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From the Student Perspective

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FROM THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Ivana Evans is a senior at Haverford College, completing a major in Spanish and a minor in Educational studies. She has spent three semesters as a TLI Consultant working with faculty members from both Haverford College and Bryn Mawr College. After graduation, Ivana plans to teach, continuing her study of education while also applying what she has learned as a TLI Student Consultant.

When I look back over my experiences of working as a student consultant through the TLI, I see that I developed several insights and important capacities. I divide these into three related categories: gaining perspective, developing empathy (for both faculty and students), and building confidence.

Gaining Perspective

One of the most important experiences I have had is learning to discern the faculty perspective and put it in relation to my own and that of other students. In the fall of 2009, I wrote this about gaining perspective:

The most significant challenge in my TLI partnership was helping my partner to slightly move away from only teaching the way in which she was taught while not making the class atmosphere seem false, strange, or uncomfortable for her and the students. One of the most significant benefits was watching her evolve. I also enjoyed watching her enjoy both teaching and learning from students and from her TLI experience. Another benefit was experiencing both her willingness to change her methods and also her reluctance to simply do whatever I suggested. If she did not think my suggestion was feasible, she made that known to me. If she thought my suggestion could work even if it was a little out of her comfort zone, she was still willing to try it. This was one of the most influential aspects of TLI for me because it taught me that I need to be open and try to think from perspectives other than my own while also remembering my strengths and being honest with myself about what's possible and what's not.

When I started as a freshman at Haverford College, and even more so when I began taking education classes, I thought that perhaps I knew more about teaching than my professors. I believed that the professor should teach the way I would and do teach. My first semester as a student consultant certainly changed my mentality. I began with an urge to push my faculty partner towards my thinking about education. But by the end of that semester, I realized how much I learned because my faculty partner pushed back. She knew herself and her students. She showed me that the world of education is so much more than my perception of it.

In the spring of 2010, I deepened that understanding, making it more human. I wrote in one reflection:

I think I often unintentionally view teachers, especially those that I don't know very well, as the job and not as humans. But my faculty partner challenged that thinking when she would get

upset about some of my observations. She showed me that teaching makes one vulnerable and therefore requires great courage.

Developing Empathy

This deeper understanding of faculty members' experiences and perspectives led to the second insight and capacity: developing empathy. In a discussion with faculty members and other student consultants, I explained that this new understanding made me inclined to take a professor's side when I hear students complaining. I said:

I feel like I am more of a professor advocate. Sometimes when I hear things about professors, it just makes me so angry. I just think a lot of students don't reflect on themselves, they don't look at what they are doing that limits or takes away from their learning experience, and I just want to be like, "What are YOU doing? Think about what you are doing in that class — Are you not paying attention? Are you not participating?"

We, as students, hold much more power over our education than we realize. Therefore, we should ask ourselves, "What is my role in this class, in my education, and in my success in this course?" I have taken several courses for which I had countless excuses for not doing as well as desired. I was quick to blame teachers. But as my faculty partnerships strengthened, I had the privilege of witnessing how much of the educator's very being goes into teaching. It is a job that requires a lot of courage and hard work. Each time I saw the magnitude of my faculty partners' contribution to their students' learning, I forced myself to be more cognizant of my contribution to my own learning.

The perspective I gained on professors' experiences, and the empathy I have developed for them, has been balanced by the perspective I gained on the student experience. In the spring of 2010, I wrote:

I will take with me from this experience of being a student consultant the understanding that each student is an individual and therefore learns in his/her own way. I, as a teacher, should not only teach students in the way that I was taught and expect all of them to learn. I want to work to be responsive to my students' unique ways of learning.

Putting this new insight into relation with my ongoing thinking about my faculty partner's work, I wrote, "I hope my partner takes with her the practice of starting where the learner is rather than starting where she believes they should be."

Similar to being a teacher, being a student also requires a great deal of courage. At the beginning of each course, I hope and pray that professors take my learning preferences into consideration when planning their lessons. I hope and pray that my professor does not consider me inferior to other students due to my different way of learning.

In the same reflection on my work for that semester, I wrote:

Both these responses speak to the uniqueness of students and learning ways to address students in ways to which they respond best. I think the TLI supports this learning through faculty seminars and student-faculty partnerships. I would often talk about my personal learning style with my partner, but I would emphasize that her students may be different learners. The consultant meetings also helped me give my partner various ways to teach different types of learners. The faculty seminars also demonstrated how professors have different teaching styles. It was nice to see professors communicate and learn from each other about teaching students with various ways of learning.

This understanding has only deepened over time. In the fall of 2010, I wrote:

I've learned that there is no one way to teach, no one way to facilitate discussion, and no one way to create community in the classroom. I am constantly thinking about how I learn and how I would teach, but my way is not the best way for every teacher or for every student. This little insight seems so obvious but it is so easy for me to forget it.

Building Confidence

The third insight and capacity I have developed has to do with confidence. Having the opportunity to talk with other student consultants about their partnerships, what their faculty partners were trying to accomplish, and how they were working together, I both gathered new ideas and also developed confidence in my own. In one reflection, I wrote:

The meetings made me much more confident about my suggestions to my partner. Even if I had no question for the group pertaining to my partnership, I often would remember something that someone said weeks before hand and I would share it with faculty when it applied to our partnership. I also loved being able to take my faculty partner's questions to the student consultant meetings. The other consultants were so helpful. I also enjoyed sharing my comments in order to help other consultants with their partnerships because it made me feel as though I was helping several professors not just my own partner.

In response to a question about how I defined and experienced confidence, I wrote:

One of the most important benefits I have derived from my participation in the TLI is the development of confidence, which I define as realizing and acting on ones power and influence in a situation.

In the last issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, faculty and students explained what role confidence plays in their educational experience, and I want to emphasize that point as well. In my reflection, I continued:

Confidence is very important to my learning because it can change everything. I need confidence to speak in class, offer my opinions, perhaps disagree with someone, and perhaps that someone is the professor. Those are all acts inspired by confidence for me and they all can affect the direction of the class and therefore, my learning.

Each semester that I have been a part of TLI, I have witnessed the confidence — the power — of students. They have shown me that students need confidence to communicate with professors and that communication can make a world of difference in the class. From these experiences, I am much more confident myself. I've also realized that what I get from a class reflects what I give to it, and giving requires confidence.

Conclusion: Sharing Responsibility, Courage, and Power

As I enter my senior year, I have begun to think more about who I am and what I have gained from my time in the Bi-Co (Bryn Mawr College and Haverford College) community. Through the TLI, I have learned more about my role as both an educator and as a student. Most significantly, I have learned that those roles do not differ very much from each other in terms of responsibility, courage, and power. Thanks to my TLI faculty partners and colleagues, I have learned that although my journey as a student at Haverford will end this May, my journey as a student in life has no end. That realization makes me eager and excited for my future as an educator.