Imagining a Better Future: Co-leading the Launch of Syracuse University's Pedagogical Partnership Pilot as a First-year Student

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IMAGINING A BETTER FUTURE: CO-LEADING THE LAUNCH OF SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY'S PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP PILOT AS A FIRST-YEAR STUDENT

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Introduction

As a mere freshman, I am working tirelessly to help develop pedagogical partnerships at Syracuse University. I am only in the beginning stages of my work, but I am hopeful for significant change in the future. I took many risks to get to where I am now, and I will take many more risks before achieving my goal. By my junior year of college, I hope to have doubled the number of pedagogical partners at Syracuse.

When I say the term "pedagogical partnership," what I mean is a relationship between a faculty member and a student that allows both partners to learn from the other. This can take place in many different forms, the most common including teaching assistant or research assistant. While TAs are considered pedagogical partners, not all pedagogical partners are TAs. In this essay, I tell the story of how I came to embrace pedagogical partnerships and what I have done to support the development of pedagogical partners at Syracuse University.

Background

In my senior year at Highland Park High School in Highland Park, IL, many of my peers were concerned with prom dates, senior pranks, or perhaps submitting some last-minute college applications. I, however, was obsessed with something else entirely: spending hours surveying students in my high school, analyzing data, and tutoring.

I was always the student who loved going to school, who loved learning. I even wanted to become a teacher. This all changed in high school when I became increasingly aware of the toxic competitive environment in schools and the socioeconomic disparities that made some students significantly more successful than others. Were teachers aware of the impact that their high-achievement expectations had on students' mental health? Did they understand that assigning large amounts of homework for the next day wasn't viable when students had extracurriculars, sports, jobs, social commitments, and work for other classes? Why was it they blamed the students when the entire class did poorly on the test?

I became frustrated because my peers and I were viewed as students first and human beings second. Yes, we were in school to work and learn, but we also had emotions and ideas. I felt as if teachers taught *at* students rather than teaching *with* them. Teachers and administrators heard me but weren't listening. I could have remained passive, but instead, I chose to take the risk of becoming an active member of my school and community to improve my own education.

I became a teaching assistant for Algebra II for 3 years, working with the teacher to make answer keys, grade tests, tutor students one on one, and create lesson plans. By doing this, I created

invaluable relationships with the students I worked with but also the teachers. Many students told me that they preferred to come to me with questions because I was their own age and knew how to explain things in a way that was more accessible to them. The teacher and I would then exchange ideas, give each other feedback, and create new plans to improve in the future. This was my first experience being a pedagogical partner, and I was hooked.

From there, I participated in a program called "Teach Day," where all of the classes at my high school were taught by students. I chose to teach the AP Language and Composition classes with Warren Wolfe, one of my greatest teachers and mentors. He and I worked together to create and execute lesson plans for the day and I sat in on strategy meetings with other teachers. Additionally, I applied for and was granted the position of student liaison on a city council board. In that position, I represented my high school and was granted an unofficial vote in policy-making decisions. Finally, in my senior year of high school, I was encouraged by my AP Statistics teacher, Tim Sirois, to pursue research in the field I was passionate about—education. I was reluctant because I had no experience with research or data analysis, but I chose to take the risk and try it out.

As an amateur researcher, I conducted surveys across my high school on subjects ranging from racial proportions in AP classes to grade obsession. I did a study on stress levels in my school and was able to present my findings and suggestions to a school board panel. Working closely in partnership with Mr. Sirois, I chose in my senior year to complete a study on classroom environment, where Mr. Sirois allowed me to use his class time to conduct my experiment. From these experiences, I learned that taking initiative in order to work with teachers and mentors only enriched my learning and leadership and fueled a passion for education policy and reform.

Coming to Syracuse

In late December 2019, I came in contact with Professor Bill Coplin, director of the Policy Studies Program at Syracuse University. I initially set up a phone call with him only with the intention of asking a few questions about the major. Instead, we talked for a number of hours and found that we both had an interest in education policy and reform. During this phone call, he revealed to me that the Policy Studies Program employs countless undergraduates as teaching assistants. This resonated with me, as my experience in high school as a TA was one of my most valuable. Over the next few months, we continued speaking, forming an invaluable partnership. I'd ask him for advice on the research projects I was doing; he'd ask me to edit one of his articles he was writing. This relationship was the primary reason I chose to come to Syracuse University over other universities.

The summer before my first year at Syracuse, Professor Coplin hired me as a research assistant. I had never done formal research, especially with someone who holds a Ph.D., so I was worried that Coplin would regret bringing someone so inexperienced onto his staff. I took the risk to pursue the role anyway, and the lessons I learned over the course of the summer were invaluable. I participated in two major research projects: one focused on the relationship between college and social mobility and another about the use of undergraduate teaching assistants across the country. The goal of the second project was to locate other professors who employ undergraduates as partners in order to create a network for those professors to collaborate,

exchange ideas, and encourage other professors to form professional relationships with undergraduates as well.

One conversation I had was both disappointing and newly motivating. In an interview with me, a professor at Brown University revealed that at Brown, partnerships between professors and students were incredibly common (K. Miller, personal communication, August 18, 2020). I was shocked to hear this, as at Syracuse pedagogical partners are much rarer. This was discouraging because I understood how important my pedagogical relationships with my high school teachers were to my learning and how amazing my experience as a research assistant for Professor Coplin was. It was at that moment that I decided my goal was to increase the number of pedagogical partnerships at Syracuse University.

My First Semester at Syracuse — Gaining Experience and Collecting Information

As I arrived at Syracuse University, I was inspired and driven from a full summer of research. Over the course of the summer, I had developed both a personal and professional relationship with Dr. Coplin, which I am deeply grateful for. I also had the pleasure of attending and participating in a Zoom session with Dr. Alison Cook-Sather, in which she outlined what pedagogical partnership might look like online at Syracuse University. Many of the faculty who attended the Zoom seemed highly interested in collaborating with pedagogical partners of their own, which was a source of hope for me as I launched the project. I had a dream—increasing the prevalence of pedagogical partners at Syracuse—but saying something and doing it are two different things. I was taking a huge risk by taking on this project so early; I hadn't spent very much time at Syracuse and I was coming in with very little knowledge about what pedagogical partnerships were already in place on campus and what players I needed to meet with in order to achieve my goal. Before I began, I needed more information—more experience under my belt.

It was at this time that I connected with Martha Diede, director of the Center for Learning and Teaching Excellence (CLTE). Professor Coplin had connected us because we have similar goals regarding the development of pedagogical partners on campus. Martha gave me the opportunity to train faculty on how to use Zoom. I began with a team of other CLTE faculty, helping a professor of practice in the College of Engineering and Computer Science, to prepare for teaching on Zoom. I even recruited many of my friends to attend the sessions as well so this professor could practice separating students into breakout rooms. From there, I began to gain confidence and run training sessions entirely on my own.

I worked with several professors, one on one, carefully explaining how to share their screen or use the chat feature. This was quite challenging for me because we were meeting virtually and I could not see the faculty member's screen or point them where to go. I gained many descriptive communication skills explaining where to go on their screen and what sort of things to click. It was interesting to experience the roles reversed, as they listened, learned, and asked me questions rather than the other way around. I encouraged the faculty I worked with to reach out to the students in their class and work with them as they transitioned into online classes. Some professors took my recommendation of assigning a student to monitor the chat section so they could focus on their lecture. Others explained to me that when they didn't know how to do something on Zoom, they would ask their students. From this experience, I learned that

professors are just as willing to learn from students as students are willing to learn from professors.

While I had gained experience working with professors, I still lacked a lot of information. *How common are pedagogical partners at Syracuse? What classes and professors integrate pedagogical partnerships into students' learning? Were pedagogical partners more common in lower-division courses? What sort of things do pedagogical partners do?* Seeking the answers to my questions, I worked with Professor Coplin to design a survey of the courses offered at Syracuse. The survey asked for the title of the course, the professor, the department, the class size, the division, if undergraduate pedagogical partners were included, and what responsibilities those undergraduates had if they were.

I also spoke to the honors section of one of my classes, Introduction to Public Policy Analysis (PST 101), about the work I had done on undergraduate TAs over the summer and my goals for launching a pedagogical partnership pilot. Many of them were moved to join the initiative, resulting in my classmates and me surveying 230 unique courses offered at Syracuse University. It is important to note that Syracuse currently offers an estimated 1,500 courses (G. Greenberg, personal communication, September 15, 2020), so it would not be reasonable to assume that the sample collected is representative of the entire population of courses offered at Syracuse due to its small size.

Of the 230 courses we surveyed, only 24 of those courses collaborated with pedagogical partners. This was upsetting to see, to say the least. However, we found that in courses that employed undergraduates as teaching assistants (UTAs), there was a large spectrum of jobs professors were having their students do. The most frequent job for UTAs was to hold discussions, recitations, and review sessions (63%). The graph below provides more details. (It is important to note that more than one job was listed for some UTAs).

Percent of Jobs Done by TAs in Classes with UTAs
n=24
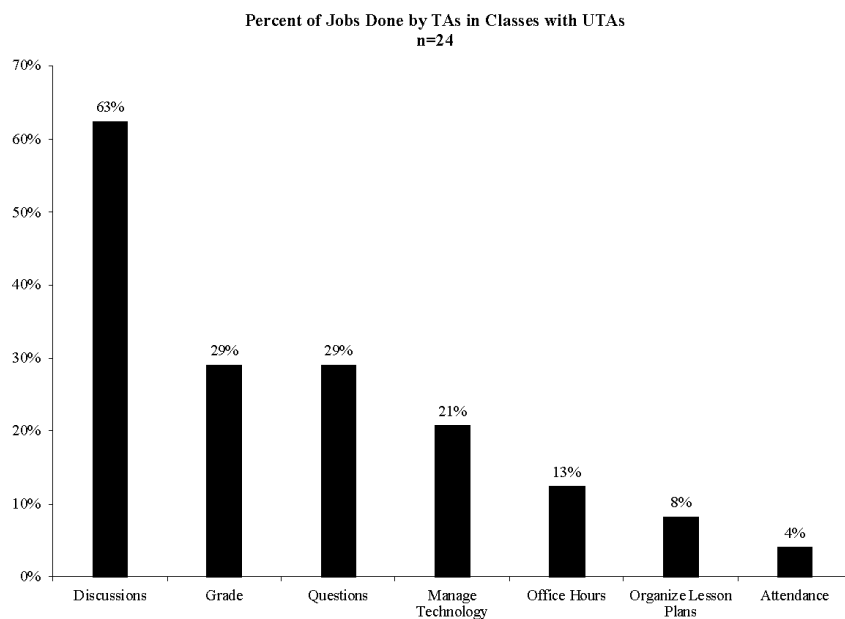
We found that 88% of the courses in our sample were in the 100 or 200 level division and 58% of classes with UTAs have between 25 and 100 students. We also found that the Engineering and Computer Science and Policy Studies Departments make up 9 of the 24 courses with UTAs (37.5%). This is no surprise as the Engineering and Computer Science Department often works with undergraduates to moderate labs and the Policy Studies Department has been working with undergraduates as pedagogical partners for over thirty years.

Additionally, the survey provided one piece of crucial information: the names of professors who currently work with undergraduates as pedagogical partners. I personally interviewed each of those faculty members as to why they chose to work with undergraduates in this way, what benefits it has brought them, and what suggestions they have for the pilot. In an interview with Bill Coplin, Laura J. and L. Douglas Meredith Professor for Teaching Excellence, he expressed how he learns from his TAs just as much as they learn from him: "I learn from undergraduates all the time. I've learned to stop talking so much, to make my PowerPoints less dense. They improve the grading rubrics. The TAs are making little incremental improvements all the time. That's why the course is the way it is. Almost all of the course is a result of their innovations. We're a team, I'm the coach. We all have the same goal to make the course better." He went on to say, "All professors should use UTAs because the professors can spend their time thinking of new innovations, can troubleshoot, can take care of students having problems, and can spend more time on research" (personal communication, November 15, 2020).

Colleen Heflin, a professor in the Department of Public Administration and International Affairs, said this as she reflected on her experience with her pedagogical partner during this unusual online semester: "Chasia has been invaluable this term with the high flex format. She keeps the online students engaged and helps me work those students into the class discussion that is often primarily in person" (personal communication, October 23, 2020).

Another Civil and Environmental Engineering professor said: "I'm all for professors using as many UTAs as they can. It benefits the class, the professor, and the UTA" (D. Joyce, personal communication, November 11, 2020). Yet another professor in the Policy Studies Department claimed, "It is a win-win for all involved. The Undergraduate TAs get to build their skills as a leader through professional experience, while the students get a more knowledgeable and hands-on TA who cares about them" (A. Zwick, personal communication, November 13, 2020).

In an interview with Naomi Weinfish, an Undergraduate TA for the "Introduction to Public Policy Analysis" course offered at Syracuse, she reflected on her experience in a pedagogical partnership as a UTA: "I love being an undergraduate TA. I enjoy working with other students, both as fellow TAs and as a leader for my group. Having deadlines that others rely on to do their job challenges me. It has taught me that completing my work on time shows others that I am professional, I care about both them, this course, and the students, and that I respect their time and work. Being a UTA is a great experience that more students should get the opportunity to partake in" (personal communication, November 22, 2020).

My Second Semester at Syracuse — Practicing What I Preach

The context I gained from the survey and the insightful testimonies I collected inspired me to apply to become an undergraduate TA myself. I took the risk to apply, with the fear of not being selected to finally get to experience what I had done research about all of last semester. Thankfully, I was selected as a TA for the same course as Naomi, "Introduction to Public Policy Analysis," or PST 101 for short. With Coplin as the professor, I looked forward to having a close friend, colleague, and mentor as my boss. In addition to acting as a UTA for the regular lecture, I was also named the Honors Director. In this position, I would have the unique privilege to independently run the honors discussion section of the class that met after the big lecture every Monday. This position would prove to hold many challenges, as I was in charge of designing the syllabus, writing lesson plans for each week, and grading all assignments. This position held extra challenges as instruction would have to take place entirely over Zoom. How could I keep my students engaged through a computer screen? Coplin and I teamed up to answer this question. I brought my experience with technology and Zoom training doing things such as putting students in breakout rooms to work collaboratively and creating a Kahoot! about Excel know-how. Coplin brought his expansive knowledge on the subject, entertaining students for whole class periods about his experience running a very successful business using the PRINCE system, or bringing in successful alumni of the major to have discussions with students about how they got where they are.

About midway through the semester, I experienced a strange, full-circle moment from the perspective of the educator. One major frustration I had in high school was when teachers would overassign homework without regard to students' outside lives. However, as I developed weekly lesson plans for the honors section, I found myself wanting to give them more and more homework. It wasn't an act of hate, but an act of love! There was so much I wanted to show them and not enough time to do it all in the 55-minute period. I got excited when they showed interest in learning about the topics I was passionate about, and my natural instinct was to throw as many resources and exercises at them as I could. I genuinely believed every assignment I gave was beneficial to them as growing learners. Ironically, it was the actual professor of the course, Coplin, who kept me in check. He reminded me that too much can often be more harmful than too little. I remembered my experience as a student when I was overwhelmed with work, and I realized that I had done the exact thing that I despised my teachers for. It was a fantastic learning opportunity from the perspective of the educator rather than the student. For the rest of the semester, I have been extra diligent to assess each assignment I give: *Is it useful? Is it interesting? How long will it take for students to complete?* At the same time, I've been working to check in with my students more. I was assigning them homework with no regard to their life outside of class because, frankly, I hadn't asked them about their life outside of class. The more I understand my students, the better I can go about giving them assignments that are manageable and beneficial.

In addition to all of that, the honors section continued the survey on the usage of UTAs from the semester before. The survey now has information from over 490 courses offered at Syracuse University for the academic year of 2020-2021. Information from classes for the new semester showed a very small improvement. 11% of the courses we sampled used UTAs, an increase of 1% from the previous semester. Change is slow, but worthwhile.

Percentage of classes at Syracuse University with UTAs (AY 2020-2021)
n=494
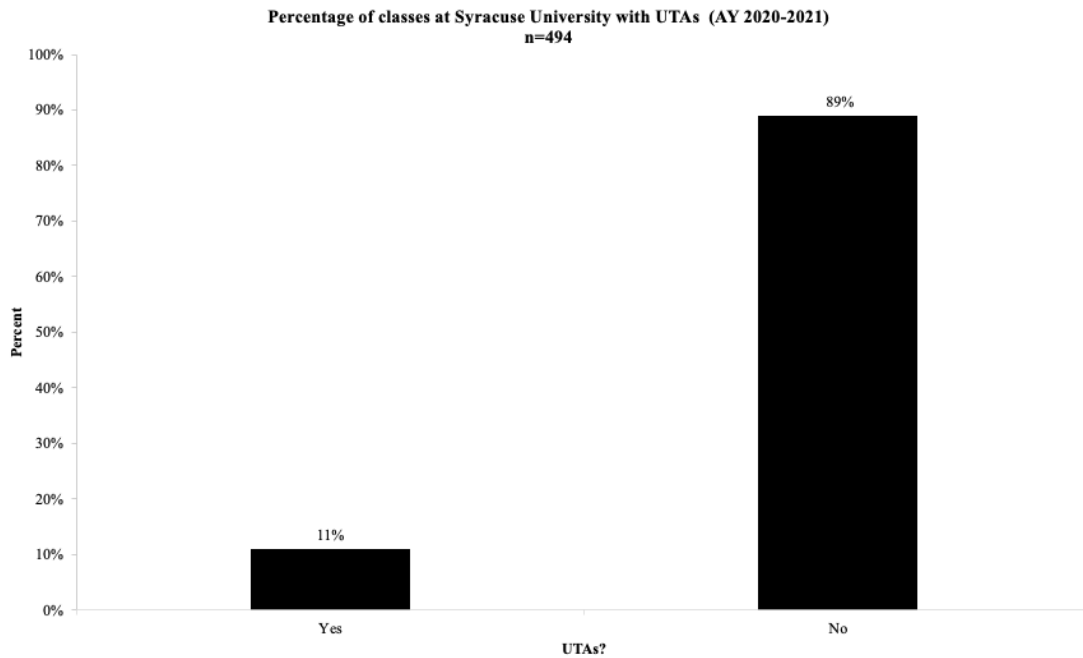
The cumulative survey also found that 62% of courses that employed UTAs were under 100 students. The departments where UTAs were most common were Engineering and Computer Science and Information Science and Technology, both holding about 9% of the courses we surveyed that had UTAs. It was even more enriching to lead the charge on this survey from an educator's perspective. Almost all of my students had little or no experience with Excel and data analysis, and I really enjoyed allowing them to take a peek into my word while they gain skills in Excel.

At the same time as I launched my career as a teaching assistant, I developed an unlikely partnership with the Director of Graduate and Undergraduate Recruiting for the College of Arts and Sciences, Chris Anderson. The partnership began when Coplin asked me to simply revise an email Chris was sending to interested students on Coplin's behalf. However, as time went on, I gained more of a leadership role in the admissions side of my major, Policy Studies. I remembered that the dedicated students of my major that reached out to me when I was considering Syracuse were one of the main reasons I chose this school . Soon, I was in charge of undergraduate recruitment for the entire major. I worked closely with Chris to organize information sessions and contact admitted students. In exchange, I shared my insight as a student who was applying to Syracuse only one year ago. I suggested that we design stickers that would be mailed to students when they were accepted, as the sticker I received from the University upon my acceptance is still proudly displayed on my water bottle. Chris, Coplin, and the marketing team at Syracuse loved the idea, and I spent the next couple of weeks creating and completing a sticker design. I had never designed a sticker before, nor did I have much experience in the marketing field either. I took a risk offering to design the sticker, but in turn I gained invaluable insight in fields like graphic design, marketing, and communications that I had never even considered before.

I reached out to every student that had been admitted to the major personally. It was a lot of hard work, but I got to meet so many new people with awesome aspirations. I also tend to get anxious when making phone calls, and being able to get so much practice speaking with others on the phone has been really beneficial to me. I noticed that many high school students weren't very good at checking their emails. I suggested we create an Instagram account for the major, and with the help of Chris, @policystudiessu was born. I am now in charge of the Instagram account and create posts for it all the time. I work with Coplin to get my posts approved before they go up to confirm that everything I post aligns with the Policy Studies brand. One of my favorite ideas I've come up with is "Why Policy Studies Wednesday," where I feature a student in the major every Wednesday and they share why they chose the major. It's effective in creating a community among current students, but also serves as great testimonials for interested students to see why other people chose Syracuse University and the major. Although I run my own personal Instagram account, I had no experience running an account that has to keep up with branding guidelines. It's a lot of work to stay engaged with the Syracuse community and run an official university account, but I would have never gotten to see "behind the curtain" if I hadn't.

Developing the Pedagogical Partnership Pilot

After gaining experience as a pedagogical partner myself, working with the CLTE to encourage faculty to collaborate with pedagogical partners, gathering information about the population of pedagogical partners at Syracuse through a survey, and interviewing faculty members who work with undergraduate students, I have gained a much clearer understanding of where pedagogical partners are at Syracuse and how I can increase their population.

At Syracuse, pedagogical partnerships are present and real, but they are often isolated and on an individual level. Professor Coplin and the Policy Studies Department have been collaborating with and employing undergraduate pedagogical partners for over thirty years, but this is due to Professor Coplin's individual choice to do so in his program. Professors may hire undergraduates as teaching assistants or research assistants, but often do this on a case-by-case basis. The honors program employs undergraduate teaching assistants in their freshman orientation classes, and the First-Year Experience course that all freshman and transfer students are required to take is run by undergraduate course facilitators. However, there isn't a universal program or resource that is a central location for pedagogical partners—each instance already in place is a result of a professor or department taking the initiative and seeking out undergraduates themselves. Many of the faculty I spoke with during Zoom training emphasized they were interested in pursuing a pedagogical partnership but had no idea where to start or who to go to.

We need a main headquarters and dedicated staff that will facilitate creating pedagogical partnerships—working with both undergraduate students *and* professors. Incorporating the guidelines from many of the structures already in place, the most logical step would be to collaborate with Martha Diede and the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence. The interest from faculty and students is present; however, we currently lack the resources to compensate the undergraduates for their work. There are three primary ways to compensate pedagogical partners: awarding credits toward graduation, satisfying community service hours, or monetary payment. Because there are many types of pedagogical partnerships, all three of these forms of compensation are feasible.

My original goal was to work with the Renée Crown University Honors Program to create a program that incorporates pedagogical partners into the honors courses and encourages honors students to pursue partnerships. However, I realized that the benefits of pedagogical partnerships should not be exclusive to honors students. While the honors program was much smaller and more likely to hear me out, I decided to take the risk to abandon the "safe route" and propose a larger and more universal program for the benefit of more undergraduate students.

Because so many faculty members expressed interest but noted they did not have funding to pay undergraduates, Coplin, Martha, and I teamed up to create a new class being offered Fall 2021. The class functions like an internship class, and students are compensated with three credits towards graduation. It was really interesting to get to see how classes are designed and built from scratch. I played an integral role in designing the learning objectives and the grading system. I felt my opinion was just as valued and appreciated as the two PhDs in the room. Professors Coplin and Diede did a fantastic job acknowledging when I, as a student, might know better than them. I worked to help students interested in the class find professors to partner with. This class is a fantastic start to creating more opportunities for undergraduates to enrich their education as pedagogical partners.

The next step for me is to present to Syracuse administrators to gain a better understanding of their thoughts on pedagogical partners and the ways in which they might assist me to achieve my goal in the future. In order to prepare for this, I have developed a formal report for the survey my peers and I completed as well as formed two lists of testimonials: one from current, past, and future undergraduate pedagogical partners reflecting on their experiences, and one from faculty who have worked with pedagogical partners in the past. In addition to the resources I have mentioned before, I have crafted a bibliography detailing academic publications about the benefits of pedagogical partnerships. I hope that all of these pieces of information, combined with my own experience as a pedagogical partner, provide convincing evidence in favor of increasing pedagogical partnerships.

Recommendations for Students Looking to Assume a Role in Launching Pedagogical Partnership Programs

1. *Find a mentor or mentors.*

   Coming into this project, I had no idea what I was doing. That's okay! Find a professor, faculty member, or administrator who shares the same goals as you and wants you to succeed. Without the help of Bill Coplin, an outstanding mentor, teacher, and friend, I would not be where I am today. Pedagogical partnerships are incredibly valuable experiences for many reasons but primarily the relationships created between faculty and students. Find someone with experience, expertise, and connections to draw from.

2. *Do not try to do this alone. Know when to ask for help.*

This project is too big for one person to tackle alone. Acknowledge the limitations of your knowledge and experience. For me, juggling coursework, my social life, adjusting to college, research, and developing a pedagogical partnership pilot would be too much if I tried to take it all one by myself. Access your support system of friends, professors, mentors, and classmates. Scout help—speak out about your mission and create a team of like-minded individuals who are going to help you get it done. For me, my team consists of Bill Coplin, Martha Diede, the students in the honors section of PST 101, and Kyle Hacker, a student from the honors section who has teamed up with me as my right-hand man.

3.   *Do not let anyone tell you that you can't. Know it can be done.*

During my first semester of freshman year, I've already accomplished so much. I've gotten to do research, work with faculty, and help enact real, tangible, positive change at Syracuse. I just got here! Your age, gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation should not act as a limitation. Do not forget that faculty and administrators can learn from you just as much as you learn from them. If you want to do it, despite hardships and challenges, find the determination to do the work. As an undergraduate, and especially as a freshman, my ethos is commonly questioned. It can be quite patronizing when people underestimate my abilities just because I don't have an advanced degree or twenty years of experience under my belt, but I've created a support network of people who do believe in me. Take this collection of essays of students who have been successful as a sign that it *is* possible with a lot of hard work and dedication.

4.   *Break up the work into small, manageable chunks. Set deadlines for yourself.*

Developing a pedagogical partnership pilot is no small feat. If you try to tackle it all at once, you will likely become overwhelmed. Instead, create small and achievable goals for yourself. This is a marathon, not a sprint. Map out what you want to accomplish and by when. For example, instead of saying, "I need to interview all the professors that my survey revealed use pedagogical partners," I tell myself, "I will interview two professors by Monday." Instead of saying "I need to create an internship course to give students credit for working as pedagogical partners" I tell myself, "I will have created an outline of the course by the end of the semester."

Concluding Thoughts

I am only in the beginning phases of my work here at Syracuse, but I am confident that the best is yet to come. As a freshman, I have a lot more work to do before the pilot is fully realized. I've learned so many significant lessons along the way about leadership, communication, determination, and relationship building. I've received immense support from Bill Coplin and the Policy Studies Department, Martha Diede and the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence, and my classmates and friends. By the time I graduate, I hope to have created a lasting change— a significant increase in the number of pedagogical partners. If you had told a high school senior me that I would have achieved all that I have done a year later, I probably would not have believed you. With big dreams comes big change. Leadership roles are available to students who have the initiative to assume them!