

# When Distance Deepens Connections: How Intercollegiate Partnership Programs Can Support Empathetic, Engaged, and Equitable Teaching Approaches

Alison Cook-Sather, Bryn Mawr College, [acooksat@brynmawr.edu](mailto:acooksat@brynmawr.edu)  
Nandeeta Bala, Vassar College, [nbala@vassar.edu](mailto:nbala@vassar.edu)

## Abstract

The pivot to remote and hybrid teaching and learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Spring-2020 term posed both challenges and opportunities to participants in student-staff pedagogical partnership programs on residential campuses. As facilitators of student-staff pedagogical partnership programs at two such institutions, we developed three intercollegiate, online fora in the Fall-2020 and Spring-2021 terms. Our explicit goal was to support student and staff partners in developing trauma-informed, anti-racist approaches to teaching and learning in remote/blended contexts. Subsequently, to gain insight into what students and staff who participated in these fora experienced, we developed a survey, secured ethics-board approval, and sent the survey to all students and staff who had signed up to participate in one or more fora. We offer a brief review of key points from several bodies of literature to contextualize our discussion, then we introduce ourselves and describe the programs we developed. Next, we report on our findings and delve in our discussion into three cross-cutting themes participants' responses suggested regarding how distance can deepen connections. The themes are: (1) experiencing raised awareness of inequity and deepened personal commitment to equity, (2) gaining connections and insights from cross-campus, cross-constituency dialogue, and (3) carrying empathy, deeper understanding, and/or engagement forward. We also explore challenges participants noted and limitations of our study. Our goal is not to generalize from participants' responses to our survey, but rather to offer a set of insights that might inform equitable teaching practices across institutions.

**Keywords:** equitable teaching, partnership, pandemic

## Introduction

On residential college and university campuses, students and staff are accustomed to in-person teaching and learning and to the ostensibly equalizing force of this form of higher education. In the Spring-2020 term, the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly disrupted this form of engagement and both revealed and exacerbated the inequities structured into higher education. Students and staff in these contexts experienced the pivot to remote and hybrid teaching and learning as deeply disorienting and overwhelming, and the trauma, illness, and loss caused by the virus intensified these experiences in various ways for different people (Fain, 2020). As an academic staff member and an undergraduate

student working at two different residential campuses in the United States, we saw a unique opportunity to create online fora in which staff and students could work in pedagogical partnership to develop trauma-informed and equity-focused approaches to teaching and learning. In the Fall-2020 and Spring-2021 terms, we used our positions as facilitators of student-staff pedagogical partnership programs at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges and Vassar College to create three online fora that connected staff and students at these and other colleges and universities.

In this article we present what we learned from an ethics-board-approved survey sent to students and academic, support, and administrative staff who participated in these fora. In order to situate our findings in wider, ongoing conversations, we begin with a review of selected literature on inequities in higher education, the potential of online communication to foster personal relationship, and empathy. We then introduce ourselves and describe the programs we developed. Next, we present participants' responses to the survey questions and build on those to explore three cross-cutting themes that illustrate how distance can deepen connections. These themes include participants: (1) experiencing raised awareness of inequity and deepened personal commitment to equity, (2) gaining connections and insights from cross-campus, cross-constituency (staff-student) dialogue, and (3) carrying empathy, deeper understanding, and/or engagement forward. We also highlight challenges participants noted—examples of when distance did not deepen connections—and limitations of this study.

Rather than generalizing from survey responses, we aim to offer a set of insights that might inform thinking and practices across institutions committed to supporting empathetic, engaged, and equitable teaching approaches. We explore the specific insights respondents offer into how intercollegiate partnership work can contribute to centering equity and inclusion in academia, and we highlight the ways in which the recommendations that emerged from this study are particularly important, since they are already in tension with the choices many institutions of higher education are making to “get back to pre-pandemic normal.”

### **Theoretical Grounding: Inequities in higher education, the potential of online communication to foster personal relationship, and empathy**

The findings from our study could be contextualized in relation to many bodies of scholarship, but given space constraints, we mention just a few key insights from important ongoing conversations about inequities in higher education, the potential of online communication to foster relationship, and empathy.

The unequal opportunity students have to succeed in higher education is well documented (Cahalan et al., 2018; Singer-Freeman & Robinson, 2020). The pivot to remote teaching and learning prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic threw into stark relief long-standing socio-economic injustices and inequities in US higher-education contexts

and revealed new ones (Fain, 2020). This pivot “made visible realities [students] were always already contending with, although there had not been an occasion to bring them to light up until then” (Labridy-Stofle, 2020, p. 3). This is what Larios and Patterson (2021) call the “insidious and intersectional effects of inequality (Hankivsky and Kapilashrami 2020).” These inequities are manifestations “of our broader, historical social system of privilege and oppression” (Williams, 2018, p. 2; Malcom-Piqueux, 2018), and they have prompted “a clarion call for more effective strategies that will result in more equitable outcomes for underrepresented populations” (Clayton, 2021).

While the shift to hybrid and remote teaching and learning prompted by the pandemic revealed and exacerbated some inequities, it also drew attention to and inspired exploration of what can make online engagement effective. Studies of what makes online communication effective explored a wide variety of variables prior to the pandemic (Dumford & Miller, 2018; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). Many of the findings point to the same kinds of qualities that make for engagement in face-to-face contexts: building rapport; fostering a sense of belonging; and being attentive to participant’s strengths, needs, and struggles (Ratiff, 2019). This literature focuses primarily on teaching and learning of content, whereas the present study focuses on pedagogical partnership that supports approaches to teaching and learning. Addressing such partnership work in particular as it shifted to online fora, student partners at institutions in Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the United States reflected on how this shift led to “the exploration and reconceptualization of existing partnership values in virtual space” (Ntem et al., 2021, p. 5). These values include authenticity, honesty, responsibility, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, respect, courage, and plurality (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2016; Cook-Sather, et al., 2014). Ntem and her co-authors (2021) quote Parker Matias (2020), a student partner at a US college, who argued that, perhaps instead of returning to “normal,” we might draw on the lessons we have learned from the shift to virtual spaces and create a new normal.

Calls for more effective strategies to achieve equity outcomes and for revisions of “normal” in response to what we learned from the forced pivot to online teaching and learning emerged in part due to deepened empathy that resulted from the conditions described above. Empathy is a complex phenomenon that has both positive and negative manifestations and potential. Clark (1997) defined empathy as “a cognitive, emotional, or physical reaching out to others” (p. 8). Drawing on Cooley’s (1922/1992) work, Ruiz-Junco (2017) highlights three components of empathy that are relevant to our exploration. The first is “empathic imagination” or the process by which one person understands another person by imagining and sharing similar thoughts and feelings. Second, people learn and perform empathy in social interaction with others. And third, empathy can, on the one hand, increase social inclusion and solidarity, and, on the other, exacerbate social injustices and exclusions.

This brief review of insights from several bodies of literature provides the context both for our approach to developing online fora for cross-institutional, pedagogical partnership work and for our analysis of participants’ experiences in those fora.

## **Background: Who we are and the intercollegiate partnership programs we developed**

We come to this work with a range of experiences in partnership. Alison Cook-Sather is professor of education at Bryn Mawr College and facilitator of the [Students as Learners and Teachers](#) (SaLT) Program, the signature program of the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. SaLT was created in 2007 with the goal of fostering the development of more culturally sustaining classrooms (Cook-Sather, 2018, 2022), long before the pandemic prompted the need to reconsider engagement in unfamiliar (to most) modes. Nandeeta Bala graduated from Vassar College in 2021 after completing a double major in Cognitive Science and Education and a minor in Chemistry. While an undergraduate, she was coordinator of the [Student Teacher Engaged Pedagogical Partnership \(STEPP\)](#) Program, a program created in 2020 at Vassar in the northeastern United States. STEPP was an outgrowth of Vassar's [Engaged Pluralism Initiative \(EPI\)](#) Inclusive Pedagogies Working Group (Bala, 2021), during the term that the pandemic struck.

The two of us have been collaborating since the advent of STEPP on developing and expanding fora that support pedagogical partnership work. We define pedagogical partnership as “a collaborative, reciprocal process” whereby “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” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, pp. 6-7). The programs we facilitate at our respective institutions began with a focus on supporting semester-long, one-on-one partnerships between pairs of students and staff, but the pivot to remote and hybrid teaching and learning in the Spring-2020 term prompted us to expand this model to include a wider variety of fora and ways of participating in them.

In mid-April of 2020, after colleges and universities across the United States pivoted to remote teaching and learning, we contacted individual undergraduate student partners working in pedagogical partnership programs at institutions across the U.S. Alison has worked closely with the partnership programs at the following institutions, all of which had expressed a commitment to continue the partnership work through the pivot to online teaching and learning: Bryn Mawr College, Florida Gulf Coast University, Haverford College, Lewis & Clark College, Reed College, Smith College, Tufts University, University of Denver, Ursinus College, and Vassar College. We invited student partners in these programs to join discussions about how to navigate—and support their staff partners in navigating—this unprecedented shift. These student partners reflected informally through dialogue in two Zoom conversations on their experiences, their efforts to support staff partners, the challenges they and their staff partners were experiencing, and the surprising and sometimes inspiring insights they gained into what is possible in teaching and learning even, perhaps especially, under novel and stressful circumstances.

The group of student partners contributed to a set of [recommendations](#), compiled by Alison and a student partner from Haverford College, that were shared across 15

institutions and posted on several institutions' websites. A number of these students as well as staff partners also published essays about their experiences of shifting to hybrid and remote teaching and learning in a collection that the two of us co-edited (see [Cook-Sather & Bala, 2020](#), for an introduction to the issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* that includes those essays). The student partners who participated in this emergent, responsive forum were very grateful for the opportunity to connect across different contexts and, in many ways, shared experiences. Indeed, the insight offered by one participant, Parker Matias, inspired the research project on which we report here. He said in one of the Zoom meetings: "Distance has the potential to move us closer. The evidence is right here: these intercollegiate connections wouldn't have happened without this crisis." In the same session, he queried: "What does this rupture do to teaching and how do we move forward?" (Parker Matias, student partner, Reed College, 17 April 2020).

Before we considered systematically reflecting on the questions Parker raised, and even prior to conceptualizing this research project, we launched several intercollegiate projects focused on supporting student and staff partners. With the goal of expanding student connections and collaboration supported by the two Zoom meetings described above, we created the [Pairing Student Partners: An Intercollegiate Collaboration](#). Nandeeta contacted students who worked in partnership in a wide range of institutions globally where Alison had supported the launch of pedagogical partnership programs or was familiar with the partnership work at that institution. She invited these students to be paired with students at other institutions with the goal of developing new relationships and supporting pedagogical partnership during the Fall-2020 term. In that term, 26 student partners from nine universities in three countries were paired, and in the Spring-2021 term, 32 student partners participated. Building on the Pairing Student Partners program and the [Summer Pedagogical Partnership Program](#) that Alison developed with SaLT student partners at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges in the summer of 2020 (Cook-Sather et al., 2021), we conceptualized two more fora. In collaboration with the director of the Liberal Arts Consortium for Digital Innovation ([LACOL](#), a consortium of ten colleges committed to student-centered education at residential, liberal-arts institutions), five student leaders, including Bala, from pedagogical partnership programs at institutions that belong to LACOL—Amherst College, Bryn Mawr College, Davidson College, Haverford College, and Vassar College—facilitated cross-institutional and cross-constituency conversations. These fora focused on [Trauma-informed, Anti-racist Teaching and Learning in Hybrid and Remote Contexts](#) in the Fall-2020 term and [Equity in Assessment](#) in the Spring-2021 term. The sessions were led by the five intercollegiate student partners who worked in pairs to co-facilitate each session.

## Research Plan and Method

Toward the end of the Spring-2021 term, we stepped back from the work described above and began to reflect more deeply on the ways in which "distance has the potential to move us closer." We set out to explore more systematically the ways in which this crisis, which

prompted the creation of these new fora, might inform us regarding what such “ruptures do to teaching” and how we might “move forward,” as Parker questioned.

We had complete lists of who signed up to participate in the fora (namely: Pairing Student Partners: An Intercollegiate Collaboration; Trauma-informed, Anti-racist Teaching and Learning in Hybrid and Remote Contexts; and Equity in Assessment). We did not, however, keep data on who actually participated in every forum or how many times. The reason for this choice was that the impetus behind creating the fora was support, not research. However, recognising that these fora had fostered experiences that we could learn from, we invited the insights of anyone who might have participated in one or more of them (indicated by who signed up). We sent an ethics-board approved survey to 124 staff and students at 25 institutions: Agnes Scott College; Amherst College; Bridgewater State University; Bryn Mawr College; Carleton College; Florida Gulf Coast University; Hamilton College; Haverford College; Kaye Academic College, Israel; Lewis & Clark College; Lafayette College; McMaster University, Canada; Reed College; Smith College; Swarthmore College; Tufts University; University of California Merced; University of Denver; University of Queensland, Australia; University of Virginia; University of Westminster, England; Ursinus College; Vassar College; Victoria University of Wellington, Aotearoa / New Zealand; and College of William & Mary. We received 23 responses. Some respondents identified themselves by role and others did not.

Survey responses were kept on Qualtrics without identifying information. The survey was expected to take 15-20 minutes to complete and was comprised of the following five questions:

1. How did the advent of the pandemic as it intersected with uprisings against anti-Black racism and for equity and justice affect your thinking about teaching and learning in the Spring-2020, Fall-2020, and Spring-2021 semesters?
2. What did you hope to gain from participating in the cross-campus dialogues [Pairing Student Partners: An Intercollegiate Collaboration; Trauma-informed, Anti-racist Teaching and Learning in Hybrid and Remote Contexts; and Equity in Assessment] and what did you gain?
3. As a [student / faculty member / staff member / administrator] in dialogue / partnership with others across campuses, which partnership principles, structures, and practices did you find could remain in place and what new principles, structures, and practices needed to be created to sustain partnership work?
4. In what ways, if any, has this intercollegiate partnership work fostered empathy, deeper understanding, and/or engagement during this time, and how could it better do so?
5. What recommendations do you have regarding how we might further develop or sustain intercollegiate partnership work? Specifically, what insights and approaches developed as a result of the pandemic do we want to carry forward post-pandemic and why?

Embracing an interpretivist epistemology that understands realities as socially constructed (Merriam, 2009), we used a form of thematic analysis to analyse the survey responses. This approach was a form of narrative analysis, which aims to learn from “experiences or events as the participants understand them” (Schutt, 2016, p. 194). It also drew on case-study research approaches, which are especially appropriate to studying a specific phenomenon that is part of a real-life context (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Yin, 2017). Our thematic analysis took into account the similarities and differences across the real-life contexts in which our participants experienced and understood their experiences in the intercollegiate partnership programs.

Our purpose in conducting this survey was not only to understand what participants experienced, but also to generate recommendations for how partnership work and the insights generated through it might inform post-pandemic efforts to center equity and inclusion. As noted in our introduction above, our goal is not to generalise from this small sample but rather to share insights that might be useful to others committed to considering what we can take forward from the pandemic times to promote greater engagement and equity through cross-institutional, cross-constituency, pedagogical partnership work.

## **Survey Results**

In this section we note, in broad strokes, the main points that surfaced across responses to the survey. Twenty of the responses were from participants at small, residential, liberal arts colleges, who had participated most actively in the fora. We include sample responses to illustrate the kinds of responses participants offered to the survey questions, indicating which survey response we are drawing on with “R” for response and the number of the survey respondent (e.g., R8). In our discussion we delve more deeply into the themes the responses surfaced.

In response to the first question regarding how the intersection of the pandemic with uprisings against anti-Black racism and for equity and justice affected participants’ thinking about teaching and learning in the Spring-2020, Fall-2020, and Spring-2021 semesters, respondents’ comments foregrounded two related phenomena. The first is raised awareness of and increased attention to inequity (12 comments), and the second was deepened personal commitment to equity and catalysed action to redress the harms caused by that inequity (16 comments). Referring to the raised awareness on campus, several respondents offered variations on how the intersection of the pandemic and the uprisings “really focused our attention on all of the inequities in higher education” (R20). Referring to their own personal raised awareness, respondents offered comments regarding how the intersection “opened a reality I was not aware of” (R5) and, as another respondent wrote, catalysed a realisation of “how I was still centering whiteness, even as I was trying to do the opposite, because I had not taken the time to do the work and to question my positionality and bias” (R14). Referring to deepened personal commitment and catalysed action, one respondent captured what many offered in writing: “It has shaped the vast majority of the work that I do, in mentoring faculty in their classes,

developing pedagogical programs, and considering how we shape, train, and reflect on student partnership” (R4).

Regarding question 2—what they had hoped to gain from participating in the cross-campus dialogues—participants stated that they wanted to gain insights (9 comments) and practical strategies (8 comments) as well as make connections with others who have shared experiences and commitments (8 comments). Regarding gaining insights, respondents noted that they hoped to learn from “student voices about their experiences in the classroom and in partnership spaces” (R4) and specific insights into “how to properly incorporate anti-racist trauma-informed pedagogy into conversation in classroom environment” (R19). About making connections, one respondent noted that “there was something about finding someone so similar to me in that sense that was comforting” (R13), and two others noted the importance of modeling and forging connections: participating to “show support for the community of reflection about how we as educators should integrate and learn from what’s happening in the world” (R22) and to “develop community to perhaps set up pedagogical accountability groups or a set of supportive relationships” (R1).

Addressing question 3 about the ways in which partnership principles, structures, and practices could remain in place and what new principles, structures, and practices needed to be created to sustain partnership work, respondents affirmed that partnership principles, structures, and practices are more important than ever (6 comments focused specifically on this point) and also noted a number of the challenges of doing such work beyond the fora provided. Regarding the reaffirmation of partnership principles, one respondent asserted that “the emphasis on relationship not only remained in place, but became even more important” (R4), and another noted that having students as “leaders of the group helped to make the group more inclusive” (R15). Considering challenges, respondents noted the necessity of, in one person’s words, “an existing habit of collaboration or even (better still) personal connections among the participants” (R18), and others pointed to the challenges of creating structures that support this work that does not constitute an add on.

In response to question 4, about how intercollegiate partnership work fostered empathy, deeper understanding, and/or engagement during this time, and how could it better do so, respondents noted the efficacy of the participation of students, of archiving and making available the resources generated through the various fora, and of having the opportunity to realise they are not alone. Regarding the latter, three respondents used exactly those terms, and one wrote: “This year was extremely lonely and difficult and being able to address these issues with a group of colleagues and students from different institutions made a huge difference” (R14). Another respondent also highlighted ways in which these fora might have exacerbated the dangers of fostering empathy, deeper understanding, and/or engagement—including creating spaces “to do anti-racist work” that are “using a lot of jargon and creating committees and working groups, but not really seeing a lot of actual tangible change” and “promoting a sense of victimhood among students instead of empowering them” (R5).



Finally, in response to question 5, which asked for recommendations regarding how we might further develop or sustain intercollegiate partnership work, eight respondents expressed the hope that we will continue to draw on a diversity of technologies as those balance in-person modes to connect across (and within) contexts and increase support for this kind of cross-institutional, cross-constituency work.

## Discussion

In discussing the themes we identified cutting across responses to the survey questions, we delve deeper into some of the complexities of the responses participants in the various fora offered. The themes we identified are: (1) experiencing raised awareness of inequity and deepened personal commitment to equity, (2) gaining connections and insights from cross-campus, cross-constituency dialogue, and (3) carrying empathy, deeper understanding, and/or engagement forward.

### ***(1) Raised awareness of inequity and deepened personal commitment to equity***

With the first survey question we asked, we had hoped to get a sense of the contexts in which people were working—what kind of environment the intersection of the global pandemic with uprisings against anti-Black racism created on campuses in the Spring-2020, Fall-2020, and Spring-2021 semesters. We also hoped to learn how that intersection contextualised and informed participants' frames of mind about teaching and learning. The reiteration of the phenomenon of raised awareness of and increased attention to inequity for both participants and those among whom they were working informed and was informed by the phenomenon of deepened personal commitment to equity and catalysed action to redress the harms caused by inequity.

Respondents noted what has been documented widely (Cahalan et al., 2018; Casey, 2020; Clayton, 2021; Fain, 2020): inequities for “BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] students and first gen students” (R18), students who had “few resources and needed to return home” (R20) or who had “extra responsibilities...because of family circumstances” (R3). Echoing colleagues at these and other institutions (e.g., Labridy-Stofle, 2020; Weiler & Williamson, 2020) and the literature on how the pandemic further revealed existing inequities (Cahalan et al., 2018; Clayton, 2021; Larios & Patterson, 2021; Singer-Freeman & Robinson, 2020) as well as exacerbated inequities (Fain, 2020), respondents noted that the pandemic “only intensified problems of equity that we knew were already there—they just became accentuated,” and while “the pandemic was new...the anti-Black violence wasn't” (R22). Referring to their own personal raised awareness, one respondent described having “no idea of [students'] everyday realities” (R5). Others who entered the fora with a commitment to equity nevertheless realised that they “lacked training in accessibility, and in anti-bias anti-racist education” (R14). The naming of these realities is an important step toward addressing them, but it does not

guarantee that they will be addressed. That is why the pairing with personal commitment is important—to move from recognition to action.

Respondents noted a range of ways in which the intersection of the global pandemic with uprisings against anti-Black racism deepened personal commitment and catalysed action. Speaking from a staff position, one respondent wrote that “the uprisings against anti-Black racism only renewed and intensified my commitment to advocacy on behalf of BIPOC students, faculty, and staff” (R10). Another staff member asserted that we need to attend to “how we better advise, prepare and assist under-represented students who go into unfamiliar cultural situations with their U.S. experiences” (R16) when they go beyond campus. Yet another staff member explained how, in the context of the raised awareness and expanded conversation around inequity, “I was also able to voice some of my frustration by asking ‘why not?’ when an academic staff member said that they did not want to include a more practical approach to teaching everyone.” This staff member explained that, “In the past, I have been less able to push faculty than I have been in this climate” (R15). As previously mentioned, another staff member captured this phenomenon succinctly: “The multiple pandemics have helped me achieve more buy-in from stakeholders throughout the college on the importance of DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] and anti-racism work” (R11). Academic staff and students also were prompted to take action: an academic staff member responded: “I was prompted to engage in a lot of reflection and self-inquiry regarding my role in the classroom in perpetuating racial exclusion and perpetrating micro-aggressions” (R1), and a student wrote: “[t]he pandemic led me to forefront humanity in caring for myself and others around me” (R13). Like this student, and echoing our title in the final words of this response, another academic staff member wrote:

I am grateful to all of the students who organized and helped Faculty like me become aware of this class and race-based differences. It really helped me re-think my pedagogy and my relationship with my students. Paradoxically, even though we were teaching remote, this last academic year I felt closer to my students than before (R5).

There was variation across the responses participants offered regarding how the intersection of the pandemic with uprisings against anti-Black racism informed participants’ frames of mind about teaching and learning in the Spring-2020, Fall-2020, and Spring-2021 semesters. However, there was clear reiteration of how raised awareness of inequity and deepened personal commitment to equity seemed to both inspire and make possible efforts that had not previously been imagined or undertaken. This reiteration speaks to the need for fora in which lived realities can be named and participants can articulate both aspirations and commitments to action.

## ***(2) Gaining connections and insights from cross-campus, cross-constituency dialogue***

The sense of isolation and loneliness many staff and students experienced at the intersection of the pandemic and the uprisings for justice increased the need for connection as people and as those working for equity. These findings are consistent with the literature that emphasises the importance of building rapport, fostering a sense of belonging, and being attentive to participant's strengths, needs, and struggles in online fora (Ratiff, 2019) and on exploring and reconceptualising existing partnership values in virtual spaces (Ntem et al., 2021).

The cross-campus, cross-constituency fora, according to one staff member, "helped many of us feel less alone, in our values and in our struggles" (R4). One academic staff member captured the experience this way: "being able to address these issues with a group of colleagues and students from different institutions made a huge difference" (R14). Specifically, the opportunity to "connect weekly," according to one staff member, "helped me rethink in the moment a lot more clearly" (R15). This staff member explained how the connection forging helped:

I am working to make anti-racism work part of my everyday life, but then there are times when I \*AM\* the person of power—for example in supervising employees or teaching a class. How can you be in power and yet relinquish power at the same time? Many times discussions in these groups helped me grapple with that question in the context of different situations I might encounter. (R15)

Another staff member asserted that we need "more structures" that "provide opportunities for more personal connection, communication, and relationship building" (R21). Five respondents specified that Zoom is an especially effective "way to meet people from other campuses" (R3), particularly "not necessarily the people we would interact with" (R15). A staff member described the importance of "slowing down," both within and beyond these fora, "to create space for the people in the room to connect as people first, prior to moving forward with the work to be done" (R4). A number of participants indicated that people need more time to connect and "an existing habit of collaboration" (R18) in order "to have honest conversations about our struggles and our successes" (R10). The appreciation of structure, space, and opportunity to connect threaded across many responses and also revealed that such opportunities are not as common as they might be. It takes an intentional creation of such fora to make time and space for slowing down, connecting, and collaborating.

The desire to gain insights from students was a particularly strong motivator to participants. One academic staff member captured what several specified—wanting "to hear the students' perspective" (R3). Another noted that "this was the only program I followed in which students were directly involved" (R14). As one respondent explained: "We tend to be siloed, relegated to the bubbles of our individual campuses, so sometimes our perspectives are skewed at best, warped at worst in terms of attempting to learn more about what students generally think" (R10). Not only did these fora include students, they positioned students as facilitators. This was an especially meaningful aspect of the fora,

according to one staff member: “having the students as not just part of the group, but as the leaders of the group, helped to make the group more inclusive” (R15). While there are certainly student experiences and perspectives that are specific to particular campus contexts, hearing from a diversity of students, several respondents indicated, helps foster greater empathy, understanding, and engagement.

The insights participants gained not only from students but also from others, were, according to participants, usefully gathered into sets of resources to be shared. As one staff member explained: “I have found myself referring to documents and referring others to the resources” (R3). An academic staff member offered a similar perspective:

The written materials have been great for sharing perspectives and making BIPOC students feel less alone or singled out. No one in my community that I know of has invested the time to really build the kinds of personal connections via this program that they would need for it to deeply impact their work, but the simple idea of the program has been helpful in creating a sense of common action and urgency. (R18)

These responses speak to the need to keep records, even if only of general themes, so that participants can return to them and be reminded of and re-inspired by those insights. Like creating the space through the fora, capturing key insights generated within them can keep conversation going that might otherwise trail off in the press of day-to-day demands.

### ***(3) Carrying empathy, deeper understanding, and engagement forward***

According to the vast majority of participants, experiencing raised awareness of inequity and deepened personal commitment to equity and gaining connections and insights from cross-campus, cross-constituency dialogue did contribute to carrying empathy, deeper understanding, and/or engagement forward. In other words, they contributed to deepening connections across distance. This theme highlights both positive and negative manifestations and potential of empathy. Participants’ responses reflect “empathic imagination” developed through social interaction with others that can both increase social inclusion and solidarity and exacerbate social injustices and exclusions (Ruiz-Junco, 2107).

One respondent noted that: “Learning from the personal experiences of others is a helpful way to gain deeper understanding and generate more empathy,” and partnership work in particular “could continue to center relationship building to facilitate understanding and deeper engagement” (R21). This is urgent work. As one respondent wrote, “I am grateful that more people were talking about accessibility/pedagogy of care/inclusive practice because those discussions gave me more standing in my own discussions with faculty” (R15). But, this participant continued, “I am already feeling like some have forgotten those conversations and those struggles because they are tired and ‘want to go back to the way things used to be’” (R15).

While most saw “positive reinforcement between equitable teaching practices and resilient teaching in the face of the pandemic” (R18), a few were impatient “for liberal arts colleges to undertake what they should have undertaken long ago: to seize upon technology to enhance and expand pedagogical modalities and, in so doing, make teaching more inclusive, flexible, and much less anachronistic” (R6). Furthermore, respondents affirmed that “we all began to prioritize well-being (physical, mental, and emotional) in a way we hadn't before” (R13). Indeed, “the multiple pandemics” have catalysed “more buy-in from stakeholders throughout the college on the importance of DEI and anti-racism work” (R11). Others who found the sessions invaluable worry about “just how many of my colleagues were dismissive of the advice [the students] provided.” One respondent referred to extensive Zoom sessions in courses that students described as “absolutely soul destroying” (R12). The mix of optimism, frustration, affirmation, and refusal documented in this selection of survey responses throws into relief the complexity of the challenge of carrying forward commitments to and practices of fostering positive forms of empathy, deeper understanding, and meaningful engagement.

Attending more closely to students’ affective as well as epistemic experiences, respondents described shifting the focus from solely “on the white males who did the work” in STEM to “lesser known but greatly contributing people of different ethnicities” (R7). Another academic staff member described growing by “being transparent with my rationale for assignments” and “being ready to seek and accept feedback” (R3). This participant recognised that “showing more vulnerability did not compromise my expertise, but made the classroom more comfortable for students” (R3). In a detailed, example, one respondent focused on how to “avoid retraumatization and exclusion of some students and create a safe space for students to engage in the difficult past and present,” and they explained a newfound approach: “acknowledgement [of] my limitations and designation of [the] classroom as a place for going through initial thoughts,” which can “help students to feel safe to try and fail in a relatively safe classroom atmosphere” (R19).

Because of the ways in which they have perpetuated inequity (Leathwood, 2005; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017, 2020), assessment and grading are particular areas to consider for revision, as noted in several recent publications about such revisions prompted by the intersection of pandemic and protest (Cook-Sather, 2021; Weiler & Williamson, 2020). One respondent wrote:

This semester, I integrated "thought experiments" into my seminar: creative, or at any rate informal responses to the readings. Students loved them. I decided that everyone who turned in one of these things by the deadline would simply receive a 4.0, regardless of "quality." Somewhat to my surprise, the quality and inventiveness of these assignments was remarkably high and allowed students to demonstrate a genuine engagement with the material. Sure, it means that the grades were a bit on the high side. But what's wrong with that? They did the work. The

pandemic has encouraged a lot of us to rethink assignments and grading. I hope this rethinking will outlast the virus. (R12)

To continue these efforts post-pandemic, participants emphasised the need for institutional and monetary support while ensuring students have opportunities to share their perspectives. They specified the need for: “more spaces to communicate across barriers, all barriers” (R17); “more shared teaching/course offerings through the partnership” (R20); “empowering students (and paying them!) to do this and to organize” (R22). Specifically addressing what to carry forward from the pandemic year and how, one of the realisations participants articulated was that “academic institutions ask instructors to do the work of redefining pedagogical practices but then do not change the structure that would actually allow these practices to be fully effective” (R14). Another argued we need to “normalize this for non-crisis years—although, of course, racism is an ongoing crisis,” and admit “that education is a mutual learning experience, rather than a top-down structure, is really powerful and I hope to continue to do this” (R12). The concern about institutional structures and practices that militate against systemic change is a well-documented phenomenon (paperson, 2017; Tate & Bagguley, 2017).

Several respondents argued in particular for sustaining the flexibility that was required during the pandemic and that proved so much more equitable. For instance, they identified the need for “more flexibility both in terms of structure (e.g., in person or remote, timelines) and seeing ourselves (and others) holistically (e.g., not just a professor, staff, or student)” (R21). They also argued for the need to “embrace the flourishing of every student as a goal to which everyone contributes—and not ‘separating wheat from the chaff’ which seems like the MO of many faculty” (R22).

These responses suggest that what needs to be carried forward as enactments of empathy, deeper understanding, and engagement is both mindsets and practices. What we need to carry forward is an orientation to relationship building, to continually learning about others’ experiences, and to holding space. We also need to recommit to what is already engaging, empowering, and equity focused, and to actively revising those approaches that are not.

### ***Challenges: When Distance Does Not Deepen Connections***

While there were many ways in which participants experienced and committed to carrying forward empathy, deeper understanding, and meaningful engagement, some people also experienced frustrations and disconnects. Some of those had to do with the virtual medium, which some participants did not find conducive. Meeting in person, according to these respondents, would have “felt more emotionally connected” (R1). Other frustrations had to do with struggling to find a balance between, on the one hand, “the opportunity to engage casually with someone else at a different institution [which] made it easier to share honestly” (R13) and, on the other hand, feeling “the need to have a stronger bond within my institution” (R16). And still other participants experienced challenges and struggles

specific to their circumstances. Some felt “isolated from faculty” on their campus (R5), others had been hopeful for dialogue “about education and advising more broadly and not just with remote/hybrid teaching” (R16), and still others hoped for “a platform to review our curriculum across the department and colleges” (R19), none of which these particular partnership fora could provide. These experiences point to the need for more and perhaps different fora for developing empathy, deeper understanding, and meaningful engagement.

While developing the language to name inequities that was core to these partnership fora felt empowering to some, others felt that the jargon hindered progress. One respondent wrote, “I am aware that perhaps my perception might be skewed because of remote teaching and the difficulty of connecting with people.” They nevertheless felt “skeptical and unmotivated” when they saw “many spaces created to do anti-racist work using a lot of jargon and creating committees and working groups, but not really seeing a lot of actual tangible change” (R5). One participant was even more skeptical, writing: “I saw no particular gain in seeking partnerships across elite universities.” This participant came away “with the sad conclusion that the elite small colleges were simply building more walls between themselves and the rest of higher education while cloaking such efforts in ‘anti-trauma,’ ‘anti-racist’ etc. rhetoric” (R6). This participant “gained an appreciation for the extent to which privileged faculty at well-to-do, elite universities are able to indulge in expressions of anti-elitism.” They found the forum in which they participated to be “promoting a sense of victimhood among students instead of empowering them.” The result, according to this respondent, was that students “seem less able to engage in critical thinking or difficult conversations about anything that would force them outside of their frame of reference,” which this respondent thought “was clear in the sessions we had with students” (R6).

## **Limitations**

As we noted in our methods section, our goal with this study was not to generalise from a small sample. The small sample is certainly a limitation of the study, as is the fact that the sample includes academic and administrative staff members and students who feel passionately on one side of the spectrum or the other rather than representing a more general sample. Another limitation is the challenge of pinpointing specific spaces or strategies for improvement when consolidating feedback on three programs. A more focused analysis of each individual program might have yielded more concrete recommendations for each program. Our focus, however, was more generally on how partnership work and the insights generated through it might inform post-pandemic efforts to center equity and inclusion. Therefore, more research is needed to delve more deeply into the themes we identified and to surface other themes and approaches.

## **Conclusion**

Our findings illustrate the potential of cross-constituency, cross-institutional pedagogical partnerships to advance and deepen the conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion. They do so by creating fora that would not otherwise exist that bring together students and staff from across colleges and universities who would not otherwise be in dialogue. They support participants in developing empathy, deeper understanding, and meaningful engagement through listening to one another, raising awareness, strategising regarding particular approaches, and intentionally creating inclusive spaces to support and enact equity-focused practices.

Our findings also reveal some of the limitations of such efforts to use online fora to develop empathy, deeper understanding, and meaningful engagement. The calls for continued and expanded use of technologies such as Zoom are already in tension with the choices many institutions of higher education are making to “get back to pre-pandemic normal.” An [Open Letter](#) that a group of Haverford College academic staff wrote to express concern regarding the administrative expectation that all teaching be in person asserted that the requirement seemed “not to recognize how creatively and energetically the faculty responded to the challenges of teaching since March 2020.” [Student partner recommendations](#) generated at the end of the Spring-2021 semester also emphasised that “there are certain things we do that we might do better and enjoy more if they stayed online,” and a staff member quoted earlier in this discussion noted that danger of wanting “to go back to the way things used to be” (R15).

The desire expressed by many respondents to our survey to find possibilities to continue to develop and support the intercollegiate network when we return to in-person settings suggests this work should be sustained and expanded. The three intercollegiate programs we developed during the Fall-2020 and the Spring-2021 terms built global community to support and deepen engagement during a period of isolation induced by the pandemic. As Lewie (2021) argues, “...the coronavirus is showing us the connection between all countries and people across the globe. The crisis is guiding us into a future in which we are fighting against discrimination and injustice” (p. 155). While no approach can meet all needs or solve all inequities embedded in and perpetuated by higher education, the vast majority of the respondents in our study suggest that cross-constituency, cross-institutional pedagogical partnership work is one promising approach.

## References

- Ameyaa, R. A., Cook-Sather, A., Ramo, K., & Tohfa, H. (2021). Undergraduate students partnering with faculty to develop trauma-informed, anti-racist pedagogical approaches: intersecting experiences of three student partners. *Journal of Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 7(1).  
<https://journals.studentengagement.org.uk/index.php/studentchangeagents/article/view/1020>
- Bala. (2021). A STEPP into uncertainty: Pursuing passions to embrace pedagogical risks. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 33.



- <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss33/4> Blankstein, M., Frederick, J. K., & Wolff-Eisenberg, C. (2020, June 25). Student experiences during the pandemic pivot. Research Report. ITHAKA <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.313461>
- Cahalan, M., Perna, L. W., Yamashita, M., Wright, J. & Santillan, S. (2018). 2018 indicators of higher education equity in the United States: Historical trend report. Washington, DC: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Council for Opportunity in Education (COE), and Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy of the University of Pennsylvania (PennAHEAD)
- Casey, N. (2020, May 5). College made them feel equal. The virus exposed how unequal their lives are. *The New York Times*.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/04/us/politics/coronavirus-zoom-college-classes.html>
- Clark, C. (1997). *Misery and company: Sympathy in everyday life*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Clayton, T. B. (2021). Refocusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion during the pandemic and beyond: Lessons from a community of practice. *Higher Education Today*. <https://www.higheredtoday.org/2021/01/13/refocusing-diversity-equity-inclusion-pandemic-beyond-lessons-community-practice/>
- Cooley, C. H. ([1922]. 1992). *Human nature and the social order*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2022). *Co-creating equitable teaching and learning: Structuring student voice into higher education*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2018). Developing “Students as Learners and Teachers”: Lessons from ten years of pedagogical partnership that strives to foster inclusive and responsive practice. *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 4(1).  
<https://journals.studentengagement.org.uk/index.php/studentchangeagents/article/view/746/pdf>
- Cook-Sather & Bala. (2020). Naming and navigating troubling transitions: Pedagogical partnership during the pandemic. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 30. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss30/1>
- Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning & teaching: A guide for faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- de Bie, A., Marquis, E., Cook-Sather, A., & Luqueño, L. P. (2021). *Promoting equity and justice through pedagogical partnership*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishers.
- Dumford, A.D., & Miller, A.L. (2018). Online learning in higher education: exploring advantages and disadvantages for engagement. *J Comput High Educ* 30, 452–465. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12528-018-9179-z>
- Fain, P. (2020, June 17). Higher education and work amid crisis. *Inside Higher Ed*.  
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/06/17/pandemic-has-worsened-equity-gaps-higher-education-and-work>
- Hancock, D.R., & Algozzine, B. (2017). *Doing case study research: A practical guide for beginning researchers*. Teachers College Press.
- Hankivsky, O., & A. Kapilashrami. (2020). Beyond sex and gender analysis: An intersectional view of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and response. *Gender*

and Women's Health Unit, Centre for Health Equity, Melbourne School of Population and Health Equity.

[https://mbspgh.unimelb.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/3334889/Policy-brief\\_v3.pdf](https://mbspgh.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/3334889/Policy-brief_v3.pdf)

- Labridy-Stofle, C. (2020). Uprooted rhizomes: Collaborating in times of troubling transitions. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 30. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss30/4>
- Larios, L., & Paterson, S. (2021) Fear of the other: Vulnerabilization, social empathy, and the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. *Critical Policy Studies*, 15(2): 137-145. DOI: [10.1080/19460171.2021.1927777](https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2021.1927777)
- Lewe, M-T. (2021). Breaking out of rigid structures and ways of being. In A. Cook-Sather & S. Slates (Eds.), *Diversifying students-as-partners participants and practices*, (pp. 146-159). *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v5i1.4627>
- Ntem, A., Nguyen, E., Rafferty, C., Kwan, C., & Benlahcene, A. (2020). Students as partners in crisis? Student co-editors' perspectives on COVID-19, values, and the shift to virtual spaces. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 4(2), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v4i2.4432>
- paperon, Ia. (2017). *A third university is possible*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Ratliff, K. (2019). Building rapport and creating a sense of community: Are relationships important in the online classroom?. *Journal of Online Learning Research and Practice*, 7(1), 26958.
- Ruiz-Junco, N. (2017). Advancing the Sociology of Empathy: A Proposal. *Symbolic Interaction*, 40(3), 414-435 <https://doi-org.proxy.brynmawr.edu/10.1002/symb.306>
- Schutt, R. K. (2016). *Understanding the social world: Research methods for the 21st century*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Tate, S. A., & Bagguley, P. (2017). Building the anti-racist university: Next steps. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 20, 289-299, DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2016.1260227
- Vlachopoulos, D., & Makri, A. (2019). Online communication and interaction in distance higher education: A framework study of good practice. *Int Rev Educ* 65, 605–632. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-019-09792-3>
- Yin, R.K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. Sage publications.