STUDENTS AS PARTNERS

PROGRAM GUIDEBOOK

Paul R. MacPherson Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Excellence in Teaching

McMaster University

MACPHERSON INSTITUTE

STUDENTS AS PARTNERS PROGRAM GUIDEBOOK

Paul R. MacPherson Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Excellence in Teaching

Original version prepared by

Robert Cockcroft, Taylor Drouillard, Jennifer Faubert, Danielle Gabay, Kris Knorr, Alexandra Liu, Beth Marquis, Ana Qarri, Rafal Shammas, Marie Vander Kloet, and Greg Van Gastel

Updated February 2020 by

Adriana Michell and Cherie Woolmer

Updated November 2022 by

Nicole Duck, Kelsey Harvey, Elisa Do, Jennifer Zhu, Nancy Lidstone, Chia-Yu Lin, Julia Evanovitch, & Melec Zeadin

Updated May 2024 by

Antonio Dos Santos and Saranya Srikanthan

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This guide is intended to be a resource for students, staff and faculty members at higher education institutions seeking to work with student partners for the first time or for those looking to enhance or refresh their skills in partnership. We created this guide after a systematic review of Canadian and several international guides, resources, and student partner institute web pages. In addition to outlining some of the historical context around the creation of the McMaster Students as Partners program, we will explore some of the more common questions and concerns new staff or students have when entering a partnership as well as exploring the benefits of partnership, and framework approaches you might adopt to your practice.


.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 2013-2014, the Arts & Science Program and the MacPherson Institute (then known as the McMaster Institute for Innovation and Excellence in Teaching and Learning - MIIETL) collaborated to create "Student Partner" positions. This initiative aimed to establish meaningful partnerships between students and staff/faculty involved in teaching and learning projects at McMaster. The program enhances the quality of work, fosters student engagement, and creates valuable learning opportunities. As you can see in Figure 1, the program has also funded over 270 projects in the last four years.

Since its inception, the Student Partners Program has seen significant contributions from students. They have played key roles in course design, curriculum development, resource creation, and collaborative research projects with faculty/staff partners. The program has facilitated numerous opportunities for students to co-author research articles, present at conferences, and engage in events like the International Institute on Student-Staff Partnerships. Over 425 undergraduate and graduate students from across campus have participated in the program, making substantial contributions to teaching and learning at McMaster.

FIGURE 1. TOTAL STUDENT PARTNER PROJECTS TO DATE
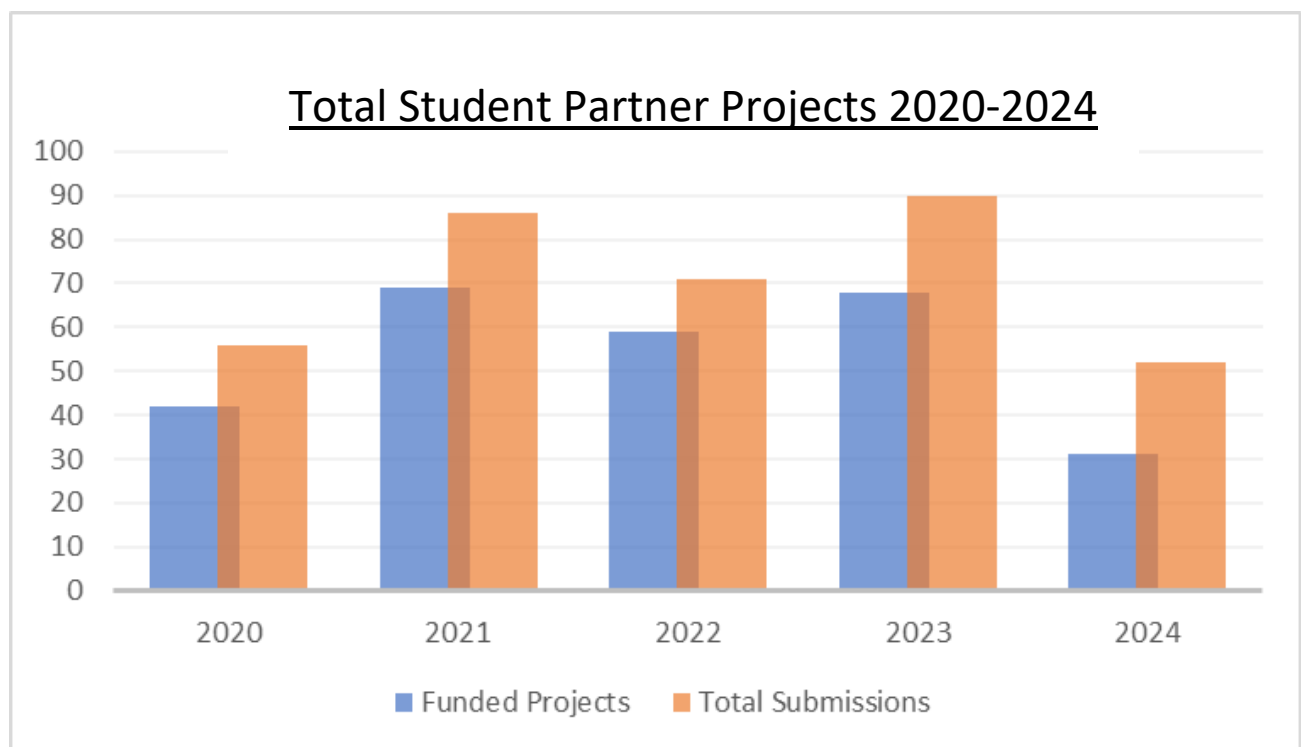
There are different understandings of what counts as partnership. Partnerships for us involve the formation of reciprocal relationships between students and academic staff. More specifically, as Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014, pp. 12) state, partnerships are

> "… a relationship in which all involved—students, academics, professional services staff, senior managers, students' unions, and so on—are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together. Partnership is essentially a process of engagement, not a product. It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself."

Partnership is, in the end, a more abstract word. How your partnership operates or looks will always come down to preference. Partnership does not take a singular form, however, at its core, all partnerships are built on reciprocity, respect, and transparency between members.

While partnerships are varied there are consistent themes that we have uncovered through reflections by project members, informal and formal interviews, and through analysis of survey data at McMaster. Respect, Reciprocity and Transparency have consistently come up as necessary building blocks of healthy partnerships and fall-back points to when conflicts arise.

Student partnerships are similar in nature to interpersonal partnerships that you have in life. There are some standards of interactions and behaviour that lead to lasting meaningful partnerships and have lasting impact on students and staff well past end dates.

Respect

Find out what works best for the partnership. What are the preferred ways to communicate and work. Be mindful that partnership requires collaboration and not just assigning tasks. The traditional staff/student dynamic should not be expected. Create an environment where students lead and take initiative, express concerns, and let it be known that expectations are not being met.

Reciprocity

Discuss how and if the project's findings will be disseminated. Whose name will go first on articles and other publications. Discuss how and where documents and other information will be saved and stored. What can be included on each team member's CV and what can be done to bolster each other.

Transparency

Discuss the short and long-term goals of the project as a group and personal objectives. What exactly do both sides want to get out of the partnership. Create a mutual and shared set of expectations, protect them, and revisit them if need be.

WHY AND HOW: THE BENEFITS OF WORKING WITH STUDENT PARTNERS

The benefits of partnerships in higher education settings have been well documented (Barnes, Goldring, Bestwick, & Wood, 2010; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014; Jarvis, Dickerson & Stockwell, 2013). For example, partnerships in teaching and learning can:

• Building research capacity through joint enquiry.

• Increased engagement with teaching and learning.

• Development of students' and staff members' knowledge and skills.

• Fostering a sense of personal and social responsibility.

• Increased personal and professional confidence.

• Leading to a greater sense of belonging and community within the university setting.

"Being involved in this partnership has been an incredibly rewarding experience for me. I've gained invaluable insights and skills that have not only enhanced my professional growth but also enriched my personal life. What worked particularly well was our shared commitment to our common goals. This synergy allowed us to overcome challenges with constructive dialogue and compromise." (Sajeni Mahalingam and Steve Bray, Student Partner Program)

"I am grateful for the opportunity to offer my lived student experience with course evaluations, while learning from the insights from my faculty partner. I also appreciate that this project allowed me to apply my interests in supporting student learning experiences and development." (Amanda Kelly Ferguson, Manahil Iftikhar, Student Partner Program)

WHY WORK WITH SPP/WHY STUDENTS AS PARTNERS?

The students as partners model differs significantly from the traditional transactional nature of the North American higher education approach. Traditionally educators place faculty in the role of expert who share their expertise with students. The student partner approach encourages a reciprocal relationship where faculty/staff and students work collaboratively. The hierarchical structure is challenged and responsibility for decision-making in pedagogical conceptualization, implementation, investigation are shared. Students are encouraged to take a more active role and become more engaged with their learning, developing a deeper sense of responsibility and ownership. Some additional benefits include building research capacity through joint enquiry, increased engagement with teaching and learning, development of students' and staff members' knowledge and skills, fostering a sense of personal and social responsibility, increased personal and professional confidence; and a greater sense of belonging and community within the university setting. (Barnes, Goldring, Bestwick, & Wood, 2010; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014; Jarvis, Dickerson & Stockwell, 2013).

> **"I believe the team benefited greatly from this partnership. This is not only a result of the detailed and well-developed outcomes and deliverables that [our student partner] produced, but also in the renewed energy, creativity, and student perspective that [she] brought. Indeed, the team's perspectives on the project were altered in positive ways due to [her] ideas and brainstorming sessions." (Adam Zvric, Maria Andreea Predoiu, and Naomi Suzuki, Student Partner Program)**

While students may not possess expertise in specific disciplines, students do have expertise on what is like to be a student. They possess lived experience of what it was like to take a particular course that is being redesigned or how a new assessment tool is going to be perceived and appreciated. Working with students provides a more contextualized and precise understanding of student collected data, feedback and assessment and it thus far more likely to result in sustainable and mutually beneficial changes to teaching and learning practices.

FIGURE 2. EARLY PHASES OF PARTNERSHIP
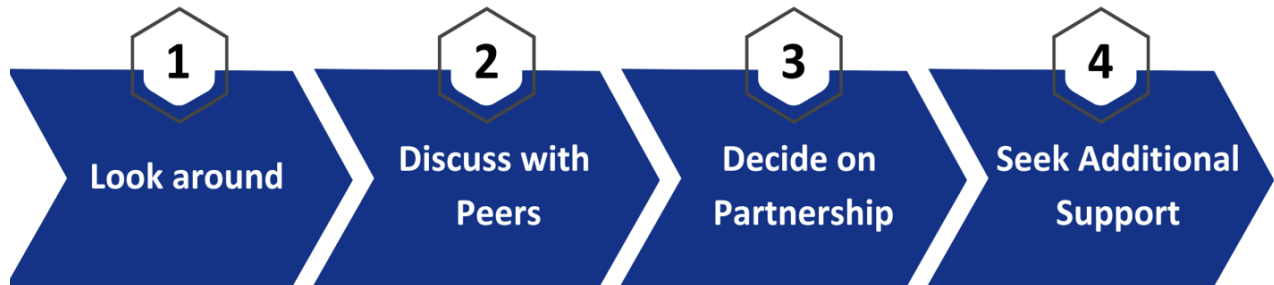
1.Look for areas of opportunities

Depending on your role in the institution (instructor, staff, post doc etc.) your opportunities to engage in student partnership may vary. University staff that work in areas of student support may see some areas of their tasks or projects where student input would be valuable. Instructors may find that including student input at a partnership level is tremendously useful at a classroom level such as a class-based activity or on the design/redesign of an assessment.

There is no one model for student engagement and opportunities can be wide-ranging. When deciding to start a partnered project, choose something that is manageable and feasible with our timeframe and resources.

2.Talk to peers/students

After you have found your possible opportunity, seek out other colleagues that have engaged in partnership in a similar area. Moreover, seek out students that have engaged in partnership prior as well. Peers and students are a potentially great resource for several reasons. They could be interested in joining your project, they could have valuable insight or resources that you can draw from.

If you are in instructor, seek out departmental peers that have engaged in similar work and discuss the steps they took to get their project started. Did they seek departmental approval? Did they seek outside funding options? Did they seek out potential student partners or did the partners find them? Develop your project plans based on some of the discussions that you have had and learn from the successes and failures of others.

3.What kind of partnership are you looking for?

Approaches to partnership will vary based on context, persons involved and institutional/departmental values. There is no one way or one correct way to go about working in partnership. The best practice may be discussing what the partnership will look like or operate like as a team. You certainly have an expectation or at least a sense of what you want to get out of a potential partnership, but your future partners may have a different perspective.

4.Additional supports

If your institution has a Students as Partners program, check with them on the kinds of resources they have for creating and developing partnerships and the kinds of partnership projects that are being funded.

Speak to program directors or leads about ways in which you could get started with your first project or ways to improve on the experience if you are already in a partnered project. (R. Healy, 2023)

FIGURE 3. CORE VALUES OF PARTNERSHIP
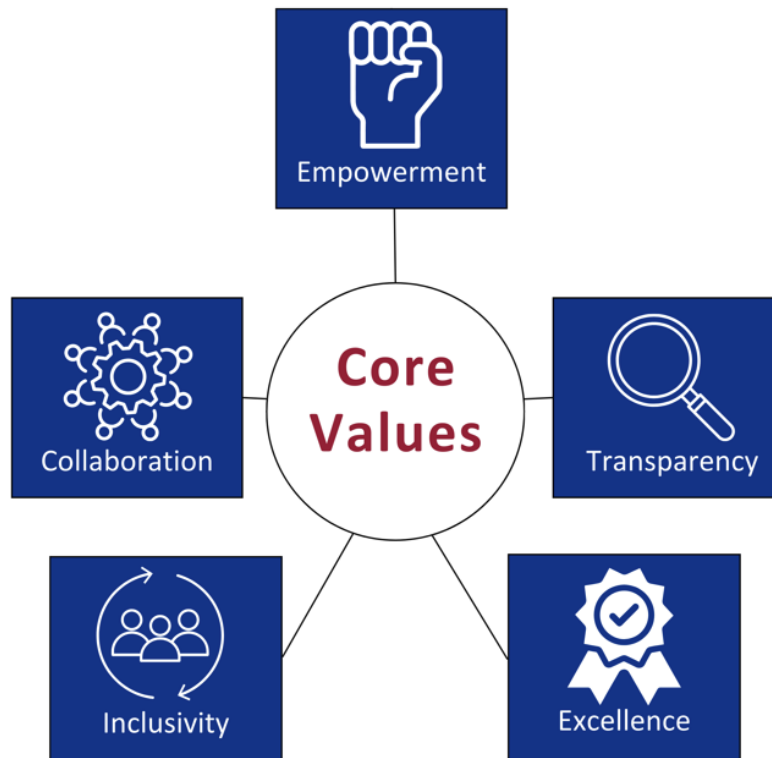
The MacPherson Institute Student Partners Program is guided by the following core values:

Collaboration

Encouraging genuine collaboration, we foster a collective effort where students, faculty, and staff collaborate to co-create meaningful contributions to teaching and learning projects. Recognizing the importance of diverse perspectives, skills, and experiences, we firmly believe that collaboration enriches the quality of the work undertaken.

Inclusivity

Our program is committed to cultivating an inclusive environment. Actively promoting participation from individuals of diverse backgrounds, experiences, and identities—including students, faculty, and staff—we emphasize the significance of equity and diversity in shaping educational practices.

Empowerment

Our objective is to empower all participants—students, faculty, and staff—to actively participate in the teaching and learning process. Through purposeful partnerships, we strive to give students the agency to contribute to the intellectual direction of projects, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment.

Excellence

We are dedicated to maintaining a commitment to excellence in teaching and learning. The program seeks projects that have the potential to make meaningful contributions to enhancing educational practices and knowledge. We prioritize rigorous scholarship, innovation, and an ongoing commitment to improvement.

Transparency

Ensuring transparency in all processes and procedures, we prioritize clear communication. From the selection of projects to reporting outcomes, our focus is on making expectations, goals, and timelines easily understandable for all stakeholders, fostering trust and accountability.

Partnership is a process. While there are always end results of projects (research articles, conferences, poster presentations, etc.), the process of partnership is not so linear. Figure 4. notes the circular nature of partnerships where the process may involve going forwards, backwards and repeating or revisiting key aspects that define your partnership.

FIGURE 4. THE PARTNERSHIP CYCLE
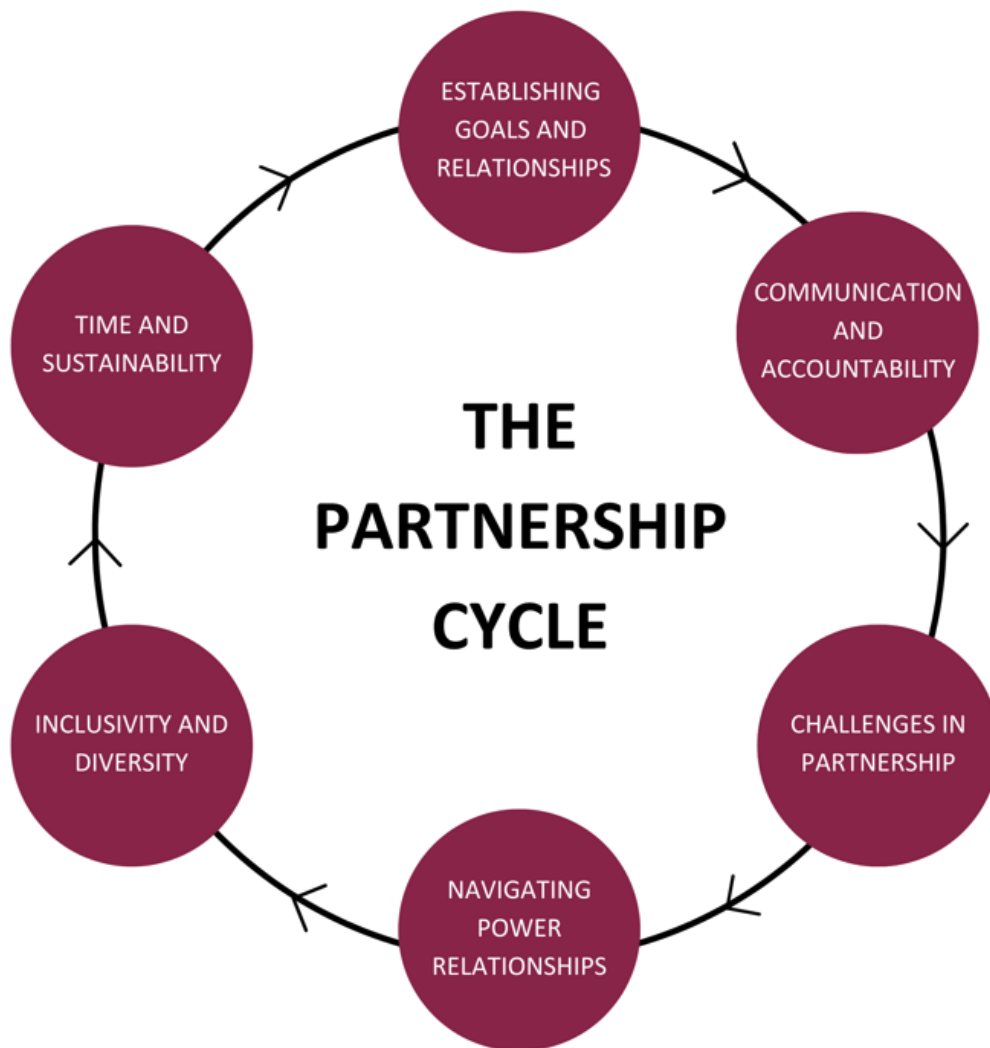
We strongly recommend using the first few weeks of your partnership to establish an open and clear relationships, soft and hard deadlines, and goals. These factors are crucial to the success of the overall project.

FIGURE 5. FACTORS OF PARTNERSHIP

Set clear guidelines and expectations for the role(s) each partner will play in the project.	Don't feel constrained by how the project is framed. You should feel free to share questions and opinions that will shape the work.	Set up a meeting and acquaint yourself with the project and its goals as quickly as you can to leave ample time for the work itself.
Get to know your partners early on – how they like to work, communicate, and what their schedules are like.	Share your goals for the project and find out your research partners' career and personal goals. Determine how you can help your group members achieve their goals.	Be critical. You might feel as though your opinion is not valuable because you just joined the project, but your perspective as a student is valuable.

Regular communication and keeping up with tasks are essential to a cohesive team. Below, you'll find some strategies that worked for students in the past and some things they wish they would have done differently.

FIGURE 6. KEYS TO COMMUNICATION

Have regular meetings. Although this may become harder to maintain during busier times of the year, setting up regular weekly or biweekly check ins can help make a habit of these meetings early on.

Provide updates. Keep your group members up to date about your work, progress, and any potential roadblocks. You can do this by sending out regular updates, scheduling meetings, or using a teamwork productivity application, like Slack.

Set interim deadlines. Although this may become harder to maintain during busier times of the year, setting up regular weekly or biweekly check ins can help make a habit of these meetings early on.

Hold yourself accountable. Although this may become harder to maintain during busier times of the year, setting up regular weekly or biweekly check ins can help make a habit of these meetings early on.

Given the time constraints we all have during the year, as well as our need to balance our school and work life with other commitments, it's important to be open to alternative modes of communicating, especially for larger groups. Create subgroups and have smaller meetings or use online communication tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

CHALLENGES IN PARTNERSHIP

Engaging students as partners in teaching and learning is a nuanced and intricate process, both in theory and practice (Healey et al., 2014). It is crucial to engage in critical reflection throughout the partnership, addressing the challenges and tensions that inevitably arise. Specifically, it is essential to critically examine the issues outlined below within one's specific context—whether it be at the "initiative, module, programme, faculty, or institutional level" (Healey et al., 2014, p. 30).

NAVIGATING POWER RELATIONSHIPS

A recurring theme in pedagogical literature on student-staff partnerships in teaching and learning is the challenge of power relationships (Bovill et al., 2011; Cook-Sather, 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Marquis et al., 2016). Negotiating existing power dynamics emerges as a significant issue, as highlighted in a case study exploring the experiences of students and staff in partnerships at McMaster University's Student Partners program (Marquis et al., 2016). Despite expressing interest in unconventional roles, participants from both groups often reverted to conventional positions. Healey et al. (2014) suggest that staff critically reflect on the implications of these power relationships within their unique contexts. For instance, consider questions such as who is responsible for decision-making and acquiring access to resources in the partnership.

However, even as efforts are made to avoid staff and faculty dominance over partnerships, it is essential to strike a balance between guidance and allowing students the autonomy to direct their efforts. In a case study, students emphasized the need for clearer objectives to focus their efforts (Marquis et al., 2016). Building effective and collaborative relationships that define meaningful roles and responsibilities is crucial, allowing members to feel comfortable seeking guidance when necessary.

> "I appreciated [my student partners'] willingness to let me know when they needed more guidance or support, and I think this openness… helped to solidify our collaboration and move the project along." (Staff, CC Book Chapter)

INCLUSIVITY AND DIVERSITY

Creating and maintaining a diverse and inclusive working environment is imperative for those involved in pedagogical projects. The literature emphasizes the necessity to broaden the involvement of students and staff as co-inquirers, ensuring the inclusion of diverse voices and identities (Felten et al., 2013; Healey et al., 2014; McLeod, 2011; Marquis et al., 2016). Marquis et al. highlight that partnership opportunities often extend to only a limited number of academically 'strong' students, limiting the range of perspectives. Healey et al. (2014) advocate for the creation of a strong community to build sustainable partnerships, urging members to scrutinize existing practices for potential structural or cultural barriers preventing certain groups from participating. Felten (2013) suggests engaging with students in flexible spaces on campus to counter traditional classroom power dynamics and encouraging the expression of diverse voices.

TIME AND SUSTAINABILITY

Differences in the duration of students' and staff's engagement in a project, along with issues related to sustainability and transitions, present potential challenges in partnerships (Healey et al., 2014; Bovill et al., 2014; Marquis et al., 2016). Marquis et al. particularly note that time constraints can contribute to various challenges, including difficulties in scheduling meetings and heightened stress due to rushed timelines. Healey et al. (2014) acknowledge that it takes time for students to transition from peripheral to full members of the teaching and learning community, emphasizing the need for support and encouragement from staff and peers. Bovill

et al. (2014) discusses the importance of planning an end to the shared goals of the partnership, a decision that can facilitate collaboration agreement.

STARTING PARTNERSHIPS (Bovill, Felten and Cook-Sather, 2014)

Create a shared set of goals and objectives from the beginning. Staff: provide students the opportunity to develop some of the objectives (Marquis et al., 2016). Understand things might not proceed as planned, so it is crucial to be patient throughout the process.

Be attentive to the language used when communicating with the student. Students may not be familiar with academic jargon or may be from a different academic background. Try to establish mutually agreed upon modes of communication. Create a support system by meeting with other staff members who are interested in student-staff partnerships or have experience partnering with students. If this is your first encounter with scholarship of teaching and learning, more experienced staff can be a great support.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Providing recognition or rewards for those working in partnership, to encourage continued collaboration (for both students and staff) (Bovill et al., 2014). Recognize the contributions students make (Marquis et al., 2016). Students may not have recognized experience in the field, but they can offer unique, unexpected, and practical insights that benefit the project.

Early in the process, staff or faculty should provide more direction and as the partnership progresses and become less directive and allow the student(s) to take lead roles and spearhead initiatives and project direction later in the process (Delpish et al., 2010; Marquis et al., 2016).

When thinking about the kind of partnership you are trying to create or what would be most beneficial to reach your project goals, seek out a diverse range of participants. Seeking partners from marginalized groups, especially if a project concerns students' lived experience, is a good starting point and offers a voice to groups that may traditionally be left out.

Provide further learning and development opportunities for all those involved (Bovill et al., 2014). Aim to find opportunities for students to grow (e.g., attending and presenting at conferences/staff meetings, co-authoring a paper, providing ideas that help shape a project, etc.) (Delpish et al., 2010; Marquis et al., 2016). This helps builds student capacity as well as staff/faculty capacity as it opens doors for new experiences, insights, and possibilities. Additionally, it reinforces the partnership bond and connection of respect and reciprocity.

Reflect on and value the process of partnership throughout the collaboration (Bovill et al. 2014). Understand when and how to end partnerships formally (Bovill et al., 2014). Not all partnerships work, so it is equally important to "be honest about when partnership is not appropriate or desirable (Healey et al. 2014, pp. 9)." If students or staff have concerns during a partnership, please feel free to reach out to MacPherson for support.

Partnerships need not end when the project is complete. There are opportunities to extend your partnership into other areas besides learning, teaching and assessment, subject-based research and inquiry, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and curriculum design and consultation (Healey et al, 2014). Partnership models can extend to quality assurance of curriculum, governance and policy making, marketing, recruitment, and admission/retention.

Additionally, you can consider the possibility of bringing in community partners to bolster or expand the scope and reach of your project. Community partners can include representatives of groups, organizations or a particular demographic that is either impacted by the research or could possibly benefit from it. For example, engaging Indigenous community leaders on projects that would benefit from input or counsel of that group.

For more information on recommendations for student-staff partnerships, refer to Marquis et al. (2016) and Bovill et al. (2014).

CONCLUSION

Engaging with students as partners is not universally applicable and may not suit every situation. Partnership, in our context, extends beyond individual projects or activities; it embodies an ethos wherein the university acknowledges the significance of integrating student perspectives into various aspects of its operations. Seeking partnership opportunities across the educational landscape, the institution aspires to enrich the student experience and cultivate a continuously evolving educational environment that aligns with the demands of the contemporary world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barnes, E., Goldring, L., Bestwick, A. and Wood, J. (2010) A collaborative evaluation of student–staff partnership in inquiry-based educational development. In Little, S. (Ed.), *Staff-student partnerships in Higher Education*, (pp. 16–30). London: Continuum.

Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A. and Felten, P. (2011) Students as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design, and curricula: Implications for academic developers. *International Journal for Academic Development, 16*(2), 133-145.

Bovill, C., Felten, P., Cook-Sather, A. (2014). Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching (2): Practical guidance for academic staff and academic developers. Paper presentation, International Consortium on Educational Development Conference: Stockholm, Sweden. Available from: http://www.academia.edu/7549718/Bovill_C._Felten_P._and_Cook-

Sather_A._2014_Engaging_Students_as_Partners_in_Learning_and_Teaching_2_Practic al_guidance_for_academic_staff_and_academic_developers._Paper_presentation_Inter national_Consortium_on_Educational_Development_Conference_Stockholm_Sweden_ 16-18_June [Accessed July 24 2015]

Cook-Sather, A. (2014) Student-faculty partnership in explorations of pedagogical practice: A threshold concept in academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development, 19*(3), 186-198.

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C. & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: a guide for faculty.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Delpish, A., Darby, A., Holmes, A., Knight-McKenna, M., Mihans, R., King, C., & Felten, P (2010). Equalizing voices. In Werder, C. and Otis, M. M. (Eds.), *Engaging student voices in the study of teaching and learning* (pp. 96-113). Virginia: Stylus.

Felten, P. (2013) Principles of good practice in SoTL. *Teaching and Learning Inquiry, 1*(1), 122-125.

Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). Engagement through partnerships: Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education. York: The Higher Education Academy. Available from: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Engagement_through_part nership.pdf.

Healey, R. (2024). A Guide to Working with Students as Partners. Chester: Centre of Academic Innovation and Development. Available from: https://www.chester.ac.uk/media/media/documents/guides/University_of_Chester_St udents_as_Partners_Guidance.pdf

Jarvis, J., Dickerson, C. and Stockwell, L. (2013). Staff-student partnership in practice in higher education: The impact on learning and teaching. 6th International Conference on University Learning and Teaching (InCULT 2012). Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences, 90, 220–25.

Marquis, E., Puri, V., Wan, S., Ahmad, A., Goff, L. Knorr, K., Vassileva, I., & Woo, J. (2016) Navigating the threshold of student-staff partnerships: A case study from an Ontario teaching and learning institute. *International Journal for Academic Development, 21*(1): 4-15.

McLeod, J. (2011). Student voice and the politics of listening in higher education. *Critical Studies in Education, 52*(2), 179-189.