

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

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

The student-to-staff partnership experience in a university-based humanitarian organization

Oshish Ungras, Faculty of Arts, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada.

Contact: o.ungras@gmail.com

My journey of student-faculty partnership is one that I did not anticipate joining when I signed up for the International Students Overcoming War (ISOW) Scholarship Initiative. ISOW is part student club, part humanitarian organization that provides students the opportunities to hone their leadership skills as they administer the operations of the scholarship program. The partnerships between students, staff, and faculty create experiential learning for all that enhances personal and professional development in this community. Over the course of 4 years, with progressive leadership responsibilities ranging from secretary to a full-time contract position, I have been able to experience partnership from the student and staff perspective. In this essay I share the key lessons I have learned about partnership as I moved through these roles and experienced the challenges of self-reflection, holding multiple identities, and moving on.

In ISOW, student leaders from all disciplines are united by their shared interest in addressing large-scale humanitarian issues in modest but meaningful ways. Each year, we are responsible for making life-changing decisions with respect to selection of scholarship recipients and reflecting on how best to support them financially, academically, and socially once they arrive in Canada. Jonsson (2020) states, “Making immediate change . . . while being part of a collective effort . . . develops feelings of efficacy; it feels life-giving to be part of change-making in solidarity with others” (p.151–152). This holds true for many of us as students, especially those who have a background in global studies (international development) and crave the opportunity to tangibly contribute to solutions outside the classroom. ISOW renews our hope that we can impact positive change by giving us the creative agency to leverage our strengths and resources.

It is exciting to root ISOW in the philosophy of student-faculty/staff partnerships because it captures the necessity of students *and* staff/faculty to support the initiative’s functions. While we in ISOW have only recently come across the pedagogy of partnership, students have been pursuing extracurricular and curricular activities in ISOW through volunteering and enrolling in half- or full-credit courses to administer scholarship programming, conduct research of topics in peace and conflict, and/or expand the program’s reach. The philosophy of partnership allows us to communicate with a new audience, namely those in a higher education institution who may wonder how humanitarian action can be sustained by student volunteer commitment. It also

enables ISOW to be an initiative that is outward facing in the university: the partnership model allows us to engage in global conversations and build external partnerships that sustain ISOW operations even as the student team experiences turnover. I have experienced two main types of partnerships that have defined my learning both professionally and personally. For the last 2 years, I have been partnering with students in the role of a staff member, while for all 4 years I have been the student in a partnership with Dr. Gavin Brockett, our faculty advisor.

WHY I JOINED ISOW

I am a recent master's graduate, the only daughter of my parents who immigrated from India, and the first in my family to pursue a university degree in Canada. My intersectionality and experience of growing up in a multigenerational household has instilled in me the resilience, courage, and determination to seek a meaningful career that prioritizes people's well-being. I saw firsthand how community is integral to one's well-being, so I gravitate towards opportunities that recreate that experience.

I have also grown up wanting to pursue a career that improves the quality of life for people all around the world. Education, being integral to expressions of agency and autonomy, has inspired me to learn about the intersection of humanitarianism, international development, and education rights. So, when I ran into Dr. Brockett near the end of my second year of university and he encouraged me to apply to ISOW, I was very excited to join. I knew about ISOW's accomplishments from taking a class with Dr. Brockett in first year and found student leadership inspiring. Plus, the opportunities to learn from my peers, university administrators, professors, and scholarship recipients about NGO work was an ideal professional development experience for me.

MY EARLY YEARS IN ISOW

Secretariat

I started my journey in ISOW as secretary in 2019. In this role, I was to manage and complete various administrative tasks. My work was mainly independent: I studied club management policies, Students' Union protocols, and our club history. I was an active participant at all team events, and thoroughly enjoyed making friends in ISOW. I also led the Grant Writing Committee and developed a passion for articulating our values, especially if it led to funding and support that would help us achieve our goals.

In a few months I was asked to be president of the student club for the 2020–2021 year, and that was truly terrifying. Based on the few months I observed, ISOW was a behemoth of an organization. While planning and completing different types of projects sounded exciting, managing a team of 20, public speaking, and representing ISOW to stakeholders, including politicians, was very daunting, and yet, I was thrilled to have the responsibility. This early willingness to take on challenges out of my depth with the assurance that I had a community of partnerships for support catalyzed my growth in ISOW.

Presidency

The start of my presidency coincided with the start of the pandemic, but I spent the summer of 2020 hoping that we would be able to return to normal life by September because I had big goals for the year. When we accepted this would not be the case, Dr. Brockett proposed ideas for my year-long Directed Studies course with him that would develop my interests, help me grow as a leader, and provide time to complete my work as a president. Developing a scholarship for newcomers in our community, pursuing multiple research projects, sustaining our ISOW community online, and exploring conversations with global colleagues in webinars gave me a packed schedule. ISOW during COVID was an outlet for my energy to create something positive and to deal with my own anxiety, but having a Directed Studies course also meant that I was tying my work to my grades as measures of my success. This was an intimidating process as a substantial portion of evaluation depends on oral and written reflections.

Dr. Brockett is often teased by students (including me) about how his experiential learning approach to teaching requires us to submit many reflections. As a result of completing work that is more practical than traditionally academic in nature, our learning is measured by our own evaluation. Although I got to choose much of what I focused on in the course, writing about myself was very challenging. I think for young adults the idea of deep reflection requires too much vulnerability at this stage in life, and we generally like to avoid self-confrontation. However, honest self-reflection is a prerequisite for growing self-awareness and personal development.

Continuous self-reflection along with thoughtful engagement is a worthy investment that leads to growth and the development of partnerships. Not only does it help us understand each other better but also gives voice to our fears and vulnerabilities, which is often the first step in addressing them. One of my fears was public speaking, which I regularly shared with Dr. Brockett with the hopes that I could avoid it. That was not the case, and, as president, leading meetings with various stakeholders was part of my responsibilities. However, I found that voicing this did two things: the first is that I received constructive feedback or positive affirmations which built my confidence; the second was that it surprised others, who thought it was very easy for me. My confidence and willingness to step outside my comfort zone has increased because the process of self-reflection and communication in my partnerships has taught me to not be so self-conscious.

MANAGING THE STUDENT AND STAFF IDENTITY

Program assistant

The following year I continued in a staff role as a program assistant while pursuing my master's degree. I took on increasing responsibility and, notably, attended two international conferences that further enhanced my partnership with Dr. Brockett to pursue new ideas for ISOW as well as my own professional development. I also began to deal with some of the complexities of being a staff member to support the student leadership team, such as wrestling with questions of delegation, responsibility, and ownership. While the scope of my responsibilities increased, I found that the time commitment of roughly 12 hours a week (as a full-time MA student), was not a drastic increase from what I was committing as president. There were some weeks during which I would have to dedicate more, and others when I had a lighter workload. The most challenging aspect of this shift from student to staff was managing my expectations of student leaders. While

program assistants are meant to provide consistency and make up for fluctuating time commitments of student leaders, I found in this role that it was difficult for me to delegate to some student leaders who saw my role as the catch-all for responsibilities they were unwilling to pursue. Although this allowed me to demonstrate my adaptability, the uncertainty and unpredictability of such moments was unpleasant. Such moments led to frustrations that were difficult to communicate because the only explanation I ever received was that this is a norm among students, and that my role was to provide the necessary consistency to maintain program functions. However, hearing this never made me feel better because I knew that both students and we, as staff/faculty, were missing out on incredible ideas, inspiration, and collaboration because of a lack of willingness to invest equally amongst the student leaders.

Global partnerships coordinator

To fulfill the internship requirement of my master's degree, I decided to accept a year-long position as the global partnerships coordinator of ISOW. This position was essentially an extension of the program assistant role, except that it was full time and would bring more complex projects, namely leading our advocacy with the federal government and planning our first international conference in partnership with the UN Refugee Agency. Although I was responsible for carrying out the majority of tasks either independently or in partnership with Dr. Brockett, working with student partners was important for me because of the richness our collaboration brings to all our work. I had no experience in lobbying, and I never imagined leading our communications with the federal government, but my determination to work hard, while trusting the partnership with Dr. Brockett would result in growth, kept me motivated. While lobbying was unfamiliar to me, planning the conference was a dream come true. From my time attending conferences in Dubai and Barcelona as program assistant, I was eager to be part of planning one because I loved the organizational aspect of such a task and because Dr. Brockett and I would be co-directing this unprecedented project together at Wilfrid Laurier University. It also encapsulated so much of what I am passionate about: youth engagement, humanitarian action, and increasing access to education rights. Shaping every detail of the conference schedule, logistics, catering, technology, research, and more was incredibly fulfilling!

This year brought challenges and lessons to learn about partnership too. On the one hand, there are benefits to being close to the students for whom I take up the staff role in the partnership. It has been the most enjoyable aspect of my time in ISOW! One example of a challenge, however, is that while we could form trusting partnerships quickly, I noticed I was increasingly treated as a channel for relaying information to Dr. Brockett. "Could you tell/ask Dr. Brockett" was often followed by "because I can't/I am not close with him." In theory, this is a harmless act, but, in practice, it reinforced a hierarchy in ISOW that did not exist in our community when I was still a student. This was not a result of the title of faculty advisor making Dr. Brockett unapproachable, but it was beginning to feel like students would say what they really felt to me, trusting that I would deliver it in a much more diplomatic manner. Mutual respect and boundaries are crucial, and over time relaying information to Dr. Brockett through me could jeopardize the partnership model in ISOW. It also made me feel as though I was not being seen as a partner, but rather as someone who could be that catch-all. Whether it be communicating on their behalf or fulfilling responsibilities they would refuse, I felt torn about the purpose of my

role and thought it was counter-intuitive to our goal of growing the capacity of student leaders as partners.

Knaggs et al. (2021) term this lack of meeting expectations an “undiscussable” of partnership that can lead to frustrations if there is an unwillingness to engage in reciprocal self-reflection and feedback. I have progressed through ISOW with the aim of building relationships wherein reliability is reciprocated, a willingness to learn and lead is shared, and effective communication that leads to mutual growth is prioritized. At the very least, this is an important professional competency; my own ability to communicate with a variety of partners developed as a result of being willing to speak for myself. Reflecting with Dr. Brockett on this dynamic as a staff member was an important part of reinforcing our ability to communicate and for me to articulate my concerns. It was necessary feedback that I had to share because as I took on greater responsibility, I needed more support in balancing student partnerships with completing my own individual projects.

MOVING ON

Throughout my years in ISOW, I have let my willingness to learn lead me to accept challenges and opportunities as they arose. Though I will never tire of marveling at all the amazing paths that has led me down, I am ready to move on. While I was excited to grow my capacity for challenging work, I have made the difficult decision to pursue my interests in new opportunities, where I can apply all the skills and competencies I have gained through ISOW. When I examine the intensity of the last few years including international travel and presentations, conference planning, government lobbying, and more, I know that it was hard for me to see when I should move on. Now, I am looking forward to new adventures.

This was not an easy process of realization over the past few months, as the fear of disappointing Dr. Brockett and student partners made it more challenging to leave a community of partnerships. Not only did I truly enjoy the opportunities, but I also know that my sustained involvement over many years has become important for the organization. The guilt, fear of the unknown, and lack of understanding I had about how I could transfer what I had learned over the years caused enormous uncertainty. What helped me process and overcome these feelings is the thought that if the students and staff who have contributed to ISOW over the years expressed such concerns, I would tell them they should celebrate the time they had in ISOW. Although they may not be contributing the same way they had when they worked in partnership, the community they were part of will continue as a legacy of their hard work. When I reason with myself, I am overcome with pride and an inner peace that helps me admire the whole-hearted approach I took to building and sustaining the community of partnerships that were so important to shaping who I am today. I know that the solid foundation of mutual respect is of the utmost priority and that even though I may feel very connected to ISOW, the best parts of my time here are the partnerships-turned-friendships that can continue. In conversations with Dr. Brockett, I have always been left assured that change is a constant of life and that good leadership moves on eventually.

As I reflect on my time in ISOW engaging in different partnerships, especially that with Dr. Brockett, I know I understand my motivations and goals on a much deeper level. While I often take up leadership positions, it is not an ambition of mine and instead I want to employ the skills,

resources, and privileges that I have in a life in service of others. Leadership is about transformational learning and relationships to me, and I wholeheartedly want to employ care in all dimensions of my life. Partnership is thus the result of me wanting to bring a genuine and honest investment of myself to all that I do, and I have come to understand that that is also what makes me a good leader.

CONCLUSION

Partnership requires care

Not everyone in the community wants to connect on a personal level, but that does not stop us from respecting and caring for each other as human beings with lives outside of ISOW. Although it helps to understand one another better, our community of partnerships serves as an escape for some—an opportunity to focus on developing themselves in a safe environment instead of bringing in other stresses. Leadership, partnership, and learning is more about the means than the ends, which is why it is important to show care and respect for your partners. This means continuously checking your expectations and maintaining open and honest communication about the collaboration. Partnership is a combination of learning, working, and community, and while it can be difficult to define, it is incredibly important to exercise emotional intelligence and care for each other's well-being, especially in high pressure situations. This includes recognizing that healthy boundary-setting and contributions by both parties are fundamental to a productive partnership.

Partnership requires courage

Courage is different from confidence. Someone can project confidence but only when their strengths are on display. Courage, on the other hand, is about taking risks to develop your weaknesses. I did not know it at the time, but my 4 years in ISOW were driven by this intrinsic courage to take risks.

Partnership requires an acceptance of the process of learning as being more important than the outcome

This is perhaps the most challenging truth to confront, as a fear of failure and self-doubt are obstacles to focusing on the process of learning that is a necessary component of partnership, especially in a community. I would say this lesson is even more important for teams (such as ISOW) because the process of completing a goal is what bonds us, even if the outcomes do not meet our hopes.

Partnership requires healthy turnover or resolution of a role

While ISOW's work is indefinite, student/staff turnover brings the healthy creativity that I valued as a student. Being able to contribute over a few years can provide a healthy sense of continuity as well, but ultimately student partnerships will flourish if there is space for them to shape their own directions. Moving on also prevents us from developing expectations of ourselves and others that can create a sense of pressure or guilt.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Oshish Ungras is a recent graduate of the Balsillie School of International Affairs with an MA in Global Governance. Her research interests include forced migration, international development, and humanitarian aid.

REFERENCES

- Jonsson, M. (2020). Five reasons why working as a student partner is energizing. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 4(2), 150-154. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v4i2.4336>
- Knaggs, A., Leonard, J., Dharmaseta, C., & Griffin, A. (2021). Partnership status: It's complicated. Reflections on the "undiscussables" in a student-staff partnership. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 5(1), 131-137. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v5i1.4342>