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THE DYNAMICS OF EXPERTISE

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Expertise is a complicated issue in academia. Professors are hired and trusted for having reached a recognized level of mastery in a particular field, and we have come to associate such expertise with a type of trust: someone who is an expert is a source of unquestionable reliability. This kind of acceptance, while typically a given regarding professors, is much more complicated in relation to students. While colleges recognize students' excellence in academics, athletics, and arts, the term 'expert' is reserved for faculty, when, in fact, students are experts in one very critical area: the experience of learning. It is surprisingly easy to overlook what seems to be an obvious connection: no one understands the student experience better than the students, themselves.

The Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) questions and challenges the notion of the professor as the only expert and the student as the only novice and allows students and their faculty partners to work toward a model of complementary expertise. By placing students in the role of consultant to faculty, the TLI makes explicit, and builds partnerships around the idea, that students have expertise as learners, both within and outside of the classroom. This student expertise can help faculty members create comfortable and productively challenging classroom environments.

While students and faculty at all points in their careers can always learn from each other's experience and expertise, one circumstance in which the student's expertise has unique value is when the faculty partner has just joined the community. Student consultants who work with new faculty become experts regarding the college because they have had more time to experience the reality of the community as well as all their years of schooling that makes them experts in the experience of learning.

The opportunity to be an expert is not only validating for a student, but also extremely useful for a professor who wants to understand the many dimensions of student life. Student consultants can use their expertise to contextualize and explain the dynamics that occur within the classroom and in the greater college community. They can be a window into the world of student life. Just as faculty members use their expertise to answer questions and explain the relevance of a particular topic for the student, students can use their expertise to demystify both explicit and unspoken college policies and norms.

A benefit of this interaction is that it prompts students to question our own experiences and the ways in which we represent them. Just as we should not leave a professor's expertise unquestioned, we should also challenge our own. I have found it important to remind myself that just because I have been a member of the community for longer does not mean that my experience is any more legitimate or valuable than the professor's or than another student's. It is tempting to present my views in a way that seems accurate to me but does not, in fact, account for the great diversity of realities that each student experiences. Working with new faculty has given me the opportunity both to rely on and to question my expertise. I now understand that that my experiences are distinct from those of other students, just as theirs are from mine.

Discussions about community dynamics provoke thoughts about the diversity of experiences that exist within and among the colleges in the bi-college (Bryn Mawr and Haverford) community. I have come to realize that the only area in which I am truly an expert is my own experience. If students and new faculty reflect upon and question our experiences and roles, we can begin to do away with the expert-novice binary. In its place we can form communities where different types of expertise can coexist with each other, and we can learn that trust does not necessarily stem from expertise, but rather a willingness to question and explore one's expertise, no matter what position we hold in a community.