

Engaging Student Partners in Inclusive Teaching Practices and Content Facilitation in Exercise Science

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Abstract

There has been an increased intentionality in academia to address issues of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). This case study shows efforts led by multiple experts, within an Exercise Science department, and their student partners to understand the intentions and attitudes necessary to create a diverse and inclusive department. To address the project purpose, students were paired with faculty to complete work pertaining to that faculty member's expertise. For the group to work cohesively, pairs had agency to determine their work's trajectory. A monthly meeting was held with the whole group to provide updates and accountability on individualized work, consider how to further enhance student-faculty partnerships, and to support a collective vision for continued DEI work. While this work was conducted to meet the project purpose, the results are framed to explore the utility of the socio-ecological model in considering how student-faculty partnerships altered attitudes and intentions related to DEI within and outside of the classroom. The intrapersonal changes (e.g. individual attitudes and cognitions) of faculty and student partners, the interpersonal interaction changes (e.g. developing reciprocity, equalizing power dynamics), the organizational changes (e.g. departmental values, attitudes), and changes in involvement with the wider campus community (e.g. changed intentions to facilitate conversation/policy on campus) are explored.

Introduction

The engagement of student-faculty partnerships has received increased attention (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, 2019) and more recently has been viewed as a framework to promote equity and justice (Ameyaa et al., 2021; de Bie et al., 2021). At its core, this is an approach that allows "students, faculty, and staff to work together to shape their educational environment, practices, and outcomes." (de Bie et al., 2021, p. 2). Student-faculty partnerships allow for mutual knowledge to be shared and the leveling of power structures, within education, that allow for pedagogical growth. However, due to practical challenges and institutional support structures, student-faculty partnerships may not often be used as frequently as may be merited.

With additional recent focus on institutional attention toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives on campuses globally, student-faculty partnership may offer a unique means to enhance the inclusivity of the classroom. Specifically, de Bie et al (2021) highlight that it allows for not just the mutual sharing of knowledge, but helps to correct the epistemic, affective, and ontological harms diverse students may experience within the traditional classroom setting. As part of a wider institutionally supported structure and initiative toward

DEI, a student-faculty partnership was pursued to create departmental and curricular change to a STEM curriculum. This work elucidated the intentions and attitudes required for doing DEI work.

Institutional Context and Support for DEI and Student-Faculty Partner Initiatives

This project was undertaken at Elon University, a predominantly white, private, liberal arts institution in the Southeast of the United States. The project began in Spring 2020, when three members of the Exercise Science Department at Elon established a working group and received a Diversity and Inclusion Grant through Elon's Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CATL) and Center for Race, Ethnicity and Diversity Education (CREDE). This first portion of the project focused on: (1) examining the departmental climate regarding DEI, 2) examining how DEI content appeared in Exercise and Sport Psychology classes, and 3) implementing changes based on student perceptions of this content. Full results from this portion can be found in Walker & Hall (2022).

Following a year of assessment of our departmental DEI climate, the project team was expanded to diversify the courses that were evaluated for the integration of DEI into our curriculum and pedagogical practices. The team received a second Diversity and Inclusion Grant from CATL and CREDE to support this expansion. These new faculty came from diverse sub-disciplines to have the largest reach within our departmental curriculum. To better understand the content and pedagogical approaches in our department, we believed that engaging in student-faculty partnership would be the most beneficial way to approach issues of DEI and honor the lived experiences of our students with the curriculum.

It is important to note a few unique dynamics with institutional level support. Due to the priority on DEI topics within the most recent ten-year plan for the university and the pre-existing grant program referenced above, strong support existed for undertaking work pertaining to DEI. Likewise, the university has an excellent model of undergraduate research which empowers student researchers to develop original research with faculty members as co-researchers. However, despite the institution making strong commitments to engaged learning and excellence in teaching and mentorship, the university has not made student partnership beyond research a priority (See Kupatadze & Hall, 2022 in this issue). The university does support faculty driven work around student partnership, but because resources are not allocated specifically and consistently to support student partnership, this work is typically short-lived projects reliant on individual faculty efforts and collaborative philosophies.

Partnership Implementation

After conducting focus groups in Spring 2021; five students were identified who were interested in continuing work with the department on DEI. In Fall 2021, these students were partnered with faculty members to engage in projects related to that faculty members' disciplinary expertise. In conducting this work, the team used the five guiding propositions of good practice for faculty-staff partnerships including: 1) fostering inclusive partnerships; 2) nurturing power-sharing relationships through dialogue and reflection; 3) accepting

partnership as a process with uncertain outcomes; 4) engaging in ethical partnerships; and 5) engaging in partnership for transformation (Matthews, 2017). These practices seemed especially pertinent considering the desire to use this partnership to enact change in departmental culture and curriculum.

For the group to work cohesively in the partnered pairings and as a full group, pairs were given agency to determine the trajectory of their work. Projects ranged from altering the structure and content of units within a specified course (e.g. examples, discussion questions) to generating new course structure and assignment policies (e.g. resubmissions, ungrading) to crafting positionality statements and considering implications for a wider field (e.g., do professional organizations have positionality statements within the field of Exercise Physiology, Sport Psychology?). Four of these students were able to receive course credit through a Teaching and Learning Apprenticeship and special approval from the Dean's Office.

The student-faculty partnership took place during weekly on-on-one meetings where each student-faculty group worked on their individual projects. As agency was given to each group to shape the content of these meetings, some meetings took the form of discussing peer-reviewed articles related to DEI, while others were used to generate new course material or produce posters for research conferences. In addition to the one-on-one work, a monthly meeting was held with the whole group to provide updates and accountability on individualized work, to further enhance student-faculty partnerships, and to support a collective vision for continued DEI work. During the group meetings, students and faculty were able to learn about and benefit from the different projects being performed by other group members.

Student and Faculty Identity

Due to the nature of this partnership work, and to best understand how attitudes and intentions toward change with DEI varied, it is imperative to understand the mixture of social identities and lived experiences that were represented among faculty and students.

Student partners offered a strong representation of varied social identities that impact lived experience and their potential experience in the classroom. The group of five students represented BIPOC and white, cis-gender and non-binary, a variance of physical ability and neurodivergent, and LGBTQIA+ and straight sexual identities.

Faculty partners represented primarily white (N = 1 BIPOC), male (N = 1 female), and straight identifying sexual identities. There was additional diversity in early life socioeconomic background, country of origin (N=1 foreign born and raised), and first-generation college student status.

Results

Student Evaluation of the Student-Faculty Partnership Experience on Attitudes and Intentions

To evaluate how the student-faculty partnerships altered attitudes and intentions surrounding DEI, student partners were asked the following questions framed on the Social-Ecological Model:

- **Thinking about yourself**, what were your perceptions of DEI work when you started your personal journey? What attitudes and intentions did you have when we initiated this DIG work? How have those perceptions, attitudes, and intentions changed as we have conducted this work? Are there specific activities, events, conversations, or other things that you think caused a shift in your perceptions, attitudes, and intentions?
- **Thinking about your partnership with faculty** as a Teaching and Learning Assistant, Volunteer, etc.: What perceptions and expectations did you have about working with faculty in partnership? What were your attitudes and intentions in working with faculty? How has working in partnership with faculty changed your perceptions, attitudes, or intentions about this kind of collaboration? Specific evidence and examples are helpful!
- **What were your perceptions of the Exercise Science Department** as it relates to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion prior to working on our Diversity and Inclusion Grant? Are those perceptions the same today, after doing significant work with our group? In what ways are your attitudes and intentions associated with the Exercise Science Department informed by your work on our Diversity and Inclusion Grant?
- **Finally, what are your perceptions, attitudes, and intentions regarding Elon University as a whole?** How have those ideas changed through working on this grant, in collaboration with other students and with faculty, and through your other experiences at Elon? What do you see in the future of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work at Elon?

Student Partner Attitudes and Intentions

Student partners provided responses to the questions above that illustrate their perceptions, attitudes, and intentions about DEI in relation to themselves (intrapersonal), their student-faculty partnership (interpersonal), the department (organizational), and Elon University (community). Table 1 provides a summary of themes from student-partner responses that not only highlight initial attitudes and intentions, but potential “critical incidences” or portions of this work that shifted their attitudes. For example, while initial perceptions ranged from optimistic to skeptical or strongly doubtful concerning whether DEI work was even possible within an Exercise Science Department, these perspectives shifted while participating in the student-faculty partnership.

Table 1: Themes from Student Responses

Project Beginning	Attitude or Intention Shift	Project Ending	Student Quotes
Intrapersonal			
<p>Existing knowledge/lived experience with DEI</p> <p>Want to gain DEI knowledge.</p> <p>Felt ill-equipped</p> <p>Nervous to talk about race</p>	<p>Continuous engagement with faculty partner</p> <p>Reflective questions as discussion fodder for full group meetings</p> <p>Engagement with other student partner perspectives</p>	<p>Loved being challenged in her way of thinking, engaging with other perspectives, hearing about student responses</p>	<p>“My intentions were to create change, because I think some of my friends who switched majors didn’t feel included (in the curriculum)...I realized we needed to start small, so working on dynamics in the classroom before the whole department.”</p>
Interpersonal			
<p>Existing relationship with faculty facilitated comfort and honesty</p> <p>Unaware that faculty wanted to do DEI work</p> <p>Intimidated by unknowns (power dynamic of partnership)</p>	<p>Continuous engagement with faculty partner-growth of relationship</p> <p>Readings/conversations allowed them to discuss DEI within scientific discipline.</p>	<p>Initially expected the teacher to drive the work, but realized they are seen as an equal partner with a valuable voice.</p>	<p>“...I feel seen by faculty”</p> <p>“I had the misconception that professors are aloof academics that care more about their own career than their students, and even though that may be the case at other universities, this school (and more specifically, this department) has shown me that it is possible for students and teachers to collaborate and teach each other.”</p>

Departmental			
<p>Perceived department did not take DEI into account with its actions</p> <p>Perceived negative and positive views of department in terms of DEI work.</p> <p>Skeptical that DEI work was possible in ESS</p>	<p>Continuous engagement with faculty partner and full group</p> <p>Transparency in faculty partners enacting changes in their classroom based on partner work</p>	<p>Surprised by success of DEI work in ESS.</p> <p>Now they know DEI can work in ESS classes</p>	<p>“Exercise Science is science-based learning and incorporating DEI is not easy, but it’s possible...this work is inspirational and important because it may inspire other departments to begin DEI work.”</p>
University			
<p>Perception that University is not inclusive</p> <p>Perception that they do not fit in on campus</p> <p>University/Faculty have good intentions, but programs are perceived to be lip service</p>	<p>Nothing prompted change in attitudes at this level from the project, but intentions for change that could be made were discussed</p>	<p>TLA partnerships are important for the university level</p>	<p>“There are a lot of programs on this campus that focus on "serving the community" which often serve as a cover for people to feel better about themselves.”</p> <p>“... I think it is so important to have student-faculty partnerships, because the students can help faculty learn from a perspective that they never lived/knew when they were our age as well as experiences, they might have never lived that we may have lived through in today’s time.”</p>

<p>University needs to listen to student DEI voices</p> <p>Communication is lacking - need to infuse DEI into core curriculum</p>			
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Faculty Partner Attitudes and Intentions

While only a few faculty had ever engaged in student-faculty partnership in the context of curricular design and development, all of the faculty had experience with undergraduate research mentorship. Therefore, the faculty believed that this research model could be successful in the present work. Faculty discussed their perceptions, attitudes, and intentions in relation to the student partnered work during regular bi-weekly faculty-only meetings that began in Fall 2021. Through these meetings, faculty communicated their overall perceptions, attitudes, and intentions for completing this work. From going through the partnership work and reviewing the answers to the above questions, faculty experienced growth and change. One such example being the faculty's lack of awareness of some students' initial perceptions that DEI work was impossible in an Exercise Science Department. Through the partnership, faculty feel optimistic about continuing this work with future student cohorts. Student-faculty partnership provided insight into the readiness of the general student body for DEI discussions in disciplinary courses, additional issues students experience at our university beyond the department, and increased value in the role students can actively play in changing structures within higher education.

Specific Observations at Each Socio-Ecological Level

Intrapersonal Level

Attitudinal change

- All students had previous experience with DEI work/knowledge, and/or first-hand experience with discrimination.
- Some students felt unsure or nervous that their voices would not be heard or be undervalued. This shifted to a feeling of “being seen” as an equal partner with a valued voice, and being excited to bring their thoughts to the table.
- Some faculty were nervous as this was a type/focus of mentorship that several faculty had not pursued.
- All faculty understood the importance of working toward equitable power structures in the project.

Intention change

- All students had an intention to make change.
- A focus among several faculty over the years has been considering the accessibility and inclusivity of their courses and how to add DEI content to course material.
- In faculty, the intention to change or a continuance of change was present at the start of this project.

Interpersonal Level

Attitudinal change

- Some students were nervous or intimidated to start student-faculty partnership.
- All students felt a breaking down of the student-faculty power dynamic, allowing their voices to be heard.
- Some faculty expressed changes in partnership power dynamics when compared to classroom and research mentorship relationships.
- Faculty identified trust and relationship building as essential to success.

Intention change

- Some students were able to shift perspective of DEI work from that of a student point of view to a faculty point of view.
- Some faculty experienced growth in their intention to incorporate students and other stakeholders in DEI work.

Departmental Level

Attitudinal change

- Some students were surprised to know the department was doing DEI work.
- Faculty perceived that pre-existing trust with faculty facilitated student-faculty partnerships.

Intention change

- Students felt the department was following through with promises and trying to learn.
- Students believed continued student partnership could be beneficial at this level.
- Some faculty questioned how to involve students in DEI work in a similar manner to how they engage in research or other co-curricular activities.

University Level

Attitudinal change

- Students indicated there is still much DEI work to do at the University level.
- Faculty experienced optimism for potential change due to knowledge about strategic goals, current curriculum changes, etc. that students may not be aware.
- Some faculty experienced resistance from colleagues and support staff regarding the importance or willingness to engage in DEI work in the classroom.

Intention change

- Students expressed that DEI work needs to be prominent and integrated into courses.
- Students believe student-faculty partnership could be beneficial at this level.
- Faculty consistently feel work needs to extend beyond the department and are committed to advocating for opportunities through inter-departmental collaboration and promoting DEI work across campus.

Discussion

Lessons Learned

Reinforced importance of reciprocity and rapport building in student-faculty pedagogical partnership, especially in DEI work.

While Cook-Sather et al. (2014; 2019) highlight that one of the hallmarks of strong student-faculty pedagogical partnerships is developing a sense of reciprocity and equalizing the power dynamic, this project reinforced the importance of this reciprocity in shifting students' attitudes and optimism regarding whether DEI change can happen in the STEM classroom. Continuously reflecting on and discussing power structures allowed for greater trust and rapport to development between faculty and student partners. Candidly discussing this led student partners to believe that their voice was heard and valued. For faculty, these discussions helped to highlight the ways in which our current students may be experiencing the epistemic (knowledge suppression), affective (emotional labor), and ontological (self-suppression) harms in the classroom (de Bie et al., 2021).

Attitude and intention change at the intra- and interpersonal levels may be critical "first steps" for wider attitude, intention, and action to change at an organizational (departmental) level.

As this project progressed, the importance of personal reflection (intrapersonal level development) was a critical step in examining our own attitudes toward DEI topics within the curriculum. Additionally, it served as a precursor to rich discussions among the students and faculty. Awareness of each of our current knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors regarding DEI content was valuable in guiding and structuring this work to address our own biases and potential knowledge gaps. This change in intrapersonal attitude led to candid conversation that directly impacted intrapersonal attitude and intention changes. As faculty and students

learned from one another, the intention to make changes to course structure and content moved to tangible action and became a reality for many of these courses in Spring 2022. In transparently seeing the attitude, intention, and behavior of faculty align in response to the collective student-faculty partner work, students reflected pleasant surprise and excitement for the impact of this work at the larger departmental level. This led to changed beliefs that DEI work could be successfully integrated into the organizational (departmental) level of a STEM curriculum.

In making change at the departmental (organizational) and university (community) level, transparency and communication of this DEI work appears to be critical to build greater trust with and involvement of diverse students.

While the majority of change that resulted from this student-faculty DEI partnership appeared at the lower levels of the socioecological model, student partners voiced the sentiment that attitude and trust in high level (department and university) change may start with a greater transparency of DEI efforts. While this grant was funded internally through university mechanisms, several student partners highlighted that prior to this project, they had little awareness of any DEI efforts from the department or the university. Further, they voiced that their fellow peers may not be aware of the intentionality and tangible change that is actively happening within the department unless it is more broadly communicated. They believe the transparency of this work may help show a greater alignment and integrity between what is voiced as valued in the department (or university) and the changes they experience in the department. Additionally, because students felt their diverse knowledge and experience was valued while directly observing faculty growth through developing inclusive content and classrooms, outwardly communicating findings from this project may help inspire attitudinal and behavioral change in other areas across the university.

In considering change at the organizational (department) and community level (university), faculty and administration are afforded significantly more power and voice than students. The onus remains on faculty to advocate for both inclusion and mechanisms of support for students to participate in this work.

The strong partnership established through this project allowed students' knowledge to be shared and used on an equal level with faculty voice. However, acknowledging the practical reality of the structure of many university systems, there is a greater ability for this partnership to occur in one-on-one mentorship roles or small group initiatives such as the one described in this manuscript. Beyond this, faculty and administration are still afforded a greater voice than students. To continue sustaining the efforts undertaken in this project and create more inclusive spaces within and outside the classroom, it is imperative for faculty to use shared governance voices to discuss new mechanisms that can include this work. For instance, while opportunities exist for students to earn course credit for undergraduate research, a mechanism could be created to earn course credit for work done in partnership with faculty regarding DEI efforts. This is one example of how faculty may need to actively communicate DEI work, and use their voice in conversation, to advocate for further attitude, intention, and behavioral change.

Conclusion

Student-faculty partnership offers a meaningful and effective way to engage students in the process of pedagogical change (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). However, it is not without its challenges. This project reflected the importance of not just institutional support for student-faculty partnership, but the additional level of institutional support that is needed for efforts involving student partners on curricular DEI initiatives (Ameyaa et al., 2021). While the project described did result in changed perceptions, attitudes, and intentions regarding both DEI work and student-faculty partnership, there are practical challenges remaining in providing the institutional support that would allow for the expansion of this work across the university over time. It is recommended that faculty interested in engaging student-faculty partnership work seek out ways to use shared governance to advocate for the creation of support structures, at the wider university level, to sustain these initiatives.

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