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Enhancing outcomes and reducing inhibitors to the engagement of students and staff in learning and teaching partnerships: implications for academic development

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Abstract

A growing body of literature on students as partners in learning and teaching offers evidence on which academic developers can draw when supporting, advocating for, or engaging in partnerships. We extend a previous systematic review of the partnership literature by presenting an analysis and discussion of the positive and negative outcomes of partnership, and the inhibitors to partnership. Implications include the importance of academic developers supporting: the relational processes of partnership; institutional or structural change to address resistance; and the potential of partnership to make institutions more equitable and empowering spaces.

Keywords

Introduction

The engagement of students and staff (including faculty and academics) in learning and teaching partnerships is a growing phenomenon that goes by various names. Because of the many ways in which students and staff can work together, the phenomenon is difficult to define (Harrison, Mann, Murphy, Taylor, & Thompson, 2003). One frequently adopted definition of student-staff partnership is 'a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis' (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, pp. 6–7). Another term used to name this work, 'students as partners' (SaP), is both recognised and contested in higher education (Cliffe et al., 2017). We use both 'partnership' and 'SaP' throughout our discussion to honour this variation, but regardless of what the work is called, its proliferation presents inescapable challenges and opportunities to academic developers.

The scholarship of the early part of the 21st century suggests that standard approaches to academic development practice 'fail to integrate student voices' (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011, p. 140; see also Barrineau, Schnaas, Engström, & Härlin, 2016). When student voice constitutes the presence, power, and participation of students in conversations about teaching and learning (Cook-Sather, 2006), and the reciprocity between students and staff listening to and collaborating with one another becomes formalised, the result is partnership (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017b). Yet, without either learning from students or 'giving students better clues about the realities of academic life, we limit their capacity to develop, invest, and participate in the very idea of the university itself' (Peseta et al., 2016, p. 64). While direct support of both students and staff through professional development is rare, several studies have explored the role academic developers might play in supporting partnership work (Bovill et al., 2011; Cook-Sather, 2014; Cook-Sather et al., 2017; Curran & Millard, 2016). Specifically, academic developers can play a crucial role in building bridges between students and staff (Barrineau et al., 2016) to challenge traditional student and teacher roles (Bergmark & Westman, 2016). Indeed, given the strategic position that many academic developers occupy (Green & Little, 2013), they 'have the opportunity and the responsibility to advise and support people and institutions in navigating new roles and creating new spaces to make partnerships strong and sustainable' (Bovill & Felten, 2016, p. 2).

Successful examples of how academic developers can support the engagement of students and staff in learning and teaching partnerships include the annual *International Students as Partners Institute* (Acai, Kirby, & Shammas, 2017; Marquis, Black, & Healey, 2017; Marquis et al., 2018). Equally important is supporting students and staff in publishing their experiences of working in partnership in relevant journals such as *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, and *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*. Finally, communities of practice play a critical role in fostering student-staff partnership, as they create space for informal learning amongst practitioners (Khouri, Oberhollenzer, & Matthews, 2017; Meacham, Castor, & Felten, 2013).

There is also a growing body of research that can inform academic developers to support partnership work. For example, a range of outcomes and challenges of student-staff partnership have been identified. Outcomes identified include: enriched student-academic relationships; improved employability; enhanced graduate attributes; improved curricula; more scholarly

approaches to learning, teaching, and engagement; and a stronger sense of belonging for both students and staff (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016; Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017a; Delpish et al., 2010). Challenges have been highlighted as well, including: developing successful partnership relationships (Allin, 2014); breaking down pre-existing power structures and control (Bovill&Bulley, 2011; Bovill et al., 2016; Delpish et al., 2010); and creating inclusive opportunities for students to engage with partnership (Bovill et al., 2016; Felten et al., 2013; Moore-Cherry, Healey, Nicholson, & Andrews, 2016).

Williamson (2013) argues that the challenge of achieving positive outcomes from partnership is improved when students and staff both identify areas for enhancement and plan for how that enhancement might be achieved together. However, predicting outcomes of student–staff partnership work is problematic, as partnership takes many forms. Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014, 2016) identify four overlapping areas of engaging through partnership: learning, teaching, and assessment (co-teaching); curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy (co-design, co-creating); subject-based research and inquiry (co-inquiry); and scholarship of teaching and learning (co-researchers). As this range suggests, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to partnership. Values and principles must be embodied in practice, which requires accepting partnership as a process with uncertain outcomes because, as Matthews (2017) argues:

> The reciprocal ethos of SaP, where all involved work together through power-sharing and dialogue, gives primacy to the co-creation of shared goals and outcomes that are mutually decided during the process of partnership. As such, the outcomes of SaP are unknown at the beginning of the joint endeavour. (p. 4)

Academic developers have a key role to play in advocating for student–staff partnership practices. As Bryson (2016, p. 85) argues, 'if we are to convince colleagues that partnership is the way to go, we do need more evidence, and evidence from students too, of the benefits it brings'. By reviewing the expanding literature and offering to academic developers analyses across a growing number of studies (Tight, 2018), we are developing and contributing to research on partnership that affirms the vital role that academic developers can play in the broader student-staff partnership movement (Bovill & Felten, 2016). At the same time, we acknowledge the tension between asserting that outcomes of student-staff partnership work are context-specific and co-created (Healey & Healey, 2018) on the one hand, and offering an analysis focused on outcomes of engaging in this work on the other.

To address this tension, we are offering broad, overarching themes to guide and strengthen the work of academic developers in supporting student–staff partnership policies and practices. The purpose of our analysis is not to make cause-and-effect statements regarding specific outcomes that arise from all partnership practices. Rather, by providing a holistic, thematic analysis of outcomes and inhibitors across the diversity of student-staff partnership, we aim to contribute to the work of academic developers committed to designing, developing, and implementing appropriate policy and programs for engaging students and staff in partnership. If informed regarding the range of potential outcomes and inhibitors arising from a diversity of partnership approaches, then academic developers can support contextualised, inclusive, and equitable partnership practices and policies.

Methods

We drew on a dataset generated by a systematic literature review that analysed 63 empirical studies published in academic journals over a five-year period (2011–2015), explicitly investigating 'students as partners' (methods draw on previous work, see Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Criteria for the inclusion of articles in this literature review were: (1) written in English; (2) situated in higher education; (3) published between 2011–2015; (4) self-identified as 'students as partners' or related terms (for example student-staff partnerships, teaching and learning partnerships); (5) based in an empirical study and grounded in the literature; and (6) subjected to a peer-review process. Articles excluded were: (1) purely theoretical works; (2) articles testing a data collection instrument; (3) works not explicitly situated in the 'students as partners' field; and (4) reflective works that did not cite other literature. As Kennedy (2007) suggests, defining the body of literature for any literature review inevitably includes and excludes work. Thus, we are not claiming complete coverage of all SaP scholarship and are mindful that many works, particularly non-traditional genres (blogs, videos, reflections not citing literature, editorials, opinion pieces), were excluded from the review.

Our data collection and analysis process followed that of Matthews et al. (2013), where two researchers read, analysed, consulted, and agreed on the analysis of each paper. Data then were entered into a purpose-built analysis instrument (an online survey tool). This article extends previous work by offering an analysis of *outcomes* –both positive and negative – reported in each paper for both students and staff in addition to any *inhibitors* reported that hindered partnership efforts. Researchers selected from a range of possible options with the ability to add outcomes and inhibitors not listed in the analysis instrument, while also copying and pasting salient quotes to further illuminate how scholars were discussing outcomes and inhibitors.

From the raw quantitative data (a subset of which was reported in Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), two co-authors (Dvorakora and Matthews) conducted a thematic analysis drawing on Kember and Ginns' (2012) iterative process. First, cycles of semantic mapping were conducted of all the identified outcomes and inhibitors to form and test different categories. This was followed by cycles of interpretative analysis to form and describe themes arising from specific categories through the use of tables. Finally, themes were refined with all co-authors through the collaborative writing process. This process allowed these data to be analyzed more deeply and in light of specific implications for academic developers.

Results

The 63 articles included in our review reported a wide range of outcomes. As a result of thematic analysis, these were grouped into eight overlapping yet distinct themes that encompassed both the positive and the negative outcomes of partnership for students and staff (Table 1). In the same process, five themes emerged from our analysis of factors inhibiting partnership for both students and staff (Table 2). As many articles overlapped across multiple categories, data are presented in percentages in our figures to better visualise comparisons and relationships.

Positive outcomes by theme for students and staff

Across the 63 articles included in our literature review, 61 (97%) reported positive outcomes of partnership for either students or staff, or both. See Figure 1 for a comparison of differences

between student and staff positive outcomes by theme. The majority of articles (n = 53, 82%) reported positive outcomes of partnership for both students and staff. Many more articles reported positive outcomes for students (n = 60, 92%) than they did for staff (n = 14, 22%). The most commonly reported positive outcomes for both staff and students were those relating to the theme of relationships. For example, both staff and students reported that engaging in partnership helped them build trust in their partners and allowed them to become more understanding of, and empathetic toward, roles and perspectives other than their own.

Table 1 Eight themes arising from our analysis of both positive and negative outcomes reported for students and staff respectively across 63 publications explicitly situated in SaP literature.

Theme	Student Outcome Categories	Staff Outcome Categories
Relationships	Change in the interactions with staff that affects power dynamics along with the development of trust and empathy with the partner/s	Change in the interactions with students that affects power dynamics along with the development of trust and empathy with the partner/s
Learning	Learning and skill development in terms of academic performance including learning about their own learning (metacognition)	Learning about teaching, new pedagogies, and insights into student learning and how learning happens
Engagement	Encompasses outcomes associated with engagement, motivation, and ownership for learning, including engaging students from under-represented backgrounds	Encompasses engagement and motivation for teaching and engaging in partnership with students along with practices that engage students in learning
Confidence	Belief in student's capacity as a learner and partner in teaching and learning; encompasses both cognitive and affective domains	Belief in staff's capacity as an educator and partner in teaching and learning; encompasses both cognitive and affective domains
Identity	Shift in how students see themselves as a student, learner and partner, and how they perceive others in the partnership process	Shift in how staff see themselves as a staff member, educator and partner, and how they perceive others in the partnership process
Employability	Awareness of developing employability skills related to career development	Acknowledgment of partnership contributing to new insights into their field of inquiry
Community	Sense of belonging to a university community	Sense of belonging to a university community
Material Gain	Being a part of publications, development of new curricular materials, or changes to university policy	Being a part of publications, development of new curricular materials, or changes to university policy

Table 2 Five themes arising from our analysis of factors inhibiting SaP reported for students and staff across 63 publications explicitly situated in SaP literature.

Broad Themes	SaP inhibitors for students and staff
Relational	Factors related to power structures, poor communication, lack of confidence, difference between student and staff goals, motivations, ambitions and identities, or uncertainty about how to begin the partnership relationship
Resistance	Both institution-level cultural structures that are risk-averse or do not recognise/reward involvement in partnership along with individual student or staff resistance for personal reasons
Logical	Encompasses time constraints, over-crowded curriculum or inflexibility of curriculum (due to professional accreditation requirements, for example), and lack of support or funding
Experience	Lack of understanding about how universities operate along with lack of experience in partnership, research, or teaching
Quality	Concerns about inclusivity in partnership and the value of materials created through partnership

Negative outcome by theme for students and staff

Across the articles, 20 (32%) reported negative outcomes from partnership for either students and staff, or for both (see Figure 2). Only a small percentage of articles (n = 7, 11%) reported negative outcomes for both students and staff. More articles reported negative outcomes for students (n = 17, 26%) than they did for staff (n = 10, 15%). The most commonly reported negative outcomes for students were those relating to relationships, for example, not being heard or feeling as if their expertise was under- or over-estimated (the latter resulting from a lack of training and guidance). The most commonly reported negative outcomes for staff were those relating to confidence, such as worrying whether the initiative would be successful, or experiencing a sense of vulnerability or discomfort.
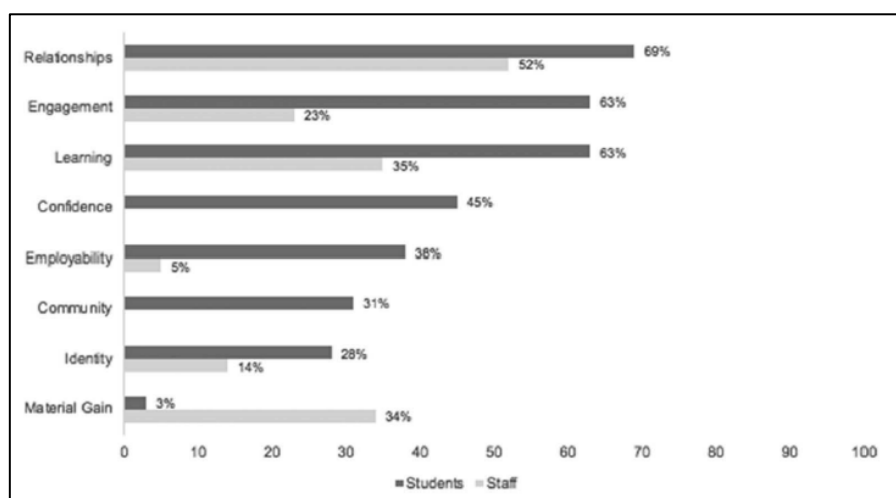

Figure 1 Percentage (%) of 63 papers reporting each positive outcome of partnership for students and staff.
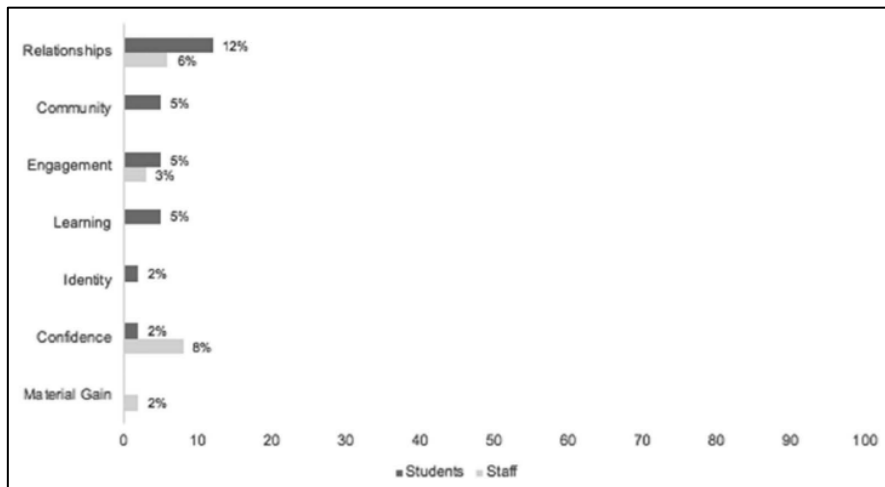
Figure 2 Percentage (%) of 63 papers reporting each negative outcome of partnership for students and staff.

Factors inhibiting SaP by theme for students and staff

Across the sample, 25 articles (38%) reported inhibitors for either staff or students, or both, as reported in Figure 3. Only a small percentage of articles (n = 7, 11%) reported inhibitors for both students and staff. More articles reported inhibitors for students (n = 35, 54%) than they did for staff (n = 23, 35%). However, this varied for specific inhibitor themes. The most commonly reported inhibitors for students were those relating to relationships, such as navigating power between staff and students, and unclear delineations of roles. The most commonly reported inhibitors for staff were those relating to resistance, for example, from their colleagues or institutions, to the idea that partnership is a positive and worthwhile endeavour.

Discussion

A growing body of SaP literature offers evidence on which academic developers might draw when supporting, advocating for, or engaging in partnerships. By synthesizing some of the most commonly reported outcomes of, and inhibitors to, partnership across one segment of this literature, we aim to highlight considerations that might be useful for academic developers working on and in partnerships. In this section, we draw out one set of key implications for academic developers based on our reading of the findings. That said, we acknowledge that these broad considerations will play out differently in different cases and contexts (Healey & Healey, 2018), and thus encourage developers to apply and adapt our analysis in ways that are responsive to their institutional cultures and the examples of partnership they encounter, initiate, and support. While our review of the literature suggests the following key implications for academic developers, then, these issues should always be considered alongside and in tandem with attention to contextual factors.

Relationships

Foremost amongst the findings generated by this literature review is the fact that relationships occupy a central place in partnership practices and scholarship. Issues connected to relationships were amongst the most commonly reported positive outcomes, negative outcomes, and inhibitors for both students and staff. This is not likely to surprise many who have been involved in partnerships. Indeed, the words used commonly to describe this work – collaborative, reciprocal (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), engagement, and working together (Healey et al., 2014) – emphasise the centrality of relational dynamics to partnership practice. Both the articles included in this review and many related publications written more recently (Bovill & Felten, 2016; Matthews, 2017; Moore-Cherry et al., 2016; Peseta et al., 2016) highlight that partnership can lead to meaningful new relationships between and amongst students and staff, while simultaneously underlining challenges connected to negotiating power and responsibility in partnership – relational processes that can be demanding and difficult. Corroborating this point, recent scholarship emphasises the need to pay attention to the affective components of partnership as well, positioning emotion as central to partnership relationships even though it has not always been thoroughly discussed in the literature (Felten, 2017; Hermsen, Kuiper, Roelofs, & van Wijchen, 2017).

The significance of relationships at all stages of partnership suggests that relational practices and skills are a key area on which academic developers should focus their attentions, both in their own partnerships and in their efforts to support partnership more broadly. Developers working with staff and students might draw on our findings to position and celebrate partnership as a relational process, rather than merely a transactional or instrumental one. Indeed, practitioners should be encouraged to recognize that relational dynamics are not only part of the process of partnership, but also a focal outcome – one with the potential to be positive and transformational, but also (as in the rare cases of negative relationship outcomes reported here) problematic, if not considered carefully. The value of this outcome might seem small in proportion to the effort invested: Is enhanced trust in a single relationship, for example, a sufficient outcome to justify the time and energy required in a partnership? We believe it is, particularly if partnership is a means of cultivating what scholars, including Allen (2006) and Palmer (2011), identify as the practices and habits of democratic citizenship – trust, courage, reciprocity, honesty, and more. Students develop these capacities – and much more – by enacting them through partnership.

More concretely, academic developers can contribute to the growth of partnership work by developing processes and practices that facilitate and solidify partnership relationships and help ameliorate interpersonal conflicts, if and as these arise. Several existing models, including communities of practice (Khouri et al., 2017) and the weekly cohort meetings of students involved in programs like the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges (Cook-Sather, 2014; Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015), offer examples of how academic developers might help to create space and support for conversations and exchanges that allow students and staff to negotiate and work through the relational and affective components of partnership work. Emerging research suggests that cultivating a culture of affirmation (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017a) and integrating positive psychology practices into academic development (Cook-Sather et al., 2017) contribute to particularly strong student-staff relationships. Events like the *International Students as Partners Institute* hosted by McMaster University also hold potential in this regard, insofar as they create opportunities to connect meaningfully with a broad network of practitioners engaged in

partnership work. This broader relationship building, in turn, helps participants navigate some of the challenges of partnership by offering them opportunities to share strategies, ideas, and support (Marquis et al., 2017, 2018).

Academic developers may want to adopt some of these same models and practices to facilitate the formation of broader communities and relationships in their programs beyond formal partnership efforts, using what is learned from SaP to enrich all academic development activities.

Resistance

Improvement in relationships is likely to decrease resistance to partnership, which our results show can be a common inhibitor for staff. Importantly, this resistance to partnership initiatives and principles was noted at diverse levels, from individual resistance to broader institutional barriers. Again, this is a finding that has been reiterated in recent research (Bovill et al., 2016; Marquis et al., 2018; Matthews, Dwyer, Hines, & Turner, 2018; Ntem & Cook-Sather, 2018); many people participating in partnership perceive SaP as counter-cultural work that is often not well recognized or supported in their institutional contexts and that can make them feel vulnerable as individuals. While some of the relationship-focused strategies discussed above may be helpful in supporting individual practitioners to negotiate such resistance where it arises, the commonality of this finding suggests that academic developers also have a role to play in advocating for partnership more broadly and contributing to efforts to support institutional or structural change. In engaging in such efforts, developers might draw on existing scholarly models for encouraging change in disciplinary and institutional teaching and learning cultures, such as work taking a sociocultural approach to seeding and developing the scholarship of teaching and learning within institutions through both formal and informal networks that support 'significant conversations' outside of the evaluative structures of the institution (Mårtensson, Roxå, & Olsson, 2011).

Reassurance

Academic developers can and should play a key role in providing reassurance both for individuals considering partnership and others unconvinced of its value. The practice of SaP is often considered risky and, given its relational emphasis, its outcomes are uncertain. At the same time, the process of setting up and maintaining partnerships is time consuming and challenging — a fact reflected in the prominence of logistical barriers reported in our data. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the most commonly reported negative outcome for staff in the present literature review pertained to issues of confidence, such as worrying whether a partnership will succeed. Nevertheless, our research findings also go some way toward providing the evidence base Bryson (2016) argues is necessary to help convince individuals of partnership's merit. Indeed, 82% of the articles analysed for this study report positive outcomes, showing overwhelmingly that partnership work is described as rewarding and beneficial. Furthermore, our study covered a wide range of SaP practices, from small-group, micro-level partnerships to macro-level, whole-of- institution initiatives. This suggests there is no single, right way to set up student-staff partnership, and that positive outcomes might follow from many different partnership initiatives. Of course, there may be some reporting bias here; negative outcomes or experiences may not be shared or published.

That noted, the preponderance of positive outcomes reported in the literature provides evidence that partnership can often be productive and beneficial, even while it is unfamiliar and daunting. We thus suggest that academic developers might draw on this literature to help normalise staff (and student) feelings of uncertainty or fear of failure, and to help partnership practitioners (themselves included) push past this vulnerable point in the creation of new initiatives by providing evidence that partnership often leads to good things, even though it is messy and difficult. This growing evidence base might also be drawn on in broader advocacy efforts and processes designed to influence institutional change. At the same time, developers might also play a role in conducting further research on SaP, contributing to expanding and refining the body of evidence on which they and others can draw. Such research may not always find evidence of *reassuring* outcomes (indeed, more critical work on this topic would be welcome), but it will certainly contribute to refining and enhancing understandings of, and approaches to, partnership work, allowing academic developers to help seed and support this work in ways that are most likely to be effective.

Equity

Our literature review demonstrates that partnership is an effective means of promoting more equitable relationships within higher education. Partnership is not a panacea for structural and historical inequality, nor is it the only path towards equity in higher education; however, in diverse contexts in multiple countries, partnerships have been demonstrated to cultivate more inclusive educational practices and to enhance the sense of belonging experienced by both students and staff (de Bie, Marquis, Cook-Sather, & Luqueño, 2018). These outcomes suggest that partnership is a promising approach for academic developers seeking to make their institutions more equitable, welcoming, and empowering spaces. The process of partnership also has the additional benefit of developing relational skills and mindsets — civic graduate attributes — that prepare students (and staff) to be constructive citizens in diverse communities. In short, academic developers seeking to pursue liberatory practices within the constraints of neoliberal institutions (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017b; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2017) can feel confident that partnership has the potential to achieve these aims.

Conclusion

Due to the relative diversity of partnerships, care must be taken not to over-generalise when discussing outcomes and inhibitors of the practice. Our intention has been to offer an analysis of broad themes emerging from the research literature, highlighting areas of particular interest for academic developers. Our analysis recognises and reaffirms that partnership is a messy, human, relational practice — all qualities that may make it inherently risky — but also showcases the many beneficial outcomes associated with partnership across contexts, providing a strong case for academic developers to support the practice.

Because of the proliferation of partnership practices in higher education that both inspire and require now forms of engagement, academic developers have a central role to play in the growth and maturation of student-staff partnerships. Focusing academic development on partnerships — and engaging in more partnerships within academic development — has the potential to enact the values at the heart of our field. Such an orientation and commitment cannot guarantee any particular outcomes since partnership is complex, contextual, and dynamic. Still, growing evidence

suggests that partnership is an effective and flexible approach to meeting the aims and aspirations of academic development.

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Disclosure Statement

Notes on Contributors

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