**Gathering Feedback**

In Chapter 6 of *Student-Faculty Pedagogical Partnerships in the Classroom and Curriculum: A How-To Guide for Faculty, Students, and Academic Developers in Higher Education*, we suggest that student partners are especially well positioned to gather feedback from students enrolled in their faculty partners’ courses. In this resource, we address the following questions about gathering feedback:

* How can faculty partners decide if they want to gather feedback?
* What goals do faculty partners have for gathering mid-term feedback and do their questions match their goals?
* How can faculty and student partners prepare for the emotional demand of receiving feedback?
* How can faculty and student partners plan to communicate to students ahead of time that student partners will gather feedback and share it with faculty partners?
* What approaches might faculty and student partners you take to gathering feedback early in the term?
* What approaches might student and faculty partners take to gathering mid-term feedback from students enrolled in a course?
* How do faculty and student partners process and share back the mid-term feedback?

***How can faculty partners decide if they want to gather feedback?***

It is essentialthat, if faculty partners ask for feedback, they are willing to make some sort of change in response to what students suggest, explain why they can make those changes, and explain why they cannot make other of the suggested changes. Both educational research and students argue that it is worse to ask for feedback and ignore it or rationalize/defend all of one’s current practices than not to ask for feedback at all. Gathering feedback is most certainly an emotional experience, but it is a reality of teaching and, beyond that, is essential to it (Lutovac, Kaasila, Komulainen, and Maikkola 2017).

For these reasons, we recommend that faculty partners, before embarking on the gathering of any student feedback, ask themselves if they plan to acknowledge and affirm student experiences and make use of the feedback they offer. If they do not feel prepared to do both of these, then they should not ask for feedback. If they do, they will gain access to the student perspective, promote “two-way communication with learners,” and facilitate “open discussions about course goals and the teaching-learning process” (Diamond 2004, 226) in which students feel “empowered to help design their own educational process” (Keutzer 1993, 239).

***What goals do faculty partners have for gathering mid-term feedback and do their questions match their goals****?*

It is important, as one student partner put it in advice to faculty partners, “not to see the mid-course feedback and end of course feedback as solely some sort of referendum on you as a person or a teacher.” This student explained:

The opportunity of doing mid-course feedback is about a whole lot more. The act of doing it, as well as things that might change as a result, is not limited to the specific feedback students offer—often the chance to give feedback on a course is as much a time for students to reflect on their own work and attitude in a course, and this opportunity for reflection can be invaluable for all involved.– Student Partner in the SaLT program

Among the goals that faculty partners in SaLT have identified are to learn about the students’ perspectives on a specific question, to assess their learning of course content, to revisit course expectations, and/or to prompt students to think about their engagement in the class. Faculty and student partners can confer about what the goals for gathering feedback might be for the focal course and then generate 3-5 questions to ask students in the class. Each set of questions should be tailored to the particular course within some more general parameters. Many faculty have found variations on the following basic questions very useful and informative:

* 1. What am I as facilitator doing to maximize your learning and what could I do more or differently?
  2. What are others in the course doing to maximize your learning and what could they do more or differently?
  3. What are you doing to maximize your learning and what could you do more or differently?

In the box below, a student partner in the SALT program reflects on how she and her faculty partner approached gathering midsemester feedback:

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| “When [the professor] would describe the aspects of the course that he was interested in gaining insight into, I would pose questions or share thoughts based on what he had said that might help me to better understand this issue. Together we generated questions pertaining to his effectiveness in presentation of the material, structuring of the course, ability to engage students, effectiveness of homework and other assignments and ensuring students’ ability to ‘see the big picture’ of the material.” – Student Consultant in the SaLT program |

***How can faculty and student partners prepare for the emotional demand of receiving feedback?***

Anyone who has ever gathered feedback from students knows that you can receive 100 positive comments and one negative one, and you tend to focus entirely on the negative one. Gathering feedback makes faculty vulnerable emotionally, and so it is important to prepare for that. Student partners can play an important role in helping keep perspective (by reminding faculty partners of the positive feedback and helping them keep from overly focusing on the negative). Student partners can also help translate the feedback, sharing their perspective on what students enrolled in the course might be getting at when they write something.

Faculty and student partners should decide ahead of time whether they want the student partner to process, organize, and prepare the feedback for the faculty partner before discussing it. Faculty partners can also communicate to student partners the extent to which they are worried about what the students might say so that the student partners, too, can be prepared and keep an eye out for any triggers.

***How can faculty and student partners plan to communicate to students ahead of time that student partners will gather feedback and share it with faculty partners****?*

It is important that students enrolled in the faculty member’s course have a chance to prepare for the feedback session and that they know that the faculty member will see what they write, not as it is written (in their own handwriting) but as it is transcribed, word for word, by the student partner. We recommend that faculty partners announce that the student partner will gather feedback one or two class sessions before it actually happens so that students are ready.

***What approaches might faculty and student partners you take to gathering feedback early in the term?***

Some faculty and student partners gather feedback from students enrolled in courses in the early weeks of the semester. The goal here is to get a sense early on of whether students are finding the classroom environment conducive to learning, if the faculty member is moving at a pace that works well for the students, if the way the class sessions are designed achieves a productive balance of challenge and support, and more. Such feedback can take the following forms:

* “Exit passes” as students leave class—index cards on which students write one point they feel clearer about after the class and one question or confusion they still have.
* Short email surveys sent by student partners that invite students enrolled in the course to offer feedback in response to questions such as:
  + Which class activities best support your learning and why?
  + With which activity/assignment have you struggled most and why?
  + If you had to tell a friend unfamiliar with this course what you are learning, what would you say?
* Brief in-class discussions during which the faculty partner leaves the room for five or ten minutes at the end of a class session and the student partner asks the students enrolled to comment on some aspect of the class upon which the faculty partner might want feedback—any of the questions above or others, such as structure of class sessions, the relationship between lecture and lab, or homework.

All of these forms of feedback accomplish the following:

* convey to students enrolled that faculty care about the learning experience;
* give faculty partners a sense of where student understanding is and allow them to adjust accordingly;
* develop in students metacognitive awareness so that students themselves have a sense of where their understanding is and what adjustments in learning approach they might want to make;
* help faculty partners move toward more of a partnership approach with all students.

These forms of gathering feedback can also be useful throughout the term. For all of these reasons, regular dialogue about the learning and teaching in the course can improve that learning and teaching and also prepare students in the class to offer more thoughtful, constructive feedback at the middle and at the end of the course.

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| “[Having a student gather feedback on the class and share it with me] gave me confidence that [the feedback] was thorough and trustworthy, unlike end-of-the-semester course evaluations.” – Faculty Partner in the SaLT program |

***What approaches might student and faculty partners take to gathering mid-term feedback from students enrolled in a course?***

Transparency in methodology paired with guaranteed anonymity can give students the opportunity to speak very candidly in the conversation about their personal experiences and specific things they want from the course in the future. In the SaLT program, we have found two basic ways of gathering mid-term feedback that have been effective for faculty: individual written responses plus group conversation, and focus groups. For each of these, student and faculty partners decide together what questions the student partner will ask students enrolled in the course to address. Then, depending on the approach they decide might work best for them, structure time for students to offer feedback.

**Individual, written responses and group conversation**

* Faculty and student partners confer and make sure that the faculty partner is willing to respond to student feedback.
* Faculty and student partners decide on the questions to ask. It is best to keep the number relatively small—perhaps three to five—because too many questions can be overwhelming, especially if students are going to do focus groups/ large group discussion after they respond in writing.
* Either the student partner or the faculty partner types up the questions on a sheet of paper with spaces for student responses and makes enough copies for everyone in the class. Some student and faculty partners create anonymous surveys through Google or Qualtrics, but if they do this, they need to either ensure that everyone in the class has access to an electronic device upon which to complete the survey or, if students complete the survey outside of class time, expect the response rate to be lower.
* When the student partner conducts the mid-course feedback session, the faculty partner should leave the room. The student partner should remind the students in the class that the faculty member will see the feedback, not in their own handwriting but as transcribed by the student partner.
* It is also helpful for the student partner to remind the students in the class that feedback focused on the class as a learning environment, assignments, etc. and offered in a constructive, thoughtful way is most effective.
* The student partner should first have the students in the class answer the feedback questions on paper in silence and, if there is time and if the student and faculty partner have agreed on this approach, the student partner can draw on what students have written to have a discussion in which they identify broad categories of feedback, record these, and take the written responses with them.
* The student partner then types up student responses in a form that can be shared with the faculty partner and with the students in the class. They should type up all student responses to each question and also provide an overview with the categories or themes they discern.

In the box below, Sophia Abbot offers another approach to gathering feedback:

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| “In the Tigers as Partners program at Trinity University, several student partners have adapted the ‘Small Group Instructional Diagnostic (SGID)’ model which combines individual written feedback and focus-group discussions: students write individual responses for some time, then discuss their feedback in pairs coming to consensus about 2-3 top items of feedback, then repeat this process in small groups to again come to 2-3 top items of feedback, then come together as a whole to identify through consensus as a class what their top feedback is. Both the written feedback and their final consensus is shared with the professor. This is a great option for mid-sized (15-40 students) classes, where seeing themes across many individual comments may be challenging or where specific aspects of the class need be addressed and constructive input generated by the students.” - Sophia Abbot, former student partner in SaLT, Fellow for Collaborative Programs, the Collaborative for Learning and Teaching at Trinity University, Texas |

**Focus group discussions.** Though responses grouped by question can and definitely do preserve anonymity, if student and faculty partners want to ensure that no response can be traced back to a specific student but that students also can give constructive feedback, they can consider this approach.

* Bring the questions that the student and faculty partner generated focused on their goals for the conversation.
* If the faculty partner is comfortable with this, the student partner can let the spirit of the group determine where the conversation goes.
* The faculty partner should leave the room and the student partner can talk to the group for a half an hour or so about how the class is going. They can record the conversation on their phone, assuring the group that they will delete the recording after the conversation is transcribed.
* Before starting the conversation, the student partner should remind the students in the class that the faculty member will see the feedback as summarized by the student partner.
* It is also helpful for the student partner to remind the students in the class that feedback focused on the class as a learning environment, assignments, etc. and offered in a constructive, thoughtful way is most effective.
* When writing up the conversation, to preserve anonymity, the student partner can begin sentences with “students felt that…” and “though half the group....others thought…”, acknowledging the feelings of the group without giving away any identifying factors. The student partner can also summarize the spirit/point of each story without giving any details of stories students tell about their experiences in class. For example, instead of saying “one student appreciated when you gave her an extension on the first paper,” student partners can write: “students appreciated your flexibility and reasonable expectations around deadlines.”
* When writing up the conversation, student partners might organize the responses by topic (one paragraph about assignments, one about class discussions, etc.) rather than the proceedings of the conversation.
* The write up can end with some general takeaways from the conversation (specific things students wish to change or want from the course in the future).
* There may be students who do not feel as comfortable sharing their perspective in front of their class. Student partners can inform them that they can stay after the discussion group or can even share their email address so that the students can reach out and share feedback that way.

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| “I wanted to leave it up to student [consultant] to decide how to present [the student] responses. She gave me a collation of every student comment and then a summation, which was a synthesis not only of her reading of the questions but also her discussion with students.”  - Faculty Member in the SaLT program |

***How do faculty and student partners process and share back the mid-term feedback****?*

There are two steps involved in the emotionally challenging work of responding to mid-term feedback once the student partner has gathered it: processing the feedback and talking with the class about it.

*Work through the feedback*

Faculty partners need to decide whether they would like to receive the typed up feedback before they meet with their student partner or when they meet. There are benefits and drawbacks to each: If they receive it ahead, they can work through it on their own first and then meet with the student consultant to discuss it; if the student consultant walks the faculty partner through it, they can facilitate the process of sense making and emotional processing, but it might be harder for the faculty partner to take it all in and formulate responses to students. It is important to be prepared for the possibility of biased as well as constructive feedback. There is research indicating that some students harbor biases against faculty due to aspects of the faculty member’s identity rather than their capacity as an instructor. It is important to think about how to identify biased feedback, when to disregard the feedback due to its bias, and where one may still find a constructive element to the feedback the student shares.

Depending on what faculty partners decide about whether they want to receive the feedback prior to meeting with student partners or during the meeting, student partners can prepare the feedback in a form that is accessible, including both the particular points students offered as well as a short set of themes that can help focus the conversation. Framing is very important. It is always essential to acknowledge the positive comments or the general consensus of what students appreciate about a class. Then, within that framework, think about how to move the conversation from what students in the class appreciate to what may need to be revised in response to their feedback. Student partners can use transitions such as: “However, I did notice some students highlighted a need for …” or “Students see the need to have more of these conversations, so it might be helpful to add more resources on X.” If feedback is generally not positive, student partners can acknowledge that in most cases where feedback may not be positive, there is most likely a disconnect between the faculty partner’s intentions and the students’ perception of that intent, which has impacted students.

Together, student and faculty partners can talk through both the content and the emotional challenge of receiving feedback. Once they have processed the content and worked through the excitement and frustration it may prompt, they can identify together some meaningful changes to make and how to formulate explanations—not defenses—for why other changes cannot be made.

*Share the feedback with the class*

Sharing the student feedback with the class is very important: students in the class as well as faculty partners benefit from seeing the range of responses and think about how to address the diversity of students’ felt needs while still pursuing the established pedagogical and learning goals for the course. Approaches faculty partners have taken to sharing feedback with the class include:

* Creating a handout to be shared in hard copy or posted online with all the responses to each question aggregated, verbatim, under each question
* Creating a summary of key points to be shared in hard copy or posted online
* Creating a PowerPoint with the main points

In the SaLT program, faculty partners spend between ten minutes and a full class session working through the feedback and deciding with the class what to revise and what needs to stay as it is and why. Again, it is essential that something be revised or the students will, rightly, feel that they were consulted and then ignored. That outcome works against the spirit of gathering mid-term feedback and is likely to have a negative effect on the classroom environment, student engagement and learning, and end-of-semester course evaluations. It may also be helpful for faculty to have designated office hours that are purely for reflection on feedback whether regarding how students can improve their learning or the kind of support they need to thrive in the classroom. Most faculty find that the mid-semester feedback discussion is a turning point in their classes: when everyone clarifies their own and others’ goals and students in the course deepen their sense of responsibility for others’ learning as well as their own.