

SPECIAL SECTION: EQUIPPING STUDENT LEADERS AS PARTNERS FOR SUSTAINABLE HUMANITARIAN ACTION

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Students as partners for effective change: Bring students into the center of decision making

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Undergraduates are capable pedagogical partners but have been overlooked despite their valuable experiences and insights essential for university-wide and course-specific policies (Bovill et al., 2011; Gärdebo & Wiggberg, 2012). A pedagogical partnership allows students and faculty members to learn from one another through a mutually beneficial relationship. Common forms of these relationships are teaching assistant (TA) and research assistant (RA) positions. This essay details my journey embracing pedagogical partnerships and efforts to develop them at Syracuse University.

In high school, I felt teachers were not teaching with us but to us students, and district administrators didn't consult students on policies that missed the problems at hand. As a result, I became involved in the city council board overseeing the school district, conducted research, and became a teaching assistant for Algebra II classes. I found a passion for education policy and reform, which led me to Syracuse University's Policy Studies Program. Professor Bill Coplin hired me as a research assistant, where we worked on two major projects. One aimed to create a network for professors and undergraduates to form pedagogical partnerships. Through a conversation with Dr. Kenneth Miller at Brown University as part of this project, I discovered that pedagogical partnerships were more common, which fueled my goal to increase the number of pedagogical partnerships at Syracuse University.

YEAR 1 AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY: 2020–2021

Upon arriving at Syracuse University, I felt inspired and driven after a full summer of research. During this time, I had the privilege of developing personal and professional relationships with Dr. Bill Coplin and Dr. Alison Cook-Sather. At a session on pedagogical partnerships with Dr. Cook-Sather, I witnessed a keen interest from faculty members in collaborating with pedagogical partners, which gave me hope as I launched my project.

To increase the prevalence of pedagogical partnerships at Syracuse University, I designed a survey during my first semester. The survey aimed to gain a better understanding of where pedagogical partners were, what they did, and how common they were across various courses

and departments. Specifically, we asked for information on the title of the course, the professor, the department, the class size, the division, and whether undergraduate pedagogical partners were included, along with their responsibilities.

Unfortunately, the results of the initial survey were not very promising. Out of the 230 courses surveyed during the first semester, only 24 (10.4%) used pedagogical partners in some capacity. Some professors who did not use pedagogical partners said they flat out had no interest in ever hiring an undergraduate. However, rather than feeling discouraged, I decided to speak with professors who already worked with undergraduate pedagogical partners. It was my hope that their insights would inspire others to consider the benefits of incorporating such partnerships into their classes.

Through conducting interviews, I had the opportunity to speak with professors who shared the common belief that working with undergraduate teaching assistants (UTAs) is a mutually beneficial experience. For instance, Dr. Colleen Heflin claimed that her pedagogical partner had been invaluable during a challenging semester. Her UTA helped keep online students engaged and worked to integrate them into class discussions that were often in-person only (personal communication, October 23, 2020). Dr. Dennis Joyce, a civil and environmental engineering professor, stated that he was all for professors using as many UTAs as they could and claimed it benefits everyone involved (personal communication, November 11, 2020). Meanwhile, Dr. Austin Zwick, a professor in the Policy Studies Department, suggested that using UTAs is a win-win for all involved as it helps undergraduates build leadership skills through professional experience and provides students with a more knowledgeable and hands-on TA who cares about their success (personal communication, November 13, 2020).

Collecting these testimonials inspired me to apply to become an undergraduate TA myself. I was fortunate enough to be selected as a teaching assistant for Introduction to Public Policy Analysis with Professor Coplin, where I was also named the honors director. In addition to being a UTA for the regular lecture, I also oversaw the honors discussion section of the course that met after the big lecture every Monday. As the honors director, I was responsible for designing the syllabus, writing lesson plans for each week, and grading all assignments, along with balancing the challenges of remote instruction during a pandemic.

With Professor Coplin's knowledge of the subject material and my experience with technology and Zoom training, we collaborated to address the challenges of remote instruction head-on. We utilized breakout rooms to facilitate collaborative work among students and implemented engaging activities like a Kahoot! game to bring the class together. Through the experience of being a UTA and honors director, I saw firsthand the benefits of pedagogical partnerships and the potential they have to positively impact students' learning experiences.

YEAR 2 AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY: 2021–2022

In my second year, I pitched a new class to the department chair that would allow students to gain three experience credits for being an undergraduate teaching assistant. After some back-and-forth negotiations, the class was added to the course catalog with my two closest mentors as my co-teachers—Dr. Bill Coplin and Dr. Martha Diede. As we launched “Community Problem Solving” (PST 416), I encountered pushback from some who felt uncomfortable with undergraduates grading papers or teaching college courses. There was also concern from parents

who were skeptical about an 18 year old teaching their child and from some professors who believed that undergraduate TAs couldn't match the quality of their graduate counterparts.

Despite these initial concerns, our undergraduate teaching assistants (UTAs) proved them wrong. They showed up to class every day, demonstrating their commitment to learning and growth. By the end of the program, many students achieved personal and professional success, honing their skills in teaching, public speaking, and problem-solving.

With the end of the semester approaching, I began to search for ways to make PST 416 a permanent program on campus. That's when I discovered Dr. Laurel Willingham-McLain and Carla Ramirez, who were piloting a similar program called the Partnership for Inclusive Education (PIE). PIE employed undergraduate "student consultants" to improve the inclusivity of university courses. I contacted them and showed them how the values of both of our programs aligned. They agreed and asked if PST 416 would be willing to merge with their program.

Together with the PIE program, we were able to provide more students with the opportunity to participate in our initiative. The partnership expanded the reach and impact of our programs, allowing students to receive hourly pay, three class credits, or an internship as compensation. Our team continued to work hard to address all the challenges that we encountered, ensuring that each student's individual needs were met.

We held weekly meetings to ensure everyone's voices were heard, and we collaborated with Dr. Willingham-McLain and Ms. Ramirez to coordinate the program. With this partnership, students could receive internship credit, course credit, or payment for being a student consultant or a UTA. I stayed on as the UTA for the class.

Our partnership with PIE proved to be extremely successful, and we were asked to present our work at the academic conference Pedagogithon. During a presentation titled "Creating and Sustaining a Student-Faculty Partnership for Inclusive Education," Dr. Willingham-McLain, Ms. Ramirez, and a student consultant presented alongside me. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to share my ideas with other educators and bring their knowledge back to Syracuse University.

As my time at Syracuse University was coming to a close in a year, I was heartened to see the success of the program and the impact it had on students, professors, and the university. The PST 416 program gave a voice to students, while the PIE program enabled us to reach more people and create a more inclusive environment on campus. Although I have graduated from Syracuse University, I am proud to say that my ideas and contributions to the PST 416 program will continue to exist and benefit students for years to come.

YEAR 3 AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY: 2022–2023

In my third year at Syracuse University, I was set to graduate. I had just one more year to ensure that students had a place on campus to make things happen and that there would be people to listen to them. In the fall, I continued with the PIE program. I was the lead student consultant for the PIE program and was assigned a series of tasks that allowed me to dive deeper into the program and take on more responsibilities. These included conducting research and publishing articles about the program, working with undergraduate student consultants, and attending meetings and conferences to promote the goals of the program.

One of my most memorable experiences was working as a teaching assistant for an online policy analysis course through Syracuse's College of Professional Studies. While it certainly had its challenges, I enjoyed the opportunity to interact with students from across the country and the world. As a teaching assistant, I was responsible for grading assignments and organizing sessions on Zoom, and I took this task very seriously. I wanted every student to feel like they had someone they could turn to for support and guidance, regardless of their background or experience level.

I worked closely with Dr. Austin Zwick, one of my favorite professors, to ensure that our course was effective and engaging. Together, we hosted Zoom sessions and created in-class games to keep students engaged and learning. It was heartening to see the overwhelmingly positive feedback we received from students at the end of the semester, particularly with regard to their appreciation for having an undergraduate teaching assistant.

In addition to my work as a teaching assistant, I was also able to participate as a student consultant in the PIE program. In this role, I observed a graduate-level coding course and analyzed the course structure, assignments, and overall dynamic of the classroom. I was able to provide feedback to the professor on areas that needed improvement and recommend changes to enhance student engagement, feedback, and inclusivity.

Overall, my experiences with both the PIE program and teaching assistantship allowed me to gain valuable experience in pedagogy, student engagement, and management. These experiences have been invaluable to me in my career as an advisory consultant in the higher education domain of KPMG, where I continue to use my knowledge and skills to help other universities improve student experiences and make strategic decisions. I am grateful for the opportunities afforded to me during my time at Syracuse University and proud to have been a part of these impactful programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STUDENTS LOOKING TO ASSUME A ROLE IN LAUNCHING PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMS

At the end of my reflection, I would like to offer advice to those aspiring to create and promote pedagogical partnerships as undergraduate students. Although I have accomplished much in 3 years, the work is far from over. I am relying on the next generation of students to continue working towards the goal of ensuring that students are respected, heard, and valued as valuable resources of knowledge and experience in higher education.

Find supportive and experience faculty mentors who have experience in partnerships

Seek mentors who have experience in creating partnerships, as they can provide valuable guidance and insight. Look for professors, faculty members, or administrators who share your interests to strive for your success. You can find mentors in all kinds of ways, including by approaching professors who taught a class you really liked or by talking to your friends about which professors they have worked with before. Forming strong relationships with mentors can open up possibilities for strategic connections and influence the success of your program's growth.

Create a clear project plan and set realistic goals

Develop a clear plan for your pedagogical partnership program. Set realistic goals and objectives with precise deadlines. Map out what you want to accomplish at each stage of the program and ensure that your goals are measurable. Breaking down large tasks into smaller, achievable chunks can help to track overall progress and ensure timely completion.

Foster open communication with your faculty partners

Open and transparent communication with partners is essential for the success of your program as it helps align all parties involved and promotes trust. Don't be afraid to say that a reading is too long or that an assignment isn't resonating with students. Constructive feedback makes everyone's learning experience better. Ensure that channels of communication are clear and that everyone involved is aware of their roles and responsibilities in the partnership. You should establish a forum for sharing feedback, reporting, and monitoring progress.

Involve student partners and recognize their contributions

Recognize and include student partners in program planning, implementation, and decision-making. Involve them in your project plan by seeking their input about program goals and objectives as well as by knowing their experiences, thoughts, and suggestions. Ensure that student partners feel valued by recognizing their contributions and offering opportunities for skill-building and career development.

Evaluate and adapt your partnership program

Monitor program progress regularly and track key performance metrics, like surveying to see if the number of pedagogical partnerships on campus have increased or if student satisfaction of classes that use pedagogical partners has increased. Gather feedback from all stakeholders involved in the program, including students, faculty, and administrators. Evaluate program performance against the set goals and objectives and identify areas for improvement. Adapt feedback into your project plan for future iterations of the program. Next semester is always an opportunity to be better!

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Dara Drake is a higher education strategy consultant at KPMG in New York City. She graduated from Syracuse University in 2023 with a BA in Policy Studies. At Syracuse, she was named a Remembrance Scholar and a Syracuse University Scholar, the most prestigious scholarships any undergraduate can receive.

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