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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

This first issue of <u>Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education</u> is co-edited by Alison Cook-Sather (Coordinator of The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr College) and Laura Perry (Guest Student Editor, Bryn Mawr College graduate, 2009).

<u>*Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*</u> was created with support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation with the goal of sharing the activities of *The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute* with a wider audience and featuring contributions focused on collaborative work among students and faculty members in other higher education settings.

Background: Student Voice in Educational Practice and Reform

When we set about conceptualizing a program for faculty development at Bryn Mawr College, we wanted to create a different model than the traditional one, in which either faculty colleagues or the staff of professional teaching and learning centers are responsible for faculty learning. We were interested in **creating forums for sustained dialogue** among faculty in various disciplines and with varying levels of teaching experience, and we were particularly committed to **positioning undergraduate students as knowledgeable participants** in those dialogues. In 2006, with support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, we piloted a program that invited undergraduate students to serve as pedagogical consultants to a small number of college faculty members in different disciplines.

The program, **Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT)**, is part of a larger effort called the Teaching and Learning Initiative (TLI) that aims to foster dialogue and collaboration across college community members — faculty, staff, and students — who occupy traditionally distinct and delineated institutional roles[1]. The TLI also invites faculty members to participate in seminars linked to the SaLT program, through which they engage in sustained dialogue with one another and with student consultants. Together these programs, along with pedagogy workshops for graduate students, constitute The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute. These programs are neither formally evaluative nor intended to be remedial; members of the community choose to participate for a variety of pedagogical reasons, but all of them desire to be part of **a reflective dialogue about what is happening and what could be happening in college classrooms**.

SaLT is modeled on a project that positions high school students as consultants to prospective secondary within the context of the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program[2]. It applies to the college context principles of student voice work developed largely within K-12 schools in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States[3]. Scholars and practitioners in the United Kingdom have led the way in developing student voice at both the K-12 and college levels[4]. Much of the work done in the United States focuses on K-12 contexts[5], although a new strand of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) centers on student voice at the college level[6].

Key to these efforts is the notion that **students have unique perspectives on learning and teaching and should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education**[7] and the assertion that we have "an ethical obligation to involve our students more actively [in faculty development]"[8]. Students are ready and willing to assume this more active role. As they explain, they think a great deal about what happens and what could happen in college classrooms. In one student's words: "I was always thinking about these issues, and I wasn't always invited to share this kind of feedback in class." Another student explained: "I always heard my friends talk about their teachers and what is not working, but a lot of them don't know how to talk about those things or put them in context or to make them improve. So a program that could help those situations was something that I wanted to be a part of."

The student comments above speak to the widespread interest among students in joining conversations about teaching and learning in the college classroom. Equally important is the realization faculty members experience when they take up the opportunity to work collaboratively with a student consultant. One faculty member captured what many feel: "I wondered if our students can do the same things as a professional teaching and learning center, but I'm a convert." Another faculty member asserted: "It's more effective to have a student come in rather than a colleague. We look for something different than a student looks for." And a third went further to argue that, **"by listening to our students, especially in institutions that claim students as colleagues, we can start to fulfill the claims that we make as educational institutions."**

Initial findings from an ongoing action research study of work through The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute suggest that both faculty and students benefit in significant and lasting ways from collaborative explorations of teaching and learning in the college classroom. Faculty repeatedly identify how their pedagogy develops through gaining student perspectives on their practice and through expanding strategies for engaging students. Likewise, student consultants repeatedly describe how, through their work with faculty members, they become better learners and assume more agency in and take more responsibility for their education[9].

From the Student Perspective: The Story of Guest Student Editor, Laura Perry
Laura Perry, an English major who graduated from Bryn Mawr in 2009, worked with SaLT in her final semester of college, and has continued this work after graduation as a Research Assistant and Guest Student Editor. Laura's story of becoming a student consultant through the SaLT program offers a glimpse into the potential for undergraduate students in taking up this role.

In the fall of my senior year of college, I had what can only be called a transformative experience. I found myself increasingly frustrated by what was happening in one of my classes, but instead of silently fuming or talking to my friends about it, I scheduled a meeting with the professor. In our meeting, I described what I saw as a gradual silencing of younger students in our class discussion, in favor of the perhaps more experienced seniors and juniors. My professor could not have been more open to my feedback, and we discussed concrete changes she (and we, as students and as a class) could undertake to make the classroom community a more inclusive one, and to invite more students to become engaged in our discussions. The professor and I met

again multiple times throughout that semester, and she always checked in with me and invited further feedback. This experience was an incredibly rewarding and recharging one for me – as a senior, I had a worrying sensation that I might have learned how to learn, so to speak, and couldn't be surprised in my classes anymore.

The Students as Learners and Teachers program made this transformative experience possible in so many ways. My professor had worked with SaLT in the past, by inviting a Student Consultant into her classroom in previous semesters, and had incorporated many structural aspects into her curriculum which clearly invited student feedback, such as one-on-one meetings with her before every paper, and a day where she discussed with us the mid-course feedback that she solicited. Beyond the inviting space created by my professor, I was also empowered because I knew several students who had worked with SaLT as Student Consultants. Hearing their stories about discussing feedback and observations with the professors they worked with, and how genuinely open the professors were to the feedback they shared, gave me the extra confidence needed to step outside the typical student role and talk to my professor.

This experience opened up a whole new space in the classroom for me, one that called on my years of experience as a student, but that also required taking risks beyond the intellectual risks my professors asked from me in my papers. I knew I wanted to do more of this, and I was lucky enough to be able to work as a Student Consultant for SaLT in the spring of my senior year.

I met weekly with a Biology professor, to observe classroom dynamics, give feedback, and talk through any issues or concerns my professor might be dealing with that week. These meetings were often the highlight of my week – I left filled with inspiration and commitment to education because of the fire, enthusiasm, and intense commitment to self-improvement that my professor exhibited. The spring of my senior year, at a time when traditionally I should have been checking out, whether because I was deep in job applications or in the funk of senioritis, I found myself more engaged in my classes than ever before, and more reflective and thoughtful about my own education and my own responsibilities as a student.

Both of these professors' concern for their own actions and for the wellbeing and intellectual health of their students made a deep impression on me, and cemented my decision to pursue a career in education after college. Beyond graduation, I have continued my work with SaLT, and will attend an English PhD program in the fall.

When I think of what this work has taught me and how my own goals have been clarified, I remember Adrienne Rich's description of her own vocation as a poet:**"Increasingly this has meant hearing and listening to others, taking into myself the language of experience different from my own."**[10] In high school and in my first years as an undergraduate, I rarely listened to others in the classroom with the same kind of care and attention as I did when the professor spoke. But because of SaLT, and my own growth as a student and scholar, I began to focus less on my relationship to the professor and more on creating a good classroom community, where everyone felt empowered and invited to share their thoughts.

Going forward, I know that SaLT has not only given me a better sense of the kind of intellectual community and inclusive educational environment that I value, but has also shown me some of the necessary steps towards creating that space, and the challenges of that progress. I would now feel comfortable stepping up to initiate and organize change in a future classroom, something that before this experience I would not have felt like I had the right tools to do. As a long-standing student, but a recent initiate to discussions about classroom dynamics or pedagogy, I feel that this experience has opened up another perspective on learning, by showing me the complexities in a space that I previously took for granted. As a graduate student and prospective teacher, I know I will return to these insights and continue to learn from the professors and students I met through this experience.

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