

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

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

An authentic discussion of the students-as-partners framework: A student's perspective

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International Students Overcoming War (ISOW) is a student-led organization that aims to provide opportunities to students from war-torn regions. Through offering scholarships and support, ISOW is able to create pathways for students to pursue higher education in post-secondary institutions. In my first year of university, I was lucky enough to sit by an individual who was a sponsored scholar with International Students Overcoming War. This individual would go on to be a wonderful friend and ultimately the reason why I joined ISOW near the end of my second year of university. I remember being extremely nervous for my interview for assistant director of scholar support, as well as the relief that I felt when I received an email saying that they would love to have me as part of ISOW. I had no idea how much my university experience would change upon accepting this role, nor how much I would grow as a result of the amazing experiences I would have.

For many university students, their time spent at university tends to lack a key component that allows them to develop in ways that prepare them for life after graduation: hands-on experience and the ability to put the knowledge gained from studying to use in real-life scenarios. In recent years, the students-as-partners (SaP) pedagogy has emerged to allow students to be more involved in their learning and allow faculty to alter the way that they teach. Through my time with ISOW, I was allowed to fully engage through the SaP model and learn more about what the idea of partnership truly means.

I served as vice-president of ISOW in my fourth year as an undergraduate student alongside our president. Together we enrolled in a directed studies course with ISOW's faculty advisor. The course, Higher Education in Emergencies, included a number of experiential components that included preparing for and presenting at an international workshop in Edinburgh and then researching the students-as-partners model and engaging former ISOW student leaders to reflect together on their experiences. I drew on this process to write the speech with which I opened ISOW's 2023 conference in partnership with the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR: Equipping Student Leaders as Partners for Sustainable Humanitarian Action.

Reflecting on the interviews and the SaP literature, I was able to identify some common themes. In this reflective essay, I will discuss my experience throughout my involvement with the SaP philosophy. Following this, I will explore the partnerships that come into fruition through the

SaP framework and how these partnerships give students the confidence needed to be successful within their SaP experience and beyond. Lastly, I will provide an overarching reflection of my experience through highlighting the difficulties and growing pains, but also the skills and knowledge gained from my involvement in the SaP framework.

MY EXPERIENCE AS AN ISOW LEADER

When I first joined the ISOW team, I was an assistant director of scholar support. In this role, I worked with two other students to assist the sponsored scholars with any of their needs. In particular, a large amount of the work of the scholar support team includes helping the scholars set up bank accounts, cell-phone plans, social insurance numbers, etc. Aside from this, it requires building a relationship with the scholars to ensure that they know they can reach out if they should ever need anything. Aside from providing scholar support, I was also involved in other critical team activities, such as visiting classrooms and promoting ISOW during our referendum in which we asked the student body for an additional \$4 per term for our initiative. Volunteering in this capacity, I quickly realized that being part of ISOW was very fulfilling and was something that I was proud of. Ultimately, I decided that I wanted to stay involved in ISOW and committed to becoming the vice-president and director of scholar support in my fourth and final year of my undergraduate degree.

When I was first offered the vice-president position I was overwhelmed. I felt as though there was still an excessive amount of information about ISOW that I did not understand and felt as though I would not succeed in such a position. I felt very underqualified and did not believe that I had what it took to be a leader in this sense. However, something in me decided to agree to this position, and I am so grateful that I did. It helped a great deal that our faculty advisor offered me a directed studies course that summer in which I was able to learn more about ISOW's history and to invest time in preparing for the year ahead.

As vice-president, I learned so much, not only about ISOW and the importance of higher education across the globe, but also about myself. There were many tasks and roles that I had to take on that I was not at all comfortable with, but they forced me to grow. In particular, I had to help the president host monthly management team meetings, which required me to take on a leadership role in front of my peers even though I felt quite uncomfortable. In addition to presenting on my experience as a student leader and partner at the University of Edinburgh in November 2022 and my speech at the 2023 conference, I also was given the responsibility of planning the opening night of the conference with our keynote speaker. Although these tasks and events were very difficult and stressful at times, they allowed me to prove my abilities to myself and made me realize the potential that I have.

During my time with ISOW, I was both a leader and a learner. Due to the unique opportunities I was given, I was able to learn so much about myself and the issues that ISOW tries to tackle. My involvement in ISOW demonstrated the SaP model very well as I was invited into many different spaces and conversations that most students pursuing their undergraduate degrees do not have access to. I was able to engage in important conversations with crucial staff of Wilfrid Laurier University and engage on a much higher level than most students. I was also given the opportunity to meet with amazing and inspiring people, such as our keynote speaker, the internationally renowned Vietnamese peace activist Kim Phuc Phan Thi. These opportunities

took my learning experience with ISOW beyond the traditional classroom style of learning and allowed me to interact with a wide range of people at a much deeper level.

As with most people, I do not like to be pushed out of my comfort zone. This was the case until I joined ISOW, at which point I quickly realized that staying within my comfort zone was not always an option. There were several times throughout my involvement that I took on roles that made me extremely nervous. During my year as vice-president, I enrolled in a second directed studies course in which I often reflected on this discomfort and how I always felt a sense of imposter syndrome to a certain degree. Now that I look back on this after graduating, it is really incredible to me how much I was able to grow into being comfortable with tasks such as leading events and meetings, giving speeches and presentations, and many other once-intimidating tasks. Prior to joining ISOW and even during my time as a volunteer leader, I often doubted myself and my abilities, but I believe that being tested in such ways and doing things that made me uncomfortable were extremely beneficial. In recent months, I have reflected on my time as a university student, and I am truly proud when I think of the person I was when I first joined ISOW and the person I am today. Being involved in ISOW allowed me to really push myself and not back away from a challenge—which is a wonderful trait that I am now implementing in my work and daily life.

REFLECTING ON THE SAP MODEL

As part of my year-long directed studies course, the ISOW president and I engaged in extremely insightful conversations with previous ISOW members. This was not a formal research study, but rather a shared opportunity to reflect on their experiences that lays the foundation for a future research project. Together we discussed what reflections they would like incorporated into this article. As I listened, the past experiences remembered by former ISOW members and students resonated with me. The most prominent theme that I was able to identify was the struggles and lack of comfort that often came with the learning partnership at the heart of ISOW. Throughout many of our conversations, previous student leaders observed that there was a sense of hierarchy between themselves and the faculty advisor, which made it very difficult at times to progress further into the type of partnership that both parties were trying to achieve. One leader mentioned that although it was not necessarily something that they struggled with, it was very apparent and evident while doing the work. Other former students discussed how at the beginning of their involvement with ISOW, many of the activities felt very unusual, such as meetings at the professor's house. However, one acknowledged that if these events had not occurred, the students and the professor would not have achieved the deeper levels of knowing one another and the partnership would have suffered as a result. Throughout the conversations, it was very apparent that many students originally struggled with the uncomfortable nature of the partnership, but by continuing to work through this discomfort, they were able to create a long-lasting and meaningful partnership with the faculty advisor. In my experience, the collaboration efforts with both my peers and the faculty advisor involved extreme amounts of work and efforts from both parties. There were no set strategies that we utilized in order to reach the level of partnership that we were able to attain. Rather, we focused on the importance of conversations and truly getting to know each other outside of our roles with ISOW and the

university and on a much more personal level. As these conversations flowed, relationships to one another inevitably grew stronger, and our partnership was strengthened as a result.

Mick Healey and Ruth L. Healey (2019) shed light on the difficulties of being pushed outside of your comfort levels when trying to build a partnership. Discussing partnership values, they state that the “process of partnership requires recognition that working in partnership is an experience which may take both student and staff participants outside their comfort zone” (p. 7). In my own experiences with the SaP model, my own limited idea of what partnership between a professor and a student should look like was difficult to overcome, and this made it quite challenging to build the relationship that is necessary when trying to create a partnership. Healey and Healey (2019) provide a valuable perspective, which is that of the professor and/ or staff involved in these partnerships. In particular, the authors state that for these partnerships to be successful, staff must renounce much of their traditional power and control and give it to students. However, this also requires that students take responsibility and put in the difficult work that they are often not used to having to do to support the partnership. Although the SaP philosophy introduces positive changes to the ways universities operate, it is very evident that it comes with many obstacles. However, these can be overcome if students and staff collaborate and communicate in ways that are effective and aim to break down the hierarchies inherent in the system.

Another insight that arose from the two texts and the conversations with previous leaders is the importance of building students up so that they are confident in the work they do within their partnerships. I have emphasized that partnerships can “drive change and redistribute power,” which can and often does lead to the voices of those who have previously been marginalized being amplified (Guitman et al., 2020, p. 65). Much of the literature has highlighted the importance of staff giving up large amounts of power to allow students to exercise a voice. By doing this, students are given the space and the opportunity to be engaged and share their thoughts and opinions on complex topics and issues that are often dismissed.

This was a common theme in our reflective conversations, with several students mentioning that, throughout their time with ISOW, they were able to develop significant confidence in themselves and their abilities and no longer viewed themselves as only being students. In my experience, university students are often not viewed with the respect they deserve. These attitudes can deter students from wanting to voice their opinions on certain matters as well as from being involved in critical issues. Thus, the structure that ISOW utilizes and the way it approaches partnership has been very beneficial for student leaders. For example, a previous president emphasized that confidence and an increased feeling of capability were the most significant skills they gained during her time with ISOW. Many of the student leaders pointed out that because of the nature of the partnership and the encouragement that it provided for them to pursue and be involved in important events and discussions, they were able to gain immense confidence in themselves despite being students. Confidence is not easy to cultivate, and so having the support from the faculty advisor truly allowed these students to grow in ways that allowed them to achieve things that they likely would not have even attempted if they had not received such support.

It is important to note that having confidence in oneself can take a person very far in life and is a trait that applies to almost all aspects of life. In our conversations, many students highlighted how the confidence that they gained while being part of ISOW was something that

transferred to their work and their careers upon graduation. One of the students pointed out that because of the work he did with ISOW, he is now much more confident when it comes to presenting ideas to important stakeholders in his field of work. On a similar note, a previous ISOW vice-president highlighted that the confidence they gained through ISOW in regard to being an advocate for social justice has continued into her life post-graduation and they feel very comfortable with putting themselves in the position of being an advocate. Yet another previous student leader shared that being pushed out of their comfort zone and having to speak with important members of the community, such as politicians, built up their confidence, and they felt that this has truly helped them succeed in their job opportunities. It is clear that a partnership model that uplifts students and gives them opportunities to be engaged in high-level discussions means that they can gain confidence in themselves, which will help them succeed not only during their time in university but beyond.

Collectively, each of these themes sheds light on the potential that the SaP philosophy has to influence academia and its traditional models of teaching. The students who were involved in ISOW all expressed that the learning they underwent as a result of their volunteer roles was extremely meaningful and had a much greater impact than what they learned in all the other aspects of their undergraduate degrees. Several of the past students that we talked with discussed the directed studies courses that many of the ISOW presidents and vice presidents took and emphasized how unique, yet beneficial, this type of learning was for them. One stated that the directed studies course that they took was one of the most valuable courses they took while at university because they were allowed to control her learning through designing the syllabus, and this included defining the skills and outcomes that they wanted to achieve from the course.

CONCLUSION

My own exposure to the SaP model included not only my learning partnership with the faculty advisor, but also actual research into SaP. This unique combination made my work not only interesting but helped me to develop a stronger partnership. I believe that, for many students, stepping into this type of relationship can be extremely difficult and confusing. In the beginning, it was very hard for me to work through and get past the power dynamics and hierarchy that existed. It took me quite a long time to feel comfortable sharing my honest opinions during certain discussions simply because I did not feel as though it was my place, even though I had been invited into these conversations. I believe that students internalize societal attitudes towards them quite a bit during their time in the university, and this can make it extremely difficult to see oneself as a valued member of an important initiative. However, if students are willing to approach these partnerships with an open mind and are willing to put in the time and effort that it takes to build them, then they can experience something truly meaningful and unique during their university experience.

When talking with previous ISOW leaders during the school year, I found it difficult to identify with their observations about how their ISOW involvement correlated to their future careers and work. However, as I write this reflective essay it is 4 months since I completed my directed studies course and my degree. Now that I have been working in my first job post-graduation as an immigration assistant, I have begun to recognize how the skills I gained from ISOW are being incorporated into my work. The communication skills I gained through my time

with ISOW through public speaking, interacting with professionals in this field from around the world, and leading team meetings have given me the tools to communicate with my current team effectively. In addition to this, the amount of team collaboration and teamwork that is involved when you are a part of ISOW will truly prepare you for how to work with anyone. In my role now, I have been able to collaborate with various teams and departments across the country with ease because of the skills I acquired during my time with ISOW.

It is very interesting to look back at the conversations with previous leaders and to see how much my understanding of what they said has evolved. A common theme was that they missed knowing that their work was making an impact and that they missed seeing the outcomes of their efforts. In essence, they missed the feeling of doing fulfilling work as they had done with ISOW. Fortunately, I have a job that I feel is fulfilling in the sense that it is helping people. Unfortunately, I do not get to see these benefits directly, and there is a strong disconnect between the work I do and the people I help. The conversations left me and still leave me with plenty of material to reflect on, and I am grateful for the insight and perspective that they provided me with during the time they were conducted.

My reflection on the SaP model suggests that not only do students perform better but they also have an overall enhanced university experience when they have the opportunity to be partners. The SaP philosophy is an exciting development within the education sector and provides both staff and students with the opportunity to advance their learning in unique and improved ways. Although the outcomes associated with the SaP model are significant, it is crucial that we also acknowledge the challenges that can arise. In particular, this type of partnership often creates an unusual disruption to traditional power dynamics that can make both parties uncomfortable. It is critical to acknowledge how these hardships may be very different from those belonging to marginalized groups, and their experiences must be considered when discussing the SaP model moving forward. However, in the case of an outward-facing SaP initiative such as ISOW, if each party is able to commit the necessary time, they will not only create meaningful partnerships, but they will experience considerable personal fulfillment as they contribute to helping others through creative and innovative means.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Brittany Ferguson is a dedicated scholar and graduate from Wilfrid Laurier University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Global Studies with a specialization in International Development. She is passionate about exploring innovative approaches to address pressing global challenges.

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