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RADICAL EQUALITY: A DIALOGUE ON BUILDING A PARTNERSHIP – AND A PROGRAM – THROUGH A CROSS-CAMPUS COLLABORATION

Meredith Goldsmith and Nicole Gervasio

In Spring 2010, Nicole Gervasio (Bryn Mawr '10) partnered with Meredith Goldsmith, Associate Professor of English at Ursinus College, in the first cross-campus faculty/student partnership sponsored by The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr College. After piloting the Student Consultant program with Nicole, Meredith began to build a similar program at Ursinus, which currently employs six full-time student consultants and three trainees. In the dialogue below, Nicole and Meredith reflect on their experiences as partners; the cross-cultural differences and similarities they encountered as each visited different campuses; the fluid power dynamic that developed between them; and the overall benefits of the consultant program for both student and faculty partners.

Pre-Partnership Perspectives

MG: What were your initial thoughts about developing a partnership with a faculty member from a different institution?

NG: One of the most persistent problems I have with liberal arts education is the insularity of small college communities. Working with the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr was the first opportunity I had to explore cross-campus collaboration. Before partnering with a faculty member at an institution outside of our consortium, which includes Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Swarthmore Colleges, I had already worked with a professor at Haverford for a semester. I had some sense of both the challenges and advantages that come with working outside of the comfort zone of my own college. I was slightly more apprehensive about the prospect of working with a professor from Ursinus because I knew nothing about the college culture there. Working within the bi-college community had not been particularly surprising in that regard since Haverford and Bryn Mawr are similar in many ways. However, I was really excited about the prospect of having a truly unique TLI experience within that bi-college community. Especially after meeting you on the phone and knowing my own aspirations to become an English professor, I was fairly confident that the experience would be really rewarding for me.

NG: What prompted your interest in the TLI at Bryn Mawr?

MG: Since I came to Ursinus in 2005, I had been interested in starting a teaching and learning center, having benefitted from one greatly at my first tenure-track job. In the fall of 2008, I was given the opportunity to co-write a Mellon grant to increase support for and conversations about teaching. Eventually I made contact with Alison Cook-Sather, who had gotten funding from the Mellon Foundation to invite colleagues outside the bi-college community to join the pedagogy seminar through Bryn Mawr's Teaching and Learning Institute, and that's how we began. Once

we got the Mellon grant, I thought that participating in the Bryn Mawr TLI would be a way for me to “apprentice” as we got the program at Ursinus running.

NG: What were your initial reactions to the idea of a “partnership” with a student consultant? Had you ever worked with a student in a similar capacity before? What did you expect?

MG: I had heard about student consultant programs at other schools earlier in my career, and at that point, I couldn’t see myself doing it. When I was first invited to join the seminar at Bryn Mawr, I viewed the partnership with a student as a trade-off for my participation. Truthfully, I was a little nervous about it. I had worked with students plenty, but the partnerships in which I had engaged were very traditional-employing a student as a research assistant or supervising her own academic research. I initially thought, before our getting to know each other and before learning more of what the program at Bryn Mawr was about, that you’d be more of a TA, reading for the course and responding to content, rather than to form, process, underlying ideas or goals.

Hopes and Fears for the Collaboration

MG: What were your hopes for the collaboration?

NG: I had so many hopes coming into my TLI experience at Ursinus. Namely, I really hoped that I would be able to learn some new, different pedagogical strategies and perspectives that I would be able to take back to my weekly TLI meetings with other student consultants at Bryn Mawr and share with my peers. On a more individual level, I also hoped that the collaboration would enable me to begin thinking about my potential as a professor outside of my fairly isolated learning experiences at Bryn Mawr.

In terms of what I hoped I could do for you as a student consultant, I hoped that my personal background as a senior English major would be helpful to you. I wanted to be someone who could empathize with your students. I also wanted my familiarity with the TLI at Bryn Mawr to help structure a program at Ursinus that would thrive once our partnership ended. I also hoped that I might be able to help you bring discussions about more marginalized strings of critical theory- for example, critical race studies and queer studies, which happen to be my own specialties- into a classroom at Ursinus. I was apprehensive since I assumed that the academic atmosphere might be more conservative than what I was used to.

MG: What were your fears for the collaboration?

NG: I was very, very confident about my ability to work well with another English professor. I have been lucky that most of my English professors have also been really empowering mentors for me. My fears mostly circled how the student body would perceive me. I was aware that, unlike Haverford and Bryn Mawr, the TLI was not an established institution at Ursinus. I realized that the students probably would not immediately understand my role or purpose in their classroom – especially the fact that my job was not to assess them. I was wary that the presence of a spectator could have confused some students or made them feel uncomfortable.

Even I myself was very much aware of the cultural differences between us. I had never attended a class with many boys present, much less one with a generally conservative atmosphere. It was strange for me not to call a professor by her first name. In particular, I did not want my presence to inhibit your students' behavior. Being able to observe classroom dynamics as they normally happened was necessary to performing my own tasks well.

NG: What were your hopes for working with a student from another institution?

MG: If anything, I was hoping that a student from another institution could help provide some context for my own experience. I think it's always easy-whatever institution you're affiliated with-to say "our students are disposed in a particular way," or "our students can or can't do this." You learn your audience and then you start to make assumptions about them, but then those assumptions can become self-perpetuating. I was hoping to be able to do things differently, more democratically, and not be stuck teaching a certain way or relating to students in a certain way. So I was hoping that you could help me think through some of those assumptions.

NG: What were your reservations about working with a student from another institution?

MG: I was concerned about a cultural divide between our two institutions, one having to do with class as well as conservatism. And then I had concerns that students would be more self-conscious around you knowing you were from another institution, but these concerns were dispelled by our working together! I still feel lucky, though, that you are exceptionally realistic about college classes and what they can or should work to accomplish.

NG: What, if anything specific, did you hope to get from working with an English major?

MG: I didn't realize at first that most students in the TLI at Bryn Mawr consulted for classes outside their own discipline, so I didn't have a sense that our working together wasn't necessarily the norm. Because I wanted to talk about course content as well as method, I was particularly interested in having a major so I could have those conversations with you. And I was curious to learn about your own disciplinary training, which, I learned from you, was very different from that of my students. One clear difference was greater emphasis at Bryn Mawr on critical explorations of particular areas rather than broader surveys, such as the broad intellectual history courses that our students take in their first year. Our frank conversations about the differences in our colleges' approaches helped me rethink some of my own assumptions about the undergraduate discipline of my field; I found it especially refreshing, for example, to hear that you would have appreciated more survey courses. Those conversations helped me reaffirm the value of what I was doing, especially as it made me feel that even students at a more "elite" school could benefit from the education I was trying to provide.

Developing Our Partnership

MG: Once you started coming to Ursinus, how did your feelings about the cross-campus partnership evolve? Did being at Ursinus allow you to see your experience at Bryn Mawr/Haverford differently?

NG: Once I started coming to Ursinus, I began to realize that my own college experience was a much stranger – or at least, more unique – one than I had initially thought. Especially coming from a women’s college, I was so surprised to realize how much classroom dynamics changed with the presence of boys and Greek life. Working with you was particularly interesting in that respect because I knew you wanted to push the boundaries of what students discussed in your class. Discussions about race, sex, and gender were an everyday occurrence at Bryn Mawr, but over one-third of the student body was also international or of color. At Ursinus, where ethnic and racial diversity was not quite so prevalent, those discussions were much more deeply fraught and required serious, thoughtful preparation. Working with a professor like you, who was so intent on bridging that gap between 19th century American literature and your students’ worldviews, definitely helped me to see the spectrum of important discussions that I’d taken for granted at Bryn Mawr. I began to see how a professor could consciously cultivate a space for open dialogue where it might not have existed before.

MG: We discussed a wide range of pedagogical and curricular issues in our weekly meetings, especially issues of diversity and canonicity. What aspects of our weekly discussions did you find particularly memorable? What sticks in your mind now?

NG: I definitely remember enjoying that those very themes you mentioned-diversity and canonicity-became a common thread. They were like big-picture goals, a sense of which had been missing from my previous partnership. They are also the two themes that I will continue to be most conscious about in my own growth as an educator. I probably remember our discussion about Nella Larsen’s *Passing* the most, likely because it was the classroom dialogue that touched on queer theory. I remember discussing an activity in which students theorized the reasoning behind one of the characters’ murders and the ways in which murder could serve as an interesting but familiar segue into the less comfortable territory of sexuality.

NG: Which elements of our conversations or particular discussions did you find most rewarding?

MG: I remember a number of conversations that were particularly rewarding, but much of what I appreciated was simply having the opportunity to talk with you about what was going on in the class. In this way, having a student outside the college was uniquely helpful-you knew the players in the course but not in an intimate way, as a fellow student might. But I especially remember our discussion about Walt Whitman, where I began to feel that I’d become too risk-averse in the way that I talked about certain things at Ursinus. I remember telling you that I’d lose the majority of my audience if I led them to a queer reading of Whitman, but I also remember you telling me that if there was one gay or questioning student in that class, that reading could make a real difference for him or her. I think that made me feel more confident about broaching these issues with students. It was also refreshing for me to be able to have a conversation about the gender dynamics of Ursinus classrooms. Again, your presence made me feel like I could confront these issues more explicitly.

MG: How would you describe your experience interacting with my students as we started to develop the TLI at Ursinus? What was most striking or notable about that for you?

NG: I was really struck by students' enthusiasm about the program at Ursinus. Students were really excited to be part of something so new and innovative. Some seemed to think that the notion that there could be a program to inspire even the most established math teachers to renovate their classes was almost revolutionary.

It was interesting for me to explain the program to students who had next to no frame of reference for such a thing. As I had to articulate it more often, I realized how crazy-and intimidating-the idea sounded. Students document in detail teachers' classrooms, write down the minutiae of all that they do, and give them feedback on *everything*, from their syllabi to the way they talk in a lecture? And then students risk having those professors as their own teachers in the future? Without any backlash whatsoever? I learned to become really sensitive to students' apprehensions.

It was also inspiring to see a cohort of students so committed to the adventure. When I had first started working for the TLI at Bryn Mawr, it was already well established. I had applied to it as a much more appealing work-study option than the dining hall where I had previously been working. Seeing students' excitement at Ursinus made me realize that all the students in the experiment, myself and those at Bryn Mawr and Haverford included, were actually extraordinarily lucky to be participants.

Questions of Authority

MG: How would you describe our power dynamic? Do you think it changed over the course of the semester, and if so, how?

NG: I would describe the power relations between us as very fluid. I already thought of myself as someone who easily communicated with professors, and I had been lucky to have several mentorship experiences that taught me to speak in terms of pedagogy, academics, etc. Even though it took me a little while to get used to small things, like calling you "Professor Goldsmith," I assumed that those small differences were a reflection of a different college culture and not of any diminishment of my role in our partnership.

I am not sure that I would say power relations changed over the course of the semester so much as they leveled out. Whereas I learned a lot from your approach to teaching English earlier in the semester, you counted on me to impart my knowledge of founding a functional TLI later in the semester. It felt like an exchange throughout.

NG: Was anything about partnering with a student in such a way startling? Did those feelings change, and if so, how so?

MG: I was very nervous at the beginning of our partnership-it was striking how much I felt like I'd yielded power. I think the position of teacher can allow a certain sense of complacency to develop, wherever you are in your career, and as democratic as I believe myself to be, I didn't expect to be addressed as an equal. But I think this kind of radical equality is what I was looking for-a sense of genuine interchange about what's going on in the classroom. Eventually, I became

more comfortable with the level of equality and the nature of our interactions, and I always welcomed your constructive criticisms.

NG: How did you perceive the power dynamics of our partnership? How would you describe the evolution of our partnership?

MG: I agree with your response to this question; I found the power dynamics of our relationship quite fluid. I'm especially struck by moments when you could tell me that you disagreed with me, or when I would describe a prospective approach and you said how you would do it differently. I think your confidence made it easy for me to get over my initial intimidation and the anxieties I mentioned above. Because of the unusual nature of our partnership, I found that our relationship evolved relatively quickly from that of faculty and student consultant to that of fellow professionals, especially when you were meeting with my prospective consultants. I think that model can be emulated in many other partnerships.

Concluding Thoughts

NG: Overall, what did you find most beneficial about the experiment? What would you avoid, and what would you do again?

MG: I especially appreciated how you would encourage me to take students to a meta-level of analysis, to get them to consider the "why" questions behind the arguments we made, the texts we read, and the approaches that we took. This kind of approach encourages greater accountability on my part as well as deeper thinking on students' parts. While it's very time-consuming, I think faculty should take advantage of the opportunity to just talk with the consultant (or even, in other circumstances, chat with students in the class) about what happened in a class, about what we were trying for, and about what did and didn't go well. I think you were also extremely helpful in terms of realistic goal setting; in fact, now that I train and interact with consultants regularly, I think they can be more forgiving than faculty at times.

I also think it would be worthwhile to expand these cross-campus collaborations beyond the bi-college community. One of my bottom-line realizations was that students have their cultural and institutional differences-but fundamentally, they're students. I think most classrooms have similar problems and concerns; I would love for my students to have the opportunity to learn that, too.

As for what to avoid, I would like not to take individual moments of criticism (either from a consultant or from students in their feedback) so seriously. While you're being observed, ten minutes of bad discussion can seem like the end of the world. You didn't encourage this mindset at all, but I think it's worth reminding faculty and students going into a partnership to be generous with each other, as well as frank.

NG: What takeaway have you gotten that you think would compel other professors to take on a similar experiment?

MG: First of all, I was reminded that it's safe for me to push students in directions they may not seem prepared to go; I think our work together allowed me to be more trusting of them and of myself. I also think working with the consultant allows one to move past the mentality of "getting lucky" in the classroom; when you discuss your aims and how you tried to get there, you start to understand why things work or don't work. If you know why something works, it's more easily reproducible.

I think that the opportunity to talk about teaching and learning with an engaged, thoughtful student on a routine basis is invaluable. Faculty work can be very atomizing—you can easily go for a whole semester never talking to colleagues about what you do. For me, that isolation increases the tendency toward unhealthy self-criticism. Partnerships can help faculty not only in the classroom but also provide a means of breaking out of that isolation.

MG: What did you want to take away from our partnership? Almost a year later, what do you find most significant or important about it?

NG: I definitely became more sensitive to a variety of students' needs. Looking back now, it's interesting to me that I thought my own college community was so diverse, when really, despite our differences, we thought so much the same way. We were mostly very liberal, very vocal, and very inclined toward change. I learned to gain respect for college communities written off by some people at institutions like mine as "too mainstream" or "normal." Now I find it very significant that the most remarkable memory I have of our partnership are comments that other students made in class. I paid so much more attention to other students' perspectives since the atmosphere was so unfamiliar to me, and I plan on carrying that super-consciousness into whatever classrooms I manage in the future.