

# Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

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Volume 1  
Issue 44 *Insisting on Inclusive Practices*

Article 5

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September 2024

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### Recommended Citation

Aden, Amiira; Evans, Alex; Huseinovic, Ilka; and Mondal, Tanushree Sow "Students' Perspectives on Advancing Inclusive Teaching Through Observational Feedback and Partnership," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 44 (2024), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss44/5>

## **STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON ADVANCING INCLUSIVE TEACHING THROUGH OBSERVATIONAL FEEDBACK AND PARTNERSHIP**

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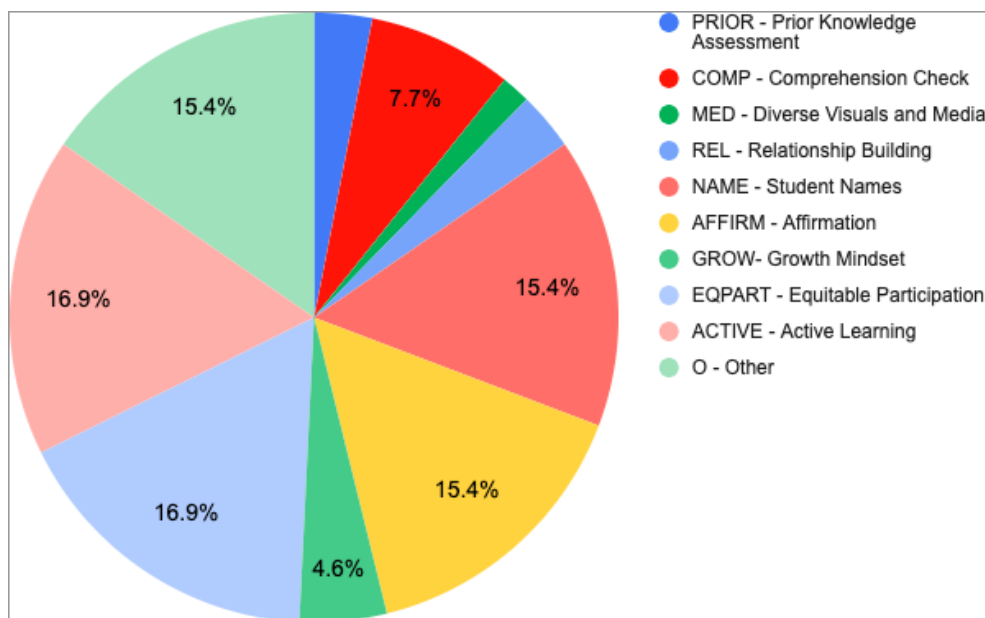
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### **Introduction**

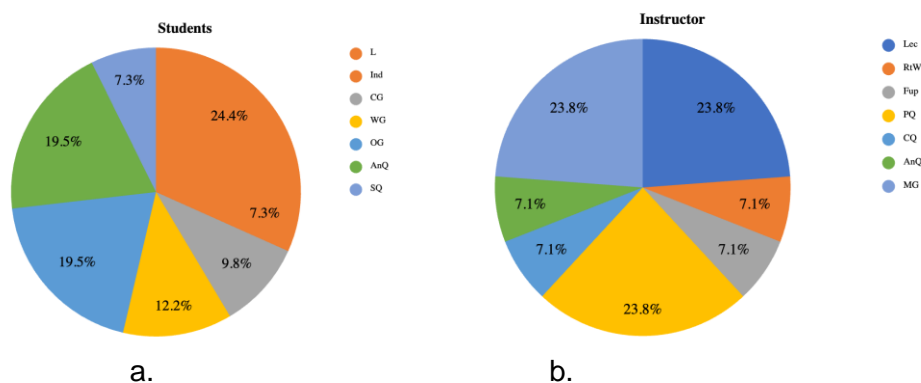
The Inclusive Instructors Academy, offered by the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship at Lafayette College, is a semester-long program with the goal of enhancing inclusion in the classroom and pedagogical practices of participating faculty. During the program, faculty members attend monthly meetings, read materials on inclusive teaching, discuss potential strategies for enhancing inclusion, develop their own inclusion goals for the semester, and receive feedback on implementation through partnerships with students. As student partners for the Academy, typically we were paired with two to three faculty members every semester. Our responsibilities included observing the classes of our faculty partners; using pre-designed research-validated protocols for recognizing and coding teaching and learning behaviors in the classroom; and meeting with our faculty partners post-visit to provide constructive feedback and discuss avenues of enhancing inclusive teaching. The following essay is a reflection on our experiences with our pedagogical partnerships in this program as well as in working with faculty members new to our college.

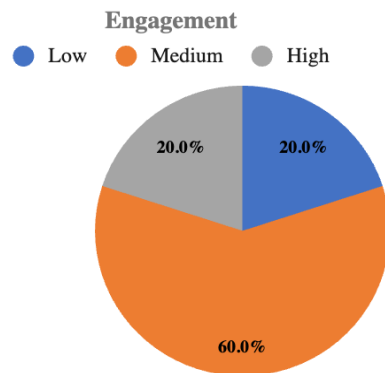
As student observers, we mostly used the Protocol for Advancing Inclusive Teaching Efforts (PAITE), which codified inclusive teaching into 16 smaller, more easily recognizable and quantifiable practices (Addy et al., 2022). For example, the code AFFIRM signified the instructor's use of words of encouragement and praise that validate students' contributions, while the code DIVEX indicated the instructor's use of examples presenting a diversity of people, situations, perspectives, or ideas. We also at times used other protocols and tools such as the Classroom Observation Protocol for Undergraduate STEM (COPUS) (Smith et al., 2013) and the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) framework (TILT Higher Ed, n.d.). COPUS records behavioral cues of professors and students in classrooms as well as overall student engagement levels in classrooms from low (10-20% obviously engaged) to high (80+% engaged). Some codes for faculty behavior include Lecturing (L), Following up on a clicker question (FUp), and Administration (assign homework, return tests, etc.) (Adm). Examples of codes for student behavior are Listening to instructor/taking notes, etc. (L), Working in groups on worksheet activity (WG), and Student asks question (SQ). Observation results using COPUS and charts similar to those from PAITE were also discussed at post-observation meetings.

During our classroom visits, we noted the inclusive teaching codes for every two-minute interval of the class. The data for every code were then tallied and visualized in a pie chart (Figures 1 and 2). In addition to this visual breakdown of the instructor’s teaching practices, we also made note of more concrete observations and comments from our class visits. A summary of the chart and our comments were then provided to our faculty partners and discussed during post-observation follow-up sessions.



**Figure 1. Sample pie chart from a Protocol for Advancing Inclusive Teaching (PAITE) classroom observation**





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**Figure 2. Sample pie charts from a Classroom Observation Protocol for Undergraduate STEM (COPUS) classroom observation**

In addition to the PAITE and COPUS we also used a TILT rubric for some courses. This allowed us to assess different components of an assignment designed by our faculty partners. Based on this rubric, an ideal assignment description should have three components: a ‘Purpose’ section, which describes what a student learns from completing the assignment; a ‘Task’ section; which explains the different components of the assignment; and a ‘Criteria for success’ section, which gives a rubric for assessment and guidelines on good performance.

Below we present our reflections on student-faculty partnership work focused on classroom observations of teaching using research-validated instruments.

### **Roles of Student and Faculty Partners**

Settling into the role of a student partner was sometimes difficult at first. Although we were essentially employed and trained to provide constructive feedback to the faculty members we were paired with, it was important for both parties to keep in mind that we were still students. As student partners, we were tasked with observing from a student’s point of view—not as an administrator or a faculty colleague. Although it was important to go into an observation with an open mind, it was still helpful to bring in experiences from classes we have taken in the past in order to compare and contrast teaching practices and activities that we found to support or hinder learning. Sometimes it was difficult to follow the material of a class we had never taken, but this was not a bad thing. In this sense, we were able to provide a perspective that solely analyzed the structure of the classroom without focusing on the content itself.

On the other hand, it was important to recognize that we did not know everything about the course; we were only observing a snippet of the structure and content of the class. It can be difficult to determine a benchmark from which to compare the classroom style or its elements—elements that may be necessary in effectively displaying the material of the class. An effective strategy in an observation was asking ourselves questions throughout, such as: “How would I feel if I were a student in this class and the professor delivered information in this way?” Again,

we did not want to be judgmental. It was essential for us to eliminate assumptions about professors and classes while observing. Some professors, classes, and disciplines may have certain reputations on campus. However, it was important for us to keep in mind that those may not be true and student partners must go into classrooms with an open mind in order to accurately observe and provide feedback on faculty member's teaching practices, including inclusivity practices and engagement levels. We found it important to observe whether or not the students were engaged and included, and whether we as student partners were interested in the material or not.

If there were concerns about the faculty partner's teaching practices, we endeavored to employ thoughtful ways to address them. Given that our observations provided only a snapshot of the classroom's functions, we could take note of any practices that could be modified and ask the faculty partner if they were taking any action to address the concerns in ways that we did not observe. For example, the faculty partner may implement other inclusive practices most of the time in other class sessions or provide flexibility of assignments in the syllabus, etc. We as student partners often asked for the course syllabus and assignments given in the class in order to better understand the overall class structure and inclusivity practices in place. These examples oftentimes gave a better understanding of the class.

On the other side, from the perspective of a faculty partner, it was equally important to keep an open mind and be open to feedback. Some faculty partners found it difficult to meet with and receive feedback on their teaching from an unfamiliar student. However, it was important for them to keep in mind that we as student partners were there for their benefit and that we wanted to facilitate a better learning experience and classroom environment for them and their students. Listening to the feedback, whether faculty members agreed or disagreed, was essential in receiving honest feedback from the student partners and for improving the classroom. Hearing what student partners shared and were thinking about it before responding was important. With that being said, providing their own input as a faculty partner was also essential. Open communication went a long way, and knowing how to work collaboratively as a faculty partner and student partner was the most important part of the partnership. Outside of feedback, open communication was also important for more logistical points of the partnership. Examples include scheduling observations and debriefings in a timely and effective manner. Finally, for the duration of the partnership it was crucial for faculty partners to remember the goals of the program: to make classes more inclusive and accessible to all students.

### **Development of Faculty Partners' Inclusive Teaching Practices**

As student partners, our focus and efforts have been directed towards a collaborative teamwork with our faculty partners where we reflect on their current teaching practices and explore potential new practices based on findings from PAITE and other protocols. Similarly, our faculty partners have typically been very supportive and welcoming of feedback. Due to the nature of this collaborative work, usually our first meeting with our faculty partner occurred even before we began making any assessment through TILT or class visits. These meetings were focused on discussing our faculty partners' inclusive teaching goals for this program and specific areas that they would like student partners to prioritize when observing. Some examples of inclusive

teaching goals that faculty partners have focused on in the past were incorporating more real-world examples of concepts discussed in class while teaching, ensuring equitable participation in small-group activities or discussions, and including more detailed purposes and rubrics for their assignments to enhance student engagement with assignments and their preparedness for them. These meetings were also the initial mediums for both parties to get to know each other better and develop a trust that is crucial for the success of this partnership.

During post-observation meetings, many faculty partners took notes and asked follow-up questions, showing active listening and genuine engagement with the student partner's feedback. Similarly, during our second or third class visits, we often witnessed clear changes in practices and areas that we had highlighted during our follow-up meeting, which was an encouraging sign that demonstrated that our faculty partners valued our feedback and did incorporate it into their pedagogy. For example, if previously some faculty partners mostly lectured during their classes, they tried to implement more attributes of the PAITE, like asking more questions or using students' names more often while speaking to them. Sometimes, student partner observations would highlight class contextual aspects that could not be codified using the PAITE or COPUS protocols. For example, a student partner might notice that during group work, their faculty partner tends to check in more on the louder students as compared to the quieter ones, a behavior that the faculty partner may not even be aware of. Upon discussing this at the post-observation meeting, the faculty partner might try to be more conscious of this tendency and pay equal attention to all students during future group-work sessions. Similarly, especially for problem sets for STEM classes, faculty partners might only have the task description for their assignment. However, seeing the TILT framework and examples of assignments that fulfill the TILT checklist might encourage them to include a 'Purpose' and 'Criteria for success' section in their assignments.

### **Challenges in the Partnership & Solutions**

As a student partner, giving feedback to professors can be difficult because we are not sure how they might respond. We can feel nervous and anxious about this process, especially when it involves suggesting improvements in their classes. It's important to keep in mind that some professors might be more receptive to feedback than others; not all professors have the same response. As student partners, we aimed to approach the situation with professionalism and adapt to the professor's teaching approaches. Sometimes, they might have a reason for why they are conducting the class in a certain way. Having a conversation with the professor and being open-minded to their response is needed in order to take a different approach that will work for the class. One of the challenges we faced was switching from one protocol to another to give more appropriate feedback on their teaching practices. For example, in math classes, which heavily involve group work, using the COPUS could make it easier for the professor to see how students are engaging in the class (Smith et al., 2013). COPUS allows a visualization of not only what the instructor is doing but also what the students are doing. Using the COPUS in this scenario can be an effective way to see if students are involved in the material because it can highlight whether the students participate in group work or mini discussions. COPUS has different codes that show different forms of student engagement.

We also observed how faculty partners can face challenges in the academic institution. Their teaching approaches might not be suitable for students with varying needs, and it's hard to incorporate all the different feedback they receive into the class. It can be challenging for professors to change their teaching practices based on student feedback, especially for those who have been teaching for a long time and have established teaching methods. Some faculty partners experience vulnerability towards the feedback they receive from student partners, which can be taken the wrong way. Our goal was not to make them feel inadequate, but rather to help them find ways to improve their classroom. Professors are typically more experienced than us when it comes to teaching, but we also do not want them to think that we know more than they do. They do not have to take the feedback we give them, but it will make them think about it during class, such as see if they can ask more questions, provide examples on the board, or make eye contact with students.

Some professors may struggle to balance the feedback they receive from students and the goals they set for themselves. For example, if a professor spends half of the class asking and answering questions, they might not be able to finish the lesson they prepared for the class. The amount of material that they feel they need to cover throughout the course might be the reason why the professor chooses more lecture-based classes, which lead to less student engagement. We could have further discussions with them regarding how they can still implement active learning approaches. Incorporating feedback was at times challenging for professors, but it was important for them to strive to make their class more inclusive and effective.

### **Student Partner Growth & Development**

By serving as student partners, we grew mentally and academically. We were exposed to different fields of study and met professors within those disciplines. We formed connections with professors and learned about classes that we could consider taking in the future. We as student partners better understand the intricacies of a professor's job. It is not easy to be a professor and to provide a safe and welcoming environment for every student. No matter what subject you teach, it can be difficult to make students engaged with the material. And we realize this as students that we should appreciate professors more and show gratitude.

Through our observations, some of us also recognized the different inclusive teaching practices on the PAITE that our professors use in classes that we took as students, such as student choice. Giving students choice is a teaching practice that several of the professors we observed wanted to use. This can provide the students a chance to show their creative side on assignments. The codes that were used in the classrooms of many professors were affirmations and names. The usage of these codes signified that the professor uses the names of students within their classroom, and affirms their answer, giving their learners confidence to answer or to look at the question in a different way.

We all agreed that once you arrive at college or the years to come as a student it can be difficult to approach a professor for help. Many students struggle with advocating for their needs because of the anxiety they can feel when approaching a professor. At first, we were afraid to give our feedback to professors. But with time we built the confidence to communicate efficiently with them. By gaining the confidence to give feedback to professors we enhanced our communication

skills through email and through in-person meetings. We now know how to communicate respectfully through email and how to appropriately deal with conflicts. Conflicts can include moving an appointment because there is a conflict with your schedule or if the instructor does not agree with the feedback that you give to them.

We see professors as a helping hand and no one to fear. Being a student partner with the Center for the Integration of Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship (CITLS) helped us realize that many professors are trying to grow and learn from feedback provided to them. We as students should not feel inferior to professors because we all are learning from each other. It is an equal partnership, and no one has an upper hand in the situation.

What we thought was amazing about the CITLS fellowship is how we built and fostered relationships with professors in different departments. We believe that it is essential to form bonds with professors because these connections can yield later social network benefits. Professors from all different fields can help us and guide us to internship and or job opportunities that they believe are the best fit for us. Our participation can also expose us to different fields, and we may consider taking courses with the same professors later on, and feel interested in the material. Observing courses might spark new interests and or aspirations.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Overall, there is a lot we have learned from our experiences as student partners. We have grown an understanding of what faculty members face in teaching. It can be difficult to align teaching practices to all students' needs and incorporate all of our feedback immediately and effectively. This can be especially challenging for more experienced faculty partners who have been teaching for a long time and have not received feedback on their teaching prior. We have also learned the importance of clarity in communication between student partners and faculty—having an open dialogue is essential for the success of the partnership.

The CITLS fellowship provided a community for relationship building between faculty and students. This allowed student partners to in turn help their peers and improve classroom settings across campus. The relationship building between faculty and student partners can also be beneficial for broader efforts, and our next steps are to work with specific departments in order to improve their inclusivity practices and classroom settings.

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