

## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

## **Inclusively studying inclusion: Centering three modes of student partnership in assessing equity and inclusion in an academic department**

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In the 2019–20 academic year, two fourth-year students (Nicole and Loops) partnered with a professor (Ben) to explore questions of inclusion, equity, and diversity within the Haverford College psychology department. Our goal was to translate what we felt we knew from our lived experiences as students—that our academic experiences were not equitable—into quantitative and qualitative data to drive conversations of equity and inclusion forward with faculty in the department and the institution overall. The project culminated early in the pandemic in May 2020, but we continued to meet virtually—nearly weekly at times—beyond then. Going into the 2020-21 academic year, these conversations became about the relevance of our project for the conversations about diversity, inclusion, and antiracism that had intensified at Haverford College, culminating in a student strike that fall.

Two questions guided our reflective discussions: what did we accomplish and, perhaps more importantly, how did we accomplish it? This latter question led to our current reflection. Our cooperative efforts were rooted in partnership at every level. We came together as student-faculty partners, our exploration was grounded in discussions with fellow students—student-student partnerships—and our work was leveraged in collaborations with the institution—student-institution partnership. In this reflection, we describe how redefining student partnerships was central in developing and implementing a survey to assess inclusion, equity, and diversity within an academic department at a small liberal arts college.

As we continued to meet to discuss our project and the current situation at Haverford and beyond, we wanted to narrate our work to better understand the process and demonstrate the possibilities of conducting research using a partnership model. When we started writing this reflective essay, we did not have a particular starting point, especially as we were pushed out of our comfort zones with writing centered around our lived experiences rather than the data collected. We each drafted preliminary ideas which developed into a brief abstract where we first detailed the idea of the three forms of partnership. We continued writing independently in response to reflective essay prompts and continued coming together to discuss questions and next steps, eventually bringing us to a cohesive essay.

## SETTING

Haverford College is a small liberal arts college near Philadelphia. Most students live on campus, as do a portion of faculty, and Haverford prides itself on the sense of community borne from its small size, relatively flat organizational structure, pervasive Honor Code (Honor Council, n.d.), and Quaker roots. This culture on campus set the foundation for our project, given that various forms of collaboration (e.g., student representation on administrative committees, a senior thesis conducted by all students with a faculty mentor, research lab work conducted by some students, a student-faculty partnership program) are encouraged and prioritized at Haverford. Our project built upon these existing structures and developed new models of student partnership.

An important element, which set the foundation for our partnership work, is the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) that serves Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges. The TLI “provides forums for exploration of classroom practices” through partnerships between faculty and students (Bryn Mawr College, n.d.). Within TLI, the Students as Teachers and Learners (SaLT) program offers opportunities for one-on-one, semester-long student-faculty partnerships focused on building collaborative relationships to foster constructive dialogue regarding pedagogical practices. Two of us (Nicole and Ben) had previously participated in the SaLT program through independent partnerships in other contexts.

Our project was situated in the Department of Psychology, which has a reputation on campus as a cohesive department with strengths in quantitative methods. The curriculum aims to build research skills, typically culminating with students completing a year-long empirical senior thesis. While the curriculum has a strong emphasis on psychological science, there are fewer opportunities for students to learn qualitative methods that take a person-centered approach or are grounded in community participatory perspectives, the latter of which is an emphasis of the current project.

Rather than building our quantitative survey on past studies or existing theoretical models, we started by amplifying students’ experiences navigating the psychology department. The project began as an effort by Ben to come together with students (a form of student-faculty partnership) to examine the structures and systems supporting and hindering students’ academic success and progress. We chose to limit our focus to the psychology department because this was the context of our lived experiences. Based on qualitative interviews assessing students’ educational experiences (which we characterize as a student-student partnership), we developed an online survey to examine students’ sense of belonging in the department and its implications for well-being and satisfaction with the department. We also assessed the role of various educational practices and experiences, such as student participation and inclusive content in the curriculum and whether sense of belonging mediates relationships to well-being and department satisfaction (Le et al., 2022). Our study was conducted during the Spring 2020 semester when the COVID-19 pandemic led to a switch to remote teaching and learning, so we also assessed students’ experiences with remote learning. These questions were later included in a college-wide survey addressing remote learning experiences. Nicole and Loops also communicated our findings back to the institution through recommendations for the psychology department (presented at a department meeting) and collaborations with

Haverford's Educational Policy Committee and other academic departments (a student-institution partnership).

### WHO WE ARE (IN PARTNERSHIP)

Nicole graduated from Haverford in 2020. As a psychology major and education studies minor, she is passionate about the intersection of mental health and education. Her own experiences as a first-generation, low-income student informed her role as a student and student consultant through the SaLT program. Over time, as she ventured into one-on-one partnerships with several professors, this developed into specific interests in equity and accessibility in educational settings.

Loops is also a Haverford class of 2020 alumna. Her lived experiences as a first-generation, low-income student of color inspired her to take courses on multicultural education, the psychology of stereotyping and prejudice, and open science and inclusive psychology. She was also a member of Haverford's Educational Policy Committee. It was in Ben's Open Science & Inclusive Psychology course where she was introduced to the benefits of the TLI student-faculty partnership model through his student consultant. The range of innovative engagement efforts executed by Ben and his student consultant inspired her to work with TLI to make an impact within the psychology department.

Ben is a professor of psychology who has taught at Haverford since 2001, including courses on research methods and statistics. His involvement in the open science movement (Hong & Moran, n.d.) led to his work on access and inclusion in academia. In spring 2019, Haverford offered a semester-long TLI faculty pedagogy seminar, sponsored by the Lumina Foundation, that was designed for visiting and senior faculty. Ben participated in the seminar and worked with a student partner (see Le & Gorstein, 2019) for a new class and found it transformative.

From the beginning, it was clear to us that the culture of the SaLT program was first and foremost about the relationship between the faculty and student partner that is forged together where both partners acknowledge existing power dynamics as well as work to dismantle them to facilitate meaningful conversations about pedagogy. Inherently, the spaces created for and by these conversations recognize that students and professors bring varying but equally valid perspectives, opinions, and expertise. Our work described here was supported by the TLI, which funded Loops' effort (Nicole received course credit) but did not take the form of a typical student-faculty partnership.

### THREE FORMS OF PARTNERSHIP

#### **Student-student partnerships**

In the beginning stages of our project, Loops gathered focus groups and conducted qualitative interviews with students from the psychology department to better understand their experiences. Over time, we conceptualized these efforts as positioning students as partners in the research process. Fostering connections with student participants became critical in the development of our survey that aimed to examine their classroom experiences, belongingness, and well-being.

It became apparent when interviewing these students that we were building the foundation for our research. The interviews were transactions of valuable data between students with the potential goal of redistributing knowledge and creating impact within the department, faculty, and student community. This transformed the perspective of our interview process to position students as research partners early in the process.

### **Student-faculty partnerships**

The way we approached the project differed from how students typically conduct research with faculty in the psychology department. Prompted by the culture of TLI, the three of us gathered in weekly meetings that centered student voices in the research process. This was not solely a research project or solely a partnership; it was the intersection of the two, bridging our collective knowledge and experiences of research and partnership to develop and implement a research project with, for, and about students and their educational experiences. Rather than working from our typical evaluative “expert-trainee” model of scholarship, this work was more collaborative, built on complementary knowledge and skills within the team dynamic rather than assuming that the faculty member was the expert in the group. By taking this approach, students’ lived experiences were positioned as valid and under-tapped sources of knowledge and were given as much weight, if not more, as faculty expertise in developing the project. Often, Ben deferred to Nicole and Loops to make final decisions on survey questions and hypotheses. In addition, the experiences of Loops and Nicole, as members of the Haverford community and psychology majors and in the context of this research project, were centered as important outcomes of the work. Further, as fourth-year psychology majors, they each had substantial psychology coursework to draw upon and in many ways had more current scholarly knowledge on particular topics than did Ben, who had been working in a narrow subdiscipline for many years.

While we attempted to flatten the status hierarchy between faculty and students, Nicole was receiving course credit and a grade for her work, which inherently produced a power differential between Ben (the grader) and Nicole (the graded) that is present in most typical classroom environments. Over time, and particularly over the course of writing this reflection, this dynamic was explicitly discussed and our group considered the ways this impacted our efforts to develop a truly equal, collaborative student-faculty partnership model for conducting research. For instance, Ben recalls being more mindful of Loops’ time since her efforts were on top of a full course load, while Nicole remembers feeling some pressures of a typical academic setting, such as completing homework and producing novel research ideas. In these discussions we came to recognize that our different roles and identities cannot be removed from the process. Many of these occurrences were subtle and subconscious but important to acknowledge when trying to replicate a student-faculty partnership in the research process. Though we recognize the inherent power differentials at play, we also believe that our efforts to follow a partnership model brought us closer to an equal footing.

### **Student-institution partnerships**

Haverford has a longstanding practice of involving students in decisions across most levels of the college; this includes students serving on most committees that govern curricular and operational matters. However, though Haverford’s processes include student voices, they

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are not always heard. In this section, Loops and Nicole share their experiences and efforts to partner with the institution at various levels to effect change.

At the onset of COVID-19, several departments and committees began to tackle questions of equitable remote teaching and learning practices and policies. Through our roles on campus, we were involved in the conversations amongst these groups. Our survey was adopted by the chemistry department based on word of mouth and collaboration between psychology and chemistry students and faculty, and directly informed how the chemistry department assessed inclusion and belonging. Furthermore, some of our measures were included in a campus-wide survey administered by our institutional research office to assess students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. These institutional collaborations (student-institution partnerships) included mixed experiences—both successes and frustrations—for us.

As part of our project, we aimed to shed light on students' educational experiences in the psychology department. Our goals included understanding students' experiences through quantitative and open-ended questions, as well as identifying actionable steps the department could take to better these experiences. We aimed to extend our learnings to the institution; however, we were often met with hesitancy. We offered our survey questions on remote learning to the Educational Policy Committee, composed mostly of faculty and administrators, as a means of gathering all students' experiences with, and feelings about, remote learning. Faculty hesitated in collecting student responses as they had already gathered data from other faculty. We also hoped to share reflections from students' open-ended responses with the psychology department, which we compiled into themes and actionable next steps in a shareable document, but the department was initially wary of holding a meeting dedicated to these findings, though eventually we did join a department meeting to discuss the project. Our experiences at this meeting highlighted the ways in which there is hesitancy to make change at the institution level. Notably, many faculty appreciated the work we accomplished and the reflections provided. Yet, as the conversation progressed, several questions were raised about the necessity of these changes and whether they needed to be across the board (i.e., during every class or in every assignment).

Following the conclusion of these student-institution partnerships, we grasped the importance of sharing student experiences with the institution and also recognized the times we felt unheard in these spaces. Faculty can be a catalyst for student involvement by inviting students into these spaces, advocating for their feedback, and centering their voices. Moving forward, students need to not only be included in these spaces but prioritized and uplifted in conversation to ensure that change is made with students in mind.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The project and the process—both of conducting the research and writing this reflection—led us to several key lessons learned. As we each independently documented the lessons learned from this experience, it was clear that our thinking converged around four distinct themes, discussed below.

### **Elevating student voice and experience**

Positioning students as equal partners in the research process, rather than having faculty “supervise” student projects, produces several important outcomes. Notably, students feel that they bring real expertise to the table and that their experiences and knowledge are valued in the research setting. Students perceive this as a nonjudgmental setting for research that promotes scholarly growth. For faculty, this approach changes the research dynamic in ways that are really productive and satisfying in that it provides opportunities for learning new perspectives from students rather than assuming that the faculty member is the expert in the field. Rather than an educational model that views the educator as an expert providing knowledge to the student, the partnership approach emphasizes the knowledge and experience of students and faculty, evoking a wealth and diversity of dialogue within educational spaces. At the institutional level, positioning students as partners allows the administration to gather information about its target population, which offers an opportunity for informed decisions and changes that advance a more equitable and accessible higher education setting.

### **Building community around DEIT work**

Given the somewhat dispersed structure of diversity, equity, inclusivity, and thriving (DEIT) initiatives at Haverford, it can be difficult to find allies for doing this work in local networks of peers and coworkers (e.g., departments, teams, or student organizations). The student-faculty partnerships allowed us to expand our networks of collaborators and become peers in our collective DEIT work in a way that was not possible with other groups on campus. When students and alumni are embraced for their expertise and experience, particularly by faculty, mutual support networks grow and dialogue about diversity, inclusion, and belonging is enhanced.

### **Building mutual support networks during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Following the sudden closure of Haverford for in-person, residential learning in March 2020, students and faculty lost a community that had previously been central to them. From the student (Loops’) perspective, the project provided purpose during the lockdown, especially while unemployed. As a faculty member (Ben), this was especially meaningful during the isolation of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic as a way of deepening connections with alumni to extend much-needed support networks. Since we tended to meet on Fridays, it was a nice way to end the week. In our (often weekly to bi-weekly) meetings, both during the immediate shift to remote learning and since Loops’ and Nicole’s May 2020 graduation, we created an intentional space for the three of us to reflect on our individual experiences in order to draw a collective story on inclusion and diversity in our school and work communities.

### **Valuing reflective thinking and writing**

As psychology students and faculty, much of our prior academic writing experience focused on research and data-driven work. The process of writing this reflective essay pushed us to step out of our comfort zones and write about our lived experiences rather than the data we collected. This was a shift in not only our writing, but also in our thinking. By working through understanding our research and partnership process, we generated terminology for



previously undefined relationships and dynamics. For many in educational settings, the only terms used to describe our roles are “educator” and “student.” Through our reflective thinking and writing, we demonstrate the complexity of these roles and the many terms and definitions that may encompass the work and experiences of individuals. By describing and defining these dynamics, we conclude that we were not only students and educators in this space, but, most importantly, we were partners.

Our continued work on this reflective paper was an opportunity for us to talk about the quickly changing landscape around the visibility of marginalized students’ experiences on campus, especially for the alumni who had been doing work to support inclusion on campus while they were students and whose final year abruptly changed without the typical closure on their college careers. It also extended our partnership and provided an opportunity to continue collaborating, which, during the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic, offered a space for the students and faculty to mutually support one another during this difficult time, both professionally and personally.

#### NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Nicole Litvitskiy** is a PhD student in the Clinical Psychology program at Miami University in Ohio researching school-based mental health. She graduated from Haverford College in 2020, where she was a student consultant and facilitated student partnership work in developing resources on accessibility, anti-racist and trauma-informed pedagogy, and remote learning.

**Guadalupe Torres** is a graduate student in the Counseling and School Psychology educational specialist degree program at San Diego State University. She is currently training to work with culturally and linguistically diverse learners with disabilities in the K-12 public school system. She is also enjoying the beaches of San Diego.

**Benjamin Le** is a Professor of Psychology and currently serves as the Associate Provost for Faculty Development at Haverford College, where he works to support equity, inclusion, and diversity in higher education. He was trained as a social psychologist and is active in the open science community.

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