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CREATING MORE INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AT DAVIDSON COLLEGE

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Developing MILE as a FIRST Action Team Project at Davidson College

In 2018, Davidson College received a \$1 million grant from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) to improve the state of inclusivity and leadership in its science education. From the grant emerged FIRST (Fostering Inclusivity In Science Together) as a means to address institutional barriers in science by supporting faculty in improving their pedagogical practices inside and outside the classroom (<https://first.inclusivepedagogy.org/first-institutional-action-teams/>).

With the understanding that students are the experts of their own experiences, it was important for the FIRST leadership team to assemble a group of diverse scholars, encompassing different majors within the natural sciences, to incorporate the student perspective within the common goal of FIRST. Thus, when the FIRST Action Team was created, the leadership team took a risk by soliciting five students to come together and challenge the current practices employed within their science departments. During this pilot phase, we were not only challenged to reflect on own experiences, but also to incorporate a wider student perspective when it came to questioning what contributed to the lack of diversity within the science departments at Davidson. We chose to expand our repertoire of narratives by creating a consultants team open to any student, where we would run our ideas by them and receive feedback that would guide us on the right direction with respect to issues that mattered.

One of the barriers to success in the natural sciences and math (NSM) that we identified together was the disconnect between our predominantly white faculty and their students, especially students of color. The lack of student voices in the development of inclusive classroom spaces often manifested itself in inequitable teaching practices and/or microaggressions. Consider when a professor is lecturing and his/hers/their back faces part of the classroom: it creates a group of students who are not interacting with the professor to the same extent, thus potentially impacting the way they learn the material. Additionally, there are instances where microaggressions can occur and impact the psyche of the students. A professor at Davidson unintentionally made an inappropriate joke to a classroom with only two students of color, then spent 20 minutes apologizing, which increased the level of discomfort those students felt.

As we began thinking about the range of circumstances that play out in a classroom, both within and beyond the professor's control, our FIRST analyst at that time mentioned to us the SaLT (Students as Learners and Teachers) Program implemented at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. We were fascinated with the concept of a professor-student partnership that empowers students to contribute their voices to the development of more inclusive environments by providing real-time feedback to professors. We were inspired to pilot our own pedagogical program based on SaLT at Davidson College, especially within our NSM departments, where a professor would be paired with a student who would attend their lectures to reinforce positive behaviors and provide feedback on how to improve their classroom practices.

Considering the high risk that professors would need to take to be a part of this novel program at Davidson, we decided to pilot MILE (More Inclusive Learning Environments) in the Fall-2019 semester with a tenured physics professor who was part of the FIRST leadership team. Then we increased the size of the pilot to three professors in the Spring-2020 semester, opening the opportunity to untenured professors who wanted to experiment with engaging in a student-faculty partnership. Students who were interested in participating as partners applied in the Fall, and we (the Action Team and the Leadership Team) had to ensure that the student schedules were compatible with the lecture courses and that no conflicts of interest were present prior to the partnership. Then, the students and the faculty underwent a series of orientation meetings to better understand their roles and get introduced to each other. The two groups were supported throughout the process to ensure that their concerns were addressed. That's what we envisioned and attempted to implement.

Support for Launching MILE

By piloting MILE as a FIRST Action Team project, we were able to use funds from the HHMI grant to financially compensate the student partners and the professors for their time, in partnership with the Crossland Center for Teaching and Learning (CLT).

Prior to beginning to imagine our own version of MILE, we spoke to Alison Cook-Sather, the founder of SaLT, who had a Skype session with us to explain how their program came about. She guided and advised us in the development of our own program by asking us to consider how a student-faculty partnership would fit with the needs of the campus and how we could modify the SaLT concept to best fit the need of our interest groups. For example, it was important for us to include an orientation at the debut of the program to facilitate and guide the student-faculty relationships, which was different from the original SaLT protocol.

Guidelines and Structures We Developed for MILE

To ensure a relatively smooth-running program, we created a set of guidelines for each student and faculty partner. In general, there was a 60-hour commitment throughout the semester that included: orientation, classroom evaluation, weekly student-faculty meetings, and meetings with the MILE/CLT staff member.

The orientation aspect was important because we felt it was needed to facilitate introductions between the student and faculty partner, as well as reflect on the PHY 125 experiences (Fall-2019 Pilot), the structure of the program, and the expectations for each partnership. We also included a microteaching experience component into the orientation, where students and faculty would reflect on how best to give back feedback within the context of a 7-10-minute teaching experiment.

To support the classroom observations, the guidelines included a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that was adapted from the one Alison Cook-Sather gave to us when she

was introducing us to the SaLT Program, as a resource to the students and faculty. We provided a series of questions and considerations that could arise throughout the program, including student/faculty roles, how to track the 60-hour minimum commitment, MILE logistics, and how to generate helpful feedback. We even provided strategies for framing constructive feedback to facilitate difficult conversations. For example, saying “I felt/experienced _____ because _____ and thus my experience was _____” is more productive than saying, “You shouldn’t do that exercise – it was terrible for everybody. Do you know anything about teaching college students?” (MILE Partnership Guidelines). The goal was to ensure both students and faculty partners were on the same page throughout the semester, and that they would be well supported by the MILE/CLT staff when conflicts would arise.

Obstacles and Challenges

Considering that Davidson had never established a premise for a student-faculty partnership program, we were concerned about imbalances in the power dynamic between the student and the professor, especially when it came to giving feedback. Drawing from our own personal experiences, the FIRST Action Team recognized how daunting it could be to give back feedback in the classroom, or even challenge a professor. But we emphasized that students are the experts of their own experiences while professors are experts of the content. It was important to normalize this idea to create a level playing field, where faculty and student partners can improve and reflect on the pedagogical skills of the professor.

There were also obstacles with communication between the student and faculty partners, and what the role of the MILE program director should be in mediating conflicts that would arise. For example, some faculty felt the students were too present in the classroom and other times, students would feel they were running out of things to “observe” in the classroom space. Spring 2020 brought its own set of challenges to the pilot program. First, the three MILE faculty partners were male, which became a concern since the Fall-2019 faculty partner was also male. The lack of female faculty representation was discouraging, but it’s important to note that the majority of Davidson NSM faculty identify as male, so creating inclusive environments in these predominantly male spaces is important. The FIRST Action team also recognized that changing the gender ratio within these departments was futile because it was beyond the scope of our mission.

Second, after COVID-19 became a big concern for our school, the campus closed, and the instructional space shifted to an online environment. For the faculty partner, switching to Zoom as the instructional space created its own set of challenges to inclusive pedagogy: technological problems, limited student interactions, and difficulties adapting to an online space. For the student partner, the online space limited the scope of his or her observations to a screen, so what constituted inclusive teaching practices had to change as well. Not to mention the stressful experiences the student partner could have been experiencing with shifting his or her own learning environment during a global pandemic.

Resulting Program

MILE (More Inclusive Learning Environments) became a student-faculty partnership where student experiences were valuable assets in the development of more inclusive classrooms spaces. Such a partnership required strong reciprocity between the student and the faculty member, mutual respect, and a shared responsibility to grow and learn from each other (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014).

We imagined a program where a student and a faculty member partner for a semester, ensuring that a prior conflict of interest did not exist. The student had to be able to commit 3-6 hours a week to attend class regularly, meet with the faculty member, and meet with the FIRST/CLT staff occasionally. They must have also completed at least two semesters at Davidson and must not be planning to enroll in the faculty partner's courses or discipline. The student must be able to provide candid and constructive feedback, observations and experiences to the faculty partner, identifying both strengths and areas for improvement within and outside the classroom setting. In return, the student partner would receive a \$1000 stipend. For the faculty, the individual must be tenured, tenure-track, or a continuing faculty member in the natural sciences and math and must be eager to consider changes in their course based on the student feedback. The faculty member must be welcoming to the student and recognize the value of the perspective of the student who is working with them to improve and enhance their pedagogical practices.

The MILE partnership required that both partners understood that their roles were mutually supportive, and that constant self-reflection would help both individuals grow into the role and the goal of the program. Neither partner would be expected to have answers when problems would arise, but mutual understanding and commitment to the program were expected, to ensure a collaborative space with the goal to create more inclusive learning environments.

Conclusion

Working with the FIRST Action team taught me that when it comes to building more inclusive learning environments, it is important to be brave. Piloting MILE at Davidson College was risky, because it not only diverged from traditional pedagogical practices, but it took courage from both the student and faculty partners to see each other's value. By recognizing the power of real-time feedback from a student's perspective, faculty members have the opportunity to grow as educators. Likewise, student partners have the opportunity to enhance their leadership skills by recognizing the value of their perspectives and experiences in shaping the classroom structure. It also took courage from the FIRST Action Team to recognize the value of non-traditional practices, such as SaLT, and how those could be adopted on our campus to improve the experience of all students.