

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 37 Fall 2022

Article 7

September 2022

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Recommended Citation

Rideau, Ryan "Working to Build True Partnership in the Leadership of the P3 Program," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 37 (2022), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss37/7>

WORKING TO BUILD TRUE PARTNERSHIP IN THE LEADERSHIP OF THE P3 PROGRAM

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As an educational developer, I did not have a great deal of interaction with students at Tufts. My interactions were limited to supporting mid-term feedback program sessions offered by our center for teaching and learning (CTL), or as an invited guest lecturer for a class. This lack of interactions with students never felt right to me. I had always envisioned myself and my role as being an advocate for marginalized students at historically white institutions. I believed it was necessary to bring student voices and perspectives into my work with faculty. So, when I was asked by our CTL Director to help develop and co-lead our Pedagogical Partnership Program (P3), I was excited. I had read about the great work of partnership programs by Alison Cook-Sather at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges and saw such programs as a potential model to better integrate student perspectives into our center's work, particularly the voices of students who have historically been excluded from contributing to the academic missions of institutions of higher education.

But through this excitement, I was worried about how to co-design and co-lead a program with students. Our pedagogical partnership program (P3) was initiated and co-founded by two undergraduate students. And given their work, creativity, and dedication, I saw it as essential that they and future generations of students continue to play a leadership role in the program. Additionally, I recognized that if I was asking faculty and students to collaborate and share power for a semester around pedagogy, the leadership of the program needed to model this collaboration. I was concerned about how to partner with students in this way while navigating the various roles required of me. On one level, I am a collaborator with the student leaders. However, the students are paid for this work, so in some respects, I am a supervisor. But because of our power differential, I also see myself as an informal mentor. I also need to represent the voices of faculty in the program to ensure they receive the necessary support to maximize their opportunities for success. In addition to these structural dynamics, my identity shapes my interactions with the students. I am a Black male, and all the student leaders have been women-identifying and of various racial identities. I am always conscious of gender and how that shows up in our work, particularly if I am coming across as too controlling or vocal. I have struggled with navigating these structures and roles, while engaging in and modeling true collaboration.

Navigating Uncertainties

The way our program is structured is that I and two to three students serve as co-leaders for the program. Our work has largely been divided in a way where I support the faculty and programmatic logistics, while the student leaders are responsible for providing most of the support and resources for the student partners. Student leaders are not engaged in a formal partnership with a faculty member, but facilitate group meetings with the student partners, do individual check-ins with each student partner every two weeks, and lead student recruiting efforts. The student leaders and I meet collectively on average every two weeks. This pattern varies depending on how busy things are and if there are immediate issues to be addressed. At

these meetings, we share feedback about current partnerships, generate ways to better support partners, discuss the recruitment of new partners, and brainstorm ideas to continuously improve the program. These meetings are opportunities for me to continue to learn from the student leaders and where I must engage in true collaboration with them.

I remember initially feeling unprepared for this kind of collaboration. At one of our meetings, the student leaders questioned me for not fully acknowledging their work. This was after a meeting when we presented the program to potential funders. The two student leaders both told me that they felt as if they were not acknowledged as being co-leaders and founders of the program, and we presented them as students following behind the work of our office. This was incredibly important feedback to hear. The students were correct. While I knew they were leaders and expressed that to them, my public words and actions were not aligned with this sentiment. They were not simply student workers but had truly laid the groundwork for this program. I needed to reevaluate my actions to ensure I was truly modeling partnership in our relationship and in how I represented our work to others.

As I tried to model more collaboration in my actions, there have been times when I thought I should take a more active role with the student partners. The student leaders take great pride in their work with the student partners. At the student meetings, the leaders are a source of support for students and guide them in building confidence and developing communication skills. They have been very successful in this role, as evidenced by the feedback we have received and our own evaluations. They also bring in guest speakers to share information about various aspects of teaching, such as social-emotional learning, critical race theory in education, and universal design for learning. These are necessary knowledge and skills for our student partners.

As great of a job as the student leaders have done to set up the student partners for success, I often feel that I should offer them more support on inclusive educational practices, my area of expertise. But I also want to provide the student leaders with the opportunity to lead and guide the program in the manner they see best. So, I have struggled with if I should suggest resources or practices because it would require my increased presence at student meetings, which I fear could invalidate the work of the student leaders. I want them to feel that they have ownership to lead the program in a manner that is appropriate for them and the student partners. I decided to hold back for the time being on offering suggestions on inclusive practices. However, recently, the student leaders and partners shared a desire for more training on inclusive pedagogy. As a result, we will be expanding these offerings for student partners moving forward. I am grateful that I took a step back and didn't impose this work on the structure of the program. I believe that the students raising this issue will create better buy-in for this work.

Personal Strategies

Beyond just taking a step back, there are several other strategies that I have tried to enact to build a reciprocal leadership structure. First, and this may seem obvious, but it is necessary to be open to student feedback. For example, in the previously described encounter where the student leaders did not feel validated in their work, I apologized to them and began to examine the ways I was not living up to the principle of shared leadership. I told the students I would work on this

and asked them to continue to share with me if I was missing the mark. I just needed to make sure that I continued to open up spaces to receive that feedback.

Second, I make sure to share important information with the student leaders about where their work fits into larger institutional priorities. For example, I am currently sitting on a working group that examines student evaluations of teaching in hopes to design and encourage a more robust system to evaluate teaching effectiveness that is based upon formative feedback. Our pedagogical partnership program is a way to build upon these efforts and encourage faculty to seek more forms of feedback. I share information about the working group with students to gather their thoughts and try to share their insights with the committee if it is appropriate. I also want to let them know that their work is being acknowledged on a larger structural level.

Third, I involve them in key decision making and am transparent when I struggle through a challenging situation. One of the major ways in which we collaborate is through the matching of our partners. I largely recruit the faculty and they do the same for the students. In each case, we must think about each faculty member and student and determine if they are right for the program. If they are, we then must think about whom they can be matched with. Sometimes matching can be difficult because of scheduling conflicts, which will limit possible matches. This means we must think hard about whether it is best to match a certain faculty member and student together if we have concerns about the fit. I really don't like turning away people from participating in the program. I try to communicate this to our students. The students and I work together on these difficult decisions and as a principle, we won't match anyone unless we all agree. We share our opinions and perspectives based upon what we think is best for the program.

Finally, I must be flexible with our student leaders. As students, they graduate and new students assume the role of student leaders. This turnover requires flexibility in how I interact and support each student leader. For example, with the first group of student leaders, I communicated over email. But this didn't work for our most recent group of student leaders. They preferred to text. I was uncomfortable with sharing my phone number with students but recognized that this would be best for them. I had to change the way I communicated with them. This is a minor example, but a reminder of the need to continue to be flexible to the needs of each student leader.

I am still navigating what it means to work as a co-leader with our talented students. I am continuing to refine my collaborative leadership skills and am always open to their feedback. But I can say the opportunity to collaborate with them and learn from them has made the program stronger. The program has been successful because of their work. I encourage others who may be designing partnership programs to consider ways that students can co-lead and collaborate with you on the direction of the program. This work may be difficult and uneasy at times. It may require you to suspend judgment and to be humble. These were all feelings I have had. But working in this way has allowed me to grow in my overall leadership skills, specifically in terms of my responsiveness and listening to the needs of others. I am grateful for this experience, and encourage others leaders of partnership programs to ensure they are collaborating with students in meaningful ways.