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## Introduction: Behind the Scenes — How TLI Partnerships Unfold

Alison Cook-Sather  
*Bryn Mawr College*

Mia Chin  
*Bryn Mawr College*

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## **INTRODUCTION: BEHIND THE SCENES — HOW TLI PARTNERSHIPS UNFOLD**

*This sixth issue of Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education is co-edited by Alison Cook-Sather (Coordinator of The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr College) and Mia Chin (Guest Student Editor, Bryn Mawr College, 2012).*

In *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Reconsidered*, Hutchings et al. write: “Educational innovation today invites, even requires, levels of preparation, imagination, collaboration, and support that are not always a good fit (to say the least) with the inherited routines of academic life” (2011, p. 6). Pedagogical partnerships between faculty members and students are emerging as an innovative way to achieve the kind of collaboration for which Hutchings and her colleagues are calling. Plenary sessions and papers at conferences sponsored by organizations such as POD (Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education) and ISSoTL (International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) and a growing number of publications feature explorations of what such partnerships have to offer. But because these student-faculty partnerships, particularly those involving undergraduates, constitute “productive disruptions” (Cook-Sather, Felten, & McKay, 2011; Felten, 2011; Glasser & Powers, 2011) — not only of the inherited routines of academic life but also of the roles we play within those routines — faculty, students, and faculty developers seek guidance on how to engage in such innovative, collaborative efforts.

In previous issues of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, some of the essays highlighted outcomes of pedagogical partnerships between faculty members and undergraduate students and some offered narratives of the process through which participants engaged in the collaborative work of analyzing, affirming, and revising approaches to classroom engagement.

These accounts varied in the level of detail provided regarding how the work of the partnerships was conceptualized and pursued. After reading these stories, people have asked, “How exactly do faculty and students work together to achieve these collaborations?” This issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* aims to address such questions by moving “behind the scenes” of partnerships supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI).

The nine contributions to this issue offer glimpses into the media through which TLI partnerships unfold: detailed, classroom observation notes student consultants complete for their faculty partners; email exchanges between faculty members and student consultants; weekly planning and reflection sessions through which faculty members and their student consultants confer, plan, and revise a course the faculty member is teaching; and blog entries posted by faculty members during the semester when they participate in TLI forums. Each essay offers reflections on how these and other forms of exchange between faculty members and student consultants inform both classroom practices and, more generally, communication in teaching and learning in higher education. These behind-the-scenes glimpses serve to highlight themes that recur across faculty-student partnerships: the importance of expanded perspectives, the power of partnership to increase confidence, the centrality of dialogue — both listening and transparency — to good communication, and the potential of gratitude to humanize and bolster the work of teaching and learning.

In “Facilitating Quantum Leaps: Reflections on How to Promote Active Student Learning in a Physics Classroom,” James Battat, Assistant Professor of Physics, uses a set of observation notes taken by his student consultant both to reveal what the consultant focused on in her observations of his teaching and to share his responses to those observations. Using comment boxes, he captures his thought processes as he read the notes — the understandings they inspired, the questions they affirmed or raised, the suggestions they offered. Battat describes how he worked with his student consultant to gain further insight into his practice, students’ experience in his classroom, and how he might revise his teaching to deepen student engagement and learning. This behind-the-scenes glimpse provides a concrete example of one form of documentation and exchange that constitutes the partnership between professor and student consultant within the TLI and also affords a glimpse into the thinking that partnership promotes.

In “Discerning Growth: Lessons from One TLI Partnership,” Zanny Alter, Bryn Mawr College ’09, takes a look from much more of a remove. Prompted by a question about her growth in graduate school, Alter looks back at a partnership she participated in several years ago, when she was an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College. Exploring both the meaning and process of growth, and how one goes about discerning it, she traces her recognition of her own growth through reflecting on this particular partnership. While Battat gives us glimpses of a faculty member’s reflections, Alter offers us insight into the thinking of one student consultant.

Like Battat, Alicia Walker, Assistant Professor of History of Art at Bryn Mawr College, shares a behind-the-scenes exchange with her student consultant. In “The Mid-semester Challenge: Filtering the Flow of Student Feedback,” Walker presents excerpts from her semester-long partnership, focusing on an email exchange with her student consultant that documents her preparation for gathering and responding to midsemester feedback from students enrolled in one of her courses. The meta-commentary she offers on the exchange provides both context for and interpretation of her experience not only with gathering midcourse feedback but also regarding the larger concept of consulting and listening to students, thus highlighting her insights and revisions of practice not only within the partnership with her student consultant but also more broadly with students enrolled in her courses. Like Alter, Walker lets us see the evolution of her thinking — the ways in which the partnership worked behind the scenes to transform her understanding of herself, her practice, and those with whom she was working.

In “The Power of Sharing the Student Perspective: Benefits to Faculty and to Student Consultants,” Emily Cunningham, Haverford College ’12, shares some of the specific kinds of insights she offered her faculty partners over five semesters of work in the TLI and the ways in which having the opportunity to offer those insights informed her own learning and growth — as a consultant, as a student, and as a future professor. This behind-the-scenes glimpse is of the human grounding of the faculty-student partnerships that constitute the core of the TLI — the insights offered, from one person to another, about what it feels like to be a learner and what it feels like to be a teacher. Like Alter’s retrospective analysis of a single partnership, Cunningham’s reflections on her various partnerships with faculty members offers us a sense of the kinds of issues that come up repeatedly across partnerships — the quality of exchange that grounds partnerships.

Jerusha Conner, Assistant Professor of Education at Villanova University, provides glimpses into the exchanges she had with her student consultant in weekly face-to-face meetings. In “Steps in

Walking the Talk: How Working with a Student Consultant Helped Me Integrate Student Voice More Fully into My Pedagogical Planning and Practice,” Conner traces the development of her awareness of problematic dynamics in her classroom through her weekly dialogue with her student consultant. Through her week-by-week analysis, she shows how she and her student together developed ways of addressing the issues that each discerned from a different angle. Conner discusses both the process through which she came to deeper awareness and the concrete changes she made in her classroom and pedagogy as a result of that deepened awareness.

In “Making Gratitude Explicit,” Maggie Larson, Bryn Mawr College ’10, captures what many TLI participants have articulated over the years — a profound gratitude for the opportunity to work with others in this collaborative way. She offers her particular version of this experience through excerpting exchanges with various partners with whom she worked in her role as a student consultant. She presents, in both narrative text and a visual representation of overlapping circles, a set of examples of how explicit expressions of gratitude among participants in the TLI provide the foundation for the trust and respect that are both required for and fostered by the program. The multiple voices included in Larson’s visual representation evoke clearly the layering effect of ongoing communication — another example of the human and highly reciprocal nature of TLI partnerships.

Highlighting another theme that emerges in TLI work, Sara Bressi Nath, Assistant Professor of Social Work at Bryn Mawr College, discusses how, through the observations of her student consultant and the dialogue she and her consultant had around those observations, she came to realize the ways in which she was silencing both her students and her more exploratory self and how she changed her approach. In “Finding Voices in Reflection: How My Work through the TLI Changed My Classroom Dynamics,” Nath uses her own experience to illustrate how partnerships with student consultants can illuminate dimensions of classroom practice that would likely go unnoticed if the student perspective were not elicited and how listening to that student perspective can, at the same time, liberate faculty.

Taking the premise of faculty-student partnership to another level, Yonglin Jiang, Associate Professor of East Asian Studies, and Yi Wang, Bryn Mawr College ’14, describe the process through which they worked together as equal partners to conceptualize and plan to co-teach an undergraduate course in “An Equal Partnership: Preparing for Faculty-Student Team Teaching of ‘Cultural History of Chinese Astronomy’ through the TLI.” This co-authored set of reflections offers both a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the collaboration in which Jiang and Wang engaged and provides a model for other faculty-student partners to consider. Jiang and Wang include the product of their partnership as well — a full syllabus.

The final contribution to this month’s issue is “In Memoriam: Duane Kight,” a selection of blog posts written during the spring of 2010, when Kight participated in a TLI pedagogy seminar and worked with a student consultant. These are included to honor Kight, who passed away unexpectedly on April 30, 2012, and afford a glimpse of a faculty member’s reflections — the thought behind the teaching.

Whether through analyzing student consultants’ observation notes or an email exchange, thinking back over individual or multiple partnerships, detailing a process of co-construction, or

stepping back to look for larger patterns of engagement, each of these essays illustrates what unfolds behind the scenes in TLI partnerships. In her reflections below, Mia Chin, student consultant during the 2011-2012 academic year and Student Guest Editor of this issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, offers insight from her perspective on the behind-the-scenes work of the TLI.

### **Mia Chin, Student Guest Editor, Bryn Mawr College 2012**

This year I had the pleasure of joining the TLI community and began a transformative journey full of incredible celebrations and valuable challenges.

In the fall of 2011 I embarked on my first TLI student-faculty partnership during my senior year at Bryn Mawr College. New to the Teaching and Learning Initiative, I had little idea how deeply involved I would become and how much the experience would change me. My faculty partner and I met for the first time on a Sunday afternoon for our initial meeting, where she brought coffee and mugs. We talked about ourselves—our interests, passions, goals and pasts. We talked about our hopes and expectations for our partnership, her course learning objectives and pedagogy. This first encounter, where we shared a complex mix of personal and professional aspirations, laid the foundation for a rich and productive partnership. While the Student Consultant Handbook specifies that we should have such a conversation, the guideline “Establish Relationship/Rapport” is only an instruction until you actually engage in such a conversation and realize the importance of connecting as human beings before embarking on the work of exploring teaching and learning.

After this meeting we continued to meet on a weekly basis and our relationship grew. We quickly developed a close partnership and our professional and personal conversations became interwoven as we both discovered how the TLI unexpectedly transforms what might be considered strictly professional into something deeply personal. Despite not being a student in my faculty partner’s class or understanding the class material she was teaching, I became extremely invested in her students and her course. Throughout the semester I was absorbed by my partnership inside and outside of the classroom. I deeply cared about the teaching and learning experience for the students and the professor. I also began to view my own academic courses and extracurricular activities differently as a result of TLI. When my faculty partner and I realized how much potential our partnership had we tried to maximize our time together and think creatively about how to bridge our individual skills and resources.

During our weekly meetings, my faculty partner and I generated ideas for group activities, arranged student pairs for class projects and restructured lesson plans. Drawing on my observations in her classroom, I shared my sense of who might work best with whom, and drawing on the feedback I got from students both during and outside of class, I shared my sense of what was working well for them and offered suggestions about how my faculty partner could structure some assignments and activities differently. I learned tremendously from my faculty partner through our celebrations of successes. She taught me how important classroom environment and community are in shaping teaching and learning experiences where students feel comfortable taking risks and become increasingly passionate about their work. I also learned a great deal when we faced challenges that needed close attention and collaboration. I was amazed by her ability to genuinely listen to student feedback and suggestions and quickly

incorporate them into her future lesson plans and activities. Her flexibility, open mindedness and creativity impressed her students, and they told me repeatedly that they had never been in an academic course before that was as familial, intellectually stimulating and innovative. Her students felt empowered by their ability to have a voice and opinion in the classroom, in shaping its content and pedagogy with a professor who deeply cared about their learning. Through celebrations and challenges she demonstrated and taught through her actions that students have the ability to transform their learning.

Regardless of what we faced, the learning and growth was incredible. My faculty partner taught me so much about education, teaching and learning in both personal and professional spheres. She demonstrated to me the beauty of being able to pursue personal intellectual interests and passions in a career. She demonstrated to me that professors can be passionate about both research and teaching without sacrificing one or the other. I learned about how much professors can care about their students' personal and intellectual development and how syllabi and curriculum can scaffold and cultivate these simultaneous processes of growth. This experience solidified my own desire to enter academia and pursue research and teaching. She embodied one of the most admirable and inspirational ways of being an educator and role model for students that I have seen.

The TLI changed my life—it was an experience unlike any other job, class or organization I have ever been a part of. It demanded a great amount of independence, maturity and flexibility. I had to carefully organize my time and attention, think at once as a student and a teacher, be a colleague to my faculty partner and yet maintain both personal and collegial relationships with my fellow students, and balance the rest of my commitments without getting overwhelmed. The most unexpected and surprising effect was how much it influenced my life not only inside but also outside of the classroom, with professors, students, peers and family members.

In the classroom, I went from being a student hesitant to speak to one who more confidently participated. After being a student consultant I realized how valuable class participation is not only for the professor but for the students as well. I learned that students bring depth to discussion based on their individual differences and unique ways of thinking that enrich everyone's learning regardless of how significant they believe it is. Furthermore, I became more cognizant of the impact individual students make in defining and redefining the personal and intellectual dynamic and development of the classroom. Students have agency of macro and micro levels to enhance and deepen their learning.

Working with my faculty partner and the other student consultants helped me develop a language to better understand interactions between people and institutional structures that I can now use to formulate and communicate thoughts. Through the TLI I gained a new perspective and consciousness that bridged my growing understanding of student and faculty perspectives. It allowed me to be more understanding of professors' decisions and methodology while voicing my student perspective about the same issues. Outside of the classroom as well I am a more confident and assertive person while also, at the same time, being even more sensitive to the complexities of any situation.

When I first began TLI, I was under the impression that the experience was about teaching and learning in the classroom, until I quickly realized that teaching and learning is ubiquitous —

constantly taking place in formal and informal settings. My experience transformed how I perceive the world around me and it fostered a young and potentially powerful consciousness I had not yet recognized or cultivated. The TLI challenged me to question power structures and academic canons while giving me confidence to find my voice. This growing consciousness and investment created both strengths and tensions that continue to influence my ways of thought and action.

What happens ‘behind the scenes’ in TLI partnerships is immeasurable. Meetings and discussions range from personal conversations that strengthen and enrich the partnership to discussions about resolving difficulties and complications in the classroom that need attention. The types of conversations that take place vary greatly and include individual conversations with the professor, informal group discussions with students and individual conversations with students. Whether it is in student consultant weekly reflection meetings, in weekly meetings between student-faculty pairs or through what unfolds in the classroom, what is ‘behind the scenes’ is always driven by the collaboration of students and faculty. There is a lot of work and conversation that is not always obvious or reflective of the number of hours spent in preparation. However, the ‘behind the scenes’ work is driven by the needs of students and faculty to create and foster the most inclusive, innovative, engaging and democratic learning environment possible. What is done for TLI in preparation for students and faculty in one semester has remarkable outcomes that have the life-long impact of empowering and giving agency to everyone who is part of the TLI community and those touched by the TLI directly or indirectly. The learned and nurtured perspective and consciousness of a student consultant is one that cannot be silenced or subdued. It still continues, even after I have graduated, to play an immense role in my perception and understanding of the world and influences how I negotiate the spaces and persons I encounter.

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