

Who's at the Research Table? An Undergraduate Student Podcast Challenges Faculty to Embrace Inclusion

Michaela Chronik and Sally Haney, with reflections from Daniel Major, Korie McAdam, Zain Mohamed, Arooba Siddiqui, and Nicole Tailby, Mount Royal University, Canada

ABSTRACT

In this reflection, a group of undergraduate research assistants and student changemakers use a podcast to explore which students are at the research table and what barriers are keeping many others away. This student- and faculty-authored paper, which includes a SoTL-inspired auditory experience, dives into multiple topics, such as gender, race, and socio-economic factors impacting students in relation to their research activities in an undergraduate setting. Faculty listeners and readers are encouraged to reflect on the recruitment process they use in finding their student partners. The hope is that this article helps post-secondary leaders better serve underrepresented populations across the undergraduate research field by implementing equity, diversity, and inclusion practices in all student-as-partners work.

Keywords: undergraduate research assistants, student-faculty partnership, students as partners (SaP), student changemakers, inclusion, equity, diversity, participation, gender, racialization, socio-economic barriers, podcast

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INTRODUCTION

This contribution is a reflection from six Canadian undergraduate students who used a [podcast](#)¹ to amplify their voices with the hopes of reaching other students and educators in a creative way. As lead authors of this article, and as the primary producers of the podcast, we represent two populations in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) realm—Michaela Chronik as undergraduate research assistant and Sally Haney as her faculty partner. Five other students with experience in undergraduate research and innovation projects also contributed to the podcast that informs this paper. This reflective work additionally acts as a talk-back to the lead authors' [initial *Imagining SoTL* publication](#)² (Haney, Dean, Chronik, & Creig, 2021)³, which examined various students-as-partners (SaP) frameworks (McCollum et al., 2019; Healey et al., 2016) also through a podcast.

Our initial podcast-article uncovered the way in which power hierarchies were impacting our partnership, as well as the relationships within our research team. The paper also identified gaps in some of the SaP models we examined. For example, we noticed a lack of awareness and emphasis surrounding *how* faculty sometimes recruit their student partners. Few mentioned whether or not post-secondary leaders consider the aspect of diversity when inviting students into research roles. We questioned who is not well represented in research spaces—often students who are racialized or have a range of gendered identities and abilities—and identified the possible barriers they face: low economic status, low grade point average, difficulties with availability and time commitment, or a lack of knowledge of how to seek out opportunities (Haney, Dean, Chronik, & Creig, 2021).

After our initial podcast-article was published, our team continued returning to questions of problematic social structures that prevent students from accessing valuable undergraduate research experiences. That experience resulted in us creating this paper and critically thinking about dismantling broader power structures, the notion of radical inclusion, and system-supported exclusion (Bindra et al., 2018; Cook-Sather et al., 2018; Fielding, 2001). Existing literature addresses the need to include more diverse populations in SaP: “Reyes and Adams (2017) show that SaP programs have the power to make learning spaces more equitable, but a scan of current SaP initiatives raises the question whether SaP fully brings *all* student voices to the forefront” (as cited in Bindra et al., 2018). The topic of systemic privilege and inequity intrigued us and motivated us to continue this work.

In answering the call for submissions for *Imagining SoTL*, Volume 2, we sought

¹ This url connects to the podcast: <https://mru.arcabc.ca/islandora/object/mru%3A813>, We thank Jason Kokot, Head of Video Production at Mount Royal University, for his assistance with the remote podcast and his audio/video editing expertise.

² This url connects to the initial podcast-article: <https://mrujs.mtroyal.ca/index.php/is/article/view/534/407>

³ In this article, we have chosen to include all authors' names in the in-text citations for Haney, Dean, Chronik, and Creig (2021) in order to avoid the deletion of names—often the names of students—that results from the use of et al.

to better understand inequity by inviting a diverse group of students to explore themes of inclusion and exclusion by podcasting our discussion. Once again, we chose podcasting as our main mode for dissemination.

Podcasting in the academic community is still largely disputed as some scholars question its professional integrity. Despite the debate over its quality, podcasting has indeed grown in popularity across multiple teaching, learning, and research contexts (Ferrer et al., 2019; Nelson & Faux, 2016). Our reason for creating another podcast follows the reasoning behind our initial podcast article:

We choose to privilege audio over text because it offers a powerful way to literally amplify voice, particularly the voice of the undergraduate student. The podcast format enables us to more easily share our uneasiness with some of the rigid structures that guide relational work in the academy. In doing so, we also examine some of the ways we are trying to negotiate power, positionality, and participation within our partnership. (Haney, Dean, Chronik, & Creig, 2021, p. 118)

Readers are invited to listen to the [podcast](#) (preferably) before examining our written takeaways within this paper.

RAS TO CHANGEMAKERS: THE PODCAST PARTICIPANTS

It is important to acknowledge who participated and how our student group was formed. With help from faculty, research assistant Michaela Chronik identified and recruited two research assistants (RAs) and three student changemakers at Mount Royal University (MRU). Two are involved in research within MRU's Faculty of Health, Community and Education, and the other three are part of the [Trico Changemakers Studio](#), a learning space that cultivates social innovation and collaboration within the campus community. Our group represents four disciplines: Early Learning and Child Care, Child and Youth Care Counselling, Nursing, and Biology. Our group also represents unique faith groups, genders, races and ethnicities, sexual orientations, and abilities.

Figure 1

Podcast participants L-R: Michaela Chronik, Daniel Major, Korie McAdam, Zain Mohamed, Arooba Siddiqui, and Nicole Tailby



WHO'S AT THE RESEARCH TABLE AND WHO'S NOT?

Our podcast was informed by literature examining a range of topics, including professorial leadership styles (Zacher & Bal, 2012; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), gender experiences in student research (Kim & Sax, 2007; Kim & Sax, 2009; Bindra et al., 2018), racialization, and socio-economic backgrounds of research assistants (Reyes & Adams, 2017; Kim & Sax, 2009; Bindra et al., 2018). Guiding questions explored student participation and inclusion, such as the following: Who's at the research table and who's not? What are the barriers that prevent students from joining the research world? To what extent are undergraduate research opportunities truly available?

Many of us felt we landed our research and changemaker positions because of who we knew—often a faculty member who had invited us into the endeavour. In hindsight, we recognize networking was critical, but we struggled with the fairness of this practice. For example, we felt these job opportunities were not always widely advertised to our peers, as described by podcast participant Daniel Major:

It's a who-do-you-know type of situation. ... I don't think there's any mechanism in place to encourage underrepresented people or groups in research projects. ... For an institution that really focuses on teaching excellence, I think [they should] consider who's participating—not only who's participating, but who has the opportunity to *generate* participation. (Major, 28:36)

Part of the challenge is sometimes related to expediency, whereby faculty rely on asking their high-performing students into the inner research circle without thinking critically about how to reach a much broader and more diverse audience.

WHAT MAKES FACULTY SUCCESSFUL IN THEIR WORK WITH STUDENTS?

As we examined our own relationships with faculty, we recognized that managing power within these partnerships is both contested and challenging, and is often deeply impacted by student perceptions of professorial leadership styles (Zacher & Bal, 2012; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Our podcast conversation then turned to gaps we notice in professors' interactions with students. While Zacher and Bal's 2012 study of professorial leadership styles found that RAs typically viewed older professors as more passive and avoidant, our experiences differed. We found our faculty partners, regardless of age, tend to be highly engaged, willing to mentor, and passionate about their collaborative work. We wondered if faculty were upholding SaP practices because of the experiential, personalized, and human service essence of their work.

We came to an agreement that all professors should strive to be engaged, understanding, and flexible—which was especially made clear during the COVID-19 pandemic. Professors who demonstrate deliberate engagement in their interactions with students are paramount to SoTL and SaP success. We also noted the importance of faculty being organized in a way that promotes student agency:

The qualities that a professor has to enable this are preparedness, thoughtfulness, a desire for excellence in teaching, and excellence in scholarship. These are the kinds of qualities that can allow a professor to achieve their own research goals and at the same time provide a really meaningful and engaging experience for undergrads. (Major, 11:12)

For example, the professor who is willing to carefully organize meaningful RA work that recognizes the rigid constraints of the semester system can greatly increase RA success.

DOES GENDER PLAY A ROLE IN RAS' SENSE OF BELONGING?

Another concerning issue that emerged in our discussion was that of gender imbalance (Kim & Sax, 2007; Kim & Sax, 2009; Bindra et al., 2018). We could not help but notice our shared characteristics—five of us are women, all of whom are in human service disciplines. Looking around our university, we notice many young women are dominating undergraduate student research roles and wonder if this is due to the people-helping nature of our academic disciplines. Kim and Sax (2009) outline that gender may play a role in the types of benefits students gain while working as RAs. In their study, female RAs were unique as they possessed the greatest sense of belonging at their campus. After having interactions with faculty, female RAs often perceived their internal well-being was enhanced in some way, a finding that our group related to, as expressed by Zain Mohamed:

The whole Trico Changemakers Studio is filled with women. I don't think that there is a male role in there. So I can definitely see what [the study] means by community-oriented. It's filled with women and it's so community-oriented,

and you don't even have to work there to feel like you *belong* there. You just go there and you just feel immediately accepted. (Mohamed, 19:05)

Mohamed paints a picture of a predominantly female organization, which in and of itself may not be problematic. However, her story does raise questions about the degree to which post-secondary leaders are thinking critically about equity and student participation.

HOW COMPETENT ARE FACULTY IN THEIR SUPPORT OF DIVERSE STUDENTS?

Kim and Sax (2009) also show how race and ethnicity influence student-faculty interaction. Arguably, their most critical finding was that African-American students were the most likely to frequently communicate with their professors outside of class, but had the lowest frequency of assisting professors with paid or volunteer research opportunities. The lack of RAs within underrepresented groups illustrates a concerning question about racial bias but also acts as a critical reminder to faculty who perpetuate biased hiring practices (Reyes & Adams, 2017; Bindra et al., 2018; Kim & Sax, 2009). Relative to our podcast discussion, the finding reminds us that racial equity and inclusion should be a priority in not only the recruitment process of undergraduate research opportunities, but also within educational practices in the classroom.

Later in the podcast, we reflect on how we have been treated in our courses, as well as how we obtained our current roles. During a specific Child Studies course, one member of our podcast group shared her dissatisfaction with one professor's Eurocentric worldview—in the context of workplace safety and her Muslim faith. This experience inspired her to work towards change and join the Trico Changemakers Studio. Now a co-leader in the organization's social media outreach, Arooba Siddiqui hopes to promote connections among students across campus and provide a platform for diverse voices to be heard:

For me, specifically, in classes, I'm very clearly Muslim. And so, I remember trying to find ways to relate to what professors were teaching me, in terms of like, What I could do in the field to gain therapeutic relationships with clients? ... And so, I went up to the professor afterwards, and I was like "Hey, I wear a hijab. How do you think I should go about keeping myself safe?" And the professor was like, "I actually have no idea." ... We [Siddiqui & Mohamed] were able to say, "this is our experience in classes" [to the Trico Changemakers Studio]. (Siddiqui, 33:37)

Bias training would also help professors and leaders better understand how to dismantle unhelpful practices, including disregard for some students' socio-economic backgrounds.

ARE RA OPPORTUNITIES LIMITED TO THE FINANCIALLY PRIVILEGED?

Our group noted that RA positions often come with limited work hours and

varying pay. Kim and Sax (2009) found that upper- to middle-income students were more likely to assist faculty for course credit, and, unsurprisingly, lower-income students were more likely to do it for financial compensation. After hearing this research finding, we were eager to talk about money, especially the financial barriers low-earning students face, as described by Korie McAdam:

In my situation, I knew that the hours were going to be limited. So it's [RA position] not my only job. So I feel some people who are working full-time in order to support themselves may overlook [RA opportunities] because of the pay. But I think for people who have external motivators, they'd be more than willing to set aside those three hours a week to get paid less, but they *know* that the outcome will be better. (McAdam, 41:27)

Despite the professional advances that research experience offers, many students simply cannot afford to pursue RA opportunities because of the precarity of the work. Podcaster Daniel Major noted, "It's a bit of a *privilege* to be able to act on those external motivators. If there are financial barriers, then being in research—despite it being something that you need to do to advance yourself and your career—you're unable to participate" (Major, 42:02). The financial obstacle is one that research leaders could reduce by explicitly asking students about ways to ease financial burdens through flexible scheduling or pursuing additional grants or bursaries.

MOVING FORWARD

We hope this discussion gives faculty and research leaders the chance to reflect more critically about the role they play in restricting which students end up at the research table. Our podcast conversation came to a close with additional suggestions for improvements and ways to lower barriers in the student-faculty research world. Some of these include the following:

- Providing more research projects within coursework
- Supporting financially insecure students with more hours and higher hourly wages
- Training faculty on best practices in supporting student-faculty partnerships
- Training faculty on how to prioritize equity, diversity, and inclusion while recognizing their own biases
- Collecting demographic data on RAs so that institutions can gauge whether their practices are inclusive

We also urged higher education institutions to develop policies that ensure the recruitment of underrepresented populations across the undergraduate research field, as shared by podcaster Nicole Tailby:

I think standardization is probably a good way to go about it. And I think that's hard to accept because it's like, "Would I be given the same opportunities if that was presented to everyone?" And I think that can be hard when you feel like, "Oh, I did all this networking. I got this opportunity. And

I worked really hard for it. But would I be given the same opportunity, if I didn't have this privilege, and things were set up differently?" I think that can be hard for people to accept sometimes. (Tailby, 56:09)

In conclusion, our podcast group shares a challenge. In the same way that we have "talked back" to previous presenters and podcasters in the students-as-partners realm, we invite faculty to "talk back" to *us* in an effort to continue the dialogue.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Michaela Chronik (she/her), mchro134@mtroyal.ca, finished her fourth year of university and will soon be graduating with a Bachelor of Child Studies, majoring in early learning and child care. Michaela is currently working as a student-partner and research assistant involved with the design and delivery of international field schools. She hopes to have a career where she can educate others about the critical years of early childhood and the lasting impact they have throughout adulthood.

Sally Haney (she/her), shaney@mtroyal.ca, is an Associate Professor of Journalism and the Chair of the Department of Journalism and Broadcast Media Studies. Her interests include international field school delivery, student-generated local news, and journalism program collaborations. Sally's research is informed by the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

Daniel Major (he/him) is a recent Bachelor of Science graduate, majoring in cellular and molecular biology and minoring in mathematics. Daniel participated in several research projects during his undergraduate program at Mount Royal University, including course-based independent projects, paid research assistant positions, and a co-curricular fellowship. Recently accepted into the University of Alberta's Doctor of Medicine program, he is excited to continue his education with a future intention to balance clinical practice, social advocacy, leadership, and research endeavours.

Korie McAdam (she/her) concluded her second year of Child Studies, majoring in early learning and child care and minoring in psychology. Korie is a research assistant engaging in a study regarding international students and their classroom/practicum settings within MRU. She hopes to continue her education and complete a master's degree to become qualified as a child life specialist.

Zain Mohamed (she/her) completed her third year of Child Studies majoring in child and youth care counselling and minoring in history. Zain is a Student Co-Lead with the Trico Changemakers Studio and is passionate about advocacy. She is looking forward to acquiring a master's degree in social work, most likely with a specialization in international social work.

Arooba Siddiqui (she/her) finished her third year of Child Studies with a major in child and youth care counselling and a minor in business. Arooba is currently working as a Student Changemaker Co-Lead with the Trico Changemakers Studio, as well as in a stakeholder relations position with the Office of Student Success at MRU. She aspires to have a career in school intervention where she will be able to educate and assist youth in their critical developmental years.

Nicole Tailby (she/her) is a recent graduate of the Bachelor of Nursing program at MRU. Nicole is currently working as a Registered Nurse. She worked as a research assistant with the Advanced Critical Care Nursing Team and presented research alongside them at the Banff SoTL Symposium in 2019. Nicole is looking forward to starting her Master's of Nursing in the fall.

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