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LAUNCHING THE COMMUNITY LEARNING AND INCLUSIVITY PARTNERSHIP (CLIP) PROGRAM AT EMMANUEL COLLEGE

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The Community Learning and Inclusivity Partnership (CLIP) is an initiative at Emmanuel College that focuses on making courses more inclusive and accessible to students of every identity and ability. It was piloted in the Spring-2021 semester in the Biology Department by three faculty-student pairs, addressing the goals of increasing retention and encouraging accessibility and involvement within the department's courses. It was modeled after the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program pioneered by Dr. Alison Cook-Sather at Bryn Mawr College. The CLIP Program is overseen by the Emmanuel College Office of Academic Affairs, with involvement from the Center for Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion.

In this essay, I offer interview style reflections as a co-creator and participant in the pilot phase of the CLIP program.

What interested you in creating CLIP at Emmanuel College?

I had been involved in several DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging) initiatives at our college for a few years. Specifically, I had been working with several Emmanuel colleagues to put together a proposal for the HHMI Inclusive Excellence 3 grant (<https://www.hhmi.org/science-education/programs/inclusive-excellence-3-learning-community>). During the process of internal data analysis and reflection that we engaged in while writing the grant pre-proposal, we learned that, as at many other institutions of higher education, Emmanuel students from minoritized backgrounds, such as those who identified as first-generation college students or as part of the Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) community, were less likely to feel belonging and have successful outcomes in our Biology Program. We knew we had to make significant changes to the courses and to our programs to increase inclusivity and belonging.

We wanted to find a way to engage our students and to amplify their voices in making positive change at our institution, but we didn't know how to do this. At the same time, we appreciated that these challenges were not new, or unique to Emmanuel. This led me to seek out mentors who had worked with other small liberal arts institutions with similar challenges to ours. I connected with Dr. Kathy Takayama (Executive Director, Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology Graduate University) who suggested that my colleagues and I investigate pedagogical partnership programs. She noted that these programs can provide a powerful forum to give our students agency in effecting transformative change and increasing access and belonging through curricular reforms. Once I became aware of the SaLT program and connected with Dr. Alison Cook-Sather, I knew that I had to try to bring an innovative program like this to Emmanuel.

The Emmanuel team included Dr. Pàdraig Deighan, Associate Professor and Chair of Biology, who also participated as a faculty partner in the pilot program, and Dr. Paul March, Professor and Associate Dean of the School of Science and Health. We received generous financial support from our administration to fund our pilot program. In addition, we formed an important partnership with the Students Taking an Active Role Together (S.T.A.R.T.) program at Emmanuel. S.T.A.R.T. was founded in 2015 by an Emmanuel student, Ashlee Jeannot, and is a student-led, intersectional, social justice program. We realized that S.T.A.R.T. participants would have the type of student perspective and experience that was needed as student partners. Amazingly, we were able to create and kick-off this pilot program over the 2021 winter break with only a little over one month of committed effort!

What are three outcomes you hoped to realize by participating in this program?

The most important outcome that I hoped for was to create a format to listen to and amplify student voices at our college. I wanted to see the Student Accessibility Consultants (SACs) feel empowered to make change. I also wanted the first-year students enrolled in my course who interacted with my SAC to see that at Emmanuel, we value student input and student experiences. I anticipated that by carrying out informal surveys, my SAC would elicit more open and honest feedback from my students than I typically have received in end-of-semester course evaluations. Secondly, I hoped that this student partnership would be a way to hold myself accountable in carrying out some of the DEIB-related initiatives that I had planned for the course. For example, I aimed to emphasize the community aspect of our classroom, pandemic-imposed restrictions notwithstanding. Lastly, I hoped that my student partner would provide an external lens through which I could learn specific words that I could use and actions I could take that would increase students' sense of belonging in my course.

What were your biggest concerns/misconceptions about the program and how has your perspective evolved?

When I read about other pedagogical partnership programs, such as the SaLT program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, I was worried about whether both my student partner and I would be able to commit the time to make our relationship successful. I teach three courses each semester, head a research lab with undergraduate students, and am a member of several committees, so time is always a challenge for me. Surprisingly, time was not an issue because I only had to commit one hour a week to check-in with my SAC, and that time just flew by! We would often, in fact, struggle to complete our conversations in just one hour because we found so much to talk about each week.

Another concern that I had was that my SAC did not have biology content expertise. I thought that it would be difficult for her to assess how the students were experiencing my course if she wasn't able to assess how well I was explaining or demystifying a particular topic. However, this ended up being an advantage if I'm honest: my SAC was able to focus on classroom dynamics and the pulse of the classroom rather than get mired in the content. Despite the fact that my SAC was attending my classes virtually, while most of the students were distanced in the classroom,

she noted the number of students that greeted me warmly or bade me farewell each class, and she noted what types of questions students did (or did not) ask when I made announcements about assignments or exams. She made suggestions for what I could say during class to encourage more students to attend my office hours. She helped me think about ways to engage students more on particular topics by thinking about whether or not they engaged her. This non-science perspective was quite helpful for me in making the content of this course more accessible.

How have you changed as a student/instructor as a result of this collaboration? Did you learn anything surprising?

I have become more confident as an instructor as a direct result of this collaboration. I am very surprised by this! I expected that my ego would need a pick-me-up after participating in CLIP. My relationship with my student partner was so affirming and enriching, and each week she supported me by listening to my concerns and my questions with warmth and with humor. It was very clear from the start that her aim was not to tear me down, or to find faults with my teaching style. Rather, her consulting approach was to serve as a mirror for me to unpack my feelings each week and to determine myself what went well and what could be done differently to increase student accessibility and to improve their experience of the course. In our weekly meetings, we discussed language that I could use to encourage struggling first-year students to meet with me while decreasing their fear and sense of shame.

My student partner also supported me in my efforts to make inclusion and belonging a more explicit course objective for my Introductory Biology course. One DEIB initiative that I had planned was to open one class meeting each week by spotlighting a scientist from a minoritized group. I was nervous about this because I wanted the students to see this as genuine and not performative. The conversations that I had with my SAC allowed me to practice how to introduce this initiative to the students and to choose language that conveyed my authenticity. This spotlight initiative was overall positive. I appreciated hearing anonymous mid-semester survey feedback from the survey that my SAC conducted that these assignments were making a genuine impact on students. In fact, she shared with me that a student stated that I was “changing the conversation around diversity and inclusion.” However, not all the students were impacted in the ways that I had hoped. For example, a few students did not reflect on the personal stories of the spotlighted scientists and the challenges they faced as a result of their ethnicity or race. Instead, these students chose to focus only on the scientific contributions in their assignment responses. It was comforting to have my student partner to talk through this with instead of bearing the disappointment on my own. She helped me put my successes and my failures into perspective in an honest way.

We also had conversations about how the homework assignments were debilitating for students due to their length and difficulty. This made it so that they couldn't be used effectively as a learning tool by the majority of students. I learned how incredibly valuable the perspectives of our course peer tutors were after my student partner discussed the results of her interviews with them. This led to a new collaborative project with an alumna who was a former tutor to revise the content of the introductory course using a curriculum mapping process.

What are your future hopes for the CLIP program at Emmanuel College?

I had an incredible student partner, and I truly learned a lot about myself by participating in CLIP. I have made lasting changes to the way that I design my courses because of this program, and I have found that the student-perspective is more readily in my consciousness. I have also added questions to my end-of-semester course evaluations that my SAC suggested, and I hope that these will eventually be incorporated into the default evaluation for all courses at Emmanuel.

We have presented about the CLIP program to our biology student community and to the faculty and administration in the School of Science and Health at Emmanuel, and there has been an overwhelmingly positive reception to the program amongst both groups. As a result of the success of the Spring-2021 pilot in Biology, CLIP consultants partnered with faculty in Chemistry as well as Biology in Fall 2021. Partnerships with faculty in Biology, Chemistry, and Math are now underway in Spring 2022.

I hope that this program will expand so that every faculty member can participate, and in every department. I also hope that participation in CLIP will become a sought-after and respected position for student consultants. In this way, CLIP can contribute to faculty retention at the College, perhaps as part of a program for new faculty as is the case at Bryn Mawr College. Primarily, I see this program as a way to attract and retain students from all identities by fostering their sense of belonging and of being highly valued members of our college community.