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Melissa Wright
Barnard College

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THE HARD WORK OF HAPPY ACCIDENTS: THE ORIGINS AND FUTURE OF PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP AT BARNARD COLLEGE

Melissa Wright, Executive Director, Center for Engaged Pedagogy, Barnard College

The idea for this essay first occurred to me on a plane ride to Iowa. I was headed to the “Teaching and Learning Together: The Possibilities and Challenges of Pedagogy Partnerships” workshop at Grinnell College, organized by Caleb Elfenbein (Grinnell College) and Alison Cook-Sather (Bryn Mawr College). Moments of transit often give me the opportunity to contemplate the existential or the comedic, and sometimes both. The Spring-2023 semester was also a momentous one for these kinds of en-route musings on various buses and planes: I started a training program in psychoanalysis, I interviewed for the Executive Director position at the Center for Engaged Pedagogy at Barnard College, and my father passed away after a sudden battle with cancer.

I knew I needed these quieter moments of personal reflection, but I didn’t quite realize how much I needed the workshop at Grinnell and the profound sense of community I found there. Before I take you back to the beginning of the story of Barnard’s pedagogical partnership model, the Student Learning Assessment Fellow, it seems important to note that in undertaking programs and initiatives that constitute significant changes in institutional culture, one needs community not only to do this work, but to ennoble failure and empower us to push on even if we don’t always get it right. Certainly, we can’t do it alone and need to learn from and be lifted up by others. But we also can’t safely learn from our mistakes without the knowledge that the work can and will go on, precisely because it is always bigger than any one of us.

In the process of building a pedagogical partnership program, I have learned that accidents and mistakes are inevitable—and sometimes even productive—and that I need to relinquish some sense of control in order to trust students and colleagues to move the work forward. I learned, in short, that I need partners.

An Origin Story

A key feature of Barnard College’s Student Learning Assessment Fellow program was actually the result of an accident.

In Spring 2022, I had been at Barnard for less than a year, and was excited by the prospect of creating a fellowship program similar to the Teaching Assessment Fellow (TAF) program I co-created at the Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning. The TAF program connected trained graduate students with teaching innovation grant recipients to support the assessment and evaluation of faculty course interventions. My boss, Jennifer Rosales, the inaugural Executive Director of the Center for Engaged Pedagogy (CEP), shared that our Provost, Linda Bell, would be supportive of a pedagogical partnership program at Barnard, in part because of her time as Provost and Professor of Economics at Haverford College. Linda Bell knew well the benefits of these programs from the radical work of Alison Cook-Sather. Looking back, I recognize Jennifer

Rosales's wisdom in tapping into what our leadership already knew about and believed in as a strategy for developing and resourcing a new program. In a practical sense, it gave me insight into what our Provost cared about and offered a fun agenda item in my first meetings with her, but it also showed me how, with limited resources, you can find the sweet spot between what you care about and know how to do and what leadership understands and values.

It was also important for me to learn and acknowledge that Barnard has a rich history of peer and near-peer mentorship programs, originating with the Writing and Speaking Fellows programs, which provide near-peer writing and speaking mentorship in the form of consultations and in-class workshops to students. Building on the fellow model, more recently, the Computational Science Center created the Computing Fellows program, which aims to enrich computing engagement across disciplines by pairing computing fellows with instructors who request additional support in teaching or consulting on computing skills and concepts. Though not explicitly described or enacted as pedagogical partnership programs, writing, speaking, and computing fellows, it seemed to me, often worked *like* pedagogical partners in their engagements with instructors and in their relative proximity to the students in these classes. If I was going to develop a pedagogical partnership program, it made sense to carry on this "Fellow" tradition, because of this history and name recognition.

Building on my prior assessment work and with this institutional context in mind, I took a first step toward a larger project of pedagogical partnership by creating a cohort of learning assessment fellows, who could conduct mid-semester feedback sessions, give feedback on rubrics and assignments, and support the analysis of relevant student learning and experience data. The Student Learning Assessment Fellow (SLAF) program was born! Or at least the idea was.

I was enthusiastic, but also a little overwhelmed by the idea of starting such a program as a very newly minted Sr. Associate Director. I had a programmatic appetite bigger than my mental and emotional capacities, and I was still committing to memory the dozen plus acronyms and catchy office names. So, when my supervisor suggested that I reach out to Beyond Barnard—our College's career and advising department and also the office responsible for the student preceptor program—as a starting point for developing the SLAF program, I mistakenly heard it as Access Barnard—our College's office for supporting first-generation, low-income, and international college students. The irony of this misunderstanding and my contacting Access Barnard—the very group of people who support students in navigating the hidden curriculum—doesn't escape me. Here I was finding my way around Barnard as a newbie and getting my wires understandably crossed. In retrospect, my small misunderstanding was not all that different from a new college student learning that "office hours" were indeed *for* students. (As a psychoanalyst in training, I also relish a fortuitous accident. If we take the accident seriously, we can perhaps learn something about ourselves.)

Partnering with Access Barnard made sense to me because of a shared commitment to equity. The SLAF program drew inspiration from the Equity and Assessment work of the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment and was aimed at creating more equitable learning environments by honoring and dignifying student feedback. Our plan was to accomplish this through both student-led mid-semester feedback sessions for faculty and opportunities for

instructors to seek feedback from students on their assignments and rubrics. Access Barnard, on the other hand, was fostering equity through more structural support for students: the First-Generation/Low Income Partnership Library, peer mentoring programs, food insecurity funds, and a space on campus for first-generation, low-income, and international (FLI) students to socialize and support one another. All of these initiatives have created a culture of pride in FLI identity. Access Barnard also has strong relationships with their student network and a prodigious Instagram following, and I suspected they would be able to help us get the word out about our new program and recruit our first student cohort.

Though we clearly shared a commitment to equity and drawing out what was hidden or taken for granted in the college experience, on a more practical level, working with Access Barnard made our hypothetical program seem possible and worthwhile. In the questions they asked me and in their willingness to support the effort, I found clarity in what we were doing or not doing and some courage to keep moving. As a younger person, I was often inventing “programs” for and with the neighborhood kids—impromptu day camps, haunted houses, musical productions—and it was the willingness of my peers to sign on and contribute to the experiment that brought it to life. I still sometimes feel like that young person dreaming things up, and I still need colleagues and comrades to get excited and co-create these projects with me.

Recruiting our first cohort

We recruited our first cohort of fellows by launching a Student Learning Assessment Community in Summer 2022. This was a paid opportunity for students to learn about the principles of equity in post-secondary assessment of student learning and to also get hands-on practice with learning assessment methods (e.g., direct measures of learning, surveys, focus groups). We advertised the program in our community newsletter and through social media, and I was pleasantly surprised to receive 50 applications for our first cohort. Thanks to Access Barnard’s strong network, many of these students proudly identified as FLI. The tough part was selecting ten students from this amazing pool of applicants. We gave priority to students who brought knowledge of or experience with inclusion or equity in education, who had existing skills in data analysis or a strong desire to develop these skills, and/or who spoke candidly about their own personal experiences navigating Barnard as a FLI student. Though these criteria helped us make decisions, it was still difficult to turn so many students away, and I continue to wonder how we can develop and staff programs in a way that shifts or reimagines a culture of competition into something more collaborative and joyful. I plan to bring this question back to our fellows to consider and discuss.

Facilitating our first summer learning community

I was also fortunate to partner with Madeline (Maddie) Miley in Barnard’s Office of Institutional Effectiveness to pilot this program. Maddie, who graduated from Barnard in 2020 and had already served as a post-baccalaureate fellow before stepping into the role of assessment analyst in the office, brought tremendous insight into Barnard’s teaching and learning culture, in addition to skill sets in survey design and data analysis. Maddie and I designed the learning

community curriculum together and then revised it as we responded to student feedback in our weekly exit tickets (Table 1).

On a personal note, co-facilitating the learning community was a wonderful way to get to know Barnard students. In retrospect, I'm increasingly appreciative of Jennifer Rosales's insight to develop a program that built on my assessment expertise, because starting a new position and learning a new culture are already significant undertakings. It was personally reassuring to establish a sense of agency through this early "win" before tackling projects that required me to "stretch" into less familiar areas of knowledge or skill development. Though I had just taught my first course at Barnard in the Spring-2022 semester, the learning community also offered another, more informal, opportunity to develop my teaching persona in this new context.

Table 1. Student Learning Assessment Community Curriculum

Week	Themes/Topics	Program Learning Objectives	Activities
1	Hidden Curriculum & the Role of Assessment	Describe key pedagogical and educational concepts and frameworks, including the hidden curriculum.	Set community agreements. Engage with a presentation by Access Barnard Directors on the "hidden curriculum." Discuss the role of assessment and feedback in equitable teaching.
2	Defining Equity & Assessment	Describe key pedagogical and educational concepts and frameworks, including equity and assessment and anti-racist assessment. Select appropriate assessment methods based on areas of inquiry or purpose.	Engage with a presentation on "selecting a method," including overview of common classroom assessment methods. Discuss Baker & Henning, "Current State of Scholarship on Assessment" in <i>Reframing Assessment to Center Equity</i> (2022) (assigned as pre-work).
3	Assessment Methods	Demonstrate familiarity with at least one assessment method	Discuss experience of taking an initial course

		(e.g., survey, focus group).	<p>survey sent prior to the session; reflect on and critique survey items.</p> <p>Discuss different methods of collecting feedback at mid-semester.</p>
4	Data Analysis	Demonstrate appropriate qualitative and/or quantitative analysis techniques when analyzing student learning assessment data.	<p>Discuss qualitative and quantitative reports (assigned as pre-work).</p> <p>Use Google Sheets to conduct quantitative analysis of example survey dataset.</p> <p>Code open-ended survey data and reflect on the process.</p>
<p>Final group projects/deliverables (completed the month following following the learning community): (1) Guidelines on inclusive, equitable, and/or transparent assignment design; (2) Initial course survey question bank for instructors; and (3) mid-semester feedback tool</p>			

Our early days in the SLAF program

Of the ten students who completed the learning community, we had six students express an interest in staying on to serve as our inaugural cohort of Student Learning Assessment Fellows (SLAFs). There was so much uncertainty in those early days. Looking back, I am filled with a mixture of gratitude and wonder that the students were willing to chart this undefined course, and to effectively build the program from the ground up. Though I never lost sight of the potential value this program could bring, there were certainly moments when I wondered if I had it in me to sustain the initiative, and I also worried about whether our faculty would be willing to request the fellows' services.

Starting in September 2022, we met as a full group (fellows, Maddie Miley, and me) for one hour on a monthly basis. The relative infrequency of these meetings (we meet weekly now) was partly a scheduling necessity for me, because it was my first semester as the interim executive director of the Center and I was still learning how to balance the various demands on my time. We decided as a group that we should prioritize the creation of our mid-semester feedback process and we spent our first couple meetings reading relevant articles and building on the work the students already did in the summer learning community. These meetings were such a bright

spot in my month; the students had so much creative energy to design the program, and with everything else going on in their lives, they came prepared every time to do the work.

The meetings were also a time and space of surprise: I distinctly recall moments when I threw my plan for the meeting all but away because the students asked such interesting questions that led us into areas of discussion and reflection I could not have anticipated. In these early meetings, we strategized about how best to get the word out about the program, discussed the realities of faculty labor and precarity as it might relate to the fellows' role, and debriefed on fellows' experiences facilitating focus groups and feedback sessions. In our meetings, and in our communications with one another, we try to remain attentive to the social-emotional registers of this work: we celebrate "wins" often, and we take time to unpack fellows' experiences facilitating feedback sessions and focus groups.

I was cautious in that first semester of the program—perhaps overly so. We advertised the fellows' services for instructors, but I was nervous to grow the program too quickly. After speaking with a couple of trusted faculty colleagues, I realized that this program could be perceived by some instructors as a big culture shift and that the goals of the initiative would have to be very clear before some of our faculty would feel comfortable opening themselves up to feedback. Here we had students with all this gusto for effecting cultural change and I was starting to worry: are there any faculty out there who *want* these services?

There were two early wins that allowed us to build some confidence in the future of the program:

1. a new STEM instructor requested a mid-semester feedback session for two of his courses and
2. the fellows were able to support two major institutional assessment initiatives, in which they (a) provided feedback on general education rubrics, and helped identify some ableist assumptions in the oral communication rubric in particular, and (b) facilitated focus groups with students to collect feedback on Barnard's general education curriculum as part of a larger curricular review effort.

The first win was very important for the team's morale, and it allowed us to put our mid-semester feedback form and session protocol into action. The experience also gave us an opportunity to develop a template and process for drafting feedback session summaries, which allowed the students to practice and hone the qualitative analysis and coding skills they encountered in the learning community. We also learned from these first two feedback sessions that an unintended benefit of the process was giving students in these classes the chance to hear from one another and recognize that they were not alone in their experience of the course—both in terms of what they appreciated in its design and where they were experiencing difficulty. In Fall 2022, we were still reacclimating to in-person teaching and learning, and it was thrilling to see that the feedback sessions—at least in these two classes—were also unexpectedly a source of community building among students.

The second win was unexpected and I perceived it as a temporary but necessary pivot to communicate the value of student input on curricular and assessment initiatives. Since I was already involved in both our general education assessment team and the Foundations Curriculum

Review team, this was one way to make faculty and administrators aware of this program, which has been very helpful in budgetary conversations, since the fellows' pay comes out of our Centers' student employee budget. This pivot was also valuable in giving the fellows a new perspective on how general education curricula are designed and vetted and experience facilitating a session on oral communication rubric design at Barnard's annual teaching and learning conference.

As far as my own emotional investments were concerned, the program suddenly felt like it was possible again. It would just take some time. I was back in the saddle, and the workshop at Grinnell came at an excellent time: we had just added a student feedback component to our course institute on designing digital projects, and I was feeling a mixture of confidence in the work we had done and excitement to see where it could go.

Back to the Beginning: My Time at Grinnell

The closest comparison I can make to my experience at the “Teaching and Learning Together” workshop at Grinnell was my experience at leadership camp in high school, which I remember so fondly for the trust we developed in one another and the way we collaborated without a sense of hierarchy or competition. Okay, so our time at Grinnell didn't end quite like camp—with everyone walking past one another slowly in concentric circles as we quietly made meaningful eye contact and sobbed. But, the workshop was unlike any conference—academic or otherwise—I've attended, because of the way the organizers authentically recognized student expertise and cultivated relationships between and among participants. Students were not there to shadow faculty and staff like apprentices; they sat on panels with them and gave moving testimony and advice about their experience as partners. The design of the workshop radiated this trust in students and this belief that we might all leave the experience with partners, if not friends, in forwarding a collective project.

Two moments from the workshop stand out to me. The first was reading and discussing Muri Marinho Mascarenhas's (2022) essay, “[Professor Love, Feedback Love](#).” If I had come to the workshop with some undefined concerns about how faculty might perceive pedagogical partnership, Muri's essay reorganized this thinking with a single sentence: “By participating in [a pedagogical partnership program], I began viewing my professors with more empathy; many of them were working very hard to improve their teaching and supporting their students as best they could” (p. 4). It was already clear to me that partnership programs could transform how faculty approach the classroom, making them more accessible, equitable, and flexible to student interests and needs (Marquis et al., 2021; Cook-Sather et al., 2021). I also knew from some of the literature and my own experience working with students that these programs could also promote student agency and a sense of belonging (Colón García, 2017). What I had not considered was how pedagogical partnership could foster empathy, trust, and even friendships between professors and students. Gathering feedback has been a great first step for our program, and this feedback could be significantly more meaningful if it was shared and discussed between partners in a mutually-rewarding and affirming relationship. This realization was only possible because the workshop facilitators intentionally centered students' voices as much as faculty, staff, and

administrator voices, and encouraged our reflections on and constructions of the social and emotional realities and possibilities of this work.

The second moment was a bit more self-reflexive. We were engaging in an activity on the various campus roles involved in building or sustaining pedagogical partnerships. We started by jotting down on sticky notes what students, faculty, staff, and administrators might need to promote or grow such partnerships. I had no problem filling out the sticky notes for students, faculty, and administrators, but I struggled to think of anything for staff. It was striking how undeveloped my capacity was for reflecting on my own role and needs. This may sound like an unconvincing answer in an interview (something about how one's only weakness is working too hard), but the truth is, this moment startled me. The Grinnell workshop, designed for and by folks at the center of partnership programs, modeled in every moment how teaching and learning together changes how we think and practice. It also taught me how to re-center staff in the bigger picture and extend grace and care to myself as well.

Back to Barnard

I cannot say enough how resonant and resounding these experiences at Grinnell were. I returned to New York convinced that I needed to do a better job sharing the work, which sometimes meant getting out of the way. I enlisted our talented Graduate Assistant, Elizabeth (Lizz) Melville, who is a PhD Candidate in Applied Anthropology at Teachers College, to help me run our Student Learning Assessment Community 2.0 (with both new and returning fellows). The students loved working with Lizz and learned a great deal from her about the ethics of transcription and data preparation in the early stages of qualitative analysis. They went on to successfully clean up all of our student focus group transcripts (the ones that they ran and helped to develop!) from our general education curriculum review and helped with the initial data analysis.

I already deeply respected and trusted our Student Learning Assessment Fellows. My experience at the workshop, however, helped me see that I was figuratively and literally getting in the way of their partnerships with faculty. Our mid-semester feedback process involved very little student-faculty interaction, because I was cautious of instructors' readiness to work with students in this new way. I wasn't wrong to be mindful of faculty's concerns—receiving feedback is often challenging and can be quite fraught—but I could step back without exiting the scene altogether. So, I tried it this semester. Instead of me corresponding with instructors and fine-tuning their feedback forms, the students did it. We still discussed everything as a group in our weekly meetings, but the students took on a much bigger role in communicating and fostering a sense of trust in the process.

This semester, we ran seven mid-semester feedback sessions, which is nearly double from the fall and is largely attributable to our fellows finding new and creative ways to promote the program. This change would not have been possible if I didn't share the labor. I'm also excited to report that we started piloting our first two pedagogical partnerships: one as a collaboration between two faculty and two of our fellows, and another that emerged organically from an existing informal partnership. This semester, we've also been reading [*Pedagogical Partnerships*](#):

[*A How-To Guide for Faculty, Students and Academic Developers in Higher Education*](#) to think through this programmatic change and its implications together (Cook-Sather et al., 2019). Pedagogical partnership will be one of our Center themes next year so we can collectively focus our efforts on building out faculty programming. We will also highlight this initiative at our annual teaching and learning conference in Spring 2025.

Over the summer, I am also excited to work with our Sr. Associate Director, Alex Pittman, to expand the program to include facilitation fellows, based on his work with a group of students in a community of practice on facilitation and dialogue this past academic year. We plan to rename the program (to Learning, Engagement, and Assessment Fellows, or, LEAFs for short) and shift the program to center partnership and, whenever possible, more enduring relationships between students and faculty. Drawing on what we've learned from the scholarship, we'll introduce our fellows to incoming instructors at our new faculty orientation workshop at the end of the summer. I'm also in the process of making a case for a different staffing model to hire a coordinator who can help me run the program and supervise the fellows, because I need help, too.

As we look forward to formalizing and promoting our pedagogical partnership program, shifting institutional culture, and building a staffing infrastructure to support both students and faculty, I'm also looking forward to all of the happy accidents and fortuitous mistakes we'll make and from which we'll make meaning along the way.

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