May 2021

Building Partnership Through Partnership

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BUILDING PARTNERSHIP THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

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Throughout the process of establishing the Pedagogical Partnership Program at Tufts University, I kept a journal. It is a chaotic brain dump of notes on teaching theory, rants on things that have frustrated me, and victory laps celebrating our successes. More than three months into this project, on March 20th, 2020, I wrote, "I still don't know exactly what pedagogy means. I really need to figure that out." Five months later, I can say that I have figured it out, in time to launch the Pedagogical Partnership Program at Tufts.

The Tufts Origin Story

Sitting in a friend's kitchen in November 2019, I complained about a class where a professor's racist microaggressions made it a stifling and uncomfortable learning space. After sympathizing with me, my friend told me about a student-faculty partnership program she had participated in at Oberlin College (Volk, 2016). It seemed to address exactly the kind of frustrations I've had for years in various classes. I left her house mulling over the idea, considering the possibility of bringing something like that to Tufts.

The current system of improving courses at Tufts relies on student evaluations at the end of the semester. However, with this system, courses aren't improved in real time, which can result in poor classroom environments. For example, in a course where a professor committed racial microaggressions, I didn't know who to go to—the professor themself, the dean, another administrator? I ended up including this feedback in the course evaluation and submitting a report to the Tufts Office of Equal Opportunity. I wanted to have an in-person discussion but worried how my professor would react. I just didn't feel like there was space to talk directly when grades were on line, but also felt frustrated and powerless with the approach that I had taken. I talked later with my friend Jillian Impastato, who was also in a course with a professor who created a frustrating learning environment. Jillian shared that she emailed and talked with a professor about some concerns she had, but the professor had reacted poorly.

Why wasn't there a system in place for professors to get consistent feedback on the classroom environment and their teaching style? I shared the concept of student-faculty pedagogical partnership with Jillian more as a compelling idea than an actual intention to start a similar program at Tufts. Jillian expressed interest in getting involved if I ever decided to fully take on such a project.

No Need for Reinvention

Shortly after this conversation with Jillian, I started writing the framework for a student-faculty partnership program proposal. I didn't know much about these types of programs other than what I read in two blog posts about the program at Oberlin College. In the meantime, Jillian began reading more broadly and learned that these student-faculty partnership programs were all over

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the country, first started by Dr. Alison Cook-Sather at Bryn Mawr College. We decided to send her an email, and we quickly received an enthusiastic response and an offer to talk on Skype. I was surprised that Dr. Cook-Sather responded so quickly and was so willing to meet. Too often I email professors and need to send a follow-up email before eventually getting an unenthusiastic reply. I expected a disappointing response, but received instead an invitation to partnership.

Clarifying our Mission

I wanted this program because I was angry and frustrated with a bad professor. However, in the first few minutes of our conversation with Dr. Cook-Sather, she recommended that we shift our mindset. She argued that student-faculty partnerships are not about fixing bad professors—they are about students engaging in conversations with faculty who are thinking intentionally about learning and teaching. My first challenge to establish the Pedagogical Partnership Program (P3) at Tufts was adopting this mindset. I struggled to even imagine what that relationship between a student and a faculty partner could look like because it is so far from traditional academic hierarchies. It was only after being a student partner myself that I truly understood what an equitable partnership between students and faculty could be.

Early on, it became clear that intentional language was important to this program. The first draft of our proposal labeled the student role as "student evaluator." Dr. Cook-Sather discouraged us from using this terminology because it connotes judgement. The next title we tried was "student consultant," which is what the Bryn Mawr College and Haverford College programs use. Students at Bryn Mawr chose it "for its associations with deliberating, conferring, and engaging in dialogue with faculty regarding classroom practices" (Cook-Sather, Bahti, & Ntem, 2019). However, Jillian and I felt that "consultant" negates the reciprocal nature of the relationship. In the end, we have settled on "student partner." This inclusive terminology breaks down the hierarchy between students and faculty and implies that both parties are learning, growing, and relying on one another.

Finding Support at Tufts

Dr. Cook-Sather also encouraged us to reach out to Dr. Annie Soisson, the Director of Tufts Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT). We reached out with a mix of excitement and trepidation. For Jillian and me, it felt risky to expose our fledgling program. I worried Annie might not be interested, and it would have been significantly more challenging to move forward without her support. However, like our meeting with Dr. Cook-Sather, Annie was supportive from the first minute. I had come prepared to defend the importance of establishing a student-faculty partnership program and was pleased to quickly realize that Annie was already on board with the idea and had been interested in starting a program at Tufts for some time. As much as it was a risk for us to approach Annie, she simultaneously took a risk on us. She was willing to invest time, energy, and finances in supporting the development of P3. We decided to nest P3 within CELT and moved forward with planning.

Jillian and I began meeting bi-weekly with Annie and also reaching out to others for insight. We met with the Tufts Community Union (TCU) Education Sub-Committee, Steven Volk (the Director of Oberlin's program), various Tufts Education Department faculty, a Tufts faculty member who was using a flipped classroom approach, and a group of students at Davidson College, who had pioneered a student-faculty program at their institution. These meetings motivated us and inspired new ideas. Meeting with the TCU Education Sub-Committee reassured us that our concerns about the current system of feedback were valid and that a student-faculty pedagogical partnership program would have student support. Steven Volk provided insight into how to establish a sustainable program by partnering with administrators. The Tufts Education Department faculty shed light on how faculty would receive this program and bolstered our foundation in education theory. The Tufts professor using a flipped classroom approach served as an important reminder that faculty care about their students' learning and are willing to take risks and expose their teaching vulnerability in order to evolve and better support students' needs. And the students at Davidson were an early comfort that a student-faculty pedagogical partnership launched by students could truly be successful.

Each person we met with asked new questions and offered the opportunity for us to perfect our pitch and to question and refine various aspects of our proposal. It took a long time to figure out how to succinctly describe the program's structure and goals. I walked away from initial conversations frustrated that others did not understand the intentions of the program. Initially, students assumed, as I had, that this was a program to fix bad professors. People also questioned what partnership between students and faculty would look like and whether student partners without knowledge in the area of study could provide valuable feedback. With plenty of energy, frustration, and time, our pitch became clearer.

Building a Partnership Program Through Partnership

Finding Support

This program is focused on partnership, and in the process of developing P3 I formed many partnerships—in seeking funding, in connecting with various senior administrators, in working with faculty, and in collaborating with Jillian.

Once Jillian and I had a solid proposal, the next step was to obtain funding. We looked first toward an internal Tufts grant. Even though I have written several grants before, at $10,000 this was the largest I had ever applied for. It was a learning process as Jillian and I figured out what a Bio sketch and RFA were. Shifting our attention to the practicalities of funding forced us to think deeply about the critical inputs, weekly structure, and measurable evaluative indicators.

We relied on the support of Annie and CELT to elevate our grant application, develop measurements and indicators, and plan the budget. The support of CELT has been critical because the P3 builds from a strong foundation established by CELT for inclusive and equitable teaching over thirteen years. Undoubtably CELT's solid reputation gave the P3 proposal legitimacy, which helped us to earn two grants. Also, because Jillian and I, the student founders, are both seniors, CELT will be able to provide ongoing structure and support for this program.

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For us, a critical part of the planning process has been developing a Transition and Sustainability Plan to ensure that this program will not end when we graduate. We all hope that after a successful pilot program, Tufts will allocate sustained, additional funding to CELT for the P3. Nesting P3 within CELT also offers the program a wealth of knowledge about classroom pedagogy and connections to faculty.

We also found strong support among other members of the Tufts administration. The Chief Diversity Officer, Associate Director of Diversity and Inclusivity, and Education Department faculty all contributed letters of support for our grant application.

Value of Faculty Stakeholders

The transition to online in March 2020 due to COVID-19 challenged and strengthened the emerging partnership between Jillian, Annie, and me. During this time, Annie and the entire CELT office was overwhelmed, supporting faculty in the rapid transition to online teaching. Annie simply had less capacity to support the development of the P3. Jillian and I were understanding of the workload Annie was juggling, but also felt frustrated that P3 was put on the backburner. While Jillian and I had the time and bandwidth to work on program development and the grant application, Annie had better positional influence to solicit letters of support for the grant from Deans and Directors.

However, our relationship with Annie also strengthened during this time. Our meetings became personal check-ins as well P3 planning. We got to know each other better in the informal space of Zoom, sharing funny videos and stories about what our families were up to. It was during this time that I got to know Annie as a real person, and that has been invaluable in reinforcing our partnership. Undoubtedly creating a strong leadership team is the key to developing a new program (Impastato & Topper, 2020). Recently, Annie has brought Dr. Ryan Rideau, the Associate Director for Diversity and Inclusion at CELT, into our P3 partnership.

Sharing the Workload

Personally, I felt a real loss of momentum in program development being separated from campus. During this time, I could rely on Jillian to keep us moving forward. This program became a reality because of the strong partnership that I developed with Jillian, my student co-founder. We each bring different skill sets to the partnership that blend well together. I am task-oriented, quantitative, focused on efficiency, and have experience with program development. Jillian brings a deep knowledge of education theory and pedagogy, she is articulate, has strong writing skills, and is well connected on campus.

As a duo we have kept one another focused on this project and always moving forward. We intentionally seek feedback from one another and aim to have open and constructive communication. After every meeting we have with others, Jill and I debrief on Facetime, complementing one another on well-articulated pitches, analyzing whether the meeting achieved our goals, and planning next steps. My partnership with Jillian is the strongest, most open, and

most effective work partnership I have been a part of. We have tried to emulate the goals of P3 in our own partnership by prioritizing check-ins and feedback, centering on inclusive practices, and showing awareness of one another's needs.

My Experience as a Student Partner

Building Rapport

In the summer of 2020, I was a student partner for the first time and partnered with a faculty member teaching a Biology course. I felt nervous leading up to the start of the course. The introductory meeting with my faculty partner felt very businesslike. I so desperately wanted to make a good impression on her as someone of academic intelligence that I bypassed casual pleasantries and jumped into a methodical monologue about the program's creation and goals. I spent the next six weeks making an effort to backtrack and get to know my faculty partner as a person because ultimately what makes these student-faculty partnerships successful is the trust and comfort that comes with getting to know someone personally.

A strong pedagogical partnership program is centered on building rapport within partnerships. This can be done through investing time in introductions, sharing educational histories and experiences, reflecting on communication styles, and slowing down to move at the speed of trust (Cook-Sather, Bahti, & Ntem, 2019). It was important to my partnership that we set clear goals at the beginning that we revisited mid-way through the course. As a student partner, having clear goals gave me topics to focus on during classroom observations and allowed for my feedback to be more directed and actionable.

Building rapport is important not only within student-faculty partnerships, but also within the student cohort. Jillian also piloted a partnership that summer, and she and I talked weekly, sharing note-taking strategies, brainstorming engaging activities for online teaching, and practicing articulating feedback. The support of the cohort gives student partners a safe space to reflect on the challenges and successes of their faculty partnership. Initially, it was challenging to not compare my partnership to Jillian's. I felt jealous at times of the strong relationship Jillian quickly formed with her faculty partner. As a student partner it's critical to understand that partnerships move at their own pace and take different forms. Each partnership is unique because the partners are each different. Understanding that allowed me to feel proud of the work that I was doing, while still learning from the successes of Jillian's partnership.

Consistent Engagement

This experience of working one-on-one with a professor not in my discipline in a virtual setting stretched me in ways I hadn't expected. In the beginning, I worried that my lack of biology experience or virtual learning experience would make it difficult for me to provide useful comments. Was I supporting my partner enough to be worth the time she was contributing? It was challenging for me to grow my confidence and believe that my feedback was valuable. In time, I became more comfortable and started to see our meetings as a conversation. I would

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make suggestions that we would then discuss and modify together. I was feeling more confident in the value I was bringing to the professor, and most importantly, to the students. My perspective as a non-biology student allowed me to observe the class through a different lens than my faculty partner, generating new discussions. I had insights about how to structure our class time and increase student participation through more small group work. At the end of our partnership, I felt assured that our conversations had led the professor to consider new things, brought changes for students this term, and driven the curriculum to be altered for future semesters.

Finding Purpose

Halfway through the class, my faculty partner asked me what I was getting out of our partnership. Her question surprised me. Despite developing the program, writing grants, and giving pitches, I had forgotten that this program was intended to be reciprocal, a two-way street of adding value both for the professor and for the student partner. I was learning how to be a student partner and developing insight into effective teaching techniques for maintaining an inclusive, engaged learning environment—my goal from the outset. This is the beauty of the reciprocity of student-faculty partnerships: students have a voice in shaping the classroom dynamic, while faculty gain insight from students on implementing more inclusive practices.

Pilot Program: Structure and Rationale

In early July 2020 we finally found out that we had received funding for the first year of P3, and later in August we got an additional grant providing us two years of funding. The pilot program we planned for Fall 2020 is a small cohort, with five faculty and five students. These partners are from a variety of disciplines, class years (in the case of students), and institutional role (in the case of the faculty), including lecturer, tenure track, and tenured. Jillian and I are Student Coordinators, working with CELT to organize and facilitate the program. We partnered with the Director of Tufts First Generation Student Center to identify possible student partners. For our first semester we got recommendations for student partners and conducted casual interviews rather than having an open application. CELT selected faculty partners from a mix of faculty who have worked with CELT previously and referrals.

During the semester, Jillian and I meet weekly with the cohort of student partners and CELT meets monthly with the cohort of faculty partners to provide support, coaching, and resources. Students are expected to attend their faculty partners' class once a week, and partners are expected to meet weekly to share feedback and strategize. They keep a record of those meetings, documenting changes made, and how they assess the impact of those changes when possible.

P3 is quite closely modeled after SaLT at Bryn Mawr, but differs in a few ways. Tufts is the second ever school (Davidson College was the first) to have students start the student-faculty partnership program. We hope that student drive and input continues as a principle value of our program at Tufts.

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A key difference between P3 and SaLT is in the academic discipline pairings of partnerships. SaLT recommends selecting student partners with no background in the discipline they are a student partner for. This prevents conflict of interest if the student partner might take a course with the professor, and a naïve perspective helps student partners focus on their observation rather than get drawn into the content. However, during my time as a student partner I questioned whether I would be a better partner if I had discipline knowledge. I sometimes struggled to give my faculty partner good feedback about an activity or the depth of the class discussion because I was not familiar with the content or readings. In our pilot we decided to have three partnerships with matching disciplines and two non-matched. We are still investigating and thinking about what works best and will decide pairings on a case-by-case basis as we gain more experience with partnership programs.

Recommendations to Develop Partnership Programs

You do not need to be an Education major to take a leading role in developing partnership programs at your own institution. Although a background in pedagogy may be beneficial, it is not necessary. I am a Community Health and International Relations major. My interest in education is most informed by personal experience, i.e., thinking about which teachers I appreciated and learned a lot from, and why. To me, this is exciting, because it means that students without a background in education are still capable of leading the development of student-faculty partnership programs and as student partners, reflecting on what works and what doesn't, and turning that feedback into action.

If you are a student taking the lead in launching a partnership program, focus on how to establish a sustainable program. We want these programs to become an institutionalized part of our universities and not disappear when student founders graduate. For us, the best way to ensure P3's survival was to position it within the Tufts Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT). CELT already works with many faculty, but is not connected to hiring, firing, or promotion decisions, making it a trusted and respected entity among Tufts faculty. CELT's reputation also helped P3 to obtain initial grant funding for our first two years. Without the legitimacy and backing of CELT, I doubt we would have received the same level of funding. When this funding runs out, CELT will advocate for P3 funding to be built into their annual operating budget. Early on, we also developed a transitional leadership plan focused on how to prepare the next Student Coordinator(s) and have discussed extensively with our CELT partners what that relationship will look like. Having the consistent support of CELT will smooth the transitions through Student Coordinator turnover.

Invest time in cultivating strong partnerships between the student founders and administrators you are working with. It is the strong personal relationship between Jillian, myself and our CELT partners, Dr. Annie Soisson and Dr. Ryan Rideau, that has propelled this program into existence. Partnership building can be a challenging process and, when between students and staff, often means transgressing traditional hierarchies. This was the first time either Jillian or I have worked closely with Tufts staff and also the first time that Annie and Ryan have worked closely with students. In our months working together we have had some candid conversations about our

respective roles and expectations for one another—challenging conversations that ultimately reinforced a trusting and communicative partnership.

Finally, when developing partnership programs don't try to reinvent the wheel. Read deeply about the philosophies and structures of other student-faculty partnership programs. We modeled Tufts University's program after the SaLT program at Bryn Mawr College. We continuously referenced *Pedagogical Partnerships: A How-To Guide for Faculty, Students, and Academic Developers in Higher Education* by Alison Cook-Sather, Melanie Bahti, and Anita Ntem for information about note-taking strategies, topics to cover in student cohort meetings, and just about everything else. We also used and adapted documents developed by other programs. For example, we used Davidson College's Memorandum of Understanding as a model for our own.

If you follow this advice and advice offered by other student partners who have launched pedagogical partnership programs, there is a good chance that you will have the kind of rewarding experience I have had.

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