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BELONGING AND BRAVE SPACE AS HOPE FOR PERSONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL INCLUSION

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Two concepts that I have been focusing on during my last semester as an undergraduate at Haverford College are the concepts of belonging and brave space. In my role as Intern in the Office of Multicultural Affairs at Haverford and as a student consultant through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, I have had opportunities to think through how these concepts have affected my own experience and how they represent a larger sense of hope for my college. As a woman of color and as an ambassador for other underrepresented students, I seek and advocate for both personal and institutional inclusion. In the following paragraphs I share my sense of how the SaLT program contributes to both.

I have been focused on the concept of belonging for a few years now. My work in Haverford's Office of Multicultural Affairs centers around issues of multiculturalism and education, which often means thinking about how first-generation students and students of color can feel more like they belong at Haverford. I began thinking of brave space this semester in the student consultant weekly meetings when Alison Cook-Sather brought it up as a discussion topic. The concept of the brave space as opposed to safe space appeals to me because of its active connotation. So with thoughts of belonging and brave space in my head, I wonder if one necessarily predicates the other or if the feelings of both are catalyzed by similar situations and environmental qualities. Can a space be considered brave if the people in it do not feel as if they belong? Can people truly belong to a community or space if they do not feel empowered to take risks and engage vulnerability?

I often tell people that I would have left Haverford were it not for the SaLT program. Although this is probably an exaggeration I am now unable to test, I do feel like I owe SaLT a debt of gratitude for making me feel like an integral part of the school and its processes. As a freshman at Haverford I felt out of the loop, uninvolved, small, superfluous. Starting my sophomore year with a pedagogical partnership through the SaLT program, I felt like I was not only working with this specific professor in the moment but also towards a far-away future Haverford in which all professors have had the same opportunity to think about their pedagogy within the space of the SaLT program. This made me feel like my work was important and would have a lasting impact, which contributed to my deepening connection to the school. It also taught me that my happiness is closely tied to how much I can imagine my work to have wider effect and guided me to participate in other activities that were fulfilling in similar ways.

The SaLT program builds feelings of belonging by building a community of people who are interested in pedagogy and issues of social justice and compensating the time we spend together as either course credit or with stipends. Some of my favorite parts of my week are the individual meetings with faculty partners and the small group student consultant meetings. The partnership meetings build individual relationships, which increases feelings of social belonging, and I feel useful, which is immediately rewarding. On the other hand, the student consultant meetings are a

time to discuss any issues in the classroom or partnership, or curriculum—a time carved out of each week to discuss and brainstorm solutions for how to make institutions more inclusive.

Though I have lost a lot of my illusions about higher education over the course of my four years at Haverford, many of these changes have been for the better. For example, I no longer believe that higher education is a magic wand fix-all solution for society's ills and therefore have developed healthier, more attainable expectations for the possibilities a Haverford education holds. I think that I have only managed to reframe my expectations for Haverford—when many of my peers leave disillusioned and frustrated at a school that they feel failed to deliver on its promises—because of my experience in the SaLT program.

To me, SaLT is much more than a faculty orientation program. Although at a surface level the day-to-day experience is in essence that of pedagogical partnership, what I see as its greater power is hope for a future Haverford in which engaging and thoughtful pedagogy is the norm and students leave with a genuine attachment to their education, peers, and mentors. This feels to me like what a brave space looks like on an institutional level. By introducing new faculty to the school in a spirit of partnership and true collaboration Haverford affirms their commitment to strong pedagogy, student engagement, and a student-focused classroom experience.

The hope for the future that SaLT instills and refreshes in me makes me more optimistic for Haverford's future because I know that Haverford already institutionally supports a program that is actively working against issues like classroom inequality. This perspective helps me feel like my personal contributions are affecting long-term change and like the school is working towards making sure that more people like me feel like they belong and are welcome.

Ultimately, however, I don't think that I would have these positive experiences in the program or any of these spaces if they were not also brave spaces. To me, brave spaces are spaces in which students feel empowered to be vulnerable, comfortable enough to speak their minds, and open to hearing things that they may disagree with or may cause them discomfort. If I did not feel like my individual meetings with faculty partners were brave spaces, I would not be able to be a useful sounding board or mirror for their pedagogy because I would be more worried about the differences between our institutional standings. Furthermore, the meetings would not be enjoyable, relaxing, or fun—all of which contribute to my feelings of belonging. Similarly, in student consultant meetings, I need to be able to trust that the perspective I bring my peers is worthy of sharing.

Most importantly, the SaLT program affirms the power of my perspective as a student and makes me a stronger, more confident student in my own courses. Through the weekly practice of taking observation notes, I have felt empowered to think of my observations and notes as important and useful. Though to some this might feel like a small detail, I have found that by practicing these skills in the SaLT program I have been able to become a stronger and more active listener, learned how to speak with conviction, and more often than not felt like my perspective on issues is worth sharing. The brave space of the SaLT program therefore helps me bring a similar outlook to other parts of my life that have not always been brave spaces for me.

As I move into my first post-college job and into a world in which self-advocacy will continue to be crucial to my personal and work lives I carry with me the confidence and skills I gained through my years as a student consultant in the SaLT program. Additionally, and as importantly, I have faith that Haverford College will become—on both personal and institutional levels—a place where all students feel they belong and can create and participate in brave spaces with other students and with faculty.