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## Partners in Partnership Work: Growing from Grinnell

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## **PARTNERS IN PARTNERSHIP WORK: GROWING FROM GRINNELL**

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In this reflection, we share insights from our journey that started in the summer of 2023 when we participated in Grinnell College's "Teaching and Learning Together: The Possibilities and Challenges of Pedagogy Partnerships." This workshop, funded by a Mellon Foundation Humanities grant and hosted by Dr. Caleb Elfenbein and Dr. Alison Cook-Sather, served as a gathering for faculty, students, and staff members who were active participants in partnership work or who were "partnership curious." We start by sharing the journeys that brought each of us to Grinnell, then describe the formation of our partnership, and then narrate our shared journey as partners working together to conduct a pilot in fall 2023 and a full partnership program in spring 2024 at Abilene Christian University. We share insights and lessons learned along the way.

### **Our Paths to Grinnell**

**Jillian:** After starting a pedagogical partnership program called P3 at Tufts University and having it play a large role in the second half of my undergraduate experience (Impastato, 2021), I started to feel like I had "aged out" of this work. Following graduation, I moved to Norway on a Fulbright fellowship at the University of Agder. Even though I was still working within higher education and Norwegian education is seemingly less hierarchical than in the United States, I didn't have the ability to start a similar program (although I hope my frequent elevator pitches planted the seed in some people's heads). While I was in Norway, I did get to reconnect with the professor with whom I did my first partnership, and we co-authored an essay (Impastato & Seaton, 2022) on our experience. In the process, I got to hear updates about the P3 program after I had left it as well as think about how the program gave me a lens to view my new educational and professional environments.

In the fall of 2022, I moved to Central Maine to work at the Colby College Museum of Art. I immediately searched for something like P3 on campus, found their "Learning Assistant" Program, and met with the staff members working on this program. It was great to establish connections at my new institution, but working with the Learning Assistant program was out of my position's wheelhouse. One day, the perfect opportunity to jump back into the world of pedagogical partnerships just fell into my lap. I got an email from Caleb and Alison inviting me to share my experiences with other participants at "Teaching and Learning Together: The Possibilities and Challenges of Pedagogy Partnerships." Besides my seemingly arbitrary yet truthful multi-year-old wish of visiting Iowa City (which I got to fulfill right after the conference), I was excited to be a part of a larger community of people excited about pedagogical partnerships.

**Scott:** In the fall of 2022, I moved back to Abilene Christian University (ACU) to accept a role in the teaching and learning center. The return to my alma mater allowed me to continue the research my wife, an ACU social work professor, and I were doing that focused on the experiences of students of color in online doctoral programs. We had done the first part of our research in 2018 and student perceptions of their experiences in online programs at a predominantly white institution were so informative that we wanted to further explore the voices of underrepresented students in online programs. One of my responsibilities in the teaching and learning center involves co-directing our student fellows program, which consists of working with six students throughout the academic year who contribute their voice, experience, and insights about the pedagogical strengths and opportunities for improvement they have observed in their own experiences as students at ACU.

As I further explored the literature to inform our online research and our student fellows program, I came in contact with Alison's work and her pioneering efforts at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges in developing the Students and Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program (Cook-Sather, 2020). The notion of the co-creation of the learning environment in which students and academic staff work together to carry student voices into the learning environment to foster more equitable learning was an approach I wanted to explore in depth. The term "pedagogical partner" and the idea of pedagogical partnerships were fascinating to me. I printed out the article and walked across the quad to my wife's office. In hindsight, I imagine emailing it would have been equally effective, but in my excitement, off I went, article in hand.

After reading the article, my wife and I started to brainstorm ideas. One that we came up with was emailing Alison to request a Zoom meeting. Our initial thoughts centered around the idea of how pedagogical partnerships might be able to add to and inform our current research. Once schedules were aligned, an exhilarating conversation via Zoom took place that would begin my journey with pedagogical partnerships. In our Zoom session, my preconceived notion of how the meeting would inform our research shifted as Alison shared the decades-long work she had been doing in her pedagogical partnership research. She mentioned the Mellon Foundation Humanities in Action grant and the workshop that would be taking place in the upcoming summer of 2023 and the possibility of my receiving an invitation to attend as a "partner curious" participant. After our Zoom conversation, I remember the transition in my thinking from partnerships as a complement to my current research to a feeling of disruption in some of the higher education constructs that involved the student voice in the co-creation of the learning environment. It was at the workshop in Grinnell where the different paths Jillian and I were on would converge and where co-creation would become a partnership.

### **The Possibilities at Grinnell**

**Jillian:** On my flight to Iowa, I was finishing up the pre-workshop readings and frantically looking through my notes from my time at Tufts working on P3. It had been two years since I fully had my "pedagogical partnership" hat on, and I was worried that it was going to be hard to keep up in conversations with others who were immersed in partnership work full-time. Fortunately, I was completely off base in harboring these worries.

On the first morning of the workshop, I had breakfast with Ryan Rideau, Assistant Provost of Faculty Development, with whom I had worked closely through P3, but only virtually, and Muri Mascarenhas, a student partner in the P3 program. I immediately felt like I had slipped right back into the mindset and energy I felt when I had started P3. It was incredibly fulfilling to hear from Muri, who had taken up the baton and was going to be in the same student leadership position in P3 that I had dreamt up and held a few years earlier. I could see that the program had grown and shifted, but the ethos had stayed the same.

Throughout the three days of the conference, we became a tight-knit group of forty-eight. I spoke on a panel entitled “Intersecting Identities in Leadership/Co-Facilitation” with current and past student partners as well as staff and faculty. It was incredibly empowering to have conversations that extended beyond the time of my panel. After hours of discussions, reflection sessions, and responding to journal prompts, we continued bouncing ideas off each other over cocktails and cornhole. At some point between sessions, I connected with Scott. After he mentioned that he wanted to start a program at his own institution and I suggested that I might be able to help, we exchanged business cards, and I tried not to get my hopes up. We met a few weeks later on Zoom and immediately realized that we were on the same page. Scott wanted guidance on how to structure and facilitate a partnership pilot the following fall, and he valued my perspective as a past student partner who had co-created the programmatic structures for P3 at Tufts as well. I wanted to get my foot back into the partnership door, to see what my insights could accomplish in this new context, and honestly, to have a side hustle for additional income.

**Scott:** The workshop brought faculty, staff, and students together to learn with and from one another—full-time faculty members, teaching and learning center directors like me, people in various staff roles, and students all in the same space. In attendance were experienced partners who have had multiple semesters in a partnership and people who like me were “partnership curious.” As I reviewed the workshop materials in my room the night before, I spread out the papers on my desk and noticed that there were a number of panels and intentional conversations. With only a few days to gather all the information I thought I needed, I had hoped there would be more information sessions so I could have resources to take back to my university and start a program.

Being in the presence of other higher education professionals, six of whom were students who were equal partners in the shared experience, was new to me. I have had many experiences in which students were part of the conversation about teaching and learning but few in which the students shared power and had an equal voice. My experiences with student voice have been largely controlled and unintentionally mediated by existing power dynamics. I don’t think I would have noticed that before my experience at Grinnell, but I was deconstructing some long-held beliefs and interrogating power dynamics. I found myself listening more intently to what the students were saying. During breaks, break-out sessions, and intentional spaces created for community, I gravitated toward several students to follow up with questions, offer remarks on comments they made, and continue discussing key points. My initial hope for more information sessions quickly gave way to my desire to engage others, particularly students, in conversation.

Throughout the workshop, I found the input from the students to be very informative, and hearing their experiences and observations was enlightening. After Jillian’s panel was over, I

sought her out to further engage the topic. I was trying to understand how partnerships fit into my framework of equitable teaching practice and was wondering how partnerships were going to fit with what I was hoping to accomplish in my future research. She patiently listened and then posed a question, “What if it isn’t about what you are trying to make it fit; what if it is about pedagogy?” This interaction and several like it over the next few days with Jillian and other students led to a conversation about a potential collaboration. Initially, I had been anticipating connections with other faculty or staff members who had partnerships at their institution. My preconceived notions of what I thought I came for were quickly being deconstructed, and it wasn’t long before I shared with someone that I thought I was learning more from the students than anyone else.

Jillian was renewing previously made connections and we were both enjoying new ones. She was re-energized with her foot back in the door, and my partnership baby steps were quickly becoming giant steps toward possibilities for partnerships at my institution. I left Grinnell energized and full of resources, ideas, good conversation, and new friendships. When I got back to Abilene, I realized I had left something at Grinnell, which would not be a surprise to anyone who knows me. However, it wasn’t the usual phone charger or an occasional workout shirt left drying in the bathroom. Left behind was part of my pedagogy. What I brought back was a newfound appreciation for students as partners whose voices are not something to sort out or to be selected on a pedagogical per-required-need basis, but rather part of the co-creation of the learning environment. I was eager to get started. Jillian and I used the summer to envision a Fall pilot.

## **The Partnership Beyond Grinnell**

**Jillian:** Scott and I operated like a meta-partnership within a partnership program as we recruited, trained, and supported two faculty-student pairs in the fall-2023 semester and then six faculty-student partnerships in the spring-2024 semester. We met weekly, just like our student-faculty partners, and we created a contract for our work together that we frequently look back on, just like our student-faculty partners with their goals. We embodied the vulnerability and flexibility that I had spoken about at the conference and that we continually sought to bring out in our student-faculty partners.

From starting pedagogical partnerships on two different campuses, I have a unique perspective on how this type of program can find its footing at two very different institutions. Tufts University is a private research university with a focus on liberal arts for undergraduates that is on the outskirts of Boston. Abilene Christian University is a private Christian university that is affiliated with the Church of Christ and is located in the small city of Abilene. I saw that the specifics of each college context are influential to how pedagogical partnerships can fit into life for both students and faculty members, but the basic structures of pedagogical partnerships are strong and flexible. Discussing this concept with Scott, we came to the idea of how a program, like pedagogical partnerships, can “nestle itself in” to institutional structures (like Centers for Teaching and Learning), campus marketing campaigns (for advancement and/or admissions), as well as individual motivation/excitement. Intra-institutional partnerships were important to help both the Tufts and ACU programs launch and evolve, but this process is usually college specific.

Besides both programs falling within each college's Center for Teaching and Learning, Tufts utilized partnerships with identity-based centers and accessibility services early on to recruit a diverse array of students, while Scott utilized the student fellows program and is starting a partnership with the faculty of the required first-year seminar "Cornerstone."

Although I haven't been able to meet the student and faculty partners at ACU in person, a major difference I have come across between the two programs is the participants' motivation for being in a pedagogical partnership. At ACU, both students and faculty consistently bring up the college's mission as well as their faith and see participating in a pedagogical partnership as a way of honoring God. At Tufts, students and faculty often are motivated by the opportunity to innovate and are inspired by both particularly good and particularly bad previous experiences in classrooms. At both institutions, participants see their work as a way to give back to their campus community. Having the experience of having developed partnership programs at two institutions gives me an unusual perspective on both these differences and this similarity.

**Scott:** As I returned to Abilene and we began our partnership work, I recognized the advantages of beginning partnership work *with a partner*. I wholeheartedly advocate for this approach to become a standard practice. As a cisgender man with inherent privilege within certain societal frameworks, I acknowledge the potential for both unintentional and intentional impacts that may not equally benefit all participants. Building partnerships with another individual serves as a proactive measure to mitigate the formation of partnerships that may inadvertently prioritize elements other than the shared endeavor of co-creating the learning environment.

An important aspect of developing a successful pedagogical partnership is to embody the elements of partnerships that contribute to their overall success. Partnerships disrupt the hierarchical structures and power dynamics that are present in higher education. Initiating a partnership at a higher education institution ideally should have the voice of a student and a faculty or staff member as partners with shared power who participate in the co-creation of the initiative. The student partner can be a currently enrolled student, or as in the case of Jillian and my partnership, can be a student partner alumnus as a consultant. It is important to recognize the power dynamics that will be present. If it is a consultancy, the consultant will be paid and a delineation between payment as remuneration for their voice in the co-creation is an important distinction as opposed to payment for the consultant to provide the resources or labor to facilitate the vision of the faculty or staff member representing the home institution. The formation of a memorandum of understanding was a key factor in establishing an understanding of the partnership dynamics Jillian and I wanted to foster.

Prior to Grinnell, I had been both excited about the possibilities of starting a partnership and cognizant of the increased work that initiating a new program and hiring a consultant would entail. This can be a concern for student partners as well, "My fear was that I might simply end up with an additional very junior staff member to mentor, direct, and supervise, meaning that at the end of the day it would be harder and more time-consuming to launch a program than had I gone it alone" (Ortquist-Ahrens, 2021, p. 193). One of the most valuable lessons I learned, and continue to unpack, is the value of co-creation. We started weekly meetings with an intentional icebreaker that Jillian suggested in which we shared a rose, bud, or thorn that represents something positive, emerging, or challenging in our work. I would characterize beginning

partnership work as a bud and working with a partner as a rose that affords many opportunities to appreciate the blooming of a partnership. Our partnership work allowed me to have an experienced partner to guide the process as I was continuing to understand partnership work. Our partnership allowed Jillian to continue using her gifts to expand her imprint on partnerships in higher education and increase her income as well.

I was hesitant to include this, but for the benefit of potential future partnership agreements, I will. As we negotiated terms, I offered an hourly rate that I thought was quite generous. My impression of generosity was based on what we typically offered student workers and in comparison to what our university paid student research associates. Jillian counter-offered a rate that was 25% higher. Her notion of a fair hourly wage was more in line with what other consultants doing similar work were compensated. Her request allowed me to understand and recognize the assumptions I had and the privileged position that allowed me to make assumptions concerning how she would be compensated. I developed a deeper appreciation of the confidence and empowerment that a student partner embodies.

### **Partnership Logistics and Lessons Learned**

**Scott:** As we began preparation for a fall 2023 pilot, we established weekly Zoom meetings for our work, and I included weekly journaling to allow me to process what I was learning. Initially, I had neglected this process of writing but realized the central role of these reflections as I tried to recall agenda items for our first faculty/student meeting. My role in the co-creation of a partnership at my institution was emerging as I guided the process at ACU in casting vision, hiring student research associates, recruiting faculty, and putting institutional support in place. Jillian offered partnership experience, her unique gifts of understanding systems, and her people skills. My interactions with Jillian allowed me to transpose those to the faculty and students who were, like me, fully bought into the idea of the partnership while learning the complexities and processes of the work of partnerships. Working via Zoom allowed Jillian and me to bring perspectives from different higher education contexts, and any concerns we had about working at a distance were quickly dispelled.

We learned to embrace flexibility early in the process. That things won't go as planned seemed to be something we could plan on! However, things will go as needed. Learning to be co-participants in the process and respecting the collective creation while guiding it was something I am not sure I could have accomplished on my own. This flexibility would be beneficial in our full partnership when we were facing a challenge with scheduling our six student partners to find one time during the week when all were available for the weekly student meetings. We ended up with three students being available mid-week and three being available at the end of the week. We embraced this reality and had two student weekly meetings. This structure afforded some unique opportunities for students to have one-on-one partner walks with a student from the mid-week and the end-week groups to connect and share. When the anticipation of bad weather arose before our spring 2024 training, Jillian joined our training via Zoom.

As our partnership continues, I have resurrected a saying I heard decades ago in graduate school: "The process is more important than the product." This saying is attributed to many different potential authors, so I feel comfortable with the idea that this quote is best attributed to those

who benefit from leaning into its meaning. The experience at Grinnell, the Zoom meeting with Jillian, the calls and Zoom meetings with other colleagues, the student meetings, faculty meetings, watercooler conversations, and emails from faculty and students sharing ‘roses’ as well as ‘thorns’ all confirm the value of co-creation and the shared journey of student and faculty as partners.

Accepting the joy that accompanies partnership work is an aspect of this work that I have learned to embrace. There will always be logistical challenges associated with any endeavor, and pedagogical partnerships are no exception. The relational component of this work likely exacerbates this reality. However, co-creation of the learning environment can create a space in higher education that is equitable and shared and serves to create better spaces where student voice is valued and where the learning environment can be formed in ways that share the power and the passion for what is being created and accomplished in the higher education classroom.

### **Personal Reflections**

**Jillian:** Just a few weeks ago, I had another full circle moment when I checked my guilty pleasure social media app, LinkedIn, and saw that I had a message from a current Tufts student who was a student partner in P3 and is now conducting a study on the impact of P3 on alumni who had been student partners. Immediately, I felt both gratified to have additional proof that my work in P3 has outlived my time at Tufts and excited to see how this could influence my work at ACU to help get increased institutional buy-in. I participated in this study over Zoom and stayed on the call to ask the student about her experience in P3. She beamed, “This is my favorite thing I have done at Tufts.”

When I say “full circle,” it sounds like I am relinquishing this chapter of my life to the past, but each of these “full circle” moments has been incredibly generative. Each has led to new opportunities and ways to engage with partnerships that I couldn’t possibly have imagined.

**Scott:** Pedagogical partnership is one of the most impactful initiatives in higher education that I have been privileged to discover. The experience of the full partnerships at my institution has brought so many roses. One of our students shared a rose in which she presented an idea to her faculty partner, and the following week the faculty member initiated that idea with his students and thanked her for the suggestion. The exhilaration she felt as she watched something she suggested be implemented was exciting to hear. Another student mentioned that her faculty partner introduced her to her faculty colleague as “my friend.” When I mentioned this to the faculty partner separately, she didn’t even realize she referred to her partner in that way. Being a part of partnerships has been life-giving.

In my partnership experience, I relate to a scene from the 1999 film “Never Been Kissed.” Drew Barrymore’s character, an undercover journalist in high school, regrets hurting a teacher she was attracted to. She apologizes through a newspaper ad, asking to start anew. The teacher eventually arrives at a baseball game, expressing regret for taking so long. “I’m sorry I took so long to get here,” he says. “I know what you mean,” Barrymore’s character offers. Their exchange echoes the mutual understanding of missed opportunities. It took me a long time to get to a place in my



higher education pedagogy of co-creation and partnership, but I am here, and I am excited about the opportunities.

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