

# Student-Faculty Partnerships: Relationship as a Doorway for Enhancing Teaching, Learning, and Well-Being

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## STUDENT FACULTY PARTNERHIP PROGRAM OVERVIEW

In the Student-Faculty Partnership program, facilitated by Dr. Virginia Pitts and established at DU in 2017, students and faculty members learn and work together as partners in addressing the question of how we can create more engaging, inclusive, learning-rich environments for every student. To date, **89 faculty members and 73 students** have participated in this program.

### The premise of this program:

- Students and faculty members can learn much from each other regarding the experience of teaching and learning
- It is through dialogue and sharing of different perspectives that this learning from each other can occur.

### Goals of program:

- **Engage students and faculty as co-inquirers** who learn and work together to analyze and improve educational practice.
- **Foster open and constructive student-faculty dialogue** to promote understanding, empathy, and connection.
- **Involve students with diverse experiences, identities, and perspectives** in creating an inclusive, engaging learning environment here at DU.

### How the program works:

- Students and faculty are “paired up” as partners for a quarter.
- Each week throughout the quarter:
  - Students visit their faculty partner’s class and take detailed observation notes (usually related to a focus question/topic that they and their faculty partner are interested in exploring)
  - Student-faculty partners meet with each other to discuss their respective observations, wonderings, and insights.
  - Students meet as a group to support each other in this work and discuss what they are learning from this experience.
- Student partners design (in collaboration with their faculty partner) and facilitate a mid-quarter focus group/survey of the students in their faculty partner’s class, then discuss the results with their faculty partner.
- Students are paid for their participation in the program to honor the fact that they are bringing a very valuable perspective/expertise to this partnership work

## WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEARN FROM STUDENTS?

If you could ask a student anything about their experience of your class (or their experience of DU, or their experience in general), what would it be?

(Please write your answer(s) on a post-it and share it in the space below.)

## PROGRAM EVALUATION METHODS

Each year, students and faculty are invited to do **closing reflections** (in writing or via one-on-one conversations with the program facilitator) to support our program evaluation efforts, answering questions such as:

- What have been some of your favorite things about this experience and/or what moments from this experience especially stand out for you?
- What have you learned through this partnership work and how has it impacted you? How has it affected – or how will it affect – your approach to teaching or working with students, if at all?
- What would you want others at DU to know about what this experience was like? Is there anything you learned that you with everyone at DU could know?
- If someone were to ask you “Is this program something DU should continue to invest in, and why?”, how would you answer?
- Based on your own experience, what advice would you have for future partners to help them get the most of out this experience and be most successful in this work?



## WHAT WE’VE LEARNED

**Both students and faculty find this experience to be incredibly rewarding/impactful**, as indicated by closing reflections and observations/anecdotal evidence collected by the program facilitator:

- **Faculty report that working with a student partner enhances their teaching through a combination of factors:**
  - The opportunity to regularly reflect on their teaching practice in dialogue with a trusted partner
  - Insight into how students experience their pedagogical moves/decisions
  - Feedback that is caring immediate, informed, specific, and grounded in their specific context, and that highlights/amplifies the positive, in addition to opportunities for growth
  - Feedback offered within the context of a caring relationship that has developed over time
- **Students report that working with a faculty partner enhances their learning as they:**
  - Develop increased confidence that their voice matters and that they can affect meaningful change
  - Hone their skills in observation, communication, and constructive feedback
  - Become more comfortable approaching faculty and working collaboratively to improve learning experiences
  - Gain new perspectives on their role in shaping the teaching and learning environment, which changes the way they engage/participate in class
- **This program has the potential to fundamentally change how students and faculty work with – and see – each other, shifting what can sometimes be an “us vs. them” dynamic to “us, together”**
  - Faculty see students more fully and recognize new possibilities for engaging the student voice, saying this will change not only their teaching but the way they interact with students moving forward
  - Students see their professors more fully, recognizing “the person behind the professor”, the complexity of teaching, and the care faculty invest in their work, and say this will change the way they interact with their professors - and engage in class - moving forward
- **Beyond enhancing teaching and learning, this work fosters well-being and connection**
  - Students and faculty report feeling more supported, connected, valued, and cared for
  - Both groups say they felt a greater sense of community and connection to DU as a result of participating in this program
- **The relationship itself – stepping outside hierarchical dynamics into a caring, trust-based, collaborative partnership – is what makes all other benefits possible**

## IN THE WORDS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

- “A lot of us get into teaching and into the academy because we want to have meaningful relationships with students. Ironically, in teaching, you don't always get that opportunity, even with your best efforts. One of the greatest joys of this was just getting to know [my student partner] and building a relationship with her, hearing her experiences, and having that just be a really fun dynamic. I feel like I was able to get to know who she is and where she's going. That to me is just a real joy.” -- faculty partner
- “Teaching at the end of the day is not about us, it’s about the students. And if we want to be effective teachers, I think we need robust ways to continue to understand the lives of students, how they are experiencing the world, how they’re experiencing education, how they're experiencing their classrooms.” -- faculty partner
- “I’ve had colleagues and supervisors observe my classes and provide feedback, but it’s always been a formal process - a single snapshot where I felt I had to ‘perform.’ In contrast, [my partner] observed my class each week, giving her a genuine and nuanced view of my teaching practice. Our weekly debrief sessions ... provided deep insights that helped me grow significantly in my curriculum and pedagogy.” -- faculty partner
- “This brings me so much closer to the community. It’s bringing the student community and the faculty community together and in a different way than our traditional classroom experience, and it’s so valuable and exciting to just feel connected to the students. I know it’s only one student, just one connection at a time. But each connection that we make, then I talk to other faculty about my experience with [my partner]. She talks about it to her [friends]. It just it spreads and grows. I think it connects us as a DU community as an educational institution. It’s connecting that piece that’s missing.” -- faculty partner
- “Participating in DU’s student-faculty pedagogical partnership program has been one of the most transformative experiences of my teaching career.” -- faculty partner
- I got the chance to really listen to the faculty’s perspective and better understand of why they do the things they do and what they expect from students. It was really eye-opening to speak with my partner and get a true understanding of what it’s like to be a professor at DU: the good, the bad, and the ugly. This work was amazing in the way that it really creates a two-way conversation between professors and students, which I think is really important for cultivating an inclusive and healthy learning environment at this school.” -- student partner
- “My partnership taught me that there are professors at DU really do care about their students and their teaching. This partnership has helped me grow and come out of my shell. Overall, this partnership has really made me reflect on my role as a student and as a person who communicates with my friends and my professors.” -- student partner
- “This is an incredible program that taught me so much about facilitating collaboration, creating genuine connections with others, the ins and outs of pedagogy, and finally how to be a better version of myself.” -- student partner
- “As a student, you often feel so powerless, like nothing you do matters. But this experience has made me feel like I really **can** make a difference.” -- student partner
- “One really positive thing about this was the ability to talk with a faculty member at a level that felt like we were peers and that we were working together on a common cause. So often it can seem like you have different aims and that you’re both coming at this from such different standpoints, but you both really want the same thing - everyone wants the students to learn and everybody wants the professor to teach. The student faculty partnership gave me specific insight into that, that we are on the same team, even if I’m a student in a class where I’m getting grades from the professor. So that was a big deal; it’s a path toward being able to actually see learning as a process of collaboration instead of one person lordng over the other.” -- student partner
- “This truly has been the most rewarding experience for me, like, the most important thing that I’ve been a part of during my undergraduate degree, and I’ve done a lot of things on campus. I’ve tried to make a big impact on DU before leaving, and this position is what heals me, and specifically working with [my faculty partner] is what made me feel whole and made me feel comfortable about leaving the institution and that I did what I was supposed to do.” -- student partner

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