

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Exploring belonging in a pedagogical partnership program

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Fostering a greater sense of inclusion and belonging was the explicit goal of the faculty-student pedagogical partnership program we developed at Vassar College, in which belonging also assumed some unexpected forms. Our program, called Student-Teacher Engaged Pedagogical Partnerships¹ arose from the Inclusive Pedagogy and Curriculum Working Group (IPCWG) in the Engaged Pluralism Initiative² at Vassar. EPI provides a unique opportunity for students, faculty, administrators, and staff to regularly interact through non-hierarchical forms of engagement and dialogue. One of EPI's seven working groups, IPCWG, provides a space where pedagogy can be holistically reimaged and where students, administrators, and faculty collaboratively develop inclusive pedagogies.

Before the pandemic became our collective dominant reality, IPCWG embarked on a pilot faculty-student pedagogical project modeled after the SaLT Program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges³. In the program, a student partner attends a class weekly to observe their faculty partner's teaching practices. In subsequent meetings with the faculty partner, the student partner shares observations and reflections from class, and both work together to adapt pedagogical practices. The aims of this program are two-fold: to help faculty reflect on inclusivity and belonging in their classrooms and to empower students to participate in shaping what an inclusive classroom looks and feels like at Vassar. The pilot included four faculty-student partners and the administrative partner who would be coordinating the students.

One person, however, was not initially included in the project: Nandeeta (the student co-author of this piece). Nandeeta was a student whose schedule during the Fall 2019 semester made it difficult for her to participate in IPCWG and the emerging faculty-student pedagogy partnership. By the Spring 2020 semester, again because of scheduling, she was unable to match up with a faculty partner. Nevertheless, Nandeeta remained both determined and committed to participating in the pilot program.

This reflective essay tells the story of how Nandeeta's indefatigable persistence altered the shape of this pilot project. Nandeeta's efforts revealed a certain ignorance, or unawareness, in Jonathon's (the faculty coordinator of the pilot and faculty co-author of this piece) approach to building the STEPP program. Realizing this unawareness created novel ways to include students beyond the faculty-student pair and new possibilities to develop and foster spaces of

¹STEPP; see <https://pages.vassar.edu/stepp/>

²EPI; see <https://offices.vassar.edu/engaged-pluralism/>

³SaLT Program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges

belonging. Nandeeta's efforts led to the creation of a student coordinator position for the pilot, and her experience in that position became instrumental in several ways, including in helping to assess the pilot in real time as the pandemic broke out and after the semester was over, as well as in helping to keep the pilot alive for the coming year when the college's institutional support remained diffuse. Nandeeta's story exemplifies the way student initiative, when given space and opportunity, becomes the crucial connective tissue for an emerging program in student-faculty partnership. This essay takes the form of a conversation, where Nandeeta and Jonathon recount their experiences developing a pedagogical partnership program and how it led them to reflect differently on belonging.

EXPERIENCES OF INSTITUTIONAL BELONGING AS CONTEXT FOR STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNERSHIP

Nandeeta: How did you get involved in EPI, Jonathon?

Jonathon: The values EPI embodies drew me to participate. EPI was the first attempt at Vassar to institutionally and holistically acknowledge that community-building is everyone's work. Vassar's campus changed enormously for the better when the college went to a need-blind admissions policy in 2008. However, the college did not adequately prepare for what it would mean to build cultures of belonging in this new context. For a decade, we were reacting belatedly. With EPI, we finally are working to proactively envision and create cultures we desire.

Nandeeta: The qualities you describe appealed to me as well and drew me to Vassar. The trusting, positive atmosphere of learning and community made me want to contribute and grow at Vassar. I think such an environment mirrors spaces conducive to fostering belonging. To create spaces of belonging is to allow people to channel their experiences and to grow in the ways that they desire. During my first year at Vassar, I found that EPI was at the heart of this sentiment of inclusion and belonging. I loved how it aimed to enact change, and I was intrigued by the idea of non-hierarchical, inclusive dialogue among faculty, administrators, and students to establish community.

Jonathon: It sounds like you were looking for something that would not only offer a model for change but would also enable you to feel like you belonged to the community. While I've found that EPI doesn't dissolve all hierarchy amongst faculty, administrators, and students, it makes hierarchies a subject of conversation in its everyday work and allows community members to disrupt, subvert, or question those hierarchies. My experience of EPI work has been freeing in the ways that I've had students and administrators challenge me, offer their views clearly, and lead IPCWG in directions that speak to their interests—all of which has made me more effective in my role as a faculty member. It's highlighted that we all are involved in teaching and learning and can do neither without each other.

Did it matter to you that EPI was not framed in terms of identity, like race, gender, sexuality? While those terms live within EPI, EPI is not specifically oriented toward any of these. What was it about how EPI was configured that drew you to it?

Nandeeta: I think I was drawn to EPI specifically because EPI is open and available to students of all identities. While I understand how defining identities can be liberating, I sometimes find them to be limiting and not as significant aspects or expressions of the self. From my experience and perception of EPI, the focus is more on growth, trust, and inclusion

than it is on specific identities. It is possible for everyone to aspire to have those qualities and personify them to a certain extent. Personally, I hope to grow as a person in relation to those qualities, and I saw that EPI could offer me a community and space to develop.

BUILDING BELONGING THROUGH STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNERSHIP

Nandeeta: How would you trace the development of STEPP?

Jonathon: During the Fall 2019 semester, IPCWG was on the road to creating a pedagogical partnership program. We had visited and were in conversation with several teaching and learning centers at other colleges, and the partnership work that Alison Cook-Sather, director of the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, pioneered attracted us immediately (Cook-Sather et al., 2019). We knew we could create partnership pairs within our working group and begin to experiment on our own. Unfortunately, however, due to your being unable to make our meeting times, you were unable to participate in the fall work, and then we ran into the same problem in the spring as well.

What remains vivid to me from January 2020 is your insistence on participating regardless. While I was busy trying to set up the partnership pairs, it quickly dawned on me that I was not creating a role and space for your participation. When you proposed the idea of a student coordinator role, where you would observe and document the pilot, it was impressed upon me that you were creating a role that added to our vision in an unanticipated way. What led you to be so invested in STEPP and to create a novel role in the program?

Nandeeta: Prior to EPI, I had not even imagined the concept of a pedagogical partnership. I just knew I wanted to be part of the pilot when I heard of the idea and realized I was so close to an opportunity to participate. I was amazed at how a program like STEPP could improve teaching practices, establish relationships, and give students a voice to share honest feedback. I wanted to learn as much as I could about pedagogical partnership programs, which prompted me to attend the orientation without expecting to participate. I think that seeking and gaining knowledge is analogous to seeking and gaining a sense of belonging. Due to sheer excitement about the program, I relentlessly searched for any way to be involved.

Jonathon: I'm really struck by what you just said: "I think that seeking and gaining knowledge is analogous to seeking and gaining a sense of belonging." Can you say more?

Nandeeta: Gradually, I came to understand my role as student coordinator of STEPP as a position for seeking and gaining knowledge about pedagogy, about faculty, and about student partners while simultaneously finding and creating a sense of belonging. While maintaining a very observational approach to documenting the program was a little isolating, when I began to take a more active role and interacted more with participants, I was able to brainstorm new ideas and feel supported and like I belonged. I found that there was an interesting balance between gaining knowledge and experience in the student coordinator role that contributed to or withheld me from a sense of belonging to the pilot. In this process of seeking belonging in a project that fascinated me, I unexpectedly improved my facilitation skills, developed meaningful relationships, and became more comfortable communicating with administrators and faculty. I've found that allowing my passion for pedagogical partnership work has led to tremendous growth and invaluable relationships. How have you found your experience in STEPP?

Jonathon: As a faculty coordinator, I enjoy offering an opportunity to faculty to acknowledge how hard teaching is and how much joy teaching brings us. At the university level, often, faculty are not encouraged to express fascination with and bottomless interest in the art of teaching in the same way that they do with their research. The ego structure of higher education is not set up to allow for uninhibited expressions of fulfillment in terms of teaching. I feel as though I've been working on the questions STEPP raises by myself for a long time, but having a program that explicitly centers these questions relating to teaching and learning has given me new energy.

For most faculty, there is little opportunity to reflect on an ongoing basis on the craft they devote the most time to during the school year: teaching. When I try to publish writing, I get an enormous amount of feedback from peer reviewers. That feedback, and the process of revising, makes for good writing. It's stunning to think that there are very few, if not no, equivalent practices that hold a mirror up to my teaching and offer suggestions on how to improve it. As a faculty partner, I see my student partner as the equivalent of a peer reviewer, someone who can offer me feedback on how parts of the course are working. My faculty-student partner conversations offer moments to explore questions or doubts. I become at ease and comfortable playing with the uncertainty of teaching.

How has trust-building worked for you? What are the sorts of experiences that created a trusting environment for you?

Nandeeta: I've found that it's often the simple gestures that develop a sense of belonging and trust. For example, checking in with each other during meetings creates a chance for vulnerability to be part of the conversation, which creates a sense of trust. Starting all STEPP and EPI meetings with check-ins helps me get to know participants as people. Especially in online interactions, I think that incorporating this "human" element provides that personal connection that otherwise might be missing.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING PARTNERSHIP AND BELONGING

Jonathon: How has your experience been planning for the Fall 2020 semester?

Nandeeta: I'm excited that I'll be able to plan for the continuation of STEPP through my role as a Grand Challenges intern. Grand Challenges⁴ is an initiative focused on inclusion in STEM. The documentation of the STEPP pilot was a valuable starting point, and over this summer, I've developed and reviewed applications; recruited faculty, students, and administrators; and organized meetings with participants. With the support of EPI over the summer, I developed and led a Summer STEPP pilot in Summer Immersion⁵ a program to support underrepresented first-years, where eight student partners provided feedback to faculty on teaching practices. By creating programs that foster inclusion and belonging, I feel empowered as an agent in my education. When I'm able to contribute to a community I care about, I develop a strong sense of belonging.

Jonathon: Is there anything else that you would like to do as student coordinator in the Fall 2020 semester? Would you recommend other institutions developing pedagogical partnership programs have a student coordinator position?

⁴ <https://www.vassar.edu/grand-challenges>

⁵ <https://summerimmersion.vassar.edu/>

Nandeeta: We will have 11 student-faculty pairs in the Fall 2020 semester! Pedagogical partnerships will prove to be especially helpful and supportive for student partners, faculty partners, and students in their classrooms due to the uncertainty of course formats (i.e., in-person, online, or hybrid models). While planning for STEPP Fall 2020, I've been reflecting on incorporating inclusion and belonging into the process of STEPP. For example, the number of student partners who applied vastly outnumbered the faculty partners invited. How else can these students who could not participate be involved? As STEPP is about building relationships and experiencing a reflective practice over prioritizing a desired outcome, it's crucial to consider these ideas in the process of its development.

I also hope to increase opportunities for support and connection over the Fall 2020 semester by hearing more ongoing feedback from participants, sharing useful resources, creating opportunities to virtually meet, and encouraging students to connect across higher education institutions. From STEPP, I've learned that creating a support network enhances a sense of belonging. The flexibility of the student coordinator position offers a lot of support to the program, and I absolutely think that other institutions starting programs like STEPP can incorporate a similar role. I also think it would be helpful to have co-student coordinators to encourage students to bounce ideas off one another and benefit from the emotional and structural support of the role. What have your learnings from STEPP been?

Jonathon: Faculty in roles like chair or director really need to be attuned to voices like yours, the voices of students who desire to contribute in ways that are outside of the plan. Those who plan projects need to open possibilities for others to intervene. As a project about developing relationships, unless I as a faculty coordinator am also doing that work, the project rings hollow. Without voices like yours, these projects are not partnerships. Having a student coordinator is crucial and communicates to participating faculty that STEPP is a project built on dialogue and mutual understanding throughout. You as student coordinator not only helped with organizing the program and offering a student perspective, you also shaped the scope of the pedagogical partnership program. You became someone whose critical voice ended up shaping the direction STEPP proceeded in and opened the possibility for reflection, research, and critical analysis of STEPP. I can't imagine being a faculty coordinator without a student coordinator.

My key realization, which your work on STEPP has impressed upon me, is a sense that students genuinely care about faculty's pedagogical well-being. Not simply because students want classes to be better for their classmates, but because they care about faculty development, want us to succeed, and help us succeed in the same way that faculty invest in and care for their students to see their intellectual and emotional growth. Your specific initiative embodies that vividly and runs through the entire program. Belonging is synonymous with a sense of mutual care.

LEARNING AND BELONGING IN THE COLLEGE COMMUNITY

Jonathon: How do you think of learning and belonging after your experiences in EPI and STEPP, Nandeeta?

Nandeeta: I've found that affirmation is an incredibly powerful tool that supports exploration of these challenging questions, and consequently, of the self. I never imagined leading the development of a program like STEPP, but EPI, Vassar's flexible curriculum, and you

and many faculty, administrators, and students have encouraged and allowed for this possibility. Having participated in STEPP and EPI, I feel more at home at Vassar, and I've grown in relation to the qualities—openness, inclusion, trust—I desire to embody.

Like you, I've discovered that academic success, for professors, administrators, and students, is built on relationships: a sense of belonging to one another and to the academic material. Relationships require growth and an open-minded approach to learning. By celebrating the collaborative nature of learning, I've realized how relationships in academia can create and foster a sense of belonging and success.

Jonathon: I too have understood vulnerability as a faculty member through a new lens. My experiences with learning to take notice and hear your voice—the energy, drive, and commitment you've given to STEPP—has re-tuned what I'm attentive to. It is not about which student can help me achieve what I think needs to happen. It is now about: how is a student talking about a project in ways that I don't fathom? It's as though a dial has been shifted: now I find myself listening to other frequencies, ones that are at first hard for me to hear, but that I sense demand my attention. Through this experience working with you, I've developed a sense of confidence and maybe even faith in the virtue of attuning myself to voices that speak in ways that reveal my misapprehensions and unawareness. Vulnerability, in this sense, is in the ready acknowledgment that sometimes I have no idea how to do something and that I'm responsible for creating openings for others to contribute, openings that insist upon my learning.

I've found that belonging is not synonymous with comfort. If I think of any intimate relationship that I have, that sense of intimacy comes from the richness of questions that those contexts allow. The more I'm in an environment of difficult-to-address questions, the more I feel like I belong. Your ability to create that environment, one which implicitly challenged my own competence, has increased my sense of what it means to work with students on projects together.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

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