

# The Power of Partnership

Students, Staff, and Faculty  
Revolutionizing Higher Education

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Elon University Center for Engaged Learning

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## CHAPTER 9

# A Radical Practice?

*Considering the Relationships between  
Partnership and Social Change*

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Healey, Flint, and Harrington define student-faculty partnership as “a *process of student engagement . . . in which all participants are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together*” (2014, 7). They also propose authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community, and responsibility as underpinning principles for their conceptual model of partnership. Based largely on these principles, partnership has frequently been framed as a practice with transformative potential (Matthews, Cook-Sather, and Healey 2018; Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014; Cook-Sather 2014). It has also been positioned as a radical approach, with the terms “radical collegiality” (Fielding 1999, 3; Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011, 133) and “students as radical agents of change” (Fielding 2001, 123) being used to describe it and related practices. Although this is certainly not exclusively how partnership has been viewed, we are interested in thinking here about partnership as a radical, political practice. We explore its potentials and limitations within that frame, whether or not it should

be understood as political, and how connected it might (or should) be to efforts for social change.

### **Is Partnership Political?**

[There is a] false assumption that education is neutral, that there is some “even” emotional ground we stand on that enables us to treat everyone equally, dispassionately. In reality, special bonds between professors and students have always existed, but traditionally they have been exclusive rather than inclusive. (hooks [1994] 2014, 198)

**Rachel:** For me, the above quotation illuminates why partnership is a political process: it rests on a commitment to creating more inclusive professor-student bonds. Education always occurs in the context of a social world governed by politics, and it is a formative process connected to a student’s existence as a political entity. As a student, I have experienced a pronounced shift in my political knowledge and conceptions at university, both from reflection in classes and through discussion and political activity with peers.

Paulo Freire and bell hooks both frame education as something that can never be apolitical; hooks writes that “the education most of us had received and were giving was not and is never politically neutral” (hooks [1994] 2014, 30). The movement for promoting students as partners is thus, to me, a political movement. When education and educational institutions are understood as inherently political, there is no such thing as apolitical “neutrality.” Rather, there exists passivity that follows the “current” within the institution and the world; conscious or unconscious reproduction of norms; and active, intentional opposition to the status quo. Significantly, institutions and broader social power structures are typically hierarchical and often oppressive to people in marginalized positions, an idea both hooks and Freire discuss. As a result, any of the aforementioned ways of relating to these structures will always be political.

Partnership—at least in the ways that I have experienced it—falls into the latter category of intentional opposition to the status quo.

**Beth:** I agree that partnership is an inherently political process, Rachel. As you note, all education functions to support or destabilize the “existing state of things,” while the extent to which postsecondary education institutions are currently shaped by neoliberalism, managerialism, and academic capitalism is hard to ignore. In this context, partnership *can* function as a means of pushing back and doing things differently; it is a process in which faculty and students are engaged as co-creators rather than purveyors and consumers of products (McCulloch 2009), and offers a re-humanizing space based in an “ethic of reciprocity” (Cook-Sather and Felten 2017, 176). I’ve certainly experienced this in many of my partnerships. While outcomes and deliverables may feature, the process is equally important: a huge part of the joy has been listening to and learning from one another. At the same time, scholars have noted the real potential for partnership to be understood in decidedly less radical ways. What are your thoughts about this possibility?

**Rachel:** This is something I have been thinking about frequently! Because partnership is a practice that typically happens within hierarchical institutions, it is not completely oppositional to those hierarchies. In fact, if one’s concept of radical change means fundamentally dismantling institutions in their current form, then partnership does not constitute a radical practice. After all, how radical or transformative can partnerships be if they do not fully address the precarity, discrimination, and overwork common to their institutional settings? Do we lose something from the potential of partnership when those involved may be tangibly struggling to survive within institutions? I think that, in many ways, the answer is yes—when those involved must prioritize their survival, it may not feel possible to focus on radical change. These institutional issues mean that often it is only faculty in relatively secure, privileged positions who can reasonably become involved in partnership. I certainly think we lose out on a wealth of diverse potential perspectives when that’s the case.

**Beth:** Your comments here also make me think about ongoing conversations about the possibility of partnership being appropriated for neoliberal ends. Mike Neary (2016), for example, has positioned partnership discourse itself as an example of the neoliberal university appropriating a more explicitly radical vision and making it safe by downgrading its subversive potential. In a discussion of the “Student as Producer” initiative at the University of Lincoln, Neary and Saunders (2016) illustrate how even a version of student-staff collaboration based intentionally on a model of militant Marxism and positioned “theoretically and practically as an insurgent form of higher education” (8) was ultimately “assimilated into the norms of academic life, so that its antagonism became a sort of fictitious competition” (13). Perhaps it’s not then surprising that a recent study of senior leaders’ perspectives on partnership (Matthews et al. 2018) documented a similar outcome: leaders viewed partnership largely through a neoliberal lens, emphasizing its potential to enhance the *educational product* on offer at the university and focusing largely on its overlap with student feedback and quality assurance measures. Such findings underscore that the politics of partnership are complex and that further attention to the interplay among its radical and conservative elements is essential.

**Rachel:** You’re right that this is a significant tension; however, it does not mean that partnership does not deliver crucial value. Partnerships still occur against the backdrop of many forces pushing for neoliberal, transactional models of education (and of life). Although partnership might have limited “revolutionary” potential for fundamentally dismantling institutions, it is an essential pushback against the wider forces you have mentioned. It also creates alternate, often countercultural institutional environments that can allow other forms of radical resistance to flourish, even if it doesn’t enact radical systemic change in itself. I have certainly felt partnerships to be spaces where I could be critical and political, and enact more change than in most other institutional settings.

## **A Diversity of Goals and Contexts: “Both/and”**

**Beth:** Thinking about this further, I’m struck by the potential need for “both/and” understandings of partnership’s political work. I see many ways in which the processes and outcomes of partnership might be viewed as simultaneously progressive and conservative—your example of individuals attempting to contribute to radical aims while also considering their survival in the academy is one example of this complexity. Here’s another: I’ve been thinking lately of the emphasis, in some scholarship, on how partnership contributes to employability for student participants (e.g., Jarvis, Dickerson, and Stockwell 2013; Lewis 2017). This might be seen as an example of the neoliberal appropriation of partnership, or at least as a version of partnership focused more explicitly on congruence with (and lack of critique of) the university’s role in the capitalist economy. At the same time, however, some research we’ve conducted at McMaster underlines that a large number of students are drawn to partnership programs precisely because they see these as potentially enhancing their capacity to meet future academic and career goals (Marquis et al. 2018b, 2018c).

Moreover, students who are not financially privileged may experience a need to focus on employment, a possibility which suggests that narrow critique of such motivations may itself be elitist and inequitable. If many participants come to partnership with (at least partially) non-radical goals in mind, and partnership is intended to honor the aims and perspectives of its participants, a challenge arises for those of us who might hope to underline partnership’s radical potential. How do we respect the fundamental need to be responsive to participants while recognizing that those participants, like all of us, are influenced by the political realities in which we live and thus might not be (at least initially) interested in work that aims to destabilize existing practices?

**Rachel:** That’s a really good point, Beth, that highlights why this tension is worth considering carefully. Even coming to a partnership with more radical goals in mind, I don’t think anyone is removed from the material reality that means we must think about employability and academic progression. As a student, I was initially drawn to partnership for its

underpinning ethos, but I also considered it a useful academic and career progression opportunity. Although I make a (privileged) choice to only get involved in extracurricular work that I genuinely care about, I always also think about that work's potential place on my resume, only because I operate in a context that makes me feel I **must** be advancing myself as a job/graduate school candidate while pursuing my degree.

**Beth:** The “both/and” issue also seems connected to the question of who participates in partnership activities. Some have rightly raised concerns that partnership opportunities are often made available only to small portions of the student population—and frequently to those that already experience various kinds of social privilege as a result of their identities and social locations (Felten et al. 2013; Moore-Cherry et al. 2016). Taking into account that partnership has been found to enhance student confidence and encourage a sense of belonging to institutions (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017), such limited access might, in fact, exacerbate existing inequities among students even while it works, progressively, to create new ways of being within the academy. In contrast, where opportunities to participate in partnership are available to students who identify as members of equity-seeking groups, the opposite outcome is likely. A growing number of studies demonstrate that partnership can contribute to equity by creating counter-spaces within inequitable institutions, enhancing equity-seeking students' confidence and valuing their knowledges and experiences (Cook-Sather and Agu 2013; de Bie et al. 2019).

**Rachel:** Absolutely. And opportunities for partnership that explicitly invite participation from members of equity-seeking groups make a powerful counter-hegemonic statement.

**Beth:** Nevertheless, the extent to which this is radical work can also be questioned. Creating spaces in which people feel welcome and valued within the academy is surely essential, but it could be argued that this does not function to meaningfully alter the structural injustices of the neoliberal university. In fact, like some policies around diversity and inclusion, it may dilute or provide ways to deflect calls for more pronounced change (see, for example, Kelley 2016). It's also worth thinking about

the potential risks of partnership for members of equity-seeking groups. For example, it's well known that faculty occupying less privileged social locations experience a wide variety of injustices in the academy, including frequent challenges to their knowledge and expertise (Pittman 2010; Martinez, Chang, and Welton 2017). Might partnership, with its call to level hierarchies among staff and students and broaden notions of expertise, help to address this problem by explicitly valuing more expansive understandings of knowledge? Or, could it *exacerbate* these inequities by fortifying and sanctioning conditions in which equity-seeking faculty perspectives are questioned and undercut? Could it do both simultaneously? The potential for both/and outcomes in this regard remains a distinct possibility (see Marquis et al. 2018a).

**Rachel:** Definitely. The “both/and” possibilities highlight how much we stand to potentially gain, or lose, from partnerships. Do you think that partnership work can contribute to institutional or social change beyond the immediate contexts in which it is practiced?

**Beth:** Some research (e.g., Cook-Sather 2014; Cook-Sather and Abbot 2016; Marquis, Power, and Yin 2018) documents ways in which individuals translate the more egalitarian ways of being honed through partnership into a range of other pedagogical, professional, and personal experiences. Nevertheless, I've also heard people talk about how difficult it is to maintain a partnership approach in contexts that feel inhospitable to it, and I thus feel confident that translation doesn't always occur. To my mind, this is an issue that partnership has in common with the broader field of critical pedagogy in which it is rooted. As Rebecca Tarlau (2014) has argued, critical pedagogy as it developed within the US academy largely lost its connections to social movements and organizing, with the result that “critical pedagogues often fail to go from a ‘language of resistance’ to a theory of how people can form movements of resistance with that language” (369). As such, the potential for tangible social change is undercut. It seems to me that partnership, like critical pedagogy, might be doing much to lay the grounds for critical engagement and more democratic ways of being, but—without direct attention to translating those possibilities into resistant practice—its potential to foster meaningful

institutional change is truncated. It becomes, potentially, a kind of prefigurative politics—a hugely important liminal space in which people might try out and enact new ways of thinking and being (Matthews et al. 2018; Cook-Sather and Felten 2017), but one whose capacity to affect structures and systems beyond those spaces remains uncertain.

## **Partnership, Relationships, and Individuals**

**Rachel:** I am also drawn to thinking about how partnership might potentially play into neoliberal models of education when it puts the focus on individuals and individual relationships, rather than larger systems and forces. I do think the relational aspect of partnership can be taken up in non-individualistic ways, but how partnership is often practiced and discussed in scholarly literature comes down to individual relationships. On the one hand, I think individual partnerships are crucial, and the ones I have been involved in have been hugely influential for me. Working with supportive, encouraging partners like you, Beth, has improved my confidence in myself and has promoted my growth as a scholar and leader. Clearly, individual interactions have great power to transform the experiences, worldviews, and feelings of individuals involved. That power is something I don't want to downplay because it is incredibly valuable. However, at the end of the day, a focus on individual relationships can only go so far in engendering institutional change, because that kind of change is not solely about individuals. It requires a collective effort and organizing, and there are many schools of thought (like postcolonial feminism or critical race theory) that reject the possibility of “radical” change without a fundamental rejection of existing structures. It can be dangerous to position individuals as agents of large-scale change because doing so can unfairly burden individuals with the mammoth task of changing the fundamental modes of functioning in an institution.

**Beth:** Absolutely. These comments remind me of a piece by Robin Kelley (2016), in which he argues that activists and others need to pay greater attention to structural issues as opposed/in addition to individual experiences in postsecondary education. Perhaps Kelley's reminder that “the personal is not always political” needs to be applied to considerations of

partnership as well. At the very least, we ought to pay greater attention to the extent to which institutional structures support or discourage partnership work, rather than simply positioning it as an option for people to choose to take up. The issue of who takes part seems relevant here as well. If some faculty, for instance, are seen as particularly approachable by students or are especially committed to partnership's aims, they may end up spending a great deal of time engaging in partnership activities, which are not typically rewarded in questions of career progress. Partnership could, as a result, become akin to the "cultural taxation" experienced by racialized faculty in many higher education contexts (James 2012), not only putting the responsibility for change on individuals but also placing particular demands on those already marginalized in the academy.

**Rachel:** Despite the limits apparent in partnership as a mode of functioning *within* institutions, I still feel strongly about its necessity and benefit. Perhaps partnership does not need to be a completely radical, institutionally transformative concept or practice. Maybe an important distinction to make is between individual transformation and institutional transformation. Even without "overthrowing" current modes of institutional functioning, partnership still acts as a push against neoliberal universities, and any kind of move in the right direction is beneficial.

**Beth:** I also think it worth acknowledging that the relational focus of partnership can itself be understood as comparatively radical and resistant within higher education contexts focused emphatically on commodified outputs and products (Matthews et al. 2018). As Cook-Sather and Felten (2017) note, by emphasizing process and relationship rather than measurable outcome, partnership can counter techno-rational discourses and re-humanize higher education environments. This is another case where I'm left with a both/and argument, then, and a desire for greater discussion of partnership's potential and limitations.

## Conclusion

We both remain excited by the many ways in which partnership has the potential to contribute to meaningful institutional and social change. Nevertheless, our discussion here has reinforced the fact that partnership

is not *always, necessarily, or only* progressive, and that we, as a community of practitioners and scholars, would benefit from more nuanced and extensive consideration of its possibilities and limitations as a radical practice.

### Reflection Questions for Readers

- Do you seek to make institutional change when engaging in partnership practice, and if so, what changes do you seek out?
- How might we create systems, structures, and processes that enhance partnership's capacity to contribute to institutional change? Should we?
- What might be an effective structure or strategy that could grow or support "counter-spaces" in your context?

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