

**SPECIAL SECTION: EQUIPPING STUDENT LEADERS AS PARTNERS FOR SUSTAINABLE HUMANITARIAN ACTION****REFLECTIVE ESSAY****SaP as an outward focused model: The ISOW perspective**

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As a first-year student entering my post-secondary studies in the Bachelor of Business Administration program at Wilfrid Laurier University, I knew that university was the place for me. As a highly conscientious and internally driven individual, I quickly found myself wanting to be involved in something more than just my mandatory academic work. However, entering my first year of university, I had concerns about how much time I would have for extracurricular activities. By contrast, my roommate constantly talked about International Students Overcoming War (ISOW), a club where he formed deep friendships and felt a sense of fulfillment by making a positive impact on the school and the world. Hearing his amazing stories led me to want to be part of the community ISOW offered, and so I applied to join. I dressed in my best suit and went for the interview. Thankfully, I was offered the position in the public affairs portfolio. Despite ISOW being unrelated to my area of study, I knew deep down that joining the ISOW community was the place I wanted to be.

My journey with ISOW as a student leader spanned 3 years. Each year saw increased involvement and understanding of ISOW in terms of the student-faculty partnership that is at its core. In my third and final year, I even had the opportunity to study the idea of partnership. I agreed to participate in a virtual session at the 2022 National Students as Partners Roundtable in Australia, and then enrolled in a directed studies course with Dr. Brockett and began to read the SaP literature. At the same time, I played a key role in planning and then participating in ISOW's 2023 conference, Equipping Student Leaders as Partners for Sustainable Humanitarian Action, in partnership with the UNHCR.

**ISOW AS A PARTNERSHIP**

My reading of articles published by the *International Journal for Students as Partners (IJSaP)* led me to the conclusion that students as partners (SaP) is best understood as inward-focused, with an emphasis upon in-classroom partnerships. Much is learned from these experiences, but typically they are limited by the duration and extent of a course. By contrast, ISOW constitutes an outward-focused partnership model that includes cocreation of curriculum alongside academic learning that extends far beyond the classroom. Courses are a key part of and sustain ISOW, but they are only one part of the experiential learning in which student leaders are engaged. ISOW is

a humanitarian initiative built around a student club and fueled by student commitment to both action and learning. As international conflict has led to ever greater humanitarian need, so too has there been increased interest in ISOW as a model that might be replicated on other university campuses. It allows for the possibility that students at universities around the world might contribute real solutions to human suffering. It was in this vein that we convened our conference with the UNHCR to encourage others to think about how best to develop the partnership model.

My understanding of the deep partnerships at the core of ISOW developed gradually over the course of my 3 years with the club. As an ISOW leader myself I have been able to see first-hand the impact of the partnership between students and the faculty advisor. Typically, student clubs lack faculty involvement: they are seen as autonomous and are governed by the student body by way of the university students' union. It has been my observation that faculty often do not get involved with these clubs due to a fear of increased workload as well as a fear of overstepping their boundaries.

Partnership is vital for the successful functioning of ISOW. In a club as large as ISOW, with numerous student leaders, sponsored scholars, and external stakeholders, it can be challenging to establish genuine partnerships among everyone. However, as I dedicated more time and effort to ISOW's goals, I noticed a significant increase in the opportunity to engage in partnership with the faculty advisor in particular. The deliberate web of partnerships within ISOW serves to ensure that everyone can contribute effectively. By establishing diverse and meaningful partnerships, ISOW can harness the collective effort and expertise of its members, enabling the organization to thrive.

The partnership between me and the faculty advisor, Dr. Brockett, differed significantly from a typical student-teacher relationship. It reflected the faculty advisor's willingness to learn not only with me, but from me: it reflected a radical rethinking of the student-professor relationship of the sort that SaP encourages. Not only did we co-create curriculum and assignments, incorporating each person's thoughts and ideas, but we also worked on substantial projects that defined the work of ISOW. This collaborative approach allowed for more creativity and innovation in my work, leading to better outcomes for the organization. The level of trust and reliance on each other was unlike anything I had experienced before, highlighting the depth of our partnership.

Initially, I joined as a junior member of the public affairs portfolio, focusing on specific tasks and responsibilities. As I assumed more responsibility and became director of public affairs, I began working closely with a program assistant—Oshish Ungras—who was a former student leader completing an internship. Eventually, this progression led to a directed studies course with the faculty advisor and two other students. This sort of progression is typical of ISOW, and it ensures that growing partnerships are at the centre of ISOW's smooth operations.

My first year as assistant director of public affairs was heavily impacted by COVID. That summer (August 2021), however, my journey with ISOW as a partnership really took shape during the ISOW annual retreat. This event usually takes place at the faculty advisor's home near the end of August over 2 days and involves planning sessions, games, and activities to set the tone for the year ahead. The concept of a retreat at a professor's home truly baffled me. It was hard for me to comprehend why a faculty member would want 20+ university students in their home over a 2-day period. However, I quickly saw its true importance. The fact that the faculty advisor

opened his home helped to break down the traditional academic hierarchy and encouraged genuine partnership.

It was at the subsequent year's retreat in August 2022 where the trust and understanding were put to the test, and my ability to see the power of partnership became clear. At this event Dr. Brockett approached me to discuss our communications goals, one of which was to illustrate a major milestone: we had reached \$1 million in student contributions for our scholarship. Dr. Brockett suggested that this would be an opportunity to thank the Laurier community for their help. After personally analyzing this annual goal, I realized that doing so would be poorly aligned with our overall mission: it risked hurting our brand image and could expose us to unwanted criticism of our financial management. Unlike other classroom exercises where the faculty's opinion is final and cannot be challenged, I decided to push back against Dr. Brockett's idea and highlighted an alternative path forward of writing monthly blogs to highlight student leaders and how far we had come since inception, which would better celebrate ISOW's progress. After deep conversation we settled on this goal for the year, and the blogs were a massive success! It was not easy to assert myself, but we are both agreed that this is an ideal example of how student involvement benefitted ISOW.

Buoyed by the confidence that derived from this experience, I launched into my first of 2 years as director of public affairs for ISOW. The highlight of this year was a referendum campaign that aimed to double our funding from the student body and required months of intensive planning and initiative. However, the key moment again came during another conversation with the faculty advisor where we discussed the optics of a social media effort tied to the campaign. In this respectful discussion, we challenged each other's ideas, and ultimately, my proposal was accepted. Again, we recognized the power of partnership within ISOW, breaking down traditional university hierarchies. It gave me confidence that my team and professor had my back, even when we disagreed.

An additional example that highlights ISOW's unique partnership is its approach to conflict. Throughout the normal course of club operations, various challenges come up that require immense thought and empathy. In ISOW, every single decision is voted on by the ISOW executive team, which is made up of student volunteers. The faculty advisor in this case does not actually get a vote himself but leads the discussion before a vote is taken. A clear example of this was the decision to accept a new scholar without a partner organization to cover a quarter of the costs as is normally the case. I was part of a cross-function discussion in which the faculty advisor asked questions to provoke our thinking. The team ultimately decided to accept this scholar which has led to her being able to fulfill her dream of higher education. Importantly, this decision added to the diversity of the program. It reflects a theme common in the SaP literature: that the student voice can help realize critical commitments to inclusion and social justice. This form of decision-making empowers students and allows them to feel as though their opinion matters while also seeking advice; it also enables students to engage in partnership with university faculty to create long-lasting global change.

ISOW, unlike other student clubs, allows students to lead in solving conflict rather than deferring to university officials. For example, during the scholar selection process a few years ago there was a difference of opinion with our partner organization as to who should be chosen. In the heated discussion, the ISOW executive team was derided as students involved in a "childish club on campus" with no real power. The organization tried to bypass student leaders and go

straight to our faculty advisor to solve the problem. However, the faculty advisor gave students the power to resolve the situation themselves, so these students decided to meet with the university's ISOW Advisory Committee and seek their advice. They agreed with the student leaders that it would be best for ISOW not to grant an ISOW scholarship for that year. This highlighted the power afforded to students to resolve conflict while working closely with the university beyond the traditional classroom.

#### ISOW AS AN ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIP

My second year as director of public affairs offered the opportunity to learn about the SaP model—something for which I was ready in light of my accumulated experiences to that point. In the Fall of 2022, when I was in the midst of preparing my law school applications in addition to taking my regular classes and overseeing my portfolio, Dr. Brockett and Oshish Ungras asked me to join them in presenting to the National Students as Partners Roundtable hosted by the University of the Sunshine Coast in Australia. Despite my prior commitments, I felt supported and confident enough to give it a try as I knew there were numerous benefits to be achieved. The process consisted of developing a presentation together and constantly editing it to make sure our parts aligned. Reflecting on this experience, it felt more like an unusually successful group project rather than an assignment, highlighting the trust and comfort that was developed over years of partnership. When it finally came time to present, the feeling of being on stage with a professor and program assistant, each of us contributing equally, was truly fulfilling and inspired me to continue my learning about SaP. This presentation was the catalyst to take on the most challenging journey I had yet taken: enrolling in an ISOW directed studied course.

Knowing that Winter term 2023 would focus on preparations for our conference with the UNHCR, Dr. Brockett offered that I could enroll in a course that would include research into the SaP model. This proved to be an opportunity unlike anything I had experienced before. In traditional academic settings, once a term or semester comes to an end, essays and assignments are submitted, graded, and concluded. However, I often found myself reflecting on past work and wishing I could go back to revise or approach things differently. The ISOW conference offered me that chance.

One critical piece of the partnership throughout the directed studies course was the co-creation of the curriculum. As a business student, I had very little experience with flexible curriculum. The vast majority of my courses were very structured with one midterm, one exam, and a few projects, all of which had specific due dates provided on the first day of class. The directed studies course was the exact opposite. For example, we designed the syllabus together: expectations, assignments, and grades were all discussed to ensure our mutual satisfaction. For instance, instead of taking on additional roles in the conference on top of my responsibilities as director of public affairs for the club, I asked for conference communications to be included as a graded element of my course to help with my workload. Dr. Brockett agreed, reflecting the respect and trust that was at the core of our strong and long-lasting partnership.

At the same time, the practice of conducting research in SaP and actively participating in a conference on this topic itself was an experience I could never have anticipated. I spent many hours exploring and reading the *IJSaP*. Prior to engaging in research, I had participated in partnerships without much consideration for the underlying structures that supported them.

However, delving deep into the literature changed everything. I became acquainted with specific topics and ideas within the broader theme, and I immediately recognized instances of these in my own personal experiences. This real-time connection made the research process easier as I could directly relate to what was being written. Furthermore, it allowed me to reflect more deeply on my past behavior and understand which aspects went according to plan and which did not.

There were two key concepts that resonated with me in particular as I learned about SaP. Alison Cook-Sather et al. (2021) emphasize that for the field to grow, we must understand the barriers to student-faculty partnerships. Often students are left out of partnerships due to limitations that are no fault of their own. For example, students may be unable to take non-compulsory credits, may not have the financial means to free up the time to make a commitment, or they may require compensation that is not available in order to find that time. I find this particularly compelling as I am aware of my own privilege: other students may face practical barriers to participating in a student-faculty partnership such as ISOW. The result would be an organization lacking diversity and, therefore, strength.

The second concept was the fact that many students are resistant to participating in partnerships due to fear of stepping out of the established framework of traditional student activities. Taking part in co-designing a course is beyond most students' comfort zone. Bovill et al. (2016) point out that students may be concerned with risking new grading schemes when applying to graduate degrees, and they may prefer the typical structure they have been accustomed to throughout their entire educational career. This was something that directly applied to me given my long-term plans to attend law school. I was nervous that the ambiguity of assessment associated with SaP would hurt my GPA and hinder my chances to get into my dream school. As Bovill et al. (2016) emphasize, although these concerns are justified, they can be mitigated through "attention to potential sources of student resistance at the outset as well as active listening and response to student concerns" (p. 199). This was precisely the solution that Dr. Brockett provided in response to my concerns, and our regular weekly meetings helped to ensure that I was progressing according to plan.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The culmination of my participation in ISOW as a partnership was the 3 days of the UNHCR conference. Dr. Brockett offered to pay me so that I could be present the entire time: my responsibilities were far beyond those of my volunteer role or my academic commitment. It was exciting to test and apply all that I had learned through my research. Most satisfying of all, I was part of a panel speaking to the 200 international guests about the partnership model: I made sure to emphasize the importance of structures that ensure equitable access for all students to partnership opportunities and to encourage students to take the risk despite concerns about their grades.

As a panel participant I explained that working in partnership had undoubtedly helped me develop two critical traits: confidence and resourcefulness. Prior to my partnership experiences, I viewed education in a binary manner, where achieving an A grade was considered satisfactory and anything lower was seen as a personal failure. However, working in partnership shifted my perspective. Instead of solely focusing on the outcome, I began valuing the journey and the

collaborative process. Much to Dr. Brockett's surprise, I told the audience that I had become increasingly excited to fail and discuss improvements: I now understood that this was the best way to success, something that would have seemed unfathomable just a few months before this partnership. As a result, I have become increasingly passionate and confident in my work, leading to successful outcomes such as presenting at conferences and publishing this paper even though the partnership has ended.

The positive outcomes that resulted from the partnership between myself and the faculty advisor extend beyond individual benefits. ISOW itself is a product of a unique student-faculty collaboration. Neither the faculty advisor nor any one individual student is expert at operating an NGO. Nevertheless, the sharing of ideas and unique perspectives between students and faculty advisor is what allows ISOW to function well: it has generated the level of success the organization has seen over the last decade. Students studying finance, communications, policy development, and human rights all contribute their knowledge. Together we complement the faculty advisor and participate in decision-making. Were ISOW run by any one of these individuals, it would not succeed. Yet, as a student-faculty partnership it has been able to thrive, benefitting all involved.

Personally, my experience as a partner has had numerous positive outcomes, significantly contributing to my personal and professional development. I am much more confident, allowing me to embrace mistakes and value the journey. Additionally, the experience has nurtured my resourcefulness and creativity, enabling me to approach challenges from new perspectives. These traits will undoubtedly continue to propel my growth in various areas in the future.

#### NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

**Justin Zekorn** is a Wilfrid Laurier University alumnus and an aspiring lawyer who is passionate about education as a human right. As the former Director of Public Affairs of ISOW, he led his peers in community engagement campaigns, such as doubling the student contribution to the scholarship in 2022 and facilitating the Equipping Student Leaders as Partners for Sustainable Humanitarian Action conference, in partnership with the UNHCR.

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