

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Toward redressing inequities through partnership: A critical assessment of an equity-focused partnership initiative

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ABSTRACT

There is growing recognition of the potential for student-faculty/staff partnerships to attend to and redress inequities within postsecondary education. As a result, there are an increasing number of partnership initiatives and programs that foreground principles of equity and justice in their design and delivery. This article reports findings from research that assessed an equity-focused partnership initiative, piloted in 2019, at a research-intensive Canadian institution. We describe the distinctive features of the pilot, including our efforts to enhance equity in and through recruitment and support for student and faculty participants during the pilot, and report findings pertaining to outcomes, process indicators, and positionality and social location. The findings suggest tentatively positive outcomes for participants and contribute to existing scholarship by raising important complexities and limitations relating to issues of access, support, and scale of equity-focused partnerships.

KEYWORDS

student-faculty partnership, equity, access, justice, partnership scheme design

A sizable body of research documents the inequities that students and staff from equity-denied groups experience in post-secondary education (e.g., Henry et al., 2017; Quaye et al., 2020). Student-staff pedagogical partnership—a “collaborative, reciprocal process” (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 6) through which students and staff work together on aspects of teaching and learning such as course (re)design or pedagogical research (Healey et al., 2016)—has recently been positioned as one strategy that might contribute to redressing some of these institutional inequities (de Bie et al., 2021; Fraser & Usman, 2021). Partnership activities can support the development of more equitable teaching practices (Ameyaa et al., 2021; Anthony-Okeke et al., 2021; Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019; Davis et al., 2021), and some partnership programs have been intentionally developed to facilitate greater justice in postsecondary education (e.g., Cook-Sather, 2018; Leota & Sutherland, 2020). Moreover, scholars have noted that partnerships involving students who identify as members of equity-denied groups, such as members of Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQ+ and disabled communities, can help to counter some of the epistemic, affective, and ontological injustices such students often experience (de Bie et al., 2019; 2021; Colón García, 2017; Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021).

In this article, we present findings from research assessing an equity-focused partnership initiative that sought to realize some of these benefits while attending to cautions and challenges that have been noted in equity-focused partnership literature (e.g., Bindra et al. 2018; Ntem & Cook-Sather, 2018).

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Overview

In 2019, our project team of six (which included faculty, postdoctoral fellows, and students) piloted a new equity-specific stream of a larger Student Partners Program at our institution (see Woolmer et al., 2020 for information about the broader program). We ran this semester-long initiative twice (Winter and Fall 2019). Building on the successful model of the Students as Learners and Teachers Program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges (Cook-Sather, 2018) and on preliminary research about partnership and equity (de Bie et al., 2019; Marquis, de Bie et al., 2021), we sought to develop a program structure that supported equity-focused pedagogical partnerships and itself incorporated equity principles.

Faculty and instructors from across campus were invited to apply to participate in this stream, indicating the course(s) on which they hoped to work and any initial ideas they had for equity topics and interventions they wanted to explore. All applications were accepted. Instructor-provided information was then included in a call for student participants who identified as members of equity-denied groups.¹ Ultimately, 15 students and 10 faculty² members participated over the two terms, with one faculty member participating twice. The group of faculty participants included at least one person from each of the six Faculties on our

campus. Some student participants were enrolled in the program in which their faculty partner taught, while others came from different disciplines or programs than their partners.

Student-faculty pairs (or trios comprised of two students and one faculty member) worked in partnership on equity-relevant activities connected to a course the faculty partner was developing, teaching, or preparing to teach. These partners collaboratively developed processes and/or foci for their work, and partnered on activities such as syllabus review, gathering and/or discussing feedback from student partners or enrolled students, developing and/or offering additional learning opportunities for students (e.g., class activities, information and feedback about equity from student partners), or conducting ethics board-reviewed research. Partnerships variously attended to disability and accessibility, colonialism and decolonization, gender and queer/trans-positivity, racism, and intersectionality, among other equity concerns. Throughout each pilot term, practical, intellectual, and affective support was available from the project team as needed. All participants were also invited to attend an equity-focused orientation and biweekly student or faculty cohort meetings facilitated by student, postdoc and/or faculty members of the project team. Student partners were paid for their work on all of these activities.

Enhancing equity in and through the stream

In developing the equity stream, we attempted to consider and contribute to equity in several ways. By establishing an equity focus and inviting students from equity-denied groups to participate, we sought to support equity work and create opportunities for faculty and students—particularly students who experience structural oppression—to have their knowledge and experiences affirmed and mobilized in ways that might contribute to positive change (Quaye et al., 2020). We also aimed to attend to equity and justice within the stream itself, responding to concerns that have been identified in the partnership literature.

Most significantly, we were concerned about inequities of access to partnership opportunities (Bindra et al., 2018; Marquis et al., 2018; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Moore-Cherry et al., 2016). Existing research has documented barriers to attaining extracurricular partnership positions and has indicated that partnership often involves students with access to social and institutional privilege (Felten et al., 2013; Marquis et al., 2019; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021). In an effort to counter these trends, we invited members of equity-denied groups to apply for the stream and ensured that student positions were paid. We also developed application processes that attempted to push against narrow understandings of who might be qualified to take part. For example, while we did invite applying students to share experiences that they might have had working to advance equity, we defined equity work broadly and phrased this question so students could speak to interest rather than experience if they preferred. We also asked applicants to offer ideas for preventing or mediating situations of inequity they had witnessed as another way of inviting them to share knowledge that might not appear in a resume and stated (in the application criteria) that we aimed to engage students with a wide range of identities and experience. Rather than using our conventional recruitment process, we focused on recruiting through services and clubs for students from equity-denied groups and broader equity and social justice networks on campus (though we also advertised in an academic program in which the principal investigator teaches). When students applied,

members of our team created shortlists, drafted interview questions, and attended interviews with faculty participants.

Another concern identified in the literature is the possibility that partnership might reproduce unjust relations of power and/or create challenging kinds of emotional labour for participating students from equity-denied groups (de Bie, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021; Ntem & Cook-Sather, 2018; Pounder et al., 2016; Sarfaraz & Hartland, 2021; Verwoord & Smith, 2020; Yahlnaaw, 2019). To mitigate these risks and acknowledge the difficulty of participating in equity work, while also recognizing the need to attend to faculty experiences of partnership (Kupatadze, 2019; Marquis, Guitman et al., 2021), we held separate cohort meetings for student and faculty partners to debrief and receive support, drawing on related recommendations and practices (Cook-Sather et al., 2019; de Bie et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

As part of the pilot, we developed a research project that assessed the equity stream by exploring individuals' perceptions and experiences of working in partnership to enhance equity and the perceived equity-related outcomes of their work. This research was cleared by our institutional research ethics board and included two components: "pilot data" and "contextualizing data." The first of these involved collecting data from stream participants near the end of each term in which the pilot was run. We conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with seven participants (four faculty, three students) approximately 1 to 1.5 months before the end of the relevant term (with the exception of one interview, which happened ~2 months after term's end). We also gathered individually completed end-of-project reports ~2 months after the term was complete and received consent to use 17 of these (nine from students and eight from faculty) for this research.³ For the "contextualizing" portion of the research, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 people (faculty/staff and students) who had participated in the main Student Partners Program and worked on projects that they identified as having equity-relevant components. Given the small number of equity stream participants, these additional interviews were used to supplement our findings and to identify recommendations and insights that could enhance support for people working in partnership to advance equity in education. Interview participants (in both components of the project) were offered a \$10 gift card as a token of appreciation for their time and contributions. Interviews ranged from ~30 to ~120 minutes.⁴

Interviews were audio recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis (except in two cases, where recorders failed and interviewer notes were used). After open coding (Merriam, 2009) a subset of the pilot interview transcripts, we developed a coding framework, which was subsequently applied to all pilot transcripts and reports, with one team member completing initial coding and another member conducting a secondary review. Once we had selected the elements of the framework on which we would focus for this article, the principal investigator re-checked the excerpts coded under the relevant portions of the coding structure, making minor revisions where necessary to ensure consistency and clarity. The principal investigator also reviewed the contextualizing interview transcripts, looking particularly for comments that could be seen as recommendations relevant to working toward equity through partnership, including responses to a question that asked about suggestions for

the equity stream. These were coded using our established coding framework and are drawn on to support, complicate, or enrich the pilot findings below.

FINDINGS

Our analysis identified three main categories relevant to our research focus: outcomes, process indicators, and positionality and social location.

Outcomes

Many participants indicated that their work in the stream had contributed to changes in pedagogy or the advancement of research connected to equity in education. While participants named outputs such as a reviewed reading list, new or revised learning activities, a guest lecture or class presentations delivered by student partners, a draft resource for faculty about equitable teaching, and completed research ethics protocols or preliminary data collection, many also noted that the outcomes of their work were tentative or still in progress. This is perhaps not surprising given the term-based nature of the stream and the fact that some data were collected before the end of the term itself.

Other subsections of the outcomes code noted the extent to which participants saw their participation in the stream as contributing (though not always in pronounced ways) to knowledge about equity and supporting (or not) affective and relational outcomes (e.g., the development of participant confidence, the growth of community and connection among participants). Given space restrictions and the existing attention to outcomes in the partnership literature (e.g., Matthews et al., 2019), we have elected not to discuss these outcomes further, instead focusing on findings that help us assess the design of the equity stream.

Process indicators

Supports and resources

Some participants noted that the existence of the equity stream was itself a helpful support, insofar as it provided a structure that enabled equity work that might not happen otherwise. For example, one faculty participant stated that the stream helped them “carve out time and attention to equity needs in [their] classroom” (R11⁵), while a student argued that participation “offered [them] an opportunity to actually affect direct change to part of the academic structure, which [they] have often wished to change” (R9). Several participants also commented specifically on the practical, academic, and/or affective support offered by the project team and other participants. In interviews and reports, participants flagged the team’s facilitation of hiring processes and room bookings, literature recommendations, consultation, and provision of information about research ethics and methods among the resources they found helpful. They also spoke to the value of the cohort meetings, noting that these offered opportunities to discuss ideas relevant to their projects and/or to equity in teaching and learning more broadly. One student noted, for example, that “another student partner was working on a similar project and could provide helpful advice about recruiting and interviewing” (R8). Another commented that connecting with others helped them find project-relevant literature.

The value of cohort meetings was also corroborated indirectly in contextualizing interviews, including by one participant who suggested that “a supportive empathetic space for conversations” (P3) might be particularly important for partnership work focused on equity. Another agreed, noting, “especially when you put the label of equity on it, I think it is really helpful to have those debriefing kinds of conversation, because it can sometimes be heavy work” (P12). This participant also emphasized the importance of these conversations being role-specific (e.g., students only), or at least not involving individuals’ immediate partners, so participants might feel comfortable to speak freely. In this, they echoed an equity stream faculty participant who appreciated the role-specific cohort meetings for a similar reason: “I think if you’re struggling with something, you want to be able to talk about it” (I5).

While many participants were broadly appreciative of the support offered via the stream, some suggested that it might have been useful to augment the available equity-specific resources and support. One faculty partner noted that “it would have been helpful to have a short briefing or background paper on equity in higher education” (R16), for example, while another suggested that they were not sure if participant-requested literature “was ever provided” by the project team (R7). In a related vein, some contextualizing-data interviewees suggested the value of supporting more equity-specific training for faculty and student participants, including (in some cases) opportunities to connect with others with equity knowledge on campus (e.g., from the equity office).

Participants also reflected on the financial support offered through the stream. A faculty participant commented that project funding not only allowed for “person hours”—the time of paid student partners—but was also indicative of “someone validating” the work (I6). Remuneration was often positioned as particularly important given the under-recognition of, and rarity of payment for, equity labour. A student noted, for example, that “a lot of people do this stuff and they’re not paid for it. . . . I feel like it demeans their work” (I1). Building on this observation, some (in both portions of the research) noted that payment also intersects with access to partnership initiatives. As one student put it, “I think it’s incredibly important that this program is financially supportive and accessible, because I don’t think everyone has a capacity to volunteer their time” (I3). Despite this recognition of the importance of payment, this student (along with one other) noted that payment nevertheless was not essential to their participation in the stream. This observation raises questions about who participates, to which we return below.

Participants also pointed to other complicating factors connected to funding. For example, one student partner suggested that “additional hours [in their contract] would have helped us to improve the quality of our output and potentially, to take the project to launch” (R10). This comment resonated with points made by a couple of contextualizing interview participants, who noted that limited hours and established pay rates (described by the relevant interviewee as “low” [P9]) also meant that the pay afforded by partnership work only goes so far as a form of student income. Speaking to the recognition of faculty labour, a few participants noted that participation in the stream did not align directly with the markers by which faculty are assessed. Thus, one suggested “changing the nomenclature” (I6) involved, such that faculty might position the funding directed to the students working with them as a grant they could note on their CV.

Freedom and flexibility

Participants offered several comments speaking to the relative flexibility of the equity stream. Some of these comments focused on the fact that the stream invited participants to develop their own projects focused on equity in education, and that, within that structure, students and faculty collaborated to develop specific goals or processes. One faculty partner, for instance, said, “I like that no one’s telling me what I need to do . . . because I think it has to be specific to what you’re hoping to achieve” (I5). Likewise, some student participants remarked that they valued having an opportunity to help shape the projects and their work on them—a feature that was also advocated by a couple of contextualizing interview participants.

Nevertheless, some participants noted that this openness led to challenges in initiating and progressing projects. One student commented: “A challenge I encountered was setting goals as [the faculty partner] and I often found ourselves getting carried away with our ideas and research” (R17), while a faculty partner described difficulties in establishing a focus “given the open-ended nature of the partnership [and] program” (R7). Another student indicated that not having a pre-established structure allowed them and their partner “to make certain discoveries and tailor [their] research plan as [they] went.” That said, they also indicated that they “did at times wish for a more structured, straight-forward project” (R6) and that having a clearer plan from the outset might have allowed them to accomplish more. This reflection resonated with a faculty member’s comment that they thought they had provided “guidance but not enough structure” (R5).

Tensions connected to the relative openness of the stream were also reflected in remarks about the support offered by the project team. Although many noted that they felt broadly supported or appreciated the tailored support available, participants also suggested that it took time for them “to figure out what kind of support [they] needed” (R1), that the cohort meetings might have been more structured, or that the diversity of the projects involved in the stream made it difficult to offer supports that would be universally helpful. A student participant, for example, shared that they “did not usually find [cohort meetings] super valuable” (R9), since their project was somewhat different from others and this difference led to fewer opportunities to receive help from other participants. Importantly, a participant in the contextualizing interviews also noted that a structure that encouraged participants to shape their own projects, with minimal intervention from the program team, might lead to particular risks connected to equity work. They noted, “I might advise that some influence is a very good thing. Only because some folks are going to do it wonderfully; other folks it’s going to be hopefully not harmful, but potentially unproductive” (P1).

Participants also spoke to the relative flexibility of program processes. One student, for example, argued that being able to flexibly allocate their hours made participating in the stream “more accessible” (I3) than other paid opportunities. Others made comments that underscored that both faculty and student participants have other responsibilities and suggested work in the stream was shaped to account for these other commitments. Again, though, participants also noted that this flexibility had drawbacks. For example, several indicated that (many) cohort meetings were not well attended or noted that their schedules prevented them from attending more frequently—a fact which limited the meetings’ efficacy. Some also pointed out that the need to be flexible around time commitments meant that work proceeded less quickly than it

otherwise might have. As one faculty member put it, the limitation of “being really fluid and flexible” is that “the project does not . . . march on this really specific timeline” (I4). The need to be willing to take a slower approach was also in tension with the term-based nature of the stream, which one participant suggested was particularly tight for folks engaging in equity-focused pedagogical research. Given these pressures, we elected to offer participants in the second iteration of the stream the opportunity to extend their participation beyond the initial end date—a choice which was appreciated by some. A faculty partner, for instance, noted, “We were grateful for the flexibility to continue this work into January, where we had great success” (R13). Nevertheless, the challenge of moving equity work forward in partnership in a relatively short time remained.

Positionality

Social location in/and partnership

Echoing concerns raised in the literature, some participants noted the danger that extracurricular partnership initiatives might be inaccessible to students who experience structural oppression. In a contextualizing interview, for instance, one person articulated a concern that partnership programs were “cultivating another kind of boutique experience at universities for students who already have a lot of opportunity and privilege” (P15). For some, the structure of the equity stream, with its emphasis on engaging students who identify as members of one or more equity-denied groups, helped to mitigate this concern to some extent. A faculty participant who identified as having several kinds of social privilege noted that in a previous partnership project, they ended up working with student partners who were “like [them], because that’s how biases work” (I6). In contrast, this participant appreciated that the stream recruitment processes helped them push back against such biases.

While equitable access to opportunities is always important, some participants suggested that the question of who participates is particularly significant for partnerships focused on equity and justice. An equity stream student partner, for instance, underlined that people who experience marginalization have perspectives and expertise that are essential to understanding inequity and working toward redressing it: “I think it is important to give minority students a voice and hear their thoughts on their classroom experiences, rather than implementing [a particular pedagogy] and assuming it is effective for all students” (R8). Further demonstrating this potential, several comments illustrated how students in the stream drew on their knowledge and experiences as members of equity-denied groups in ways that informed their partnerships and the outcomes of their work. Student partners noted that their positionality and experiences allowed them to empathize with other students and ensure a diversity of experiences were being considered, and contributed to shaping the perspectives they brought to their projects, helping, as one put it, to “[open] new doors and [create] new pathways” (I1). Faculty partners reiterated these ideas and sometimes underscored how formative the perspectives shared by student partners were to their thinking about their teaching. One, for instance, suggested that the student they worked with “brought to the project an incredible combination of professional and lived experience, and [their] perspectives shaped not only this course but my entire teaching philosophy” (R1).

While many faculty partners described themselves as occupying privileged social locations, some also noted experiencing marginalization in some respects (e.g., gender oppression). In some cases, participants' comments suggested these experiences created opportunities for common ground with students and/or awareness of the importance of equity work. One faculty partner, for example, argued that being in the gender minority in their field "absolutely informs [their] motivation and interest," but also underscored that they are "incredibly privileged in other ways" and thus "don't recognize all of the other intersections or components of under-representation that can occur within a classroom" (I2). Nevertheless, as suggested in the latter half of this quotation, a key emphasis in this section of the data was on faculty partners becoming more aware of issues and perspectives that were not immediately apparent to them previously, in some cases due to their positionality. One suggested, for example, that they "have become more aware of [their] unconscious biases, and [the] gendered, disciplinary, and subject matter tendencies" (R16) they applied in their teaching.

Despite these positive outcomes, a few participants expressed concerns connected to positionality that should be attended to when working in a model like that of the equity stream, including potential harms and injustices that might arise. One faculty participant indicated the risk of being insensitive when trying to learn about marginalized students' experiences, for example, and the need to avoid unintentionally taking an extractive or exploitative approach. Relatedly, a participant in the contextualizing interviews pointed out the importance of thinking about how power operates in and through such partnerships, underscoring the need to consider questions like, "who gets to call up particular kinds of things? . . . What kinds of benefits or risks exist for people that are going to be different in the collaboration . . .?" (P15). Two others (one from each portion of the research) raised the possibility that an emphasis on the participation of members of equity-denied groups could be tokenizing (though the stream participant indicated this had not been their experience). Finally, some participant comments spoke to the need for conceptualizations of privilege that are not "all or nothing," noting ways in which participants may be advantaged in some respects even as they are marginalized in others. One student suggested, for example, that they were selected for the stream because they had done well in their partner's course and acknowledged that this kind of process (which was not common) had the potential to create a "cycle of privilege" (I3). One contextualizing-data interviewee also suggested that if participants indicated that payment was important, but not the primary factor motivating their participation (as was the case for some students in this research), this was likely reflective of the fact that they had "the option" of working for free (P15). Such comments suggest the benefit of further attending to recruitment and hiring processes that might help to address what one interviewee called "the dynamic of . . . the most privileged student from marginalized communities getting the opportunities" (P1).

Experience with equity work

Student participants within the equity stream commonly had some experience with equity-related work. One, for example, described themselves as a "community organizer" and as "actively involved" in justice efforts on campus (R2). Others likewise noted (or were described by their faculty partners as) being involved in campus or community groups focused on equity and justice, learning about relevant issues in their courses and programs, or

conducting previous equity-related research. These experiences were often framed as informing the contributions students made to their projects, and, in some cases, supporting faculty learning. This could be seen, for example, in the quotation offered above, in which a faculty participant suggested their student partner's combination of lived and professional experience had important impacts on their teaching.

Some faculty participants likewise brought equity-related experience to the stream, mentioning participation in relevant committees, describing awareness of equity-focused scholarship, and/or speaking to previous equity-relevant activities in which they had engaged. Some, however, positioned themselves as comparatively new to thinking about equity in teaching and learning and noted that the knowledge students brought from their disciplines (wherein equity might be taken up more extensively or in different ways) and experiences helped to respond to what one faculty participant called "a gap in [their expertise]" (I5). This range of faculty experience raises interesting questions. For example, if faculty partners have previously engaged in equity work, they (like experienced students) can ostensibly draw on this experience in ways that might support effective partnerships. At the same time, as one participant suggested, faculty who are already attuned to equity may have comparatively more equitable classrooms in any case, and thus might not "need a partner as much as someone else" (I3).

DISCUSSION

Like all research, this study has limitations. The size of the equity stream meant that we had a small number of participants from which to recruit and thus a limited pool of stream-specific data to draw on. Moreover, while we attempted to convey an openness to critique (e.g., by asking questions about challenges), some participants might not have felt comfortable expressing negative perceptions or experiences of the stream, given that the research team also designed and facilitated it. Anonymous feedback forms might have helped to address this possibility to some extent. The contextualizing interviews helped to supplement the otherwise small dataset and offered a number of insights, but they also introduced complexity into the data, as participants determined whether their projects had equity-relevant components and had varying understandings of what this might mean. These limitations should be kept in mind when considering our findings.

Nevertheless, this study has generated several preliminary questions and insights that merit further consideration. In particular, it builds on work discussing the practicalities of developing partnership initiatives that are attentive to equity (Cook-Sather, 2018; de Bie et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2021) by describing some of the steps we took in developing our equity stream and offering participant perspectives on the possibilities, limitations, and tensions of these choices. Overall, participants were largely positive about their experiences, describing their partnerships and/or the opportunity to take part as "amazing" (R14), "a joy" (R15), "awesome" (R1), and "one of the highlights of [their] undergraduate career" (R17). Some also indicated that they "hope the program continues" (R3) or recommended that we sustain "and expand it" (R4). However, participants also gestured toward several complexities, that, together with the contextualizing interviews and our own reflections, point to the importance of

continuing to assess the strengths and limitations of this approach to working toward equity in teaching and learning rather than simply recommending it uncritically.

As noted above, two of our key considerations when designing the stream were to reduce barriers to participating and to recognize the complexity of working toward equity in partnership and mitigate potential harms it might involve. The data suggest that design features such as our recruitment of students from equity-denied groups, provision of payment, and flexible hours and requirements went some distance to countering typical access barriers, aligning with ideas suggested in the literature (Bindra et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021). Likewise, many noted the role of payment in recognizing and validating the labour of equity work and the ways in which the cohort meetings provided opportunities for intellectual and affective support, again echoing recommendations in existing scholarship (Cook-Sather et al., 2019; Matthews et al., 2019; see Linder et al., 2019 for concerns about simply remunerating students for equity labour). These cohort meetings also provided an opportunity for us, as a team, to remain in relatively frequent contact with attending participants so we could learn how projects were developing and offer guidance or support if we became aware of issues of concern.

Despite these positive reflections, the data also suggest that our efforts to meet these goals might not have been entirely successful in some respects. Some of the comments about payment and experience, for instance, raise the possibility that, in some cases at least, the stream might not have been fully accessible to students without relative financial privilege or previous opportunities to engage in particular kinds of equity work. This finding suggests the importance of considering additional equity-conscious recruitment strategies described in the literature (e.g., de Bie et al. 2021; Marquis et al., 2018; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021), as well as further incorporating support for equity into hiring processes, reviewing pay rates and allowing for additional hours in student contracts where desired, and developing more mechanisms to ensure that students new to equity work can be meaningfully involved.

The data also suggest areas for growth in terms of mitigating potential harms and supporting participants through the difficulties of this work. While the cohort spaces were widely seen as valuable, for example, it is also the case that they were not always well attended (perhaps in part because of our desire to be flexible and acknowledge participants' busy schedules). Likewise, although the data did not speak extensively to equity stream participants experiencing harm or oppression within their partnerships, the limitations of our research design, the attention to such possibilities in a few interviews, and the growing body of partnership scholarship that acknowledges these risks (Marquis, de Bie et al., 2021; Ntem & Cook-Sather, 2018) suggest the significance of developing further means to prevent these potential harms and respond to them if they do occur. This might involve developing opportunities for participants to reflect on their positionality and the operations of power in their partnerships (Verwoord & Smith, 2020), affirming and responding to critiques of partnership from equity-denied students and staff (e.g., de Bie, 2020; Yahlinaaw, 2019), and/or offering more training that takes up how oppression and injustice might play out within partnership spaces, including for program facilitators where necessary.

While these tensions and recommendations are clearly relevant to our pilot, they also resonate with issues of relevance to partnership scholarship and practice more broadly. For

example, it is worth underscoring that implementing the suggestions offered above would require resources, including the time of both participants and those facilitating a partnership stream (and potentially of others). Although time is often pointed to as a challenge to partnership work (e.g., Diaz et al., 2015), the present data also suggest that demands on time can connect importantly to concerns about access and participation; one stream participant suggested that the flexible hours of their contract made it more possible for them to take part, and others indicated the potential need for flexibility by noting that they had difficulties participating in some program components and/or had to prioritize other work (see also Burns et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2021). These tensions suggest the difficulty of ensuring that program participants receive essential training and support that might help to mitigate potential harm occurring in partnership while also accounting for the need to be flexible to support accessibility. They thus echo and extend Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill's (2020) argument that offering further training as part of partnership schemes is both potentially valuable and complex.

Considering the intersections of access to and potential harm within equity-related partnerships also complicates our previous discussion of the role of experience. As noted above, it is important to consider how to make partnerships accessible to those who might not have extensive or formal experience of equity work (both students and faculty). Indeed, one contextualizing-interview participant suggested it is not fair to expect students to have considerable experience given the nature of the roles and their corresponding rates of pay. At the same time, faculty and students with at least some experience might have more familiarity with how to navigate the risks involved in working toward equity across power differentials and how to mitigate potential harms. This potential to reduce harm could be an important reason to involve faculty with experience of equity work in particular, even though this suggestion runs counter to one participant's remark that their faculty partner did not need to participate as much as others might, and to similar concerns about faculty taking part in other partnership schemes (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021). Of course, faculty members can themselves experience harm in partnership, particularly if they identify as members of equity-denied groups (Marquis, Guitman et al., 2021; Kupatadze, 2019), so it is also worth thinking about whether experience (faculty members' and students') might relate to or reduce this risk. We thus recommend further attention to the intersections between experience, access, and harm in equity-focused partnerships.

The tensions articulated above also lead us to reflect on the recommendation, sometimes articulated in the partnership literature, to scale up or mainstream partnership activities such that they are available to the largest number of participants possible (Bell, 2016; Bryson & Callaghan, 2021; Flint, 2016). While we certainly see the value of such arguments, our experience with this pilot also underlines the importance of exercising caution before attempting to expand equity-focused partnership initiatives in a pronounced way. As the data underscore, operating a program like the equity stream in ways that seek to ensure access, offer necessary support, and mitigate risk takes considerable time and resources. Our pilot involved a fairly small number of participants, many of whom had equity-related experience, and was supported by a six-person project team, a grant to fund the initiative and research, and the established infrastructure of our existing Student Partners Program. Given the areas for

refinement identified here (and others, such as clarifying the boundaries of student roles⁶), it is nevertheless unclear whether the stream could be sustained without further resources. Rather than simply scaling up, then, we advocate considering carefully if and how more participants could be involved in ways that enhance outcomes and access, while attending to sustainability and the increased risks growth might bring. In so doing, we contribute to existing discussion of tensions involved in expanding partnership schemes (e.g., Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020).

One final concern connects to the observation that this pilot had several positive outcomes, but these remained fairly preliminary (due in part, perhaps, to its term-based structure). Participants spoke to the value of co-developing their projects, in line with partnership approaches, though some also noted that this delayed progress. These findings are interesting to consider in relation to the emphasis in some partnership literature on process over product (Matthews, 2016; Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020)—an emphasis that pushes importantly against the neoliberal measurement of impact (see Wijaya Mulya, 2019 for related reflections). That said, it is also important to work toward concrete outcomes in equity-focused partnerships, particularly given critiques that initiatives and statements often express a commitment to equity but do not lead to tangible change (Ahmed, 2012; Linder et al., 2019). Further consideration of the benefits and drawbacks of a focus on process over product in equity-focused partnerships is thus merited. Fraser and Usman (2021) offer a welcome and nuanced step in this direction.

Having noted these concerns, we do not want to suggest that an initiative like our pilot stream is without merit, or that it does not have the capacity to contribute to equity in education. Indeed, the data indicate a number of positive outcomes for participants and resonate with existing literature indicating that equity-focused partnership can contribute to changes in thinking and pedagogy with the potential to affect others beyond the partnership itself (Marquis, de Bie et al., 2021; Narayanan & Abbot, 2020; Perez, 2016). Elements of the approach might also be adapted to inform other partnership initiatives, whether these focus on equity or not. By highlighting tensions, however, we hope to underscore the importance of proactively attending to the complexities and limitations of equity-focused partnership schemes, such that we might enhance their potential to function justly and contribute to positive change.

This research was reviewed and cleared by our institutional research ethics board (MREB files 0442 and 2262).

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NOTES

1. We originally used the term “equity-seeking” groups, but have updated that in this article.
2. As noted, both full-time faculty and instructors in other roles were welcome to participate in the pilot. For ease of articulation, we use the term faculty for the remainder of the article to refer to all instructor participants.
3. One student returned a report that they and their faculty partner appeared to have completed together. We checked with the faculty partner, who subsequently sent in a separate report with their own consent. As such, we used only the parts of the first report clearly marked as coming from the student for the research.
4. The interview of ~120 minutes took place over two sessions.
5. Identifiers beginning with R and I refer to “pilot data” reports and interviews, respectively. Identifiers beginning with P refer to data from “contextualizing data” interviewees.
6. Some concerns were raised about potential overlap between student partner positions and other teaching support roles during our pilot, which led us to be more attentive to this possibility and to work to counter it.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

As noted, the authors developed and facilitated the initiative described in this article, as part of roles they held at the university.

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