

# **Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching (1): benefits and challenges – what do we know?**

Felten, P.<sup>1</sup>, Bovill, C.<sup>2</sup>, and Cook-Sather, A.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Elon University, North Carolina, USA, <sup>2</sup> University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK,  
<sup>3</sup> Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, USA.

## **Extended Abstract**

### **Abstract**

This short paper defines partnership and both synthesizes and raises questions about the research on student partnerships in teaching and learning. Drawing on Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014), the paper focuses specifically on what the authors' research suggests about the benefits and challenges of student-faculty faculty partnerships.

### **Introduction: Defining Partnership**

Decades of research indicate that close interaction between faculty and students is one of the most important factors in student learning, development, engagement, and satisfaction in undergraduate education (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Indeed, frequent and meaningful student- faculty contact is a central characteristic of all high-impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008).

Large-scale research on the power of interaction has not focused on partnership, however. The scholarship examining student partnership typically is more narrowly focused, employing a range of qualitative research methodologies and methods to access and analyze student and faculty experiences and outcomes (Bovill, 2014; Seale, 2010).

While limited, this emerging scholarship highlights the power of approaching particular forms of student-faculty interaction as partnership. Such an orientation often is unusual in higher education because of the real (and important) distance between the roles of faculty and of students. However, partnership does not require participants to be the same. Indeed, we define partnership as a “collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical

conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (pp. 6-7).

Thus defined, partnership is a highly flexible practice that provides faculty with a way to productively view *all* of their interactions with students – through a partnership lens. In addition to the classroom, a partnership lens is applicable to the many other spaces where faculty engage in rich partnerships with students, including mentoring undergraduate research, facilitating service-learning, designing and leading study-abroad experiences, and advising living-learning communities.

### **Benefits of partnership**

In our new book *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching*, Alison Cook-Sather, Cathy Bovill, and I synthesize research on higher education partnerships. We conclude that partnerships tend to produce similar outcomes for both students and faculty. Since students and faculty are so different, these shared outcomes might seem surprising. However, the premises of partnership for which we argue — respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility — create a solid foundation for all participants to learn and grow in similar ways.

We identified three clusters of outcomes from student-faculty partnerships:

(1) *Engagement* – Partnerships tend to enhance motivation and learning for students and faculty. Specifically, partnerships deepen students’ learning, increase their confidence, and focus them on the process rather than simply the product of learning. For faculty, partnerships often produce new thinking about, and understanding of, teaching, enhanced enthusiasm in the classroom, and a reconceptualization of teaching and learning as a collaborative process.

(2) *Awareness* – Partnerships also seem to lead both students and faculty to develop metacognitive awareness and an evolved sense of identity. Students become more reflective about their own roles in learning and teaching, and think in new ways about their own capacities as students. Faculty partners see both their teaching practice and their identity as teacher in new ways.

(3) *Enhancement* – This set of outcomes emerges from the previous two, yielding enhanced teaching and classroom experiences. As a result of partnership, students become more active as learners and take more responsibility for their own learning. Faculty have increased empathy for their students, including a better understanding of their experiences and needs and how to respond to those.

In short, partnerships tend to make both students and faculty more thoughtful, engaged, and collegial as they go about their work and life on campus.

Research also indicates that partnerships can have institutional outcomes linked to higher education's civic goals. In particular, partnership offers students an opportunity to engage in democratic practices as well as democratic ways of being (Stefani, 1998). While partnership certainly is not a panacea for student engagement or faculty development, emerging research suggests that it fosters precisely the kinds of student-faculty interactions that are so important for learning – and for the broader aims of higher education.

### **Challenges of partnership**

While the benefits of partnership we outline above are widespread, partnership is not without risks. Scholarship demonstrates the challenges presented by questions of power (Bovill, 2014), inclusion (Felten et al, 2013), and context (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2012).

In our book, we acknowledge a variety of challenges and suggest that as faculty and academic developers create partnerships, they should be mindful of a range of partnership issues (Cook-Sather et al, 2014, 133-134). We list several key challenges here.

In starting and sustaining partnerships, it is important to address "student-faculty vulnerability"; attend to "under-represented students and faculty members"; address "power issues"; and be careful with "the language" used in partnerships. These are challenges because of the diverse ways in which faculty and students experience their roles and responsibilities and because of the varied cultures on different campuses.

Furthermore, to avoid some of the pitfalls of moving too quickly or taking on too much, it is important to start partnerships on a small scale; adopt a critical stance throughout partnership work; heed "institutional contexts"; and avoid the assumption that all students and faculty want to be involved in partnership projects. Taking small, slow steps allows for regular and thoughtful communication and revision.

### **Questions for further research**

To build on the existing research, we suggest that scholars and practitioners pay particular attention to the following questions:

- What are the most promising practices for developing student agency and voice in partnerships involving diverse students and disciplines?
- How can academic developers most effectively cultivate partnership practices and programs?

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