

# Connections in Unexpected Places: Learner-Oriented Mindsets in Staff-Student Partnerships

Tracie Addy<sup>a</sup>, Maria Salmeron Melendez<sup>b</sup>

- a. Lafayette College
- b. Lafayette College / Harvard University

## Abstract

For this reflective essay we describe our lived experiences of an inspirational staff-student partnership where Tracie Addy, a Black, female centre for teaching and learning (CTL) director and associate dean at Lafayette College partnered with Maria Salmeron Melendez, now an alumna, who identifies as Black, female, and Latina. At the time of the partnership Salmeron Mendez held a leadership role in student government focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. She was also a scholar of the Posse Foundation, a nation-wide organisation partnered with Lafayette to train exceptional students from diverse backgrounds for future leadership. Our partnership was born out of Salmeron Melendez seeking more development for faculty around topics of equity and inclusion. The partnership evolved into her playing a lead role in helping the CTL generate campus conversations around social-emotional learning and trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education, topic areas of both personal and professional significance for Salmeron Melendez. After a process of developing mutual understandings and jointly collaborating on what could be accomplished, our partnership blossomed and paved a way for a new area to be explored on our campus during a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was altering ways of being. In this piece we discuss various learner-oriented mindsets that manifested in our staff-student partnership such as openness, investment in student agency, flexibility, sponsorship, and advocacy. Each of these mindsets contributed to the achievement of our reciprocal goals.

## Context

In this reflective essay we describe how learner-oriented mindsets were critical to the success of our staff-student partnership at Lafayette College, a private liberal arts institution. We define learner-oriented mindsets as those focusing on the growth and development of the student, while still embracing the reciprocity of the relationship. The institution where our partnership formed is a natural place for the emergence of staff-student partnerships given the strong emphasis on undergraduate education and student mentorship. The motto of our college, *cur non*, Latin for “why not?,” is reflective of the cultural norms where students are encouraged to forge their own paths to explore their interest areas which may include unfamiliar territories. These journeys manifest in students seeking out opportunities within the college to grow and develop, whether through their majors, involvement in independent studies or other research experiences, co-curricular activities, internships and externships, or other avenues.

Our partnership formed between the director of the centre for teaching and learning (CTL) (Addy) and a student, now an alumna (Salmeron Melendez), who held a leadership position in student government, and was a Posse Scholar, a program that is dedicated to supporting emerging leaders. The CTL coordinates and facilitates initiatives on a wide range of aspects of classroom instruction, including equity and inclusion. Centre CTL student fellows play pivotal roles in programming, including panel discussions and other initiatives focused on elevating student perspectives on classroom teaching, and partnering with faculty to provide feedback through classroom observations and course material review. The CTL can be a natural place where staff-student partnerships emerge on campus given its focus on undergraduate teaching and learning, and the value of student voice in instruction. However, this partnership was not typical as the CTL is mostly an instructor-facing office, and students may not be aware of the work of the centre and may not identify it as a place where they can partner for change on campus. In these regards, the CTL can be an unexpected place for students to partner.

Our partnership emerged from Salmeron Melendez's initiative to seek out individuals in leadership positions who could help enact change at the college, specifically around faculty awareness of, and commitment to, equity and inclusion. Early on, her goals for the partnership were still in development, as she was in an exploratory phase where she was trying to determine who at the institution could help drive change, while simultaneously deliberating on what that change could be. During discussions at various meetings, Salmeron Melendez initially expressed some of the concerns that she had around faculty awareness of microaggressions that happen in the classroom as well as their commitment to respond to them. We brainstormed various initiatives that could encourage awareness, and considered their potential. Salmeron Melendez later also shared her personal experiences of, and growing interest in, social-emotional learning (SEL). SEL and trauma-informed approaches align with holistic approaches to teaching and learning (Costa, n.d., Durlack et al., 2016, Gallagher and Stocker, 2017, McCurtie, 2020, Stocker and Gallagher, 2018). SEL is implicated in inclusivity, and generally, the emotions associated with lived experiences of students greatly impact how students experience a course, particularly when combined with classroom dynamics. When an instructor attends to the social-emotional environment of a course, they can positively impact the learning experience of all students. Our brainstorming sessions fulfilled several purposes including allowing the authors to develop a trusting relationship, as well as providing a space for Salmeron Melendez to express her interests, and for Addy to brainstorm possibilities for how a partnership with the CTL could further both of their goals in a mutualistic manner.

As Salmeron Melendez furthered her studies, elevating conversations around SEL at the college level became of increasing importance, particularly as HE confronted the collective trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic. Together we decided that Salmeron Melendez could partner with the CTL by creating a guide for faculty that provided background information on SEL, its importance in teaching and learning, and recommendations for how to implement it in classroom settings. This project would allow her to learn more about SEL and achieve her goals of increasing awareness and action on campus, and aligned nicely with her senior thesis and post-graduation goals. Additionally, we intentionally created another opportunity for the authors to co-facilitate a Q&A instructor session led by an expert known for her work on trauma-informed

pedagogy. Together we crafted the questions we would ask the guest speaker and co-led the event in true partnership.

## **Reflections**

### ***Tracie Addy***

As a staff member whose primary responsibilities involve working with faculty on their teaching efforts, partnering with students has not only benefited my centre and the faculty at my institution, it has also been an opportunity to model mindsets that value and respect learners. Openness, investment in student agency, flexibility, sponsorship, and advocacy were the learner-oriented mindsets that contributed greatly to how I experienced the partnership described in this article with Salmeron Melendez

When I first met Salmeron Melendez I recall being struck by her boldness to question the way things were at the College, particularly the necessity for increased faculty awareness on various topics related to student well-being. I approached our first meeting with an open mind, wanting to hear her thoughts as a student leader navigating her own experiences at a majority institution. There was much that I could relate to from my time as a student, but there was simultaneously much to learn from her. By actively listening to her and inviting her into the centre, my hope was for her to see me as a trusted and approachable figure, who was genuinely interested in learning more about her, her interests, and her motivations.

At these early meetings Salmeron Melendez was still formulating what she hoped to accomplish by contacting my centre. Because a primary audience for CTLs focused on teaching is instructors, students typically have limited contact with and knowledge of the work of the centre. CTLs might not be considered the first places where students make connections on college campuses, which could evolve as student pedagogical partnerships continue to become more widespread. There have been several occasions where I have explained to students that my centre exists and been met with surprise and appreciation. Salmeron Melendez, in learning the work of the centre, had as much to learn from me as I did from her. Our openness allowed us both to navigate this uncertain territory.

In addition, a mindset of investment in student agency, emphasizing the importance of Salmeron Melendez having an opportunity to give voice to and help address the gaps she saw related to increased awareness of the importance of socio-emotional learning and a necessity for professors to take on a trauma-informed approach to teaching viewing, and utilizing more holistic approaches to teaching. Because I wanted her to have a voice, I invited her to become a student fellow in the centre and to focus her work on developing resources for faculty around socio-emotional learning. Having flexibility also led to me taking conversations at the centre in this new direction which we previously only tangentially explored.

Giving Salmeron Melendez agency in the partnership aligned with also the mindset of sponsorship, whereby I saw one of my roles as connecting her with opportunities for growth and

advancement. The creation of a resource for faculty on this topic was one opportunity. Another was her co-facilitation of a Q&A session with a national expert in trauma-informed pedagogy. Together we crafted the questions we would ask and together co-led the session. This provided an opportunity for Salmeron Melendez to take on a more central role in bringing social-emotional learning to campus.

An advocacy mindset was also cultivated through our partnership. Particularly, with regards to advocating for Salmeron Melendez's growth and development as she engaged in further exploration of her interest areas through her senior thesis. This perspective was illustrated by me playing a role as a member of her thesis committee who supported her work as an external reviewer. Given that her thesis related to teaching and learning, this was a natural place for advocacy and all of these efforts fully aligned with the goals of our staff-student partnership. The thesis was another mechanism by which Salmeron Melendez would grow in knowledge and skills that supported partnership initiatives.

Each of the intentions behind our partnership was encapsulated in our invitation by the college admissions committee to share our experiences with recently admitted students in an initiative called the Lafayette College FIT which stood for academic freedom, social impact, and limitless talent. They showcased student-faculty/staff pairs that cultivated transformative relationships. We were an example for academic freedom, and I was able to convey my mindset and intentions in the partnership including openness, investment in student agency, flexibility, sponsorship, and advocacy. Uniquely through this event, similar mindsets were apparent in the other student-staff partnerships. One involved a director of the college's farm and a student worker. Another involved an office on campus that supported student leaders, and a learner who formed a student group to create a space for those who like her that did not feel as if they had a home on campus, so they could benefit from community. Collectively, my staff colleagues and I each exhibited investment in student agency, advocacy, and sponsorship in our partnerships.

During this time of reflection, I can imagine how my partnership with Salmeron Melendez might not have ever come to fruition had I approached it with a dismissive mindset. I was in a position of authority to support its formation, and I am grateful for the choices I made, and for how much I learned in the process even though it was unfamiliar territory. This partnership in many ways was inspirational and I am thankful for the impacts.

### ***Maria Salmeron Melendez***

My passion for trauma-informed approaches and SEL developed significantly when I was a student at the college, meshing perfectly with my interest in culturally responsive education policies. Before college, my student activism in high school included advocating for cultural competency in the classroom and closing opportunity gaps disproportionately affecting students of color. My student leadership blossomed by virtue of trusting adults who were intentional about enabling my agency and encouraged my boldness, driving me to dream big and become the positive change I wanted to see in education. Because of these positive experiences, I

navigated college looking to form meaningful relationships with adults who would invest in my agency.

As I approached my partnership with Addy, I looked for a trusted adult who had this mindset. Addy's openness and willingness to listen and understand helped me view her as a trusting adult, which encouraged me to lean onto the partnership and approach the work with the Centre with a curious mind. I became increasingly excited about the possibilities the partnership could bring, ranging from my ability to develop my expertise, the lessons learned throughout the process, and the chance to lead the change I was advocating for in my research. As the relationship flourished and I began writing my senior thesis, I grew more comfortable talking about my research and big picture ideas with Addy.

Driven by my lived experiences and career aspirations, I was passionate about advocating for equity and inclusion on campus and sparking a greater conversation about policies that make students feel emotionally safe and thrive on campus. Writing a senior thesis on social-emotional learning policies, racial academic disparities, and trauma-informed approaches was an act of activism for me, influenced by a mindset of advocacy. While my studies revolved around my education policy aspirations, so did my intentionality towards pursuing opportunities that enhanced my advocacy skills and allowed me to apply the knowledge from my research to real-time initiatives at the College. As I reflect on my partnership with Addy, I cherish that my advocacy mindset was complemented by Addy's mindset of sponsorship, flexibility, and openness to enable my agency in this process. Our mindsets aligned with each other was pivotal to forming a bilateral partnership that helped us start the conversation around SEL and trauma-informed practices at the institution.

My research continuously emboldened me to push my thinking and be creative, and it was evident throughout our many conversations that Addy was continually open to learning with me. I felt an urgency to see my research applied in real-time at the college, but I initially felt discouraged by my assumptions about the institution's willingness to enact trauma-informed practices solely after my recommendations. Yet, as I navigated through the complexities of writing a senior thesis on an idea that was bold in practice, Addy was a partner in brainstorming actionable ways to apply my research. I went from feeling discouraged to feeling more enabled in my agency to advocate on campus.

Addy's guidance empowered me to pivot to higher education and bring my work to Lafayette College which differed from my initial intention to focus on K-12. Because of her investment in my agency, I became a student fellow, facilitated a panel with a trauma-informed expert, and produced a resource on supporting students emotionally for faculty at the College. I went from being skeptical about pursuing my newfound intricacy at the college to expanding beyond what I initially intended, which is a product of having a shared understanding of growing and learning together as we navigated our partnership. As I reflect, I am filled with gratitude and joy for diving into a partnership with Addy that had trust, openness, and student agency at its core.

## **Lessons Learned**

Through our interactions, we learned a lot about what is possible through staff-student partnership, particularly the importance of the learner-oriented mindsets of:

- Openness - The staff partner's willingness to embrace partnership and the student partner's contributions can be a welcome invitation for further engagement by the learner. This stage can be challenging when there is uncertainty as to the goals, intent, and expectations of the partnership. As the relationship develops, we found that clarifying these items, which can take time, was particularly important.
- Investment in Student Agency - Allowing the student partner to play a significant role in driving the partnership through their interests as aligned with the goals of the staff partner can be mutually beneficial.
- Flexibility - Entering the partnership with a rigid mindset or framework can be a hindrance. At times plans may need to shift in order to meet the needs of both the staff and student partner.
- Sponsorship - Being intentional about connecting the student partner with opportunities to advance their goals can result in unexpected successes.
- Advocacy - Supporting the student partner throughout and beyond the immediate partnership can further their goals and serve as a model for what a staff-student partnership can look like. When this happens others may witness the positive impacts of the partnership.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Our staff-student partnership led to the fulfillment of unmet needs including the elevation of conversations on social-emotional learning on our campus through Maria Salmeron Melendez's efforts. In order for this to occur, there needed to be an intent to support such work, and in this case, the centre for teaching and learning on campus became an unexpected place where Maria Salmeron Melendez partnered to carry out such work. This case example highlights the importance of mindset in partnership work. We acknowledge that there may have been additional factors that allowed our partnership to form that might be different from another pairing. Despite this, what became apparent was that espousing a learner-oriented mindset allowed our partnership to bud in different directions and ultimately blossom. The buds and resulting flowers form when conditions are right for the context. In our case those conditions included mindsets of openness, investment in student agency, flexibility, sponsorship, and advocacy.

## Reference list

Costa, K. (n.d.) Trauma-aware teaching checklist. 100 Faculty. Available at: <https://bit.ly/traumachecklist> (Accessed 12 November 2022)

Durlak, J., Domitrovich, C., Weissberg, R., Gullotta, T. (Eds.) (2016). *Handbook of social and emotional learning research and practice*. Guilford Press.

Gallagher, K., Stocker, S. (2017). *A guide to incorporating social-emotional learning in the college classroom: Busting anxiety, boosting ability*. Society for the Teaching of Psychology. Available at:

<https://teachpsych.org/resources/Documents/otrp/resources/Gallagher%20and%20Stocker%20SEL%20Manual%20-%20FULL.pdf> (Accessed 12 November 2022)

McCurtie, B. (2020, April 6). What does trauma-informed teaching look like? *Teaching: The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Available at:

<https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/teaching/2020-06-04> (Accessed 12 November 2022)

Stocker, S., Gallagher, K. (2018). Alleviating anxiety and altering appraisals: Social-emotional learning in the college classroom. *College Teaching*, 67(1), pp. 23 - 35 doi:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2018.1515722>