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## Pink Bagels and Persistence

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## **PINK BAGELS AND PERSISTENCE**

*Helen K. White, Chemistry & Environmental Studies, Haverford College*

In my role as Director of the Koshland Integrated Natural Sciences Center, I began mapping initiatives related to equity and inclusion at Haverford. My focus was on how the center could better engage underrepresented students in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). I was motivated by the disparities in student success I had observed over the years, as well as stories shared with me by individual students and faculty about their experiences in the classroom. I wanted to explore how faculty could reconsider the culture of their classrooms to provide all students with the opportunity to succeed. Of equal importance was my intent to engage students in the conversation without burdening them with work that is ultimately the responsibility of the faculty to do.

In the Spring-2019 semester, I partnered with Haverford Psychology major and student consultant in the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program, Paul Wynkoop, to explore these questions further through a pedagogy seminar supported by a grant from the Lumina Foundation. Paul and I met early in the Spring semester and began a discussion about gender, racial, and socioeconomic disparities in students leaving STEM fields for other majors. In our first meeting, we shared anecdotal observations, discussed key literature, and made plans to survey students to attempt to understand which aspects of these student decisions might be unique to Haverford. We also talked about ourselves, and why this issue was important to us. Paul asked the first question along these lines – a simple inquiry as to why I cared about inclusion and belonging in STEM – that set the tone for our collaboration.

As the Spring semester unfolded, Paul and I became caught up in our own hectic schedules. We both agreed that the work we were doing together was essential, but it was extra. While we managed to send out surveys of carefully crafted questions to students as a step toward addressing the issues that prompted our collaboration, the focus of our meetings shifted away from executing a plan of work. Our meetings evolved into a more reflective and conversational space where we could discuss our despair and frustrations with existing structures. It became clear that we needed to use at least some of our time to take care of ourselves and to manage the emotional demands of this work. Over time, a shared understanding and renewed commitment to addressing the existing inequalities emerged from the connection between our faculty and student perspectives.

It is challenging to neatly describe our conversations. When I scoured my inbox for clues, I mostly found messages where one of us informed the other that we were running late, or were suddenly out of town, or we slept in, or we needed to reschedule. We spent significant portions of our in-person meetings asking the other how they were doing, whether we were sleeping and eating enough, or taking time away from work over Spring Break to rest, relax, and escape. One highlight was when Paul had a late breakfast in my office comprised of a bagel of the brightest pink I have ever seen for a bread product. The color alone lifted my spirits.

My conversations with Paul were energizing. Paul's insights into various student perspectives allowed me time to reflect on my own experience, to learn more about those whose experiences

differ from mine, and to continue to learn in partnership about the work that we need to do. Our conversations created a space of care, kindness, and patience – all qualities necessary to do work that at times can seem overwhelming and insurmountable. Yet through my conversations with Paul and others, it became clear to me that this work of connecting with each other, and addressing inequalities is the most important work that we will do.

**Student Partner’s Perspective:** *Paul Wynkoop, Haverford College ‘20*

Throughout the time I got to spend with Helen, I gained valuable experience and insight in thinking about pedagogy and inclusion at large. The conversations that Helen and I had were always illuminating in that they provided a glimpse into the ways that professors and students conceptualize identity in the classroom and how best to support underrepresented students, particularly within the STEM fields. Indeed, I came out of every meeting Helen and I had knowing that I was more knowledgeable and aware of the way that identity and pedagogy interact. But perhaps even more importantly, the meetings that Helen and I had were affirming and validating of the SaLT student consultant position and all the work that we as SaLT partners strive to engage in. More specifically, Helen demonstrated the spirit and attitude of someone who is constantly reading, talking, and thinking about ways to make departments and classes accessible and inclusive spaces for all students. It is this energy and passion for creating an intentional, equitable environment for all, in conjunction with an openness to feedback and others’ perspectives, that lies at the core of SaLT’s mission and goals.