistently affirm participants for their involvement and importance is instrumental in creating yet another cycle within the TLI, one of giving. The great thing about positive reinforcement is that it can easily have a domino effect, where recognition of one person's achievement leads to that person being more conscious of someone else's and then taking the time to say something to her or him. This can create a continuous cycle that coordinators and participants in the programs help to maintain and foster, especially in weekly reflection meetings and at end of semester celebrations. Through these practices, participants learn to lead and then create and maintain their own cycles of affirmation that can then be applied to larger contexts beyond the TLI, such as in a college course or peer relations.

## **5. Have a Collaborative and Reciprocal Partnership Framework**

A truly beneficial principle in the TLI is encouraging participants to form collaborative and reciprocal relationships with their partners. Therefore, when two people are paired together they enter into that new relationships with the idea that it will be something that is co-created and that will involve a constant exchange of knowledge and ideas, a productive give and take, which can support the development of a deep and meaningful partnership. This type of partnership framework provides a foundation and basic guidelines that both previous and new participants can reference and work from to build non-hierarchical, teaching and learning relationships. This framework helps to create space for both giving and sharing and it also creates a shared responsibility and gratitude between partners.

As partners negotiate the specifics of their partnerships, everything from how often to meet to what types of pedagogically oriented goals they want to set, they grow and change both as individuals and partners. This change was something I experienced in my partnerships as a student consultant. When I first started working with one of my faculty members, he expressed hesitation about how effective our meetings would be and any ideas I might contribute since I did not have an academic background in the subject matter of the course and would only be observing some of the class meetings. I was surprised by these concerns and took some time to reflect on how these things might be concerning from my partner's perspective. I also utilized the weekly student reflection meetings to ask for advice from my peers about how to best communicate the potential for meaningful growth I saw in our partnership. Over time I was able to see the change that occurred in our partnership as we both negotiated the different perspectives we brought to our work in the TLI and learned to really listen and respect each other's ideas and views.

Working with faculty members each semester I was able to increase my own confidence in my expertise as a student because I came to see how valuable my own experiences in different courses and with various teaching styles could be in working with professors who wanted to think deeply about their own teaching. I found that by trusting what I had learned by taking different courses, working with other faculty, and continuing to reflect on my own experiences, I became more confident in what I could contribute to my faculty partnerships. I also learned more about how different teaching approaches worked in different contexts while also exploring new ways to communicate ideas with my partners. Both my faculty partners and I were able to grow and change through the negotiation of our relationship and development of a collaborative framework for working together in new contexts and spaces.

## **6. Embed Continual Learning and Research**

In order for an educational initiative to succeed and be supportive of participants' growth, it needs to foster continual learning and research about the initiative itself and among participants. This can be challenging since ongoing learning can, at times, require the acceptance and even the invitation of cognitive dissonance and personal discomfort, as people begin to question what they know or assume and explore new areas of knowledge and ways of thinking. The TLI incorporates continual learning and research in many ways, such as supporting the rupture of existing hierarchical structures and ideas and breaking bounded conceptions of teaching and learning to create community change. This idea of rupture is connected to the TLI mentality that there is always something more to reflect on, to discover, to learn, and to share so participants need to do more than simply accept the status quo of relationships and structures. By broadening their knowledge and experiences through building a collaborative partnership framework, participants can engage in educative and meaningful self-reflection and open dialogue. These are the conversations that make learning a cyclical, ongoing process in the TLI, with one new idea leading to another, and topics constantly emerging as new potential research themes.

Participants in the TLI are constantly engaging in various research explorations, and one way that the TLI incorporates continual learning and growth is through the addition of new projects. In the summer of 2010 a group of faculty, IT staff, and students came together to work on participating faculty members' new and existing courses. This course revision workshop was created in response to feedback from faculty who were interested in expanding both their learning as well as the group of people who would be involved in the creation and revision of courses. For the first time students who had worked in student consulting partnerships and IT staff that were also interested in course creation and could offer their expertise in technologies like Blackboard and online media joined with faculty to think meaningfully about these courses. Syllabi were reworked, collaborative discussions about creating a class community and engaging students in course material were held, and individual partnerships were formed between participants to delve deeper into each faculty members' goals for their course. Instead of isolating learning or research, these types of activities are embedded in the TLI so that any participant can be involved in the process and contribute their ideas and experiences. The blending of learning and research in TLI projects and partnerships empowers those involved to continually further their own knowledge and also to act as change-agents who can affect the structure and mission of the Initiative.

## **7. Self-define and Respect Time**

This last principle, which encourages participants in the initiative to self-define time for themselves and with one another, so that together partners can co-construct new spaces for teaching and learning, is integral to the development of the other six principles. Cultivating a sense of time that is flexible and self-defined, instead of limited and strictly scheduled, allows for greater diversity in how partners interact and communicate while supporting a unique appreciation for slowing down.

This flexibility and self-definition empowers participants to reflect on how they are using their time, if there are ways to use it more wisely, and to take the control needed to break free of social



constraints, such as the need to feel “productive” by constantly being active. Instead, by self-defining how time is conceived, partners can create a new respect for their time and time used for teaching, learning, and self-reflection. This can include time used for active planning of a new project, time spent in dialogue about various pedagogical approaches, or time to just sit in silence, immobile, contemplating an idea. This respect and redefinition of time involves an acknowledgement of the importance of waiting and the trust that can be built with time. TLI partnerships are great example of how powerful waiting and respecting time can be. While it can be tempting to try to rush relationships and jump ahead to a place where two people feel completely comfortable with one another and able to express a diverse range of emotions and perspectives, it is not realistic if the relationship is to develop a strong foundation.

Personally, I was able to experience the power of waiting and respecting the time it took to build trust with my faculty partner during my first semester as a student consultant. Although my partner and I were both hesitant at first to open up about our expectations and goals and to share our various perspectives and experiences, I was able to wait and slowly discover that our hesitancy was something that could fade over time if we simply respected that period of relational development. By the end of the semester, my faculty partner and I were quite comfortable collaborating, listening, and setting mutual goals because over time we had been able to establish a meaningful partnership and my partner actually requested that we continue working together for another semester.

### **Bringing them all together**

Although each principle is important on its own, it is only when you put all seven together that you can truly address all of the components necessary to create a meaningful and rewarding educational initiative with ongoing potential for growth. Each principle feeds off the others so that together they reinforce and support a unique programmatic structure, which can break through traditional barriers like differences in backgrounds and make new spaces for teaching and learning. Combined, these seven principles have the power to pair a professor and a student together to engage in discussions about how to make a classroom more culturally responsive and to more generally connect people in new ways. As one TLI student consultant said, “... sometimes it [working collaboratively] happens in these magical moments with certain faculty members, but to have a structure that supports and encourages that is really exciting.” These seven principles provide that support and structure for faculty-student partnerships and for many other types of relationships so that open and expressive dialogue, collaborative and respectful partnerships and goal-oriented teaching and learning can occur in new and exciting ways.