Creating Inclusive Classrooms with Faculty-Student Pedagogical Partnerships[*]

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Abstract:

As political science faculty, we often confront controversial topics in our classrooms. The general decline in respectful political discourse in the United States makes creating inclusive classrooms for all our students crucial, and perhaps, more difficult than it was five or ten years ago. One strategy we have found useful in our classrooms is creating pedagogical partnerships between faculty and students.

Our institution, William and Mary, prides itself on opportunities it provides for faculty and student collaboration. This collaboration comes in a variety of forms; at W&M the opportunity for student-faculty collaboration in creating knowledge through discipline-specific research is one of the most highly valued of these practices. The literature provides substantial evidence of the benefits afforded to students through these "high impact learning opportunities" (Kuh 2008).

While engaged research opportunities are certainly valuable, there is also substantial evidence that faculty-student partnerships with a pedagogical focus, another kind of high impact learning opportunity, provide significant benefits to participating faculty and students (Cook-Sather, et. al. 2014). Further research finds that faculty-student partnerships involving students from historically underrepresented groups provide significant benefits for student partners (Cook-Sather 2018). In this paper, we explore the use of faculty-student partnerships focused on making classrooms more inclusive.

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Many of us have experienced political science classrooms that have become more divisive environments as the political climate has become more polarized and public discourse has become more caustic and vitriolic.[1] This is perhaps particularly true in teaching about U.S. politics and the relevant institutions, but certainly extends to the global environment as well. At the same time, increasingly prominent acts of racial discrimination have been made visible to larger audiences as cell phones and their cameras have become ubiquitous. Most prominent among these incidents may be the horrific acts of police violence against people of color, and particularly Black people. With George Floyd's murder in May 2020 recorded in broad daylight, many previously unengaged Americans joined the movement to stop police violence and fight for greater equality more generally.

At the same time, many on college campuses continued and/or renewed efforts to diversify their faculties and student bodies, as well as their curricular offerings. Some, like Ohio State University, Dartmouth, Indiana University and UC Berkeley began new hiring initiatives, including cluster hires.[2] Ohio State University President Kristina Johnson announced an initiative through which the University planned to hire 150 new faculty under a new race, inclusion, social equity program (RAISE). Of those faculty, Johnson set a goal of 100 "underrepresented and BIPOC hires in all fields of scholarship."[3]

Efforts such as those undertaken by Ohio State are admirable, but many schools lack the funding and/or support to engage in such a cost-intensive program. And these efforts take time. Even as faculty have become more diverse over time, they are not keeping pace with a much more diverse student body. Recent research published in Inside Higher Ed has found that if colleges and universities seek a faculty that is representative of the U.S. population, they will need to diversify at a rate 3.5 times the current pace.[4] However, that research actually points out problems with what they refer to as "individualistic solutions" like cluster hires that can lead to "poaching" of faculty.

As of the fall 2020, the National Center for Educational Statistics reported that nearly 75% of full-time college faculty at degree-granting postsecondary institutions were white; 39% were white males and 35% were white females. Another 7% of faculty were Asian/Pacific Islander males and 5% were Asian/Pacific Islander females. Black female faculty accounted for about 4% of all

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[1]Pew Research Center, "Public Highly Critical of Public Discourse in the U.S.," June 19, 2019. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/06/19/public-highly-critical-of-state-of-political-discourse-in-the-u-s/

[2] Liz Farmer. "3 in 4 Professors are White. Here's How Colleges are Trying to Diversify Faculty," Higher Ed Dive. December 21, 2021. https://www.highereddive.com/news/3-in-4-professors-are-white-heres-how-colleges-are-trying-to-diversify-fa/616424/

[3] Kristina M. Johnson, "2021 State of the University Address," Ohio State University. February 18, 2021. https://president.osu.edu/speeches/sotu2021

[4] Colleen Flaherty. "Faculty Diversification Must Accelerate, Report Says," Inside Higher Ed. December 6, 2022. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/12/06/study-finds-true-faculty-diversity-possible-2050

college faculty, and Black males, Hispanic males, and Hispanic females each accounted for 3% of full-time faculty.[5] Clearly much work remains in our efforts to diversify our faculties.

And as is so often the case in the United States, those fighting for equality face significant backlash by those determined to maintain the status quo and reinforce the system of White supremacy from which they benefit. Public education, including higher education, has been a target of attack in the backlash against pursuits of greater equality. Such attacks on public education are not new. Indeed, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have long been the focus of racist threats of violence. Joy Williamson-Lott, dean of the University of Washington Graduate School who studies the history of Black educational institutions, asserts that as these institutions "represent the drive for equal opportunity and a threat to white supremacy in the South" they have been "deliberately underfunded" in efforts to limit their success.[6] During a week in early February 2022, more than a dozen HBCUs had to lock down their campuses due to bomb threats.

Other non-violent but certainly substantial attacks on higher education have come in the form of critiques of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts at campuses across the United States. Governor Ron DeSantis's attacks critical race theory, Advanced Placement courses in African American history, and his plan to defund DEI in Florida's public colleges and universities is one of the most systematic statewide efforts, but he is far from the only state political leader engaging in such rhetoric.[7]

Higher educational institutions face a number of structural barriers to achieving an inclusive and equitable environment. These institutions are not historically structured to support a multi-cultural, multi-racial, socioeconomically diverse, and diversely-abled environment community at their institutions. Curricula are centered around one-type of student audience (white, upper-class, college-educated family, heterosexual/heteronormative, male, US native) and depending on whether or not students fit one or multiple characteristics of this type of student audience, may be significantly disadvantaged in their educational experience at the institution as their faculty, staff, and resources may not be able to support their academic experience.

Sanger (2020) discusses the impact of "inclusive pedagogy" as a means to provide students from historically marginalized backgrounds, and for all students in general, with greater access to "equitable access and opportunity" in course curriculum and classroom experience[8]. This is in contrast to the stance of allowing multicultural and/or marginalized students to recreate their

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[5] National Center for Education Statistics, "Race/Ethnicity of College Faculty."
https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61
[6] Tat Bellamy-Walker, "HBCUs Have Long Been A Target for Racial Backlash," NBC News, February 4, 2022.
https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/hbcus-long-target-racial-backlash-rcna14382
[7] Jack Stripling, "DeSantis Aims to Cut College Diversity Efforts; New College Ousts President," The Washington Post. January 31, 2023.
[8] Sanger, Catherine Shea. 2020. "Inclusive Pedagogy and Universal Design Approaches for Diverse Learning Environments." Diversity and Inclusion in Global Higher Education: 31–71. doi: 10.1007/978-981-15-1628-3_2.

own academic experience, outside of the classroom, to support the insufficient accommodations for their needs, otherwise known as a "deficit approach" to teaching (diverse) students.[9]

Political science faculty, for a variety of reasons, may not teach with a consideration of students' needs. A lack of diversity in political science faculty may lead multicultural students to miss out on an equally beneficial, academic experience as compared to their counterparts who are able to see themselves reflected in the field. Additionally, the political science field has shown "little systematic effort" to embed intersectional pedagogical practices in the classroom that would allow them to structurally incorporate student experiences, especially those reflecting the diversity of students' experiences.[10] In addition to higher educational institutions' historical and cultural makeup, faculty, particularly political science faculty, may not be prepared to teach students coming from more diverse backgrounds and experiences. They may perceive pedagogical practices as being too complex and student resistance too high. These perceptions create barriers to incorporating new pedagogical practices in the classroom.

Despite such barriers, there is clearly an urgent need to implement pedagogical practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in political science classrooms, as well as college classrooms more generally. For example, these barriers emphasize a need for political science faculty members to restructure their courses to effectively and inclusively teach content incorporating all of their students' backgrounds and experiences. Doing so encourages the concept of critical thinking and analysis, instead of pushing a narrative of an ideal democracy based on experiences shared only by those who look like the faculty member.

Student resistance towards pedagogy, especially as it relates to diversity, identity, and inequality, may be due to insufficient investment in foundational concepts necessary to consider diverse perspectives. Additionally, faculty engaging in these themes in their classrooms, may not have pre-existing classroom practices necessary to navigate such critical, and simultaneously sensitive issues. That preparation is essential to effectively facilitate open, interactive, and inclusive classroom experiences for students and faculty.

Lastly, student resistance may stem from a lack of understanding from faculty of the experiences that students bring into the classroom. Additionally, faculty may be reluctant to incorporate their own experiences into the classroom, which may discourage students from being vulnerable and open to fallibility relating to course themes.

Preparation for effectively utilizing inclusive and pedagogical teaching practices can come in a variety of forms. For example, during moments of tense discussions between students of differing experiences, perhaps such as classroom dialogue on police brutality or other manifestations of injustice, faculty may find it helpful to have already developed communication strategies to navigate the situation and to manage their own emotions as well as students'

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[9] ibid.

[10] Amy Cabrera Rasmussen (2014) Toward an Intersectional Political Science Pedagogy, Journal of Political Science Education, 10:1, 102-116, DOI: 10.1080/15512169.2013.862501

emotions and wellbeing. Such strategies can include seeking clarification from students perceived to be making offensive comments, before jumping to conclusions - as well as creating space for "learning opportunities" for students in the event that such comments were actually offensive.[11] In collaboration with students, faculty can also utilize the concept of ground rules to make students aware of the expectations by which they must abide. Students are also likely to respect those ground rules because they were established with students' interests in mind, not to mention their input.[12]

Student-faculty pedagogical partnerships create opportunities to structure courses around fallibility. They have the potential to allow faculty and students to enter the classroom with the intention of learning and developing critical thinking skills, rather than focusing on ego, perfection, or supremacy. There is substantial evidence that faculty-student partnerships with a pedagogical focus provide significant benefits to participating faculty and students.[13] The literature also provides substantial evidence of the benefits such partnerships afford to students through these "high impact learning opportunities."[14] Further research finds that faculty-student partnerships involving students from historically underrepresented groups provide significant benefits for student partners.[15]

Confronting many of the hurdles discussed above, we sought to determine whether pedagogical partnerships between faculty and students might be a strategy to at least bridge some of the gaps that exist between primarily white faculty and an increasingly diverse student body. Could pedagogical partnerships help us navigate our classrooms, be more responsive to our students' needs, increase a sense of belonging for both students and faculty, provide students partners with a direct means of influencing their program's curricular offerings and their classroom environments?

W&M Faculty-Student Pedagogical Partner Program
In support of a university curriculum requirement, and in collaboration with a student who had compiled research on the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) experience at William & Mary, faculty fellows with the Center for Liberal Arts (CLA) developed a Faculty-Student Pedagogical Partnership Program (PPP). W&M is a public liberal arts university in Williamsburg, Virginia and the CLA is the institution on W&M's campus charged with helping faculty develop courses to serve our general education, or College (COLL), curriculum.

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[11] "Navigating Difficult Moments." Derek Bok Center, Harvard University. https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/navigating-difficult-moments (February 7, 2023).

[12] Garibay, Juan Carlos. 2015. "Creating a Positive for Diversity - UCLA Equity, Diversity & Inclusion." Creating a Positive Classroom Climate for Diversity . https://equity.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/CreatingaPositiveClassroomClimateWeb-2.pdf (February 7, 2023)

[13] Alison Cook-Sather, Catherine Bovill, and Peter Felton. 2014. Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

[14] Kuh, George. 2008. High Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who has Access to Them, and Why They Matter. Washington DC: AAC&U.

[15] Alison Cook-Sather, 2018. "Listening to Equity-Seeking Perspectives: How Students' Experiences in Pedagogical Partnership can Inform Wider Discussions of Student Success," Higher Education Research & Development. Vol 37, Issue 5: 923-936.

The goal of the PPP was to make classrooms more inclusive and to improve faculty teaching practices to better support the university's new curricular requirement on diversity, equity, and justice. That requirement "enhances students' knowledge and facilitates their critical analysis of the workings of power, privilege, and inequity in U.S. society and globally, past and present."[16]

Our partnership program began when one of us (Nemacheck) was the director of our Center for the Liberal Arts, the institution on W&M's campus charged with helping faculty develop courses to serve our general education, or College (COLL), curriculum. The first student pedagogical fellow (Mered) worked directly with faculty on the partnership program, first as a student and then in a one-year post-baccalaureate position. The program we structured draws heavily on partnerships discussed in Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Fenton (2014).[17]

Our first student fellows were recruited based on the recommendation of our founding student pedagogical partner and faculty involved in DEI initiatives on campus. Each of the SPPs was a third- or fourth-year student who had prior experience with DEI work on campus as well as their own experiences as students of color at W&M. The faculty partners provided some initial training for the SPPs in terms of understanding the role of the CLA and the new curricular requirement in process, the structure of the institution and the faculty role in their departments, in shaping their department's curriculum, and shared governance in the university more broadly. Each of the faculty partners also met individually with their SPP to discuss the courses on which they would be working together, the content, and any particular issues on which they were especially keen to get SPP feedback.

Faculty and student partners met regularly throughout the semester to discuss their courses. Each faculty member and student developed their own process for generating feedback. To some extent that feedback came during conversations and in response to specific faculty questions, but SPPs also generated memos providing their own observations from sitting in on the classes. There was no one policy on how the SPPs should be introduced (if at all) to the students enrolled in the classes. Whether and how they are introduced might well affect the experiences of faculty, SPPs, and the other students enrolled in the courses.

W&M compensated each SPP for their work. Each student partner received $1500 over the course of the semester. SPPs were not enrolled in the courses in which they were pedagogical partners and were not given any grade.

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[16] William & Mary's Center for the Liberal Arts. https://www.wm.edu/as/center-liberal-arts/coll-350/index.php

[17] Alison Cook-Sather, Catherine Bovill, and Peter Felton. 2014. Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Initial Analysis

As a very early first cut at assessing the potential of a program like the PPP, we obtained feedback from several of our former student pedagogical partners (SPPs).[18] These former SPPs worked with the PPP during the 2019-2020 academic school year.[19] The fall 2019 partnerships formed the basis for a more expansive program that included a significant training course for student partners during the spring semester of 2020. Unfortunately, by March 2020, W&M shut down its campus in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and shifted to online learning. Those partnerships already in place for spring 2020 went on as scheduled, but the training program ground to a stop. In future iterations of this paper, we will survey those students involved in the spring 2020 training program (who were scheduled to begin work as pedagogical partners in fall 2020, but the program was again halted by COVID). We will also analyze an extension of the PPP within W&M's Government Department—a student diversity fellows program now in its third year of operation.

Although we are very early in our analysis, our former SPPs have provided some reflections on their experiences in the program that will inform our future analyses.[20] As we expected, being compensated for their work played an important role in affirming the SPPs' legitimacy to the students themselves. One former SPP remarked that they "really could not conceptualize that my existence and contributions were experiences worthy of being compensated" prior to being a part of the PPP. Faculty partners' genuine receptivity to working with student partners also contributed to SPPs' sense of empowerment as did the fact that students were not enrolled in the course or being graded. One former SPP addressed the importance of removing the grading dynamic to their relationship with their professor in the classroom: "Not being graded in the classroom was a vital piece as a student fellow, being graded would mean that the professor is the proprietor of knowledge, but when you are a fellow and not getting a grade, the fellow can counter that notion that the faculty member is always correct." This nuance of the faculty-student partner dynamic was not an angle we anticipated, but it was an important benefit that program feature provided.

Several of the former SPPs also commented on the need for student partner training and for opportunities to know faculty members prior to engaging in a partnership with them. Training students prior to their entrance into the classroom was certainly lacking in our first iteration of the program. As mentioned above, we had begun implementation of a semester-long training program in the spring of 2020; unfortunately, the pandemic ended that effort prior to its completion. Incorporating such training is essential to a program like this and would likely help to ameliorate the power dynamic that seems to almost inevitably exist between faculty and students.

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[18] The participants differed slightly in their relationships to the program, as one joined for a shorter period of time than the other two participants, one was from a different graduating class, and the other participant was an original co-creator for the program.

[19] We collected qualitative responses from former SPPs in January 2023.

[20] The questions we asked each of the former SPPs appears in Appendix A.

Each of the former SPPs commented on the often attenuated, but persistent power imbalance between faculty and student pedagogical partners. Student partners commented on factors that might increase the power imbalance, such as if the student needed to take a future course from the faculty partner, especially if it were a graduation requirement. They also suggested that although they had good relationships with their faculty partners, had they not, they might have been hesitant to provide honest feedback. Perhaps most concerning, the student partners suggested that a poor experience due to their shared or differing identities with faculty partners, particularly for SPPs who are members of minoritized populations who might have limited access to mentors at their institution, could be particularly harmful to the student partner's well-being.

Although the former SPPs identified important issues that could worsen the power imbalance between faculty and students, they still felt their own participation in the program was beneficial to them individually and to students enrolled in the course. One former SPP commented that "the faculty member will never be equal to the student advisor," that relationship can work because "the faculty member trusts their [student partner] and views their role as important." The same SPP emphasized that "there doesn't need to be an equal power dynamic, but it needs to be a space of vulnerability." The former SPPs also expressed that the existence of SPPs in the classroom provides opportunities for a more a balanced power dynamic between faculty and students. Having SPPs in the classroom might allow students who are enrolled in the course to more effectively communicate their needs to the faculty through the SPP and that opportunity can increase overall student influence over their own learning and the classroom environment.

In terms of more specific reflections on political science classroom. The former SPPS observed a distinct lack of discussion on concepts relating to identity, diversity, and equity, primarily in their introductory political science courses. They also noted that their political science classes lacked important nuance in discussing the demographics of communities studied in the course. The former SPPs evaluated the failure to discuss these concepts in introductory courses differently. But one who did take other courses in which concepts of identity, diversity, and equity were plainly addressed noted that the "human-centered curriculum" in those classes was fulfilling.

Conclusion and Next Steps

We are clearly at an early stage in our assessment of W&M's Faculty-Student Pedagogical Partnership Program. But it seems clear that the PPP allowed students to incorporate their own experiences and identities in the classroom, an experience not very common in higher education classrooms. And it is an even more uncommon experience for students who do not typically see themselves reflected in course curricula and discussion.

There are many ways colleges and universities are attempting to diversify their faculty, students, and course offerings. We do not contend that partnerships between faculty and students is the only or best way to meet universities' goals. But the partnerships can be an effective effort that may have other positive externalities like increasing a sense of belonging among faculty and students, making universities and/or programs within them more attractive to future faculty recruits, particularly faculty from minoritized communities. These partnerships could also create

a new avenue for student advocacy and student political power at both the classroom and institutional level.

As we continue our analysis, we will home in on a few important questions and expand our set of student and faculty partners in our analysis. Based on our initial feedback, it is clear that protecting students from professional exploitation or ostracization from faculty due to their role as student partners is crucial. How we can we best structure partnerships to provide that protection? More formal training for students, as we had begun prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, is essential. But faculty involved in these partnerships would also benefit from similar training.

We will also continue our work by focusing our analysis on implementing a program like W&M's PPP in political science courses in particular. At W&M we have begun that work and we will incorporate additional analysis and data on that process to date.

In short, we think student-faculty pedagogical partnership programs hold great promise. As with most programs, there are certainly problems to be addressed. But these programs are perhaps particularly important because they are possible in the near term in most institutions. They do not require huge monetary investments, though it is important to appropriately compensate student partners. These partnerships could substantially improve classroom environments for students presently on our campuses. We owe it to them to improve their experiences now as we continue to pursue other important structural changes leading to greater inclusion down the road.

Appendix A—Questions Posed to Former Student Pedagogical Partners

1. If you have taken a Government or Political Science Course at the University, what was your experience?
    a. How did you see yourself reflected in the curriculum, if at all?
    b. Did your ability to see, or not see, yourself in the curriculum impact your learning experience in the classroom?
2. As a Student Fellow, part of your experience involved observing a professor teach one of their courses. Utilizing your own experiences as a student, and then as a Student Fellow, what was your experience like observing the professor?
3. For your services, you were compensated for being a Student Fellow and not graded in the class you were observing.
    a. How did it feel to be compensated for your work?
    b. How did it feel to know that you would not be graded in the classroom that you were observing?
    c. Did you feel that these conditions contributed, and were sufficient, to providing an equal power dynamic and exchange for services you were providing as a Student Fellow?
    d. If not, what barriers existed to creating a safe and equal dynamic in the program?
4. What impact, if any, did your role as a Student Fellow have on your overall wellbeing as a student?
5. Has your experience with the student pedagogical partnership program had any impact on your educational or professional experience during and/or after your William & Mary college experience?
6. What power dynamics existed during your time as a Fellow, and did such dynamics impact an equitable working and learning environment
7. What limitations or conflicts existed, if any, for you as a Student Fellow?
8. What role did personal identity play, if at all, on your experience as a student fellow?
9. Did you feel empowered in your position to do your job effectively? If so, why? If not, why
10. How could the Program have been better to you as a Student Fellow?
11. If you could participate again, what would you change about the Program?
12. What ways do you think having student-faculty pedagogical practices in the classroom impact the classroom experience for students? Faculty?
13. Do you think your work as a student pedagogical fellow improved the inclusivity of the classrooms in which you worked? In classrooms on campus more generally?
14. Rate your experience as a student pedagogical fellow from 1-10 with 10 being an incredible experience and 1 being horrible.