

REFLECTIVE PIECE

## **Growing Student-Faculty Partnerships at Ursinus College: A Brief History in Dialogue**

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In 2009-2010, Meredith Goldsmith (English) created the Teaching and Learning Initiative (TLI) at Ursinus College with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The centerpiece of the TLI was a new student-faculty partnership program, the Student Consultant Program, formed with substantial guidance from Alison Cook-Sather (Bryn Mawr College). In 2014, the TLI (now the Teaching and Learning Institute) became a formal College office within the division of Academic Affairs, and TLI leadership passed to Susanna Throop (History).

The TLI Student Consultant Program allows individual faculty an opportunity to engage in pedagogical dialogue over the course of a semester with a trained student observer and dialogue partner (i.e., a student consultant). Faculty participation in the program is voluntary, open to all instructors, and kept separate from formal evaluation procedures; students are selected to work in the program after a rigorous hiring process. Every week during a semester-long partnership, a student consultant visits their faculty partner's course, shares detailed field notes, and meets for discussion with their faculty partner. The program's primary goal is to support faculty in reflecting upon their teaching. Additionally, the program aims to offer students a chance to develop as collaborative leaders.

In the following dialogue, Goldsmith and Throop are joined by two alumni who worked as student consultants: Codey Young ('14) was a leader among the initial cohort of consultants and Megan Hanscom ('16) played a pivotal role in the transition from grant-funded initiative to College office. In this essay, the co-authors reflect from their various perspectives on the experience of building a student-faculty partnership program at a small liberal arts college. The essay is organized around five key questions that lead readers through critical actions in

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designing partnerships and partnership programs: beginning, sustaining, growing, leading, and assessing. Each question is addressed first in terms of the partnership *program* and then in terms of the *partnerships* themselves (though it will be evident throughout that *program* and *partnership* are interdependent).

#### HOW DO WE BEGIN?

##### **Meredith**

For me, the partnership program began through a stroke of luck: upon Ursinus receiving a Mellon grant, I joined a faculty pedagogy seminar with the understanding that I would be partnered with a student observer. My experience in that one partnership was so transformative that it made me want to build a partnership program at Ursinus (see Goldsmith & Gervasio, 2011). It further convinced me that anyone building a program should participate in a partnership and experience the associated feelings of vulnerability and alliance. Looking back, it is clear that trust between faculty member and student was critical to beginning both my partnership and our partnership program.

Built on trust, the Student Consultant Program allows both faculty and students to talk about the work of teaching and learning that we do every day. Teaching can be an atomizing profession, the presence of students and colleagues notwithstanding. My vision was to create a community around teaching and learning where both students and faculty could engage in more active dialogue. In my view, improving teaching can then come with the territory.

##### **Susanna**

Trust enables frank dialogue and deep learning for both members of a partnership. I would go even further though and say that *leading* a partnership program is also an opportunity for both faculty and students to learn greatly, especially when that position of leadership is approached with trust for others. Leading the TLI required me to learn a great deal from the student consultants themselves. Because of their direct and preexisting immersion in the program, they were my primary mentors and advisors as I took on my role. I think that willingness to learn from and with students, whether one is leading a partnership program or just participating in it, is vital. When leading a partnership program, one is an educator, a manager, an administrator, and a coach; at the same time, one is also a learner.

##### **Codey**

If faculty and student are both going to learn greatly from a partnership, trust is key, and trust is often built through empathy. Knowing that the beginning of a partnership with a faculty member laid the groundwork for the rest of the semester, I was always intentional about making each partnership relationship-centered. In initial meetings, I asked questions about the professor's academic background, how they came to teach in their current area of focus, and how they ended up at Ursinus College. I also asked the professor what they wanted to accomplish during the semester. Doing all this helped establish common ground between us. This initial questioning also gave me insight into their mindset. For example, in my first partnership, I became aware that my partner's academic background was at a large R-1 university where he had received little training as a teacher. This knowledge informed my understanding of the discomfort he displayed standing before a small class, and it allowed us to emphasize confidence building, which translated into higher rates of student engagement.

**Megan**

Building trust is essential in developing an open dialogue throughout the semester, and it is an ongoing process. Like Codey, I tried to get a sense of my faculty partner's background and teaching experience as well as their goals for the semester. I also made sure the professors understood that I was a sounding board for their ideas and worries, and I was there to support them, not to report my observations to anyone else for evaluation. For partnerships to be effective, faculty need to see consultants as people who support professors and pedagogical development, and that means that consultants need to demonstrate their support for their faculty partner from start to finish of a partnership.

**HOW DO WE SUSTAIN?****Meredith**

In the program's early days, it became clear to me that program sustainability involves person-to-person encounters and, broadly speaking, visibility. Individual student consultants might feel isolated by their work, and so from the start, physical meetings increased program sustainability simply by deepening contact. At the beginning, some did not see why our bi-weekly meetings, where all consultants met to discuss highs and lows and solicited advice from our peers, were necessary. However, I believed strongly that face-to-face encounters were essential, not only within a single partnership, but also within the community of consultants working in the program. The bi-weekly meetings provided support for individual consultants and generated esprit de corps among the consultants. At the institutional level, visibility and in-person encounters are also crucial for sustainability. The TLI has recently held some of its events at our President's house, which offers a powerful symbol of institutional support. In our start-up days, several early adopters attested publicly to the effects of the program, thus encouraging others to participate. When I began the program, people kept asking me, "Well, what do you do?" The answer to that question should always be readily apparent.

**Susanna**

For me, sustainability all boils down to engagement. First, a student-faculty partnership program needs to be supported and valued by a critical minority of faculty members who are actively engaged in partnerships. Second, the student consultants themselves need to continue to be engaged in the program's development, and they need to see a connection between the program's success and their own personal success. In both cases, faculty and consultants need to feel they have agency and the ability to impact their institution. That brings me to my third "need" for sustainability: active institutional engagement with the program.

**Codey**

Meredith and Susanna have talked about visibility and engagement. I would like to address the importance of flexibility. As the semester progresses, the needs and desires of a student-faculty partnership naturally shift. In particular, as faculty and students advance through the syllabus, I have found that student engagement tends to decline. Sustaining partnerships then depends on providing student consultants with the training to assist faculty in reevaluating goals throughout the course of the semester.

**Megan**

Codey is right about the challenges of sustaining engagement through the course of a single partnership. Flexibility becomes vital, but so too is what is sometimes called a “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2006). One thing I have often encountered is the class with no obvious “issues” to be addressed. This is not unusual because often skilled faculty are precisely the ones who want to improve even further. In that case, you can use weekly meetings to discuss the general climate of the classes, ask if any of their other classes need help, ask about upcoming assignments or projects that they are excited to teach, or inquire about the professor’s career and goals. Helping consultants learn to be strong allies even when there is nothing “wrong” is useful for both partners as there is always room for growth. Teachers often remind students of this support; in a partnership, a consultant can help their faculty partner remember it too.

**HOW DO WE GROW?****Meredith**

Having learned from my own experience growing a program, I would suggest that program development should be a bit like backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005)—you want to think concretely about where you want to be three years out, and then see what you can do along the way to get there, while leaving room for spontaneity and creativity.

**Susanna**

I want to echo what Meredith has said about backward design and offer a concrete example. One of my personal goals as program leader was to increase the professional development of the student consultants and to ensure that working for the program was a truly professional experience for them. With these goals in mind, the consultants and I designed a first semester for new hires that includes explicit mentorship by other consultants, a set of introductory readings, and bonding among all consultants as well as specifically among new consultants. We also co-created an online performance feedback form that faculty partners complete at the end of a partnership. This feedback helps individual consultants to grow in their roles, assists me in writing strong letters of reference for consultants, and generates assessment data. Last, we incorporated consultants into the TLI more broadly. Because some consultants were taking on greater responsibilities as a result of all these changes, we created a two-tiered set of positions: Consultant and Senior Consultant. Senior Consultants are leaders within the program; they take on additional partnerships, serve on the TLI Advisory Board, participate in on- and off-campus TLI events, and help hire and mentor new consultants.

**Codey**

Over the course of my work as a student consultant, I watched the program grow fairly organically. In my own interactions with faculty who were not part of the program, I often encouraged them to consider a faculty-student partnership to address any issues they may have in the classroom. Because Ursinus is a relatively small campus, word about the Student Consultant Program spread quickly from person to person.

**Megan**

I agree with Codey that working with students and faculty who already support the program helps generate new ideas about how partnership programs can continue to grow. I would also like to note that program growth can also lead to personal growth. For example, an

important part of my own time in the TLI was taking on multiple partnerships in the semester. The majority of our training comes from on-the-job experience as with each partnership we observe new skills and strategies to implement later on. While multiple partnerships increased workload, I had more access to diverse styles and adaptations to share with professors as problems arose. More responsibility gave me more experience to draw on, which actually relieved the stress of working with two people at once. Likewise, serving on the TLI Advisory Board gave me managerial experience and allowed me to work collaboratively with faculty who cared about the program. These added responsibilities helped me grow as a consultant and in turn my contributions helped shape the future of the program.

#### HOW DO WE LEAD?

##### **Meredith**

For me, leadership of the program began with decision making. Essentially, I created practice, policy, and programming where none had existed. I also needed to convince administrators in a climate that was basically tolerant, but not, at that point, particularly knowledgeable about issues of teaching and learning. My leadership also involved cultivating and demonstrating trust among my faculty colleagues—if it had not been clear that consultant work was separate from the evaluation process, our program would not have succeeded.

##### **Susanna**

Meredith is right to emphasize decisiveness, persuasiveness, and the cultivation of trust. We are socialized to think of leadership in terms of dominance, but effective leaders have more in their toolkit than dominance alone. Besides, in student-faculty partnerships and the TLI more broadly, faculty cannot be “made” to do anything. In my experience, leadership in the TLI means being able to inspire, to support, and to facilitate. Those were my tasks, as program leader, and those were the consultants’ tasks as they worked with their faculty partners. The challenge is achieving meaningful and positive change without the ability to explicitly direct others.

##### **Codey**

I believe that active listening and self-awareness are necessary for leadership in teaching and learning. Active listeners are constantly engaged in dialogue, which enables them to hear not only what is said explicitly in the classroom, but also to perceive the nuances of a faculty’s pedagogical style. A student consultant who observes what a faculty partner asks them to focus on does well. A student consultant who is able to observe requested issues while also noting additional factors of which a faculty member may be unaware (like race or gender dynamics in class participation) makes an even greater impact. Likewise, a consultant who has the self-awareness to be able to listen to their faculty partner while also offering feedback informed by their own perspective a student is doubly effective.

##### **Megan**

My ability to empathize was my most useful skill as a consultant. Having a strong sense of empathy allows us to work with people who are in very vulnerable positions, whether it is professors allowing us into their classrooms, students who trust us to defend their anonymity when reporting feedback, or other consultants who seek help in working through difficult situations in partnerships. This also is a key component for allowing multiple consultants to take

leadership positions within the program. If everyone is attuned to each other's goals, as well as able to imagine what the world looks like from another's point of view, it is easier to negotiate responsibilities and allow the whole group to take on leadership positions.

#### WHAT MIGHT HAVE WE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

##### **Meredith**

Although we could not predict our success, planning for growth would have made our expansion easier. We never really discussed how many partnerships we could manage and overbooking to me seemed like a good problem to have. Having worked with a program where all the consultants I worked with were women, I focused on sex/gender diversity in my own recruiting. It was not until we were running for a year or so that we hired our first consultants of color, and I would have liked to foreground racial diversity from the very beginning.

##### **Susanna**

I wish I had made greater efforts to engage the departments and faculty who did not (want to) participate in student-faculty partnerships. We have done a good job of reaching out to those faculty who are open to the idea and to new faculty, and the program runs fine this way. Nonetheless, I think targeted outreach to departments with more limited engagement with the program would have been effective in both predictable and surprising ways.

##### **Codey**

While I am a firm believer in qualitative data, I also think that quantitative metrics serve an important role in documenting the efficacy of pedagogical consultation. It would have been interesting to see if there was some means of linking evaluations of faculty-student partnerships to evaluations used in tenure-track reviews, for example, to compare if there is indeed a marked improvement in the faculty member's performance over the course of their partnership.

##### **Megan**

My suggestions have to do with changes that are currently in progress. In my time we worked to build a more diverse group of student consultants both in our individual backgrounds and in the subjects that we pursue, and I hope that commitment to diversity continues and, if anything, intensifies. On a related point, I think focusing on helping consultants learn to work with diverse faculty partners should be part of the TLI's long-term program goals; it is good that this is addressed in readings for new consultants but more can be done. For me, it was important to work with a variety of professors, particularly with other women. In those partnerships, I felt that I was most valued and I also gained the most insight by seeing what it was like to work as a woman in academia. That is not to say that students should always work with professors that are "like them," but the chance to work with someone who has faced similar challenges can be as beneficial as working with someone with whom you share little in common.

#### CONCLUSION

Our dialogue, as revealed in the preceding pages, mirrors the partnership process in that we listened, learned, and reorganized our ideas as we went along. Yet, as in any discussion, certain key themes emerged and were repeated. First, we hope it is clear that a successful

partnership program will be itself firmly grounded in the practice of partnership. Like a Fibonacci spiral in a seashell, one starts with a single partnership, circles out to an initial program, and scrolls further still to additional growth and development. Scale changes but the central importance of partnership between students and faculty does not. Second, at the very heart of partnership is the word that has been repeated more than any other in our essay: trust. Trust enables collaboration and dialogue, growth and reflection, for persons, programs, and institutions. The need for trust should not seem unduly daunting. As we hope this essay demonstrates, trust is built one question, one conversation, at a time.

#### NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Meredith Goldsmith** is a Professor of English at Ursinus College and founder of the College's Teaching and Learning Institute (2010-2014), and Special Assistant to the President for Strategic Initiatives.

**Megan Hanscom** graduated in 2016 from Ursinus College, where she majored in Environmental Studies and minored in English and Gender and Women's Studies. In her four years at Ursinus, she served as a TLI Student Consultant and TLI Advisory Board Member, as well as a Green Fellow in the Office of Sustainability.

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**Codey Young** graduated in 2014 from Ursinus College, where he majored in Philosophy and Anthropology & Sociology and minored in African-American and Africana Studies. Codey served as a TLI Student Consultant from 2013-14 and helped lead a pilot TLI program at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, China.

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