Pedagogical Partnerships as a Way to Amplify Undergraduate Voices

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Abstract

My journey as a student partner began amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and an exciting opportunity to explore online learning. I was invited to attend a Pedagogical Partners workshop with Dr. Alison Cook-Sather. It was there that I was struck by the incredible impact students could have as partners in their own learning, and I knew I just had to get involved.

Having felt for years that students were often overlooked, ignored, or talked down to, I was determined to create positive change. In my freshman year, I became an undergraduate teaching assistant (UTA) and the experience completely transformed my relationship with learning. Instead of dreading classes and homework, I found joy in the opportunity to grow my knowledge and develop my skills.

By my senior year in 2023, I had served as a UTA every semester since my freshman year. However, I discovered that UTAs were few and far between across campus, with only about 10% of classes offering them. Many faculty felt that they simply couldn't afford them. So, I took matters into my own hands by creating a class that gave students three credits to be a UTA and partnering with Dr. Bill Coplin and Dr. Martha Diede as mentors. Our self-designed course was a huge success, and we formed deep connections with faculty and each other.

Building on this achievement, we joined the Partnership for Inclusive Education (PIE) Program through the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE) to fuse the UTA program with a student consultant program. As a lead student consultant and UTA in my final year of college, I enjoyed the best of both worlds. Throughout my college career, I learned the true meaning of partnership, experiencing the two-way learning it provides, and continually strived to make courses more inclusive, compassionate, and student-oriented. I worked tirelessly to put students in decision-making roles and mentored many students into fantastic student partners that had a remarkable impact on our campus.

Introduction

Since the summer before beginning my freshman year at Syracuse University, I launched an initiative to increase the representation of undergraduate students as decision-makers in the classroom, with the ultimate goal of promoting an inclusive education for all. Despite their potential as capable pedagogical partners to instructors, undergraduate students have long been overlooked (Bovill et al., 2011;Gärdebo & Wiggberg, 2012). They possess

valuable experiences and insights that are essential within the context of the university-wide and course-specific policies.

When I refer to the term "pedagogical partnership," I am referring to a mutually beneficial relationship between faculty members and students that allows each partner to learn from the other. This can happen in a variety of ways, with the most common being teaching assistant (TA) or research assistant (RA) positions. However, it's important to note that while teaching assistants are considered pedagogical partners, not every pedagogical partner is a TA. In this essay, I share my personal journey towards embracing pedagogical partnerships and detail what I've done to support the development of pedagogical partners at Syracuse University.

Background

As a passionate learner, I had always loved going to school and dreamed of becoming a teacher. However, my enthusiasm waned once I reached high school because I felt that teachers were teaching at us rather than with us. District administrators often made policy decisions affecting the student body without consulting students. Often, the policy ~~often~~ missed what the actual problem they were trying to solve *was* - for example, the school district spent over $3 million renovating our cafeteria in hopes of "reducing segregation among students". The reality was that no matter how the cafeteria was renovated, segregation would still exist among students. Administrators should have been looking at racist tracking policies that kept students of color out of honors and AP classes or put that money back into marginalized communities in the district in hopes of putting resources that were previously denied to them into their hands.

I became frustrated because my peers and I were viewed as students first and human beings second. Yes, we were in school to work and learn, but we also had emotions and ideas. We had insights that were valuable and experiences that were teachable. Teachers and administrators heard me but weren't listening. I could have remained passive, but instead, I took a risk - I applied to and was appointed to the city council board that oversaw the school district. Because I was so young, I did not have an official vote on policy matters, but I was allowed to share my opinion. My role on the committee was one I did not take lightly - to represent the sentiments of my high school. However, the committee was not quick to take my opinion into consideration as I was 16 years old. Because I was significantly younger than the rest of the group, it was assumed I didn't know much. I got used to being spoken over, skipped, and uninvited, until I found my credibility in data. My AP Statistics teacher, Tim Sirois, sparked a love for research that *does* something and *means* something. Data alone does not create change, but data used as a tool can inspire it.

As an amateur researcher, I conducted surveys across my high school on subjects ranging from racial proportions in AP classes to grade obsession. I did a study on stress levels in my school and presented my findings and suggestions to a school board panel. Working closely in partnership with Mr. Sirois, I completed a study on competitive versus

collaborative classroom environment. where Mr. Sirois allowed me to use his class as my experiment participants.

At the same time, I became a teaching assistant for the Algebra II classes. At just 16 years old, I was teaching at the front of the classroom, making answer keys, grading, tutoring students one-on-one, and creating lesson plans. As a result, I created impactful relationships with both my students and the teachers of the course over the 3 years I was a teaching assistant. Many students told me that they preferred to come to me with questions because I was their own age and knew how to explain things in a way that was more accessible to them. The teacher and I would then exchange ideas, give each other feedback, and create new plans to improve in the future. This was my first experience being a pedagogical partner, and I wanted more. From these experiences, I learned that taking initiative to work with teachers and mentors only enriched my learning and leadership, and fueled a new passion for education policy and reform.

In late December 2020, I came in contact with Dr. Bill Coplin, a tenured professor in the Policy Studies Program at Syracuse University. I initially set up a phone call with him only with the intention of asking a few questions about the major. Instead, we talked for a number of hours and found that we both had an interest in education policy and reform. During this phone call, he revealed to me that the Policy Studies Program employs countless undergraduates as teaching assistants. This excited me, as my experience in high school as a TA was one of my most valuable. Over the next few months, we continued speaking, forming a reciprocal partnership and friendship. I'd ask him for advice on the research projects I was doing; he'd ask me to edit one of the articles he was writing. This relationship was the primary reason I chose to study at Syracuse University over other universities.

The summer before my first year at Syracuse, Professor Coplin hired me as a research assistant. I had never done formal research, especially with someone who holds a Ph.D., so I held anxieties that he might regret bringing someone so inexperienced onto his staff. I took the risk to pursue the role anyway, and the lessons I learned over the course of the summer were invaluable. I participated in two major research projects: one focused on the relationship between college and social mobility and another on the use of undergraduate teaching assistants across the country. The goal of the second project was to locate other professors who employ undergraduates as partners in order to create a network for those professors to collaborate, exchange ideas, and encourage other professors to form professional relationships with undergraduates as well.

One conversation I had was both disappointing and newly motivating. In an interview with me, Dr. Kenneth Miller at Brown University revealed that at Brown, partnerships between professors and students were overwhelmingly common (personal communication, August 18, 2020). I was shocked to hear this, as at Syracuse pedagogical partners were much rarer. I understood how important my pedagogical relationships with my high school teachers were to my learning and how amazing my experience as a research assistant for Professor Coplin was. It was in that moment that I decided my goal was to increase the number of pedagogical partnerships at Syracuse University.

Year 1 at Syracuse University (2020-2021): Surveying Pedagogical Partnerships

When I arrived at Syracuse University, I was inspired and driven by a full summer of research. Over the course of the summer, I developed both a personal and professional relationship with Dr. Bill Coplin, which I am deeply grateful for. I also had the pleasure of attending and participating in a session with Dr. Alison Cook-Sather, in which she outlined what pedagogical partnerships might look like online at Syracuse University. Many of the faculty who attended the session seemed highly interested in collaborating with pedagogical partners of their own, which was a source of hope for me as I launched the project. I had a dream—increasing the prevalence of pedagogical partners at Syracuse— but saying something and doing it are two different things. I was taking a huge risk by taking on this project so early; I hadn't spent very much time at Syracuse and I was coming in with very little knowledge about which pedagogical partnerships were already in place on campus and which players I needed to meet with in order to achieve my goal. Before I began, I needed more information—more experience under my belt.

It was then I connected with Dr. Martha Diede, who was the director of the Center for Learning and Teaching Excellence (CLTE) at the time. Martha gave me the opportunity to train faculty on how to use Zoom as the University prepared for all online courses due to COVID-19. I worked with several professors, one on one, carefully explaining how to share their screen or use the chat feature. This was quite challenging for me because we were meeting virtually and I could not see the faculty member's screen or point them where to go. I gained many descriptive communication skills explaining where to go on their screen and what sort of things to click. It was interesting to experience the roles reversed, as they listened, learned, and asked me questions rather than the other way around. I encouraged the faculty I worked with to reach out to the students in their classes and work with them as they transitioned into online classes. Some professors took my recommendation of assigning a student to monitor the chat section so they could focus on their lecture. Others explained to me that when they didn't know how to do something on Zoom, they would ask their students. From this experience, I learned that professors are just as willing to learn from students as students are willing to learn from professors.

First semester, I designed a survey that would eventually become a year-long effort to understand where pedagogical partners were and what they did. How common are pedagogical partners at Syracuse? What classes and professors integrate pedagogical partnerships into students' learning? Were pedagogical partners more common in lower-division courses? What sort of things do pedagogical partners do? The survey asked for the title of the course, the professor, the department, the class size, the division, if undergraduate pedagogical partners were included, and what responsibilities those undergraduates had, if they were.

First semester, 230 courses offered at Syracuse University were surveyed, and just 24 (10.4%) used pedagogical partners in some capacity. This was upsetting to see, to say the least. After a full year, 490 courses of the 1,500 courses offered at Syracuse University in the 2020-2021 academic year had been surveyed. Information from classes for the

new semester showed a very small improvement. 11% of the courses we sampled used UTAs, an increase of 1% from the previous semester. Change was slow, but worthwhile.

Additionally, the survey provided one piece of crucial information: the names of professors who currently work with undergraduates as pedagogical partners. I personally interviewed each of those faculty members as to why they chose to work with undergraduates in this way, what benefits it has brought them, and what suggestions they have for the pilot. In an interview with Dr. Bill Coplin, he expressed how he learns from his TAs just as much as they learn from him:

"I learn from undergraduates all the time. I've learned to stop talking so much and to make my PowerPoints less dense. They improve the grading rubrics. The TAs are making little incremental improvements all the time. That's why the course is the way it is. Almost all of the course is a result of their innovations. We're a team, I'm the coach. We all have the same goal to make the course better."

He went on to say,

"All professors should use UTAs because the professors can spend their time thinking of new innovations, can troubleshoot, can take care of students having problems, and can spend more time on research" (personal communication, November 15, 2020).

Dr. Colleen Heflin, a professor in the Department of Public Administration and International Affairs, said this as she reflected on her experience with her pedagogical partner during this unusual online semester:

"[My pedagogical partner] has been invaluable this term with the high flex format. She keeps the online students engaged and helps me work those students into the class discussion that is often primarily in person" (personal communication, October 23, 2020).

Another Civil and Environmental Engineering professor, Dr. Dennis Joyce, said:

"I'm all for professors using as many UTAs as they can. It benefits the class, the professor, and the UTA" (personal communication, November 11, 2020).

Yet another professor in the Policy Studies Department, Dr. Austin Zwick, claimed,

"It is a win-win for all involved. The Undergraduate TAs get to build their skills as a leader through professional experience, while the students get a more knowledgeable and hands-on TA who cares about them" (personal communication, November 13, 2020).

In an interview with Naomi Weinfish, an Undergraduate TA, she reflected on her experience in a pedagogical partnership as a UTA:

"I love being an undergraduate TA. I enjoy working with other students, both as fellow TAs and as a leader for my group. Having deadlines that others rely on to do their job challenges me. It has taught me that completing my work on time shows others that I am professional, I care about both them, this course, and the students, and that I respect their time and work. Being a UTA is

a great experience that more students should get the opportunity to partake in" (personal communication, November 22, 2020).

The context I gained from the survey and the insightful testimonies I collected inspired me to apply to become an undergraduate TA myself. I was selected as a teaching assistant for "Introduction to Public Policy Analysis," (or PST 101 for short) with Professor Coplin. In addition to acting as a UTA for the regular lecture, I was also named the Honors Director. In this position, I independently ran the honors discussion section of the class that met after the big lecture every Monday. This position would prove to hold many challenges, as I oversaw designing the syllabus, writing lesson plans for each week, and grading all assignments. This position held *additional* challenges during the time I was teaching as instruction would have to take place entirely over Zoom. *How could I keep my students engaged through a computer screen?* Dr. Coplin and I teamed up to answer this question. I brought my experience with technology and Zoom training doing things such as putting students in breakout rooms to work collaboratively and creating a Kahoot! about Excel know-how. Coplin brought his expansive knowledge on the subject, entertaining students for whole class periods about his experience running a successful business using the PRINCE system or bringing in successful alumni of the major to discuss with students how they got where they are.

Year 2 at Syracuse University: 2021-2022

It turns out I wasn't the only one managing a classroom racking my brain on how to keep students engaged mid-Pandemic. Many of the professors I interviewed or worked with in Zoom meetings admitted they didn't know how to keep students present, participating, and productive. I often recommended asking students for advice tailored to the context of their course, but professors explained that they lacked opportunities to compensate them for their contribution due to budget constraints (for example, faculty could only acquire funding in some departments for graduate teaching assistants rather than both undergraduate and graduate students). And they weren't the only ones – this proved to be a problem across many institutions of higher education (Boville et al, 2016). As a solution, I conceptualized and designed a class that would grant undergraduate students three credits for acting as teaching assistants in any class across Syracuse University. Together with Dr. Bill Coplin and Dr. Martha Diede, I spearheaded the course named "Community Problem Solving" (PST 416) and guided the enrolled students with the help of our collective expertise in pedagogical practices and academic content.

PST 416 was a weekly meeting hub for all the teaching assistants to share their successes and seek guidance from our team and each other, as they spent most of their credit hours in the classroom they were working in or meeting with the professor of their course. Having Professor Coplin, a seasoned professor, and Dr. Diede, an expert in pedagogical practices, on my teaching team was invaluable as they were able to advise each of the teaching assistants on every problem they brought with them to class. As we aimed for our students to acquire not just teaching skills, but also professional and

personal prowess, we had them practice public speaking through short speeches and PowerPoint presentations on a variety of topics.

We also wanted to instill in each of them that the power to create change even at the University-wide level was within them, so we even had all the students read through the official policies of Syracuse University and pull out policies they felt were not effective, inclusive, or productive and propose what they would change about it and, more importantly, how.

After one successful semester of PST 416, I started looking for ways to make it a permanent program on campus rather than a temporarily listed class. It was then that I found Dr. Laurel Willingham-McLain of the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence and Carla Ramirez of the Shaw Center. They had been piloting a similar program called The Partnership for Inclusive Education (PIE). PIE was comprised of paid undergraduate "student consultants" who helped faculty to improve their courses through observational data and reflection.

We partnered with the PIE program to expand our reach and strengthen our impact, allowing all students involved the opportunity to choose compensation in the form of hourly pay, 3 class credits, or an internship. The PIE program was focused on creating a student-faculty partnership where their mutual collaboration could lead to inclusive education for all students. This was a perfect fit with our own program as the combination of both programs allowed us to reach more students and help them achieve their academic goals. We adapted our lessons to include PIE's objectives, and that was the beginning of a powerful partnership.

We worked hard to address all of the challenges that came our way as we combined the programs. We knew that each student had different needs, and we made sure that we met them all. We had weekly meetings where everyone's voices were heard, and I worked with Dr. Willingham-McLain and Ms. Ramirez to coordinate the program and ensure that all the students had the support they needed. In addition, I stayed on as the UTA for the for-credit portion of the group.

This combination of programs was so successful that we were invited to speak at the academic conference Pedagogithon. Dr. Willingham-McLain, Ms. Ramirez, a student consultant, and I all presented about what PIE was and all the different things we did in a presentation titled "Creating and Sustaining a Student-Faculty Partnership for Inclusive Education". I loved the experience and getting to learn from all the other presenters at the conference to bring their knowledge back into my own programming at Syracuse University.

As I ended my second year at Syracuse, it was heartwarming to see how the program had grown and the impact it had on everyone involved. PST 416 had given a voice to the students while helping the professors and Syracuse University. The partnership with PIE enabled us to reach out to more students and help create a more inclusive environment on campus. Because the two programs seemed to fit together perfectly, the content of

PST 416 was immortalized within the PIE program and still exists today. It is a great source of pride for me that my ideas for change will exist long after I graduated from Syracuse University last spring.

Year 3 at Syracuse University: 2022-2023

As I approached the beginning of my final year at Syracuse University, I realized that time was running out - I was set to graduate in just 3 years. I had one more year to ensure that students had the opportunity to express themselves and that their voices would be heard.

I continued my involvement with the PIE program in the fall semester, and that's when my role began to evolve. Carla Ramirez had left, and Laurel Morton took over her position. I was awarded the title of the first-ever "lead student consultant", and given more responsibilities than other consultants, especially in research and publication about the program. As I took on more challenging work, I became more invested in the program, and eventually, I became an essential component of the program itself. I was someone most student consultants and undergraduate TAs came to for advice, as well as undergraduate students who wanted to get involved. PIE's goal was simple, as far as I was concerned: to promote a more inclusive environment within Syracuse University. Undergraduates were crucial because they were the ones who could speak from first-hand experience about what it's like to be an undergraduate student at the University.

At the same time, I was given the opportunity to be the teaching assistant for the "Introduction to Public Policy Analysis" course through Syracuse University's College of Professional Studies (CPS). This course was entirely online, and most students were part-time and worked during the day. Although keeping these students engaged during the course on Zoom was a challenge, I cherished the opportunity to work with students from all over the country and the world.

As a teaching assistant, I was in charge of grading assignments and organizing sessions on Zoom. This was a monumental task, and I took it very seriously. I wanted to establish myself as a valuable resource for all students, regardless of their age or background, and an authority figure they could respect. I worked alongside one of my favorite professors, Dr. Austin Zwick, with whom I had taken several courses before, which allowed us to be an incredibly effective team. Dr. Zwick trusted me to manage the Zoom sessions, record them, create in-class quizzes, and organize our Blackboard page.

Despite the challenges we faced, our course was a strong success, as evidenced by the overwhelmingly positive feedback we received from students in the end-of-semester survey. I was delighted to learn that students appreciated the opportunity to work with an undergraduate teaching assistant. In the survey, students rated their agreement to course-specific questions on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The results are as follows:

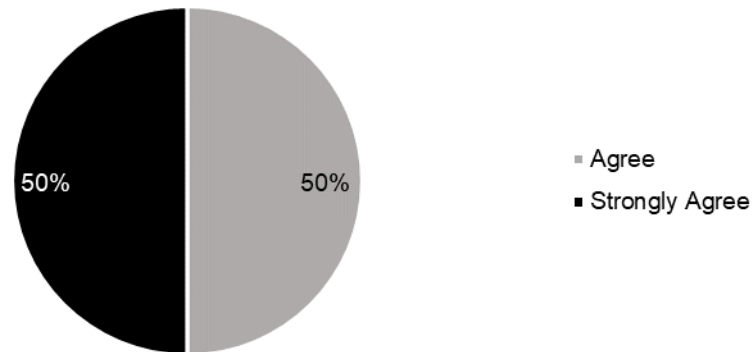## "The syllabus was an accurate guide to course requirements"

- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Figure 1, Course Assessment Results Pertaining to Syllabus Accuracy (designed by me!)

"Student participation and the contribution of ideas, comments, and questions were encouraged"
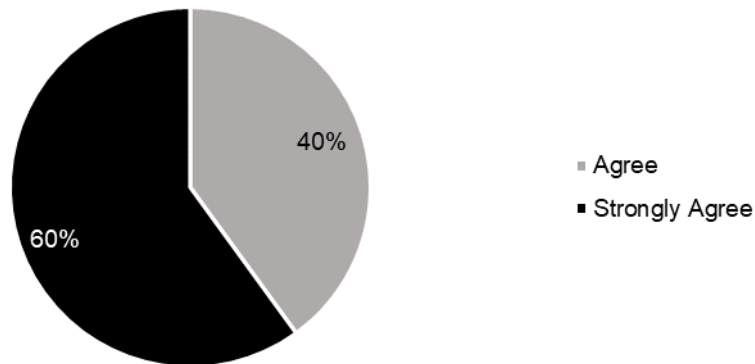

- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Figure 2, Course Assessment Results Pertaining to Student Participation

Other results included:

- ***"I feel that I performed to my potential in this course"*** - 100% of students chose "somewhat agree", "agree", or "strongly agree", and 30% chose "strongly agree".
- **"Course assessments (e.g., exams/quizzes, papers, presentations, projects, performances, etc.) allowed me to demonstrate what I learned."** - 100% of students chose "somewhat agree", "agree", or "strongly agree", and 40% chose "strongly agree".
- **"I received helpful feedback from the instructor to guide my progress in this course."** - 100% of students chose "somewhat agree", "agree", or "strongly agree", and 40% chose "strongly agree".

I also got to experience the role of a student consultant through the PIE program. I observed a graduate-level Python scripting course, which of course was something I knew very little about. However, despite my lack of experience, my fresh perspective allowed me to identify strengths and weaknesses of the course. I was able to provide valuable feedback to the professor about the clarity of his teaching, whether the requirements were fair, and how students were responding to the course material.

I sat in the back of the classroom and watched which students tended to not pay attention or play games on their computers instead, which students were called on more frequently than others, and which students tended to be ignored. The very few women in the course were often overlooked when the professor was looking for hands.

We implemented in-class activities to keep students engaged where students could learn by doing rather than sit through a 3-hour PowerPoint lecture (which, admittedly, is hard for almost anyone to do). I created discussion boards where students who were not called on or who did not feel comfortable raising their hands in class could ask questions and reflect on their understanding. I also developed a new feedback system in the form of an anonymous survey where students could share what was working well for them and what wasn't. Then, I was responsible for analyzing all the feedback and providing it to the professor of the course. The surveys were administered mid-semester and at the end of the semester. The results provided insights the professor and I had not caught before. Some feedback from students included:

- *"The course is hands-on. We look at the notebooks and have the option to work on the code during the lecture. This helps better to grasp the concepts rather than just sitting and listening to them."*
- *"The lectures are pretty tightly spaced meaning they need every minute of the scheduled time and often go late, beyond the expected time frame."*
- *"The homework is closely related to the course lectures, if I have a problem with the homework I can refer to the lecture notebooks and it will be a very easy fix."*
- *"As the professor said, coding for three hours is a grueling task. I know this is a coding class, but going at code for three hours is very tough. It is difficult at times to follow the lectures as closely as possible for the entire time because it can be either tedious or lecture heavy."*
- *"I like the mini projects structure, I feel I have been learning a lot while doing them"*
- *"It would be great if lectures were recorded"*
- *"We could incorporate practical exercises and real-world problem-solving questions, which will prepare students for internship assessments."*
- *"Maybe [split] the session into two parts, one for lecture/concepts, and the other for practice and discussion."*

At the end of Fall 2022, PIE had made a real difference on campus, with 45 total partnerships between faculty and students. Student consultants represented 8 of 13 schools within Syracuse University (Center for Teaching & Learning Excellence & Shaw Center for Public and Community Service, 2022). Feedback from faculty partners about the program includes:

- *"It was very useful to talk through things I was thinking about changing and get a student perspective. It helped me think about those changes faster than I would have on my own. I bounced ideas off the student consultant asking, 'How would you handle this? What do you think of this?'"*
- *"This was my first experience with a person who is openly not cis gender. They helped me learn not to make assumptions."*
- *"It is so good to have a partnership where no one is being evaluated – in this day when so much focus is on testing."*

I graduated from Syracuse University in the Spring of 2023. Taking this on the work of pedagogical partnerships amidst competing demands from my own coursework, clubs, activities, and time with friends was no small feat. Sometimes I wished there were two of me! While I certainly kept myself busy, you make time for the things you care about. As a proud alumna of SU, I currently work as an advisory consultant in the Higher Education domain of KPMG, a global consulting firm. In my role, I help other universities much like SU improve student experience and make strategic decisions that further their goals.

Recommendations for Students Looking to Assume a Role in Launching Pedagogical Partnership Programs

I close out my piece with advice for other undergraduate students looking to create and promote pedagogical partnerships. In just three years, I've achieved so much, but the work is not done. I rely on the students who will come after me to continue on the work to ensure students are listened to, respected, and viewed as rich resources of knowledge and experience in higher education.

1. *Find a mentor or mentors*

    Coming into this project, I had lots to learn. That's okay! Find a professor, faculty member, or administrator who shares the same goals as you and wants you to succeed. Without the help of Dr. Bill Coplin, Dr. Martha Diede, and Dr. Laurel Willingham-McLain, all amazing mentors, teachers, and friends, I would not be where I am today. Pedagogical partnerships are incredibly valuable experiences for many reasons but primarily the relationships created between faculty and students. Find someone with experience, expertise, and connections to draw from.

2. *Break up the work into small, manageable chunks. Set deadlines for yourself.*

    Developing a pedagogical partnership pilot is no small feat. If you try to tackle it all at once, you will likely become overwhelmed. Instead, create small and achievable goals for yourself. This is a marathon, not a sprint. Map out what you want to accomplish and by when. For example, instead of saying, "I need to interview all the professors that my survey revealed use pedagogical partners," I told myself, "I will interview two professors by Monday." Instead of saying "I need to create an

internship course to give students credit for working as pedagogical partners" I told myself, "I will have created an outline of the course by the end of the semester."

3. *Do not try to do this alone. Know when to ask for help.*

This project is too big for one person to tackle alone. Acknowledge the limitations of your knowledge and experience. For me, juggling coursework, research, clubs and activities, jobs, maintaining my physical and mental well-being, spending time with friends, and developing a pedagogical partnership pilot would be too much if I tried to take it all one by myself. Access your support system of friends, professors, mentors, and classmates. Scout help—speak out about your mission and create a team of individuals who care about what you do and are going to help you get it done. In saying this, I acknowledge that not everyone has the privilege of dedicating their free time to a project like this, especially at an institution as expensive to attend as Syracuse University. Do what you can when you can – small changes add up over time.

4. *Don't let anyone tell you that you can't. Know it can be done.*

I was told many times that I was being too ambitious by department chairs or faculty members. That I was being unrealistic. That no one would listen to me because I was so young. My experiences are a living testament that this is not true. Your experiences have value. Your knowledge has value. Know your worth and use it to drive your passions. Don't stop until they listen to you.

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