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TAKING OWNERSHIP OF MY LEARNING AND PUSHING FOR CHANGE

Elena Marcovici, Haverford College, Class of 2021

When I entered into my first partnership with a faculty member at Haverford College through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program, I was initially surprised and nervous by how unscripted the work was. There were few rules or requirements for how the partnership work should play out, and as a result, I had almost no expectations for what I wanted to occur. Though nerve-wracking at first, the flexibility we were afforded and my lack of expectations helped me gain more from the partnership than I might have otherwise. It helped me develop trust in my observations, led me to be a more active learner in my own classes, and informed how I could contribute to wider campus discourse.

One of the first major hurdles I had to overcome to cultivate agency within my partnership was not trusting my own observations and perceptions and feeling like I could not be an asset to my faculty partner. There was no particular moment in which I suddenly came to validate my own observations, but through gathering feedback, including hearing enrolled students' classroom experiences in informal meetings, my interpretations were confirmed, and I eventually came to trust my own intuition. I recognized that my experiences were not the product of my own sensitivity but were shared by others, both in my partnership observations and in classes that I had taken throughout my Haverford career. In advocating for other students' experiences, I had my own validated, and I felt capable of valuably contributing to conversations with my faculty partner.

Moreover, in moments when I felt like I could not contribute and ones that felt like setbacks, I confronted the nonlinearity of progress. It takes everyone time to incorporate new habits and develop new thought processes. As I came to understand this, I was able to reframe success in my mind to be the pursuit of and effort in creating change rather than change itself. The flexible structure of the partnership, then, was crucial to a productive partnership. If I had gone into the process expecting a certain outcome, then the daunting task of creating change might have stopped me from realizing the value of sharing even small observations because I did not trust their validity and potential for impact. But allowing things to unfold as they did gave me confidence in my abilities to contribute to the partnership and the perspective to recognize how crucial reflecting on and delving into setbacks was to progress.

The agency I felt within my partnership then led me to become more active in my own education which, in turn, reinforced my partnership work. One of the primary ways my experience impacted my academics was in prompting me to reaffirm my purpose in my own classes. Through my partnership and in conversations with other student partners in our weekly meetings, I was able to refocus on how fundamental student learning and experiences are to what college is for. While professors play a large role in creating classroom environments that maximize student learning, both professors and students have the responsibility to enact inclusive learning. For me, this meant acknowledging that I had to prioritize my own learning in my own classes and to the best of my ability, "partner" with all of my professors to help produce it.

In one class in particular, I frequently found myself confused during class and disengaged with what was going on. Instead of continuing to struggle through the material on my own, though, I went to office hours and asked for certain practices that I thought might improve my own learning, something I would previously not have thought to do. Because I had spent a significant amount of time dissecting pedagogy with my faculty partner and hearing how deliberately they constructed the course and classroom culture, I was able to engage with professors in my own classes with a great deal of appreciation as well as through more proactive efforts. When I offered suggestions to professors that would help my learning, they were grounded in respect and perhaps better received. Professors, as I realized through my partnership, cannot read students' minds, and even with the best intentions can be misinterpreted. Therefore, students have the equal role of speaking up to create more ideal learning environments for themselves and each other.

This same mindset and agency also empowered me to have greater expectations for the meaningfulness of my learning even when I felt like I could not speak up. When I think back to my work in high school, I remember, first, how much there was and, second, how dedicated I was to completing it all. While this made me successful at school, I now realize that such success does not equate to a meaningful education. There is little integrity in approaching education as a means to secure a reward like good grades. However, through partnership, I began prioritizing learning itself, and that led me to approach my post-secondary coursework differently. I found myself wondering why I was doing six readings for one class (totaling approximately 200 pages) when we would only discuss two of them, why I was spending hours on assignments that didn't seem to relate to the content of the course, and what I was losing by focusing my energy on these tasks instead of ones in which I could feel my thought patterns changing.

So, I began to skip readings and disengage from assignments that weren't discussed or integral to the experience. I came to expect my teachers to assign reasonable amounts work and to provide space for discussion of readings in class. Though this seems antithetical to the idea of agentic engagement because, on the surface, it is disengagement from class materials, in making these choices I was and am better able to invest in work that feels meaningful to me. This approach is not about assigning a value to the work or the pedagogy itself but rather about discerning its meaningfulness to me specifically. I know that what I find repetitive or uninteresting, others might find fulfilling because of our different experiences and perspectives, and because of this, I decided I have to respond authentically to the work before me. This is not an excuse to not do my work; it's a re-prioritization of learning within education rather than a choice to continue to merely do school well.

My evolving perspective on the student's role in learning informed how I approached my partnership work by helping me see where students could contribute to a more inclusive environment that empowers them to prioritize their own authentic learning. That agency was enacted by Black, Indigenous, Students of Color (BISOC) through a student-led strike in the Fall-2020 semester at Haverford, which was largely born out of a frustration with the continued discrimination and racism they faced. This call for and pursuit of equity coincided well with the work we were doing in SaLT partnerships. Consequently, that continued work in partnership, along with the positive reception to my suggestions in my own classes, gave me the confidence and skills to share a student's perspective on the strike with professors.

During and after the strike, it sometimes seemed that professors wanted me to affirm that their practices were inclusive. Without all the work I had done in partnership, I might have decided that pushing back against this desire was not worth the conflict it might generate. But instead, in these moments I recognized my responsibility to speak up for myself and other students because I knew that we could not create better learning without listening to and voicing concerns. In my partnership, I had also practiced giving feedback grounded in respect and empathy. So, when I entered into difficult conversations with faculty who were not working in formal partnership with me, rather than feeling stressed by the potential for conflict, I was able to lean into discomfort and actively show that I was hearing what professors were saying and validating how they felt while still pushing for change. I could communicate honestly the areas in which I felt they created really inclusive classrooms as well as areas for improvement.

The agency that I cultivated through my partnership bolstered my confidence in my observational skills, granted me ownership over my own educational experiences, and helped me re-prioritize authentic learning. It led me to develop a sustainable way of pursuing greater educational equity, not only for students I was advocating for in my partnership, but at the college more broadly.