

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Issue 6 Spring 2012

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Emily Cunningham
Haverford College

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Recommended Citation

Cunningham, Emily "The Power of Sharing the Student Perspective: Benefits to Faculty and to Student Consultants," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 6 (2012), <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss6/5>

THE POWER OF SHARING THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: BENEFITS TO FACULTY AND TO STUDENT CONSULTANTS

Emily Cunningham, Haverford College, 2012

I am a student who has been interested in teaching longer than any other discipline. Because I am the daughter of two law professors, the exploration of ideas and the sharing of knowledge has always been a huge part of my life. I grew up into someone who is very passionate about both astrophysics and teaching, and it has become my dream to be a faculty member at a college or university. As such, the TLI has been the perfect outlet for me to explore my interest in my own education and the possibility of working in higher education. I believe that my most valuable insights in college have been about teaching and learning through this program, and I am so grateful to have had the privilege to be a participant.

In the first semester of my sophomore year, I was enrolled in a course focused on math and science pedagogies, and my professor approached me about participating as a student consultant for the TLI. A number of faculty members in the natural sciences were going to be participating the following semester, and they had requested student consultants with quantitative backgrounds. I became a student consultant for a geology professor, and armed with my background in physics and astronomy, I perhaps felt more qualified and confident to be consulting for this course. However, as the semester progressed, I realized that it was not my knowledge of math and science that I was drawing on with my work with this professor. I reflected on this element in a reflection paper I wrote at the end of my sophomore year:

It seemed reasonable to me at the beginning that I was “qualified” to be in [my faculty partner’s] classroom as his consultant because I am a physics student. However, at the end of the semester, I realized that I barely used my physics background in my work with [my faculty partner]. . . I figured out a few lectures in that while I do know a lot about many science-related things, I do not know anything about geology, and this ended up not proving a problem at all for my partnership with [my faculty partner]. Looking forward to future partnerships, I will have much less anxiety about understanding the material, and look forward to learning what I can and experiencing many different disciplines through the TLI.

While I felt more secure by being convinced that my background made me a good fit for this professor’s course, I quickly learned that it wasn’t my scientific knowledge that was helpful to our partnership. For the first time, I began to appreciate the subtle difference between what I had learned, which is discipline specific, and the way that I learned, which is related to student learning in all disciplines. This was the first deep insight I gained through reflection, and I carried it forward into my subsequent partnerships.

Over my five semesters as a student consultant for the TLI, in addition to geology, I’ve worked with faculty partners at both Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges who have taught French, Religion, and History. Each semester, working across disciplines and across colleges, I have felt more and more affirmed in what I began to appreciate at the end of my sophomore year: it is not

knowledge of content that is necessary for a student consultant, but simply a willingness to discuss and reflect on my experiences as a student.

Before I participated in the program, I probably would have wondered what a physics major could possibly say that would be useful to a historian or scholar of religion. However, since that first partnership, I have never felt insecure about my background in a classroom. My presence in a classroom creates a unique space in which faculty members and students interact beyond the traditional roles in higher education. Conversations about teaching occur far too rarely in higher education, and many faculty members have not yet had the opportunity to reflect deeply on their teaching before TLI. I can be simply a sounding board, nodding and asking questions as my faculty partner talks through the benefits and disadvantages of giving grades. I can be the devil's advocate, pushing the faculty member to question why a given reading is assigned and how it fits in with his or her goals for the students in the course. I am often a translator, rearticulating student feedback to faculty members, explaining why I think the students found an assignment unclear or a website confusing. Sometimes, I even feel like a friend to the faculty member, as we discuss our ambitions and hopes for the future, and share stories of our friends and families.

In this work, it is not knowledge from education courses or pedagogical theory that I draw on in my conversations with faculty members—I simply draw on my own educational experience. I often share with faculty members how much my own understanding is vastly improved when I am forced to rewrite my work. When faculty members get frustrated when the class discussion gets away from the text, I explain how I find that the quality of my participation improves when I'm given a few minutes at the beginning of class to gather quotes and page numbers and write down a few thoughts. Professors often express frustration when students do not make use of office hours, and I explain how foreign and intimidating I found office hours as a freshman given that there is no equivalent in high school. My willingness to share and reflect on my experiences and engage in these conversations with faculty members is what made me an effective student consultant, for a faculty member in any department.

Each semester, no matter the department, my partners have always made me feel that my perspective and presence in their class is useful and valuable. I have been so fortunate to work with faculty members who have been so affirming of the work that we did together through the TLI. Whether through conversations, emails, or notes, my partners have always made me feel that my contributions to our partnership have been meaningful and shaped the way they think about teaching and learning at Bryn Mawr and Haverford. One of my faculty partners concluded our partnership by writing me this note:

Many, many thanks for all your support, encouragement, and warmth throughout the semester. I know that in future classes I will imagine you sitting in a chair, taking precious notes about class dynamics, and then I will go over—in my own mind—what we need to talk about and work through. In that sense, you will always be a part of my growing awareness about active learning.

I find receiving feedback like this from faculty members so rewarding, given that all I had to do was share my point of view and my experiences.

While I have learned a lot of very interesting science while at Haverford, I have learned so many important skills through my work for the TLI that I know will play a very important role in my life. The TLI has helped me to become a better communicator, to be willing and able to have difficult conversations with people who have a higher status than I do. I have learned how to navigate different personalities. I have learned to appreciate that every relationship, be it personal or professional, is completely unique, and what worked well for one might not work for another. I have also come to learn a lot about my own learning. I recognized my tendency to lose patience with a course or professor without fully understanding the sources of my frustration. I have become better at articulating why a course works or doesn't work for me, and communicating my feedback to professors in evaluations or even sometimes in conversation.

Ultimately, I feel that one of the most valuable things I've learned in college is the importance of intention in teaching. I strongly believe in the importance of constantly reflecting on the goals of the course and the goals of the students. As a hopeful future professor, I want to always remember the importance of reflecting on the key questions: Why are the students taking this course? Why am I teaching this course? What do I want the students to get out of this course? What is the best way that I can help them both get what they are looking for and achieve my own goals for them? I think too often, in particular in the sciences, content is taught because everyone in that field always learns that concept or reads that book. Both students and teachers become distanced from the reasons behind learning about a given topic. I hope that as a teacher in the future I will maintain the awareness I developed for teaching and learning through this work, and that I will constantly be asking myself about my intentions for my students. I'm so grateful to have the perspective I've gained through my work with the TLI, and I know that my experiences will continue to impact both my learning and my teaching as I continue on in the field of astronomy beyond Haverford.