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Finding Agency through Student Partnership

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FINDING AGENCY THROUGH STUDENT PARTNERSHIP

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Joining the Pedagogical Partnership Program (P3) at Amherst College was a decision I made in an effort to engage more with my learning. Previously, I had always used different class engagements to learn the content of a course, focusing on learning the material as well as I could. Since we are evaluated as students on how well we understand and can demonstrate understanding of the material, it made the most sense for me to devote my effort to that. Because of this, I didn't put much time into many other aspects of the class, or try to consider my agency as a student.

So, when I learned about the opportunity to join this program, it seemed like a unique chance to engage further with my professors and classes, a chance that I knew I didn't want to pass up. It also seemed like a quintessential liberal-arts opportunity—emphasizing in-depth engagement with professors, developing critical thinking skills, as well as learning how to take day-to-day observations and communicate them effectively. I have benefited from serving as a student partner in two different class contexts; each experience is described below.

I started my partnership in the Spring of 2020 with the professor of my mathematics class, along with two other students in the class. Since we were all co-enrolled in the class, our attention was split into two parts: learning the material in the class, and also noting any observations we had about anything related to the pedagogy of the class. Since our class was a math class, often we noted how certain examples or online graphing demonstrations helped our understanding, and if homework exercises were beneficial to us. Additionally, after instruction went remote due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we distributed a survey to our classmates to get their feedback on how the transition to remote classes had impacted their learning. We also conducted a focus group after the semester ended in order to gather feedback and final reflections from students in the class. Lastly, we constructed a draft course material calendar to adjust the pacing of when different concepts were introduced as part of an effort to make the time spent in lectures as effective as possible.

Having had this first experience as a student partner, I learned quite a bit. As a student who was in the class, I really appreciated that my professor had made an effort to be a part of this pilot program. I could see that he placed a lot of value on gaining student feedback, believing that it was an important mechanism for providing the best class experience. Additionally, I learned that many times, professors only collect feedback from students in places like mid-semester surveys or end-of-year course evaluations; they rarely get a chance to converse with a student throughout the semester and gain live feedback through a conversation. Sometimes, they plan an activity but are unable to see whether it was helpful or unhelpful to students' learning. Being able to provide timely information about the impact of these things on student learning really gave me a sense of agency in my own learning. If I found an activity extremely helpful to my learning, or not as helpful, then I was encouraged to share that feedback, and it was taken seriously by my professor, an individual with many years of teaching experience. It was extremely empowering to have that partnership experience: I had a voice in the classroom and in my own learning. Additionally, because I was a student co-enrolled in the classroom, I was able to use my own

understanding as a benchmark. While each student has different needs and preferences for how they learn best, it was very helpful when evaluating an example or demonstration to be able to see how it aided my own understanding, as well as the understanding of my fellow student partners.

In the following 2020 – 2021 academic year, I rejoined the program as one of two student fellow mentors in the P3 Program. In this role, I had a part in leading and mentoring other students as well as shaping the discussions that we would have as a cohort. During that time, I also was a student partner in a co-taught course—an upper-level biochemistry class designed to teach students how to perform research. In essence, this course helps students develop the ability to navigate the learning context in which the answers to the questions they are exploring are not yet known. The goal of this partnership was to set clear expectations with students, as well as get them comfortable with learning in the realm of the unknown—where the answers can't be found in the textbook or from the professors. Additionally, the professors wanted the students to be able to participate in journal discussions, a type of discussion where students were expected to contribute their thoughts about research articles even if they were unsure of the answers to the questions that were asked. Going into this partnership, I felt confident to share my thoughts because I knew from my prior partnership experience that professors in this program actively wanted to hear student suggestions and believed that those suggestions offered valuable insights in shaping their classes.

In this partnership, since I wasn't co-enrolled in the class, I offered an outside perspective. Much of what I observed and suggested to the professors focused on being consistent about messaging to the students. One common message that we emphasized was that active participation in journal discussions was more important than always having the right answer in them. The goal was to move the discussion forward in a meaningful way. Additionally, something else that was consistently emphasized was that the process of going through research was more important than arriving at a right answer. After all, when you're delving into an unknown topic of research, you don't even know if you will find an answer!

Being a student partner in a class with two professors, my experience was most definitely different, but it was just as valuable and exciting as the first partnership. One difference that I noticed was that in a class with two professors, many pedagogical insights were arrived at through collaborative conversation, of which I was a part. It was often the case that a weekly meeting with my faculty partners would involve my provision of an observation or insight that I had noticed. In response, the co-instructors would reflect on that observation together in real time, bouncing ideas off of each other and thinking about how these ideas related to the class. During that time, I would often listen to their active processing while sharing additional contributions. When contrasting that dynamic with my first partnership, in which the professor would be speaking directly to us as student partners rather than another faculty colleague, I at first felt that I was not contributing as much to the conversation. However, after discussing this feeling with the program leaders at Amherst College's Center for Teaching and Learning, I understood that this dynamic represented a necessary shift when partnering with two professors, and that while my contributions might transpire in a different way than with one professor, they were still as valuable and helpful. It was my presence and observations, at least in part, that

inspired conversations across these teaching partners that otherwise would not have likely occurred.

Another difference between my two experiences of partnership was that in my second partnership experience, I was not co-enrolled in the class. Because of this, I could only gain insights from observations, not having my own learning as a benchmark. I think this different positionality led to somewhat of a gap in my confidence in what students were struggling with in the course compared to what I had felt in my first class, because I wasn't experiencing it myself as well, and so didn't have as much of a base to guide my observations. On the other hand, since I wasn't comparing my observations to my own experiences in the class, there was no chance of missing what others might be experiencing if it wasn't similar to my experience, or assuming that my observations were applicable to other students in the class.

So, I spent some of my time observing how students interacted with each other in breakout rooms, and how they seemed to be processing questions and assignments that they had been given time to do in class. I spent the other part of my time observing the journal discussions they had, and seeing whether the professors' goals of how students contributed were met. If they weren't, there was a disconnect between how the professors and students saw the goal of the discussion. In response, I worked to support the faculty in clarifying how students should approach the discussions. If I had been co-enrolled in that class as a student, I likely would have felt inclined to align with the students, to not stray from the other students. However, because I didn't have to also focus on my performance in the class, I could truly take a step back and observe from all points of view.

In both of these partnerships, I not only learned how much effort goes into each detail of a class, no matter how minor, but that the professors have more goals than only teaching content to students. Many students will not pursue continued study in these areas after college, but the skills they learn in their classes will assist them wherever they go after graduation. For instance, learning how to balance the details, such as the process for approaching a singular homework problem, with the big picture of the class is a goal I saw both courses attempt to support. Being able to solve or approach a homework problem is important, but taking the concepts you learned in that problem and connecting them to further concepts is just as important to deep learning in the class.

An additional insight that I gained across both partnerships relates to communication: communication is imperative between professors and students, and its importance was made even more obvious during remote learning. If professors don't know where their students are struggling or the aspects of course expectations that are confusing to students, they are unable to help students navigate their learning and experience in the course. Being able to start that conversation between professors and students, by providing our own insight so that professors can use it to shape their approach to communicating with students and the activities and themes they build into their courses, was an incredible experience. I got to play a part in shaping an ongoing course but also future courses on the same subject, so that future students experience a class that was shaped by students who had experienced it. The feedback I provided was implemented; hopefully, that will empower future students to also share any feedback they have so that the course can continue to evolve.

I feel lucky to have been able to participate in this program, because it made the way that I approach my own learning in the classroom more full of student agency and made me truly want to take charge of my own learning. I became more comfortable sharing my experiences and ideas about what would be interesting to explore in my classes. I also feel empowered to talk to my professors about topics unrelated to the course material. I go to office hours more often and ask questions, not feeling that my only option is to figure out each homework question by myself. Instead, I feel encouraged to ask any questions I have and clarify points of confusion.

Being a part of this program has also helped me develop many skills outside of the classroom. As a student fellow mentor in the program, I learned how to lead meetings, from coming up with productive discussion topics, answering questions that student fellows would ask by drawing on my own experience, encouraging discussions, and following up on points that others would bring up. Furthermore, it has helped in my professional development. Because the partnership is designed around sharing ideas and suggestions to faculty members, I have been able to translate that skill to other aspects of my work, especially in terms of the strategies I employ to share ideas that I have with those more senior to me. Because I have practiced sharing ideas and suggestions with professors, who are in positions of authority, I've gained confidence to simply share my thoughts, when I might otherwise have decided not to. Additionally, having experienced a response to those thoughts that has been open and welcoming, I have a greater sense of agency, knowing that my ideas are considered, even if not always implemented, because they can always inform or be combined with new ones. Without being a part of the P3 program, I would have had less practice getting comfortable sharing ideas and thoughts with those in a more senior position to me. Now, I realize that my input is valuable and that it's always worth sharing an idea, because we never know what it could lead to or whose insight it could expand.

This program has empowered me to get the most out of my time in school, because there is much more to learn than the content of a course. Being able to play a role in shaping a course not only in the present, but also for the future, makes me realize how just a few voices, or one conversation between a professor and a student, can provide so much insight into the aspects of the class that are helpful, or less helpful, for student learning, as well as help students understand more of where the professor is coming from in their course design process. I know now that each part of the class is crafted carefully to aid different ways of understanding, and I will make efforts to understand the goal of each aspect of my courses. As such, I can gain a better and larger picture of what I should be leaving the class with, and how it should help me grow as a learner.