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## Developing Belonging and Mattering as BIPOC Students through Student Consulting

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## **DEVELOPING BELONGING AND MATTERING AS BIPOC STUDENTS THROUGH STUDENT CONSULTING**

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In this essay, I explore the experiences of four BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) student consultants in the SaLT (Students as Learners and Teachers) Program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges (known as the “Bi-Co”) and how this program is able to develop a sense of belonging and mattering for these students. The SaLT program, part of the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI), consists of partnerships between faculty members within the Bi-Co and paid undergraduate students, known as student consultants. Within SaLT, there are multiple opportunities for student consultants to engage with this work, all of which focus primarily on engaging students and faculty in discussion to create equitable and inclusive learning environments.

This essay seeks to put into conversation four separate perspectives, including my own, of current and past BIPOC student consultants while explicitly looking at belonging and mattering. In the broadest sense, belonging can be thought of as a feeling connection and fit in a particular context, while mattering is, according to Cook-Sather and colleagues (2024), transferable across rather than dependent on context, and it is based on feeling valued for who one is rather than on fitting in. I will look at belonging and mattering through the lens of BIPOC student consultants’ experiences in the predominantly white institutions (PWI’s) of Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges. PWI’s, such as the Bi-Co, were not built for BIPOC students and faculty. Therefore, I take the stance that striving for belonging and mattering in these contexts is not only an act of resistance against the system but also a celebration of the diversity and wealth of perspectives that are gained through putting the perspectives of BIPOC student consultants in conversation. I utilize these claims to offer suggestions for further developing belonging and mattering for BIPOC students.

For three of the perspectives that I have chosen, I engage in a critical document review, and for my own perspective, I offer a critical autoethnography. By “critical” I mean that these experiences and analyses unfolded in the context of power that exists between the institutions and the students. Three of these experiences come directly from publications by former BIPOC student consultants, and I draw on these perspectives to talk about elements of belonging and mattering. Recognizing that these are real, lived experiences that these former student consultants vulnerably shared, I do not refer to them as “data” but rather as “experiences” or “sources” to recognize a need for humanity when putting these perspectives into conversation. For the fourth perspective, I reflect on my own experiences as both a BIPOC student at a PWI, and as a BIPOC student consultant through a critical autoethnography. At the end, I draw conclusions based on similar observations made amongst all four perspectives.

This combination of a critical document review and critical autoethnography permits me to make various connections across time, space, and communities. The incorporation of sources across different years also allows conversation between perspectives from the SaLT program that may never have had the opportunity to interact before. This aspect of time between past, present, and

future also encourages this continued dialogue surrounding belonging and mattering for BIPOC students to be further analyzed in the future.

### **Kayo Stewart: “From Student Consulting at my Liberal Arts Institution to Applying to Law School”**

This first source I explore was written by Kayo Stewart, a former student consultant who self-identifies as a first-generation college student and as a Black woman. She writes about her experiences with the SaLT program and how it helped reaffirm her desire to fight for justice and apply to law school. She notes specifically how her time as a Bryn Mawr student consultant involved in the SaLT program affirmed her sense of belonging and mattering in a myriad of ways. For example, in describing her experience working in Pedagogy Circles where students, faculty, and staff come together to discuss pedagogical practices to increase equity, she highlights how she was able to draw on her own lived experience:

With the Pedagogy Circles, I am able to challenge professors and students to communicate beyond the curriculum, talk vulnerably about my experience as a Black student attending a PWI... and discuss campus community issues alongside those of the United States more broadly. (Stewart, 2023, p. 2)

Kayo also writes about her experiences co-facilitating the Pedagogy Circles for BIPOC Faculty, which she describes as a place where faculty of color and students of color had the opportunity to share experiences of people of color in a PWI. Kayo states that she did not always find the social environment welcoming at her PWI, but she was able to use her positionality to engage in conversation surrounding campus issues.

Kayo uplifts how her experiences with the SaLT program were both personally and professionally beneficial. In particular, she discusses how her identity and experiences were validated as a result of working with the Pedagogy Circle for BIPOC faculty. She states, “I was also able to find a sense of security because I could share my sentiments with faculty who looked like me” (Stewart, 2023, p. 1). Working with the SaLT program, but specifically being able to connect and relate with students and faculty from diverse backgrounds, offered up perspective and comfort and made Kayo feel validated through having such a partnership role. In terms of professional development, she explains: “I know that these consulting experiences in association with my sociology foundation through my major helped solidify that I want to be someone who fights for justice for all but also teaches people that differences should be celebrated and respected rather than ridiculed and seen as a threat” (Stewart, 2023, p. 3). Through this reflection of her participation in SaLT, Kayo was able to connect her past and present experiences as a reaffirmation of her desire to continue creating equitable spaces and as a reaffirmation of her lived experiences.

Kayo touches upon the notion that PWIs can be challenging for BIPOC students due to the difficulty in feeling validated in terms of belonging and mattering among peers who may not understand their backgrounds. By engaging in the SaLT program, it is possible to discuss campus issues with those who empathize with their struggles and identities. This engagement can allow BIPOC students to develop a sense of belonging and mattering in a community that was not originally designed for them.

### **Sasha Mathrani: “Building Relationships, Navigating Discomfort and Uncertainty, and Translating My Voice in New Contexts”**

The next source highlights the experiences of Sasha Mathrani, a former student consultant of color at Haverford College. She writes about her experiences working with three student-faculty partnerships and how they have, as her title suggests, led to building relationships, navigating discomfort and uncertainty, and translating her voice in new contexts. In terms of relationship building, Sasha explains that “through building a relationship with my faculty partner, I felt valued by my partner and that contributed to valuing myself” (Mathrani, 2019, p. 2). Sasha goes on to reflect on how she was able to have productive conversations with faculty partners about topics related to access and equity-seeking identities, as well as being able to humanize professors and being able to meet them “where they are.”

Moving onto discomfort and uncertainty, Sasha explains that these were not prominent themes of her partnerships, although they did come up. However, she states that even when she felt discomfort, she was able to lean into it. In one instance, she disagreed with her faculty partner in one of their weekly meetings and spent a great deal of time trying to come to a compromise with them. She explains that “although this was uncomfortable and I was uncertain about our relationship at that point, we spent time listening to each other and ended up building a stronger relationship” (Mathrani, 2019, p. 4). As a result, discomfort and uncertainty allowed Sasha to grow and better understand where her faculty partner was coming from.

Lastly, similar to Kayo’s experience of the work done with SaLT being professionally beneficial, Sasha illustrates that she was able to translate her voice into new contexts. She reiterates that, since she has an interest in inclusive science teaching, that these experiences allowed her to gain perspective on the importance of student’s perspectives in making pedagogical choices and decisions. On top of that, she explains how she was able to develop her public speaking skills and ability to articulate suggestions.

From these reflections, Sasha describes her experiences with SaLT as “transformational” where “each small transformation has contributed to my personal growth and appreciation for myself” (Mathrani, 2019, p. 6). She reflects on these experiences as being incredibly beneficial to her personal life, even outside of education. Overall, the knowledge and skills gained from SaLT are something that she felt could translate to all aspects of her life.

The experiences Sasha shared reflect a similar sentiment to what Kayo expresses in her essay in relation to the work done by BIPOC student consultants at PWIs, and personal growth. For BIPOC students in particular, feelings of imposter syndrome or a sense of not belonging or being unworthy to exist in certain spaces can be very prevalent at PWIs. Sasha describes how she was able to feel reaffirmed as a student through her engagement with the SaLT program and developing relationships with people from diverse backgrounds and lived experiences.

## **Khadijah Seay: “‘I Was Involved as an Equal Member of the Community’: How Pedagogical Partnership Can Foster a sense of Belonging in Black, Female Students”**

This final source was co-written by Alison Cook-Sather, the director of the Teaching and Learning Institute of which SaLT is a part of, and Khadijah Seay, a former student consultant in the SaLT program. Both authors make their positionalities in writing this article very clear, with Khadijah identifying as a “Black, female graduate of and former participant in a pedagogical partnership program at Bryn Mawr College” and Alison identifying as a “White, female staff member and director of the pedagogical partnership program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges” (Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021, p. 7). In this co-written source, Alison and Khadijah describe their research and findings from a survey they sent out to all students who participated in pedagogical partnerships at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges who identified as Black and female. In total, they collected 12 responses and shared their findings, particularly about perceiving, feeling and acting differently.

In terms of perceiving differently, they noticed that there was a heightened sense of exclusion where “students described the conditions of their college contexts that worked against their sense of belonging— what one student described as a ‘predominantly white institution where space was not created for people of color’” (Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021, p. 8). This common sense of exclusion was the result of critical reflection on what it was like to be a Black woman at a PWI and how those spaces were not created with their needs, particularly for a need to feel belonging, in mind.

Moving onto the next aspect, feeling, the surveys showed that there was a common pattern of students feeling like their expertise and opinions were valid and that they were actually being heard. For example, one student stated, “because partnership ‘flips the paradigm’ through which ‘[staff] are viewed as the experts who are imparting knowledge to students ready to receive it’, it affords students ‘another way...to become a stakeholder in the community’” (Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021, p. 9). After a recognition of the difficulties with the system, student consultants found reassurance in the SaLT program as a reaffirmation of their knowledge while simultaneously transforming the traditional system of viewing students as simply the recipients of knowledge into positioning students as co-constructors.

Finally, in terms of engaging differently, many students from the survey found that they were able to take what they learned from the program into aspects beyond the partnerships:

While it is important to note that one student respondent felt belonging within a partnership but did not experience a ‘sense of belonging on a campus-wide scale’ (S9), for the other respondents this sense of belonging, identity and agency carried beyond partnerships themselves, into life even beyond college. (Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021, p. 10)

In this final aspect of the study, similar to what we have seen in the previous two sources, students felt as if they were able to transform their recognition of harmful experiences in terms of lack of belonging and mattering into a reaffirmation and a sense that they can take this knowledge with them into the future as a guide to establishing belonging and mattering for themselves personally and professionally.

The research Khadijah and Alison conducted holds similar sentiments and findings to the sources published by Kayo and Sasha for BIPOC students more generally. Similarly, all three touch upon a heightened sense of exclusion that exists among BIPOC students at PWIs, and all three sources agree that community building through the SaLT program has allowed for people from diverse backgrounds to come together and share their experiences. Belonging and mattering, especially for BIPOC student consultants, is based in community and resistance against oppressive systems that were not built with equity in mind.

### **Jacob Chan: Autoethnography**

During my time as an undergraduate student, I first worked with SaLT during the Fall of my senior year. I was invited by the program director, Alison, after a recommendation from one of my Education professors. In this role, I worked in a one-one-one, semester-long student-faculty partnership with a new, visiting professor. Even though I was only able to participate in this program near the end of my experience as an undergraduate at Haverford, I gained invaluable insight into my experiences in higher education as an Asian-American student and a sense of belonging and mattering, as well as insights into what I want to do in the future.

I am fortunate to say that my student-faculty partnership was filled with positive memories, crucial insights into higher education, and a reaffirmation to continue advocating for equity in the future. The semester that I first started working with SaLT was also my faculty partner's first semester in the Bi-Co. They had heard about the program from Alison and decided to try it out. Even though neither of us had "experience" with this type of partnership, a crucial reminder that Alison offered was that our experiences as students and learners enrolled in institutions of higher education has already made us well-equipped to do this type of work. As someone who suffers from imposter syndrome, I found it hard to believe that this was true, but I was able to voice these hesitations to my faculty partner. Over the course of the semester, we began to develop trust in one another's pedagogical perspectives. Even if we did not see eye-to-eye on everything, we were always able to remain open to hearing each other's suggestions and understood that our end goal was the same. In that regard, the SaLT program allowed me to humanize professors while better understanding and reaffirming my role as a student in the context of these partnerships and higher education more broadly conceived.

Throughout my time at Haverford, I often found myself isolated and misunderstood by many of my peers. Being at a PWI, I found that the majority of students did not understand what it meant to be a student of color in these types of institutions and some of the emotional burdens that came along with it. From multiple professors in the past, I was met with stereotypes about what it meant to be "like the other Asian students." One professor asked why I had an "English-sounding" name if I was an international student. Having been born and raised in New York, I was shocked by the question. Stereotypes such as these made it hard for me to find a community. My intention in writing this essay was not to focus solely on the struggles that BIPOC students face at PWI's but rather to highlight the resilience of these students and look towards spaces where their struggles and identities can be uplifted and genuinely valued in terms of belonging and mattering. The community of support that I was able to develop over the years and through SaLT has allowed me to feel as if I mattered and belonged, "simply as I am." Being able to

discuss my experiences in these types of partnerships with other student consultants of color and with the program director allowed me to feel heard and seen by others who understood where I was coming from.

## Conclusion

In writing this essay, I recognize that BIPOC identities are not a monolith and are filled with a rich diversity of cultures and backgrounds. Furthermore, my intention is not to simply state that all BIPOC students should become student consultants and that the SaLT program is void of any and all systemic issues. In this essay, I hope to provide context for looking at ways in which belonging and mattering can be fostered for BIPOC students, through the lens of student consulting. Similarly, it is essential to mention that I did not have contact with the three previous student consultants whose sources I utilized. While I fully intend to respect their lived experiences, I acknowledge that contact with them might have shifted how this essay was written and the directions it took.

I offer the following final reflections based on my own, individual perspective after completing critical document reviews of three reflections written by BIPOC student consultants and completing my own autoethnography. I noticed three main patterns. The first is an increased sense of exclusion from “traditional” education where the educator is the sole source of knowledge in a classroom which turned into validation for lived experiences through this partnership. The second pattern I observed was the importance of having your experiences validated by students and faculty who have shared aspects of your identity as a way to feel heard and seen. The final pattern I determined was an increased reaffirmation to increase equity in the future. Overall, by putting these four perspectives in conversation with one another, my aim is to increase the visibility of how student partnerships can increase belonging and mattering for BIPOC students.

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