

Where Student Engagement Meets Faculty Development: How Student-Faculty Pedagogical Partnership Fosters a Sense of Belonging

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Abstract

'Belonging' is widely understood to be important in both student engagement and faculty development. Only recently, however, have these two arenas begun to overlap. In this opinion piece we contend that student-faculty (student-staff) pedagogical partnerships, situated at the intersection of student engagement and academic development, are uniquely positioned to foster belonging for students and academic staff, particularly for those who have traditionally been marginalized in higher education. This enhanced sense of belonging emerges as partners engage iteratively in three dynamic processes: doing meaningful work together, creating spaces and opportunities for exploration and growth, and engaging in regular and ongoing affirmation of all involved. Through these mutually informing processes, partnerships nurture belonging for both students and faculty, fostering a reinforcing cycle of deepening engagement and meaningful development.

Belonging and Student Engagement

Hurtado and colleagues (1998) have described higher education institutions as "complex social systems defined by the relationship between people, bureaucratic procedures, structural arrangements, institutional goals and values, traditions, and large socio-historical environments" (p. 296). What does it mean for students to feel a sense of belonging in such systems? Strayhorn (2012) defines belonging as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)" (p. 3). Asher and Weeks (2014) offer a similar definition: belonging is a feeling of comfort and security based on "the perception that one is an integral part of a community, place, organization, or institution" (p. 287). In short, feelings of

belongingness have two key components: “(i) a sense of valued involvement (the feeling of being valued, needed, and accepted in the system or environment); and (ii) a sense of fit (the person’s perception that his or her characteristics are shared with or complementary to those present in the system or environment)” (Hagerty et al. [1992, 1993] cited in Asher & Weeks, 2014, p. 287). Hagerty et al. (1992) argue further that belongingness is always linked to context (e.g., university, neighborhood, etc.) and therefore one can experience a sense of belonging in one context but not another.

Institutions contribute to students’ sense of belonging in a variety of ways, but perhaps most significantly through engagement efforts. Neary (2016) argues that “engagement activities give students a sense of being, belonging and becoming as well as feeling part of their institutions.” Research demonstrates that engagement experiences are critical for all students (Felten et al., 2016), but they are particularly important for students from underrepresented backgrounds. Indeed, students from “at-risk and nondominant groups often feel a profound sense of both social and academic nonbelonging when they arrive on campus” (Barnett & Felten, 2016, p. 9-10). If students are not engaged as they enter the university, their perceived lack of belonging can become exacerbated if peers, staff, and others on campus respond to them in negative or insensitive ways. Belonging uncertainty, “doubt as to whether one will be accepted or rejected by key figures in the social environment,” can “prove acute if rejection could be based on one’s negatively stereotyped social identity (Walton & Cohen, 2007b)” (Cohen & Garcia, 2008, p. 365). For students, then, a lack of engagement begets a lack of belonging, and vice versa.

Belonging and Academic Development

As faculty roles and responsibilities have shifted and as the contexts of higher education have changed both locally and globally (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013; Gibbs, 2013; McAlpine & Åkerlind, 2010; Paris, 2013), academic development is increasingly understood as a complicated and ongoing process of “‘self-authoring’ a professional identity as an educator” (Gunersel, Barnett, & Etienne, 2013, p. 35)—a process that involves faculty finding a sense of belonging within a discipline and an institution. Like students, a sense belonging for faculty is contextual, and tensions often emerge among faculty members’ individual identities, their disciplinary and institutional affiliations, and their social contexts (O’Meara, Terosky, & Neumann, 2008).

Institutions contribute to faculty members’ sense of belonging in a variety of ways, but perhaps most systematically through academic development efforts. For instance, fostering a sense of belonging is often a primary focus of new faculty orientations (Sutherland & Taylor, 2011), especially for underrepresented faculty as they strive to “establish ‘home’” on a campus that may not historically have been a welcoming place (Mayo & Chhuon, 2014, p. 227; see also Montero-Sieburth, 2000). This sense of belonging is essential because, as a major study of faculty careers in the United States concluded: “in all the work faculty do—whether in choosing research questions, mentoring students, crafting pedagogies, or designing community outreach—they involve themselves; they must ‘be there’ and ‘be in it’ to do it” (O’Meara et al., 2008, p. 179). For faculty, then, as for students, a sense of belonging involves feeling a part of

and making a difference in what they do on campus, and absent a sense of belonging, they cannot fully settle into their academic “home.”

On Partnership and Belonging

As student-faculty pedagogical partnership has emerged as a promising approach to fostering both student engagement (Bryson, 2014) and academic development (Bovill & Felten, 2016), there is growing evidence that such practices are closely linked with a more general sense of belonging to the institution in which the partnership takes place. Indeed, Curran and Millard (2016) report that 93% of students who worked in student-staff partnerships at Birmingham City University felt they had a greater sense of belonging at the institution. This belonging develops, as Matthews (2016) has argued, because “the linchpin of partnership is a relational process between students and academics/staff underpinned by a mindset” (Matthews, 2016)—what we have called an ethic of reciprocity (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017). Student-faculty pedagogical partnerships are, therefore, especially effective at fostering a sense of belonging through that relational process underpinned by an ethic of reciprocity.

In our experiences of facilitating and analyzing student-faculty pedagogical partnerships, we have found that it is through the interaction of three dynamic processes that this sense of belonging emerges. One process is partners’ engagement in meaningful work together. That collaboration both requires and generates the second process: the creation of spaces and opportunities for exploration and growth. The third process, which informs and is informed by both the others, is regular and ongoing affirmation of all partners. Partners engage in these three processes cyclically and iteratively, and the weave they create through their movement among them generates a sense of belonging for both partners. Below we briefly outline each of these processes, highlighting how traditionally marginalized students and staff experience partnerships.

Valued involvement in meaningful, collaborative work

Student-faculty partnerships vary in shape and form, but all are rooted in collaborative work that is premised on respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). Engagement with some common task is foundational to partnership, creating what Reckson (2014) calls “a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose” that is not the norm in student-faculty interactions in higher education. As one student partner put it, “I felt like I could create change or make an impact because I was working as a **partner** alongside those that are typically viewed as having the power (faculty)” (student quoted in Cook-Sather, 2015, emphasis in original).

The literature brims with examples of students reflecting on the value and meaning they derive from partnering with faculty (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Faculty, however, also recognize the value of doing meaningful work together with student partners. For instance, a first-year economics professor described her relationship with a fourth-year undergraduate partner,

Miriam, as transformational:

I found that having Miriam in the room strengthened my resolve to pursue the goals we established for me and for my students.... Miriam helped support me in the face of all of [my] anxieties. She affirmed my qualification and capability to teach the writing skills that are important in my field. She also reassured me that my expectations for student writing were not at all unrealistic. She reminded me that I had the authority and the responsibility to provide critical feedback to my students and suggested that they would be more likely to appreciate than to resent being corrected. (Binder, 2016, pp. 2-3)

Miriam, who describes herself “as a woman of color and as an ambassador for other underrepresented students,” explains how the partnership program in which she and her faculty partner participated “builds feelings of belonging by building a community of people who are interested in pedagogy and issues of social justice and compensating the time we spend together.” The sense of “camaraderie and shared purpose” of working with a student partner, the experience of working “alongside” a faculty partner, the power of using the first-person plural “we” about pedagogical work—these create a sense of connection, meaning, and value. The shared work of partnerships, in short, provides a strong foundation for both students and faculty to cultivate engagement and belonging.

Creation of spaces and opportunities for exploration and growth

Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) contend that “partnership learning communities” are at the heart of all student-faculty partnerships. These communities “facilitate deep connections between staff and students and lead to enhanced learning and motivation for all community members” (p. 28). We have described these elsewhere as liminal spaces within which partners engage in a “balanced give and take not of commodities but of perspectives” (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017, p. 176).

By creating such spaces and opportunities, partnerships nurture the types of experiences and relationships that contribute to belonging. As Cook-Sather & Porte (2017) put it, “Staff and students who engage in reciprocal reaching across the fluid, open spaces of pedagogical partnerships begin to support pedagogies that turn our differences from divides into possibilities for more life-affirming human connection.” One student partner reflected on how she found her pedagogical partnership program to be “a space of affirmation” that itself is always growing and that “encourages the growth of others” (Student partner, Personal Communication, April 27, 2016). And a faculty partner reflected: “I deeply appreciate the space that [my student partner] and I have created in which I can talk more about how I feel in the classroom rather than focusing on technical areas, that at least for me are less relevant in the search of becoming a better knowledge facilitator!” (Informal reflection on partnership work).

These spaces and opportunities for exploration may be particularly important for students and faculty who feel marginalized in higher education and who often lack such spaces on campus

(McCabe, 2016). In a partnership between a faculty member of color and a student partner of color, for instance, the faculty member noted “race was a very open topic because we both self identified [as people of color].” Although—or perhaps because—she and her student partner disagreed about how explicit and public one should be about one’s racial identity as a teacher, the conversation was a generative one. The faculty partner explained: “Dealing with the uncomfortable places real conversations can take you allows you to reconstruct more productive approaches to the classroom” (faculty partner quoted in Cook-Sather, 2015).

Affirmation of and by all partners

Finding a space to fit informs students’ sense of belonging. A student who self-identifies as a Chinese national explained how the space of her partnership program helped her “find a place on campus” and “identify more with Bryn Mawr College and get more involved.” The experience of partnership, she continued, “built my confidence and enthusiasm about the Bryn Mawr experience” (all excerpts from student partner quoted in Cook-Sather, 2015). This student’s partnership, in other words, provided affirmation that comes of feeling one has a place and is an integral part of a learning community (Asher & Weeks, 2014); scholars have demonstrated that such involvement and belonging are necessary for student engagement and success (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005).

Faculty partners offer similar perspectives, highlighting how affirmation can lead to growth. One explained:

[My student partner] provided plenty of positive reinforcement (which was great, very empowering) and identified a couple of issues to work on/watch out for in the future. It’s funny, it is so easy to think that only negative criticism will suggest change...but that really isn’t true. Having something that works pointed out is just as effective, since it can lead you to think, “Oh, I should do that more!” or, “How can I work that into future classes/discussions?” (Informal reflection on partnership work).

By affirming relationships between students and faculty, partnerships act as “a process through which people buttress their self-integrity by asserting or manifesting some value that is important to them (Steele, 1988; see also Sherman & Cohen, 2006)” (Cohen & Garcia, 2008, p. 368). Identifying, getting more involved, building confidence, pursuing positive change—these are both the processes and the outcomes of meaningful, collaborative work if affirmation of and by all partners is the modus operandi of partnership.

Where All Belong

A sense of belonging is important for all in higher education. The “sense of camaraderie and shared purpose” (Reckson 2014) that faculty can find in partnership with students is complemented by students’ experiences of partnership: as a U.S.-born student who identifies

as white explained, she felt like “a more legitimate member of the community” because she “contributed something to the schools” as well as did her “best to help future teachers and learners on the campus” (student partner quoted in Cook-Sather, 2015).

Especially for underrepresented students and faculty who endure a “daily barrage of racial microaggressions” (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 70), finding and feeling empathy, connection, and empowerment can transform their sense of themselves and their engagement with others. One self-identified African-American student captured what many students of color have expressed in our partnerships programs: “I feel like being a [partner] literally gave me a voice...[and] made me feel like who I am is more than enough—that my identity, my thoughts, my ideas are significant and valuable” (student partner quoted in Cook-Sather, 2015). Similarly, a faculty member of color explained that through working with two different student partners, both of whom self-identified as people of color, she was able to rethink her role and sense of responsibility for the discourse and engagement in the classroom; as she put it, she came to realize that she need not “be the only voice speaking” in the learning and teaching process (faculty partner quoted in Cook-Sather, 2015).

When all voices are welcomed into the dialogue that is key to partnership, when each one has value and finds fit, partners experience a reinforcing cycle of collaborating, exploring, and affirming. In this way, partnership is a powerful means to cultivate belonging in both student engagement and faculty development efforts.

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