

Research Summary: Faculty, Students, and Pedagogical Change

Research Questions & Study Rationale

This study is part of a multi-institutional research program ongoing in Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, and the US. Researchers from various universities have developed concurrent but independent studies devoted to better understanding what factors influence faculty to change, or refrain from changing, their teaching practices. The present study aims to understand the role students play in processes of faculty change, focusing particularly on the potential influence of faculty-student pedagogical partnerships developed within the context of McMaster's Student Partners Program (SPP). The research was guided by three main questions:

1. How do faculty, students, and educational developers participating in or facilitating the SPP experience the process of partnering on change efforts at the course or program level?
2. In what ways (if any) does partnering affect their approaches to teaching, learning, and/or educational development?
3. How do they perceive these partnerships to influence faculty approaches to teaching and learning on campus?

Methodology

Two students and a staff member worked together to design and conduct this study. Student researchers gathered data through focus groups and/or one-on-one interviews in February (7 participants: 1 student, 4 faculty, 2 MacPherson staff) and April 2017 (7 participants: 6 faculty, 1 Macpherson staff). Between January and April, participants were also invited to complete brief, online responses to 3 sets of reflective prompts. Online responses were received from faculty (n=2, 3, 3), students (n=6, 3, 3), and educational developers (n= 1, 2, 1). Following data collection, interview and focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis, and all data were analysed using constant comparison (Merriam, 2009).

Key Findings

Participant comments suggested that students typically play a relatively circumscribed role in faculty development outside the context of the SPP. Some suggested that the central mechanism for students to influence teaching is via course evaluations, which many positioned as limited or problematic. Faculty-student partnerships via the SPP, in contrast, were seen to enable or encourage at least some faculty change and development in a range of ways, including the following:

- Creating opportunities for students to contribute directly (and meaningfully) to teaching and learning projects
- Helping faculty to understand student perspectives
- Promoting increased belief in student capability and engagement
- Making faculty increasingly receptive to student input and feedback

Some participants suggested these shifts had begun to extend beyond the individual level, as faculty sought to share their experiences with colleagues in their departments and/or encourage further involvement in faculty-student partnership amongst their peers.

Interestingly, several participants also indicated that these potentially positive outcomes were facilitated by the fact that the student-faculty partnerships enabled by the SPP involved students who were *not* currently enrolled in their faculty partner's courses and who may be especially keen and engaged.

Alongside indications of faculty-student partnerships encouraging moderate change in faculty approaches to teaching and learning, participants also noted a number of issues that limited the capacity of student-faculty partnerships to support change. These included:

- Practical limitations (e.g., scheduling difficulties, starting partnerships once a project was already underway)
- Uncertainty about roles and responsibilities
- Questions and doubts about the extent to which student partners are representative of a broader student population
- Faculty resistance to partnership
- Faculty already engaging in partnership approaches (and thus not experiencing further change in this direction)

Next Steps and More Information

A manuscript that describes the research in greater detail has been prepared and submitted for publication. Results have also been presented at the 2017 Connecting Higher Education conference. If you would like to see a copy of the manuscript or the presentation slides, please let us know.

We have also prepared anonymized summaries of the results to be shared with members of the MacPherson Institute responsible for supporting the Student Partners Program in order to help develop the program in future.