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## **"VERY NERVOUS AND VERY EXCITED": MY EXPERIENCE DEVELOPING A PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM AT TUFTS UNIVERSITY**

*Jillian Impastato, Tufts University, Class of 2021*

### **Introduction**

When I look back on the last seven months during which my friend Langley Topper and I developed and piloted a pedagogical partnership program at Tufts University, I see risks I took for pedagogical partnership, the steps I took to get there, and the obstacles to partnership that I had to face. After taking those risks and steps and moving past the obstacles, I can add my own recommendations, based on my experiences, for other students who want to create similar programs. I reflect on all of these aspects of my experiences here.

### **Taking Risks for Pedagogical Partnership**

Although I come from a big family with many educators in it, becoming one myself always felt like it was off the table. Every summer, I would visit my dad's side of the family in Hawaii where many of my relatives were educators. I like to joke that the majority of kids on Maui were in one of my family members' classrooms at one time or another. Living in a small suburb of New York City and attending one of the best public school systems in the state, I grew up in a bubble where it seemed like law, medicine, engineering, and business were the only four possible fields to choose from. Going into college, I knew those four fields were not for me, and I was inspired by the close relationships I had with a few teachers and by a museum education program I took part in, so I began to take art history and education classes. Having a less certain career path than most of my classmates in both high school and college definitely feels "risky," but it also feels inevitable. Like Dr. Arshad Ahmad and Dr. Alison Cook-Sather, who discuss the forces that pushed them away from some choices and toward others on their way to creating student-faculty pedagogical partnership programs (Arshad & Cook-Sather, 2018), I have felt like I was both being pushed away from and pulled towards this next part of my life. I was pushed away from the seemingly predetermined paths that my peers were on and pulled towards this new and exciting field of pedagogical partnerships. Because of this, I have sometimes felt like I am not motivated for the "right reasons." I felt a renewed sense of pressure that this new project must turn out to be "successful" (what I meant by that, I still do not know) or else it would be proving that the little nagging voice created by my hometown was right.

The idea for the Pedagogical Partnership Program started in the Medford Whole Foods on one of the last days of finals period of Fall 2019. My friend, Langley (see Topper, this issue), and I wanted to catch up before winter break. As we were eating, she brought up that she had a project that she was going to try to start and that maybe I would want to help. She told me about her friend who graduated from Oberlin College and had participated in a student consultant program there (Volk, 2016). My ears rang with all the exciting buzzwords ("partnerships," "inclusivity," "innovative pedagogy"), and I was excited by the opportunity to make something productive out of my frustrations with a professor I had that semester. Looking back, it totally feels like one of

those stories about college students getting together and deciding to make a startup together. I was having so many “wow, this might be something big” Zuckerberg-like moments paired with “Oh shit, is this just a complete waste of time?” moments.

Then it was winter break and Langley and I were on different coasts. We did a bit of research on our own and made a really bare bones proposal document. It was still so exciting and new, but that also meant that we had no idea where it was going to go. I also didn’t want to overstep my boundaries with what still felt like “Langley’s project.” Navigating a friendship-turned-collaboration is always a bit uneasy at first, but working together while being physically apart was an added obstacle. I was just starting an internship at MASS MoCA (a contemporary art museum in remote Western Massachusetts) for the semester and navigating my new life, while Langley was about to start her next semester at Tufts. What felt like a huge risk at the time, to start a major project while I was not on campus and the “FOMO” (fear of missing out) nerves that came up with that, actually turned out to be the biggest thing making me feel connected to Tufts while I wasn’t there.

After taking that first risk with someone I knew well, I took a new series of risks: reaching out to people I did not know. Langley and I decided to reach out to three education professors with whom I had close relationships (including one who had taught the course where Langley and I met) to get their thoughts on this proposal. I also cold emailed Dr. Alison Cook-Sather because her name kept coming up in our research. I definitely felt the risk of letting down all of these academic mentors of mine and, simply put, making a fool of myself to faculty and student leaders of the field. At the same time, I was excited to share what I was learning with my professors and to learn from people currently engaging in pedagogical partnerships, which luckily outweighed my feelings of doubt. Especially as Langley and I started to reach out to more “important” and established people, I was concerned that it simply wouldn’t be taken seriously.

Closer to home, we connected with Dr. Annie Soisson, the director of the Tufts Center of Enhancement for Learning and Teaching, who became our primary collaborator. Luckily, I recall not being that nervous for the call (now I say that I “forgot to remember to be nervous”), but afterwards, talking with Langley and being like, “Whew, thank god that meeting went well, because the project might have died if it hadn’t.” Then, reaching out beyond Tufts again, we had a Zoom call with student partners at Davidson College, where they had started a pedagogical partnership program the year before (see Lherisson, this issue), and I realized that I was speaking with students who really knew what they were talking about. They were students with similar passions and made them come to fruition. While it was inspiring to see other students taking the lead on such an important initiative, it also reminded me that Langley and I had been talking/thinking/reading a lot, but we hadn’t really done anything yet. Same goes for when Langley and I finally got a meeting with two academic deans. We talked a bit about our research and our conversations, but we couldn’t really back it up with anything, besides our passion.

Throughout this process, I sometimes took a mental step away from the project and realized (1) how legitimate we somehow sounded while pitching our program and (2) how much time and energy we had put into something with literally nothing guaranteed to come out of it. The combination of certainty and uncertainty, and of passion and not-yet-realized action, made me

feel like I just had to keep moving and thinking, because if I stopped I thought I would realize that I hadn't really accomplished anything. I didn't feel fraudulent per se, but I knew if I stopped to think I would most likely fall into the familiar spiral of imposter syndrome. Although, looking back, I deserved to feel more accomplished and confident, these insecurities lit a fire under me. (Now, I have the fun, yet still difficult, task of basking in my first successes for long enough to internalize them, but not too long that it goes to my head.)

Another major risk of launching our pedagogical partnership program was our collaboration with Dr. Annie Soisson. When we first started meeting with her, I was Zooming in and Langley was in her office, it was my first time deciding to embark on what ended up being a major project, with someone I had never met in person before. I knew that we needed the support of Annie and CELT to move forward, so I was immediately invested in quickly developing a strong working relationship. It also meant realizing that for this program to move forward and gain legitimacy (with applying for grant funding) that we needed to let go of some of our ownership over the program. We had to trust that student voice and student interest would be at the center of the development of this program even when Langley and I weren't in the room (or Zoom). Our partnership with Annie, and eventually Ryan Rideau, the Associate Director of Teaching, Learning and Inclusion at CELT, made me feel empowered to retain ownership over this program, while also feeling comfortable enough within the team to share my concerns when they arose.

One of those concerns was that my student voice was not enough. I was, and still am, worried that Langley and my positionalities as white women from wealthy suburbs of major cities were obscuring or distorting the voices and needs of other Tufts students. We were not, and are not, representative of the full student body at Tufts. Additionally, I worried that our original leadership team of all white women was not enough (and it wasn't). In order to expand the people and perspectives involved in the project and begin to find our blindspots, I sought out collaborations every step of the way. We collaborated with many people across campus, like Ryan Rideau joining the leadership team and working on recruitment efforts with the director of the FIRST Center (for First-Generation, Low Income, and Undocumented students). Obviously these collaborations were/are not enough, but by acknowledging our particular identities and limited perspectives and centering what we hope to be the benefits of our program for the whole Tufts community, we made our program the strongest we could possibly make it!

If I had to describe my feelings about the process of launching a pedagogical partnership program in two words, they would be: nervous and excited. Those two words (and many, many exclamation points) appeared in almost every single entry in the "thought journal" google document where I kept notes in order for me to move forward. The excitement had to outweigh the nervousness, but I am glad that I embraced the combination of the two. It is unrealistic to be fully confident in creating a program that has no precedent at your institution, so I let myself be a real and vulnerable person. I used these concerns that someone would see me/my project as a "phony" as motivation to actually do the research and feel confident in my pitch. The research, in turn, helped to continuously rejuvenate my passion for this work.

A final risk was publishing about this program before it actually exists! But, I think that our process, our summer trial run of partnership, and our months of conversations about partnership make us experts on how we got to where we are today.

### **Taking Steps toward Pedagogical Partnership**

Our first “real” pilot was the first summer session of 2020 where Langley and I were virtual partners in two different classes. The summer pilot was kind of last minute in ironing out the details, mainly because of Annie’s chaotic schedule figuring out Fall remote learning plans for the institution. For the pilot, I was partnered with Professor Erin Seaton who was teaching a graduate level course on human learning and development (ED130) that I had taken with another professor the previous summer. Although I had taken ED130 with a different professor, Erin and I thought that my disciplinary knowledge would help the program to move forward.

We decided that I would go to both class sessions each week (because they were shorter than normal) and we would meet weekly for about an hour to discuss our notes. Less formally, Langley and I would talk at least once a week to update each other on our partnerships (and often ask for help on different challenges we were encountering). Additionally, we helped to set up a meeting between Annie, my partner, Erin, Langley’s partner, Dr. Sara Gomez (Coco), and Dr. Ryan Rideau (who had just joined the team!) where they gave feedback about how they thought the program was going. Less regularly, Langley and I would meet with Annie and Ryan to discuss updates together.

Erin and I met once before the class started to discuss the program, set expectations, and just get to know each other. It was a bit difficult to have both my “program developer” and “student partner” hats on at the same time as I tried to both create structures and leave room for flexibility. Additionally, I just love the course material, so sometimes I had to remind myself to observe how the class was being taught, and not what it was on. Juggling all of these roles was difficult, but after a while, I realized that I should not treat them as distinct and individual identities, but rather that I should embrace the blurriness between them. When I spent extra time going through the homework before a class meeting, I not only understood students’ comments better, but I was able to engage with students in the virtual breakout rooms and develop a rapport.

A few days after the pilot ended, everyone (Langley, Erin, Coco, Annie, Ryan, and I) met and had a big big big debrief! It was really great to reflect on my partnership, hear more about Langley’s partnership, and think forward about how this should impact our official launch in the fall. All of us who participated in these pilot partnerships agreed that we wish we could have had more time at the beginning of the semester to bond with our partner. We felt pressure to “jump right in,” and although the relationships got more casual and comfortable as time went on, it took work to get there. Coco brought up specifically recruiting from the Experimental College, since those students could have had prior undergraduate teaching experience, and Langley and I met with the directors of the ExCollege and got a list of names!

Langley and I both discussed how we had forgotten about the student empowerment aspect of the partnership until our faculty partners explicitly asked us what we were getting out of the experience when we were nearing completion. Although I was really enjoying my experience in the program, I had been focusing all of my conversations and reflections on the development of my relationship with Erin and how our partnership was benefiting her. Being asked explicitly what I was getting out of the program felt really unexpected, so Langley and I are already planning ways for student partners in the fall to remember that. We will build in time for student partners to reflect on their personal growth throughout the program. Opening this dialogue for student partners is essential, because it sets the precedent that P3 is not only a professional development program, but also a student empowerment one.

### **Critical Support for Pedagogical Partnership**

There were numerous people who provided critical support for me and my partnership work, and I want to name them here.

#### ***Langley, Co-Developer and Friend***

The best support I received throughout the process of creating P3 at Tufts was from Langley. At the beginning, I worried a bit about "stepping on her toes," but I quickly got over that and dove into a really communicative collaboration. I felt really connected to her because we were both very goal oriented, but also placed an emphasis on little check-ins about how we were doing since we were not in person together. We constantly say to each other that this pilot wouldn't be what it is today (and maybe not even exist at all) if it wasn't for each other. Our strengths and weaknesses seemed to really complement each other. I had some close relationships with education professors at Tufts and a stronger background in educational theory, while Langley was skilled at working through data and making sure we followed up on everything in a timely manner, and she was able to have many meetings in person since she was on campus. Our verbalization of appreciation for each other was a huge support that I am very thankful for.

#### ***Dr. Annie Soisson and Dr. Ryan Rideau, Institutional Support***

Additionally, we were supported by Annie and Ryan. Although they were both extremely busy, during our meetings we felt really seen and heard. I was always confident that we all wanted to work together to see this program succeed, and that we all truly believed in the program. We quickly learned everyone's communication styles and developed a productive working relationship. Langley and I were always quick with a follow-up email and quick to create action steps. Because of this, Annie and Ryan saw our effort and energy, and contributed to the best of their abilities. Throughout the meetings, they frequently validated and expressed gratitude for our contributions and passion for this project. With their support came the support of the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, where they work. This support meant eventually getting on their payroll, virtual doors of information and collaboration opening to us because of CELT's recognition, and eventually us getting internal grant funding.

### ***Professor Erin Seaton, My First Faculty Partner***

I cannot put into words how supported, empowered, and challenged I felt working with my summer partner, Erin. We bonded extremely quickly and genuinely, and I felt supported during the partnership through her frequent check-ins and words of affirmation. Since the partnership has officially concluded, we have remained in each other's lives, just giving brief life updates as well as asking advice on our recent endeavours (her second summer class and my first teaching experience in the virtual continuing education program). Her support definitely transcends what I expected, and I am so grateful that I have it during this important and turbulent time in my life.

### ***Supportive Networks***

On an individual level, I felt very supported by the network of people that I virtually connected with. It seemed like everyone I spoke with had at least three more names for me to reach out to. The network of three education professors were a great sounding board who gave me the validation to move on in the beginning. I also was in conversation with Margot Cardamone, the director of Tufts FIRST Center (for first-gen, low-income, and undocumented students). Knowing that I had her individual and institutional support made me feel like the future of the program could really be rooted in student voices that came from different backgrounds from Langley's and my own. Our meeting with Alison near the beginning of this process was essential in pushing forward our thinking about partnerships, connecting us to people to help us along the way, and finally, just to have the support of this person leading a movement to center student voices. Alison connected us with past student partners and included us in a whole group of intercollegiate student partners. Knowing that so many people were in similar boats and on our "side" was incredibly encouraging.

### ***Additional Support that Would Have Been Helpful***

I am extremely grateful for the institutional and individual support that this program received throughout the last seven months, but there was still more support that I think would have been beneficial to this program. As Annie got busier and busier with the university's transition to remote teaching, I now wish that Ryan had joined the team sooner. I also wish that we had more extensive institutional support to have a better understanding of how to find additional avenues for funding. That knowledge in particular seemed to be further up the ivory tower than I was.

### ***Obstacles to Partnership I Encountered***

Many of the obstacles I encountered stemmed from (or were heightened by) the fact that I was not on campus for the spring semester, and then because of COVID-19 (of course). Timing and getting on steps to move forward were sometimes difficult because the semester was pretty crazy (even before mid-March). At times, Langley and I would express our frustration to each other

about how we wished everyone was as on top of things as we were (some naive and wishful thinking). We worked to manage this obstacle through many MANY email reminders.

A more unique challenge was that I was working so closely with Annie and Ryan, whom I have never met in person! It was an interesting experience to navigate small talk about us as people while also having to work towards a goal together. Zoom was helpful and hurtful. While it sometimes felt like scheduled meetings needed to be straight to the point and end when the content was covered, we also got to see into each other's homes and lives. Getting more comfortable starting (or continuing) tangents about coronavirus, our families, food, or comedic bits about Andrew Cuomo has made it so now I am constantly taken aback that I have been working with Annie for over seven months (!!!) and have not met her in person yet.

Adding to my qualms about virtual communication, I found it difficult sometimes to advocate for myself and my program. It is harder to read social cues and body language through a screen, and that can make a real difference. I remember a meeting Langley and I had with two academic Deans, and when one of them had some pushback to the structure of the program, I had real difficulty responding to her. Later it was productive so I could do more research and conceptualize my response to her concerns, but it was more than that. I have a gut feeling that if we were in person, I would have been able to explain myself or at least come across more convincingly than I did.

### **Guidelines I Used, Modified, and Developed on My Own**

Although pedagogical partnership programs are a relatively new innovation, Langley and I looked into the structures of every partnership program we could locate on the internet. The two most helpful documents we found were *Pedagogical Partnerships: A How-To Guide for Faculty, Students, and Academic Developers in Higher Education* by Alison Cook-Sather, Melanie Bahti, and Anita Ntem (Elon University Center for Engaged Teaching Open Access Series) and Davidson's FIRST program's "memorandum of understanding." The how-to guide was incredibly helpful in answering specific structural and philosophical questions about creating a partnership program. Reading Chapter 3: How can you situate and structure the program, how do you get started, and how might you plan for sustainability? prompted our collaboration with Dr. Annie Soisson/CELT and the creation of our sustainable leadership plan. Additionally, Chapter 4: What are the shared responsibilities of facilitating pedagogical partnerships? painted a picture of the work that student and faculty partners do together. Reading these first-hand experiences helped me to begin to envision what partnership could look like at my own school.

After we met with students from FIRST, they sent us some of their program documents, including their "memorandum of understanding." This concise document situated their partnerships in mutual understanding with established expectations. It included a clear description of the things that each partner was committing to within their partnership. It included logistics (like committing to meet at specific intervals throughout the semester) and broader partnership values (like committing to listening intentionally, assuming best intent, and validating differences in experiences and identities between partners). As we prepare to launch a full pilot in the fall, we will situate our meetings with these ideas and values.



The process of submitting an internal grant at Tufts helped us modify and develop our own guidelines. The painstaking process of structuring and restructuring the programmatic components and values made it so that we, individually and together, needed to be able to justify every part of our program. Filling out this grant also prompted me to start an informal literature review of pedagogical partnerships around the world. I pulled together a list of other university's programs, journal articles about the diversity and inclusion application of partnerships, articles where students and faculty members reflected on their experiences, and any other resources I could get my hands on. Obtaining and distilling this body of knowledge helped me to situate our program within the entire field of pedagogical partnerships.

My goal is to develop guidelines that put structures into place to support the facilitation of healthy and productive partnerships, while also giving them enough flexibility/latitude to grow organically. But looking back, Langley and I have said that we should have developed more guidelines for our summer partnerships. For example, we were both so concerned about being as helpful as possible to the needs of our faculty partners, that we forgot until more than halfway through that it was also important that we, as students, were getting something out of the partnerships. Although it was luckily true that I was getting a lot out of my partnership, it would be beneficial for future partnerships to have more structured and intentional reflection points throughout the semester. This could help course-correct if students are not feeling empowered by their partnership in the moment.

## **Processes and Structures in Our Pedagogical Partnership Program**

I have shared some of the details of our program already, but here I offer more detail regarding the processes and structures we developed.

### ***Processes***

We wrote out a leadership structure, because the sustainability of this program is of the utmost importance to us! I have pasted an excerpt detailing the plan from a grant application below. While the details of the plan might change, the lens of sustainability and the valuation of student leadership is central to our vision for this program.

For the program's first semester (Fall 2020), Langley Topper and Jillian Impastato will serve as student co-facilitators with the support of Annie Soisson as the program advisor and administrative home. For the second semester (Spring 2021), one of the original student co-facilitators will work as a student partner, while the other original student co-facilitator will co-facilitate the program with an underclassmen who served as a student partner in the previous semester. This student will be the "facilitator-in-training." The "facilitator-in-training" will have had first hand experience as a student partner and will engage in supported leadership experience with an experienced co-facilitator, in order to be fully prepared to facilitate the program with Annie Soisson in the following semester

(Fall 2021). For sustainability, this transition plan will continue to be repeated with a singular student facilitator in each Fall semester, and two student co-facilitators in each Spring semester (one of which being a "facilitator-in-training" who has previously been a student partner).

## ***Structures***

I piloted an anonymous dialogue session that mirrors the midterm feedback sessions that CELT offers to faculty members and is recommended for partnership work in "Guidelines for Student and Faculty Partners" (Cook-Sather, Bahti, & Ntem, 2019). Since it was so successful, we are thinking about making it a recommended part of future partnerships if both the faculty partner and student partner feel comfortable with it. In this anonymous feedback session, my faculty partner left class 15 minutes early and students were told to stay 15 minutes after class if they could. I shared these three prompts with the students and gave them a few minutes to reflect. The three prompts were: 1. What aspects of this course enhance your learning?/What is working? 2. What aspects of this course could be improved?/Suggestions for improvement? 3. What could you (as a student) do to make the course better for your classmates and the teacher? Then I put the students into small breakout rooms to discuss the prompts and told them to write up summaries of their conversations. Then as a full group, students shared out their summaries, which turned into a more free-form discussion. Next, I synthesized the main points and presented them (without any student's names attached) to Erin at our next weekly meeting. I think this anonymous dialogue session went very well, because the students already felt comfortable with me (as a result of my engagement with students in breakout rooms). Additionally, it succeeded because it was obvious to students that Erin cared about hearing their input, so the students were invested in participating in this exercise.

## **Recommendations for Other Student Leaders or Developers**

Based on my experience taking risks for and taking steps toward pedagogical partnership, I want to share some recommendations with other student leaders or program developers.

### ***1. Align yourself with strong advocates for student voices.***

Where your partnership program is situated matters, but so does the "who" of who you are co-creating it with. You need to feel like your voice is still represented, even in rooms where student voices aren't usually allowed or welcomed. Align yourself with people who will hopefully be at your institution long after you have graduated. Sustainability is key!

### ***2. Find or create collaborations (especially inter- and intra-institution conversations!)***

Although every person I spoke with seemed to have three more names for me to reach out to, the amorphous network and body of knowledge I built for myself continuously challenged and prompted innovation every step of the way. Knowing when to stop before you get overwhelmed is important, but the sheer quantity of people at your institution (and within higher education) who have thoughts, ideas, and support to contribute to your work is really what takes your program to the next level.

### **3. Know your team/partner as real people**

Especially at the beginning of your partnership or as you develop a team, make a real effort to know your team or partner as real and complete people. Use your modality or platform as a resource! Over Zoom, if conversations about the books visible in your background or the stray family member passing by arises, let yourself go down that tangent for a while. These “little tangents” are what transforms an adequate partnership into a great one.

### **4. Research, research, research!**

Constantly be searching and reading about partnership programs at other universities and let yourself follow “research tangents” as well. Look into programs, institutes, or people at your institution that you think you can learn from, or maybe even collaborate with! Everything you read becomes a part of your tool kit and will help you promote or defend your program in the future.

### **5. Keep practicing your pitch!**

Throughout this process of launching a pedagogical partnership program, I have probably explained this program a hundred times in almost a hundred different ways. As you dive deeper into the work, your pitch will evolve. But, it is an added skill to learn how to adapt your pitch to different audiences. I have a friend pitch, a parent pitch, a professor pitch, and an administrator who hasn’t understood the first three pitches pitch.

## **References**

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