

# **Research Summary: The Role of Student-Faculty Partnerships in Promoting Equity and Inclusion**

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## **Research Questions & Study Rationale**

The subject of student-faculty partnership in teaching and learning has received increasing attention in recent years (e.g., Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014, Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014). Several authors have documented the benefits that can attach to student-faculty partnership, underlining (amongst other things) that such work can contribute to destabilizing existing institutional hierarchies and increasing students' sense of belonging to institutional and disciplinary communities (Moore-Cherry et al., 2015; Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015). While some authors suggest these benefits may be especially significant for students who identify as marginalized groups (e.g., Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013), there has thus far been little research examining how partnership might contribute to equity and inclusion more broadly. Against this backdrop, the present study sought to explore the ways in which the process of participating in partnership is experienced by students who identify as members of equity-seeking groups. By conducting interviews with student participants in the student-faculty partnership programs at McMaster University (Canada) and Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges (US), it aimed to address the following research questions:

- (1) How do students who identify as members of equity-seeking groups experience the process of participating in the partnership programs?
- (2) How, if at all, do such programs contribute to the development of more egalitarian and inclusive learning communities on campus?

## **Methodology**

Four students and two faculty members from McMaster, Bryn Mawr, and Haverford worked together to design and conduct this study. Data were gathered in 2 ways:

- Semi-structured interviews (conducted either face-to-face or via phone/skype)
- A survey which asked the same questions as the interviews, but was available as an alternative to those who preferred to participate that way.

In total, data were collected from 39 participants (31 from Bryn Mawr and Haverford and 8 from McMaster). Interview recordings were subsequently transcribed, and all the data were analysed to look for themes relating to the research questions.

## **Key Findings**

The data spoke to a wide range of issues of relevance to participants' experiences and to issues of equity and inclusion more specifically. Some of the ideas arising from the data that were most prominent and relevant to our research questions are summarized below.

## ***Individual Successes and Impacts***

Participants discussed a number of ways in which participating had positively affected their own experiences as a student and/or within the academy more broadly. Key outcomes they described included:

- Enhanced confidence and other forms of personal growth
- Positively changed experiences of teaching, learning, and research
- The development of enhanced relationships with faculty and other students

Alongside these benefits, participants also noted a number of challenges they experienced, including difficulties navigating power differentials and potential resistance from faculty partners.

### ***Contributions to Classroom Equity***

In addition to the individual-level impacts participants noted, many also suggested their work in the partnership program had contributed to equity more broadly by helping to shift faculty's classroom practices and interactions with students. This was particularly common in when participants had been involved in classroom-focused partnerships. Key ideas raised in this regard included the following:

- Student partners naming and problematizing the power relations that were playing out in the classroom
- Partnership work contributing to instructors' developing greater empathy for students or to more equitable pedagogical approaches

Nevertheless, some students suggested that questions of equity did not feel directly relevant to their work in the partnership program. As such, the above outcomes were not seen to be universal amongst participants.

### ***Campus Equity***

The data also provided some indication that participants saw partnership programs as helping to make campuses more broadly equitable by virtue of the fact that they establish egalitarian relationships that seek to destabilize existing hierarchies and develop meaningful dialogue between people occupying different roles. Again, though, many also pointed to limitations in this regard, including the fact that resistance to such approaches can still be found on campus, and the acknowledgement that individual experiences are not necessarily enough to combat systemic injustices.

### **Next Steps and More Information**

A manuscript that describes the research in greater detail is currently being prepared and will be submitted for publication shortly. Additional manuscripts that take up particular sections of the data or conceptualize/frame it in different ways have also been developed and published, or will be published shortly (e.g., Cook-Sather, 2018; de Bie, Marquis, Cook-Sather, & Luqueño, 2019; Cook-Sather, Krishna Prasad, Marquis, & Ntem, 2019). If you would like to read any of this work, please let us know. Results have also been presented at the 2017 International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) and Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network conferences, and incorporated into broader talks about partnership given by members of the research team.

Given the positive, preliminary findings of this study, along with the fact that some participants suggested partnership programs might contribute to equity and inclusion more directly if this is their explicit focus, we are also currently piloting a new stream of the Student Partners

Program at McMaster that focuses specifically on equity and inclusion. In this pilot, students and faculty will be supported to partner specifically on working to make some aspect of the faculty member's class more equitable. Future research will assess this pilot program and its outcomes.

### **References**

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