

Research Summary: Exploring Students' Perceptions of Student-Faculty Partnership

Study Rationale

Student-faculty partnership has been defined as “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants [students and faculty] have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, pp.6-7). Given the documented benefits of partnership for both faculty and students (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015; Marquis et al., 2016; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), several programs and initiatives have been designed to support such work at colleges and universities. In many cases, however, these programs exist on the ‘fringes’ of academic culture, with only a small number of students participating (Felten et al., 2013; Flint, 2016; Moore-Cherry et al., 2016). At the same time, the perceptions of students who have *not* participated in such programs remain comparatively under-studied, and we thus know little about how they view the relative accessibility of partnership initiatives.

Against this backdrop, the present research explored how current students at McMaster University understand partnership and perceive the university’s Student Partners Program (SPP)—a program that supports student-faculty collaborations on a wide range of teaching and learning initiatives. In particular, it investigated the following research questions:

1. How do students understand the concept of student-faculty partnership?
2. What factors influence students’ participation in partnership activities like the Student Partners Program?

Methodology

- Following ethics clearance, undergraduate and graduate students at McMaster University were invited to complete an online survey that included multiple choice, ranking, and textual response questions.
- At the end of the survey, participants indicated whether they’d be interested in participating in a focus group to discuss their perceptions in more detail.
- Six focus group discussions were held. These were facilitated by student researchers, and involved a range of open-ended questions about factors that influence student participation in partnership activities.

Respondents

- We received 65 responses to the survey. Seventeen respondents had participated in the SPP, while 48 had not.

Level

- Undergraduate: n=51
- Masters: n=5
- PhD: n=9

Faculty Affiliation

- Arts & Science: n=11
- Business: n=1
- Engineering: n=6
- Health Sciences: n=13
- Humanities: n=0
- Science: n=21
- Social Sciences: n=7
- More than one Faculty: n=2
- Unspecified/unclear: n=4

- Nineteen of these respondents chose to take part in a focus group. Five focus group participants had taken part in the SPP, and 14 had not.

Key Findings

Analysis of the data from the survey and the focus groups revealed the following broad themes:

Motivations for participating

For the most part, participating students suggested they'd be interested in taking part in student-faculty partnership initiatives. Several factors were mentioned as underpinning this interest.

These included:

- Interest in the topic of a project or in the process involved (e.g., participating in research)
- Opportunities for personal and professional development
- Opportunities for networking and relationship-building
- The desire to feel recognized and valued for their contributions

Facilitators of participation

Participants also described a range of issues that might make it *easier* for them to participate if they are interested. Central facilitators of participation included the following:

- Relevant previous experience (e.g., taking particular kinds of courses, participating in clubs, having research experience)
- Existing social networks
- Flexible scheduling
- Having approachable faculty members involved

Barriers to participation

Alongside these facilitators of participation, students also noted a range of barriers that make it *harder* for them to participate in student-faculty partnership opportunities. Key barriers included:

- Perceived ineligibility for partnership opportunities and competitiveness of positions
- Lack of time
- Lack of awareness

Next Steps

- A manuscript that describes the findings in greater detail has been accepted for publication in the *International Journal for Students as Partners*. It should be published in 2018 (see <http://mulpress.mcmaster.ca/ijsap>). Findings were also presented at the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education conference and at the McMaster Research on Teaching and Learning Conference in 2017.
- We have initiated a follow up study, which will aim to increase the size of our participant pool. We intend to re-survey students at McMaster, and will also invite students at other universities with programs similar to the SPP to participate.

References

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