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Students as Partners Versus Students as Employees: Division of Labour Between Students, Faculty, and Staff in the McMaster Student Partners Program

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ABSTRACT

Many post-secondary institutions have implemented students-as-partners frameworks to redefine traditional educational practices and value students as co-creators of knowledge. The aim of this study was to investigate the degree to which students are working as partners and co-creators of knowledge with faculty and staff, rather than replicating traditional hierarchies. We undertook a multi-methods study consisting of a secondary analysis and a survey of one cohort of the student-as-partners program at McMaster University, as well as qualitative interviews. In the responses, we found that some language practices replicated traditional hierarchies, which was reflected in the degree to which partners contributed intellectually to the work undertaken. However, we also found that meaningful shifts in practices occurred over the course of working collaboratively to foster more equitable partnerships. We found that faculty and staff bore the responsibility of sharing power with student partners, but the blurring of professional and personal boundaries complicated the ethics of partnership.

Keywords: students as partners (SaP), mixed methods, equity, reciprocity

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Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
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Students as partners (SaP) positions students as co-creators of knowledge, rather than only consumers of information (Healey et al., 2014). In practice, students partner with faculty and staff to collaborate on teaching and learning initiatives, such as pedagogical research, resource development, or course design projects (Healey et al., 2016). Contrasted with traditional academic hierarchies, these partnerships are predicated on mutual respect, shared decision-making, and reciprocity of responsibility (Cook-Sather, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2020). The students-as-partners framework recognizes that all partners—students, faculty, and staff—bring meaningful knowledge and expertise to pedagogical endeavours (de Bie et al., 2019; Matthews et al., 2019). Thus, many institutions have implemented students-as-partners frameworks to redefine traditional educational practices and value student contributions (de Bie et al., 2022).

Numerous positive outcomes have been connected to students-as-partners projects, including students developing transferable skills and confidence, while faculty gain a deeper understanding of teaching (Hanna-Benson et al., 2020; Kaur et al., 2019). Challenges have also been identified, particularly surrounding issues of equity (Brown et al., 2020; de Bie et al., 2022). Although equitable collaboration and respect can be goals of students-as-partners projects, in practice these projects can fall short of this ideal (Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021). As such, it is vital for those who implement students-as-partners frameworks to evaluate their processes and procedures to foster positive collaborations.

The MacPherson Institute Student Partners Program (SPP) is an internationally recognized students-as-partners funding initiative, which aims to foster meaningful partnerships among students, faculty, and staff while advancing teaching and learning at McMaster University (Marquis, 2017). Twice annually, members of the university community can propose collaborative teaching-and-learning-related projects to be included in the SPP. Common project foci include the co-design of course materials and scholarship of teaching and learning research. Launched in 2013, the SPP has grown over the past decade to boast over a hundred participants collaborating on dozens of projects annually (Ahmad et al., 2017). As the SPP has grown, the coordination team has been mindful of how the principles of student engagement and partnership are being implemented across project teams (Marquis, 2017). The purpose of this study was to further explore the practical application of the students-as-partners framework within one cohort of the SPP by examining the division of labour between partners.

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Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
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METHODS

The aim of this study was to investigate whether student partner positions in the SPP differed in practice from research assistant, teaching assistant, and work study positions. Therefore, our research question was "Are student partners working in partnership with faculty and staff partners, or is the work undertaken by student partners replicating traditional hierarchies?" Towards this aim, our methods were threefold: a secondary analysis of application data from the Summer 2022 cohort, a survey of the Summer 2022 SPP cohort, and a secondary analysis of qualitative interviews from various cohorts of the SPP at McMaster University. This study was approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB#5539 and MREB#5845).

Data Collection

SECONDARY DATA

We performed a secondary analysis of application data to assess the type of work that student partners were expected to perform and whether it tended to constitute meaningful and intellectually demanding tasks or more menial and administrative work. Application data was derived from a de-identified spreadsheet of the application form for the Summer 2022 cohort. This application form is filled out by faculty, staff, and students when applying to the SPP for funding in support of their projects. This application form asks applicants to provide an estimate of how student partner work hours will be allocated (e.g., literature review, team meetings, data analysis). They are also asked to specify at which level the student partner should be enrolled (i.e., Undergraduate—Level I, II, III, IV, V or Graduate—Masters, PhD).

SURVEY

To compare the anticipated allocation of work tasks as captured in the application data to the actual allocation of work tasks in practice, we disseminated nine bi-weekly (every other week) surveys from May 1 to September 3, 2022, to faculty, staff, and students who participated in the Summer 2022 cohort of the SPP. The objective was to ask these partners about their work activities and intellectual contributions related to their respective projects. The call to participate was emailed to the Summer 2022 cohort by the program manager (KH) and included a letter of information explaining the protocols and risks associated with the study and a link to the survey.

We administered the survey via LimeSurvey and each survey took respondents approximately 5–20 minutes to complete (Supplemental Data: Survey Protocol). CS, KH, and MC-N devised the survey tool based on the study's objectives. The

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

full survey was comprised of four sections: an anonymous participant ID to link responses between weeks, quantitative questions about types of activities completed during the past two weeks, single-choice questions about respondents' perceptions of the activities they undertook, and demographic questions. We disseminated the full survey tool for the first and final surveys and a shortened survey tool (without the demographic, perception, and feeling questions, to reduce the survey response burden on potential participants) for the interim seven surveys.

Following the completion of each survey, respondents could enter a draw for one of three $25 UberEats gift cards. Gift cards were randomly awarded to three participants after the study's conclusion. Respondents could enter the draw without participating in the survey, participation in which was voluntary. Because the survey data was anonymized, respondents could not withdraw from the study after completing the survey but could freely withdraw at any point prior.

We received 34 unique responses across all nine surveys, with the number of responses per survey ranging from 4 to 14 (Table 1).

Table 1

Responses per Week

Survey Weeks (Date Administered)	Respondents (N)	Total Respondents (%)
Week 1-2 (May 14)	14	41
Week 3-4 (May 28)	12	35
Week 5-6 (June 11)	9	26
Week 7-8 (June 25)	4	12
Week 9-10 (July 9)	5	15
Week 11-12 (July 24)	10	29
Week 13-14 (August 6)	6	18
Week 15-16 (August 20)	5	15
Week 17-18 (September 3)	8	24

Note. N=34. A variable number of responses were received for each survey from May 1, 2022, to September 3, 2022. Total Respondents is the percentage of the total number of unique individual respondents from the entire survey who responded to each weekly survey.

This data included similar proportions of student partners (44%) and staff or faculty partners (41%), with 15% of respondents preferring not to disclose their career stage (Table 2).

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

Table 2

Respondent Career Stage

Career Stage	Respondents (N)	Respondents (%)
Student	15	44
Staff or Faculty	14	41
Prefer not to Disclose	5	15

Note. N= 34.

This survey was slightly skewed towards respondents from Heath Sciences (32%) and Science (32%) compared to other academic backgrounds such as Arts & Science, Humanities, or Social Science (Table 3).

Table 3

Respondent Faculty Affiliation

Faculty Affiliation	Respondents (N)	Respondents (%)
Arts & Science	1	3
Health Science	11	32
Humanities	1	3
Social Science	2	6
Science	11	32
MacPherson Institute	2	6
Other	1	3
Prefer Not to Disclose	5	15

Note. N= 34.

The high representation of Health Science and Science participants is representative of typical SPP cohort compositions. Over half of the respondents indicated they were working on projects that were proposed by faculty or staff partners (69%), which is also consistent with previous SPP cohorts (Table 4).

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

Table 4

Student Partners Project Proposers, Stratified by Career Stage

Primary Project Proposers	Respondents (N)	Respondents (%)
Student(s)	3	9
Faculty or Staff	20	59
Joint Proposal (Students and Faculty or Staff Members)	4	12
Unsure Who Proposed the Project	2	6
Prefer Not to Disclose	5	14

Note. N=34. Respondents indicated whether the partnership project they worked on from May 1, 2022, to September 3, 2022, was proposed by students, faculty or staff, or as a joint proposal.

INTERVIEWS

Qualitative research facilitates understanding nuance, areas of divergence, and complexity (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Therefore, to look for nuance, diverse experiences, and multi-faceted understandings of how student partners differ from other student employment opportunities, we included ten interviews in our study. These interviews come from another research project, headed by KH, which investigated age relations in the students-as-partners movement. We re-analyzed these interviews for this study because the interviewees spoke to themes relevant to our survey.

Interviews took place over Zoom in 2022 with McMaster students (N=4), staff (N=1), and faculty (N=5). Three students were undergraduates, and one was a graduate student. Seven interviewees identified as women and three as men. Interviewees were affiliated with the Faculties of Health Science (N=6), Engineering (N=3), and Humanities (N=1). We assigned each interviewee an alpha-numeric identification, labeling student partners as SP1, SP2, etc., and faculty and staff partners as FP1, FP2, etc. Interviews were scheduled for one hour and co-facilitated by KH and a student partner from the original project. Interviews were transcribed using AI-generated transcripts in Zoom and cleaned by a student partner.

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

Data Collection

Secondary Analysis

To analyze the application data, JZ coded and tallied data according to the tasks expected to be assigned to students as outlined on the de-identified application. JZ organized these tasks into the corresponding task categories listed on the survey for ease of comparison across methods. We stratified our analysis by student level to see if there were any meaningful differences in the tasks expected of undergraduate versus graduate students and tallied the total number of students in each group that were assigned a particular task. We also tallied the proportion of total hours assigned to each task by student level. Once all the applications had been tallied, we had a proportion of total students in the Summer 2022 SPP cycle that were expected to complete a particular task. After completing the tallies for all successful applications, CS ran Fisher's exact test on the two sample groups, graduate and undergraduate students, to determine whether a particular category of student was more likely to be assigned a certain type of task.

Survey

For the survey, we had a response rate of 33.37%, representing 34 participants from the Summer 2022 cohort. CS generated descriptive statistics for demographic and single-choice questions. CS also conducted a two-way ANOVA analysis on bi-weekly activity data and completed Fisher's exact test analysis on quantitative perception and feeling questions. CS completed descriptive statistics and statistical analysis in GraphPad Prism 8 (GraphPad Software, San Diego, USA).

Interviews

For interview analysis, we employed a directed approach to qualitative content analysis, which consists of creating a coding-scheme from extant theory or research to apply to the data. This is thus deductive and structured in nature (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We deemed this to be the best approach as we could focus on the data corresponding to our survey and that specifically addressed our research question for this study.

For this project, MC-N, MA, and KH analyzed the interview transcripts. We first co-developed a coding scheme based on the questions posed in this study's survey:

1) work/tasks partners performed (corresponds to survey question 1)
2) meaningfulness of the work (survey questions 2 and 5)
3) relationship dynamics/labels partners used (survey questions 6, 7, and 8)
4) partner expertise/skills (survey questions 3 and 4)

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

5) partners' roles (survey question 9)
6) partners' expectations (survey question 10)

We then applied these codes to the data, highlighting passages in the transcripts that pertained to each code. MA and KH co-coded one transcript to test the efficacy of the coding scheme, then each independently coded one transcript. We looked over one another's coded transcripts to discuss our understandings and interpretations. MA continued to code the remaining seven transcripts, engaging with KH when needed.

After the ten transcripts were coded, KH organized the data, saving passages pertaining to each code on a separate document such that all data related to Code 1 (work/tasks partners performed) was saved to one document, and so on. MA and KH independently read the coded data, making notes of common and divergent experiences in interviewees' accounts and ways in which the data extended our understandings garnered by the survey findings. We met to discuss our interpretations and co-contributed to writing up our analyses in the findings section that follows.

FINDINGS

In this section, we share the findings from each of the three methods we employed. We begin with the application data, which revealed differences in the allocation of tasks by student level. We then share the results of our survey, which found differences in the tasks performed by faculty/staff partners and student partners. We conclude this section by contextualizing these results with our interview findings, which add nuance, context, and complexity to our findings.

Secondary Data

While similarities were noted as to the tasks undergraduate and graduate student partners were expected to contribute when working on partnered projects, we found that applicants to the SPP expected undergraduates to complete a more varied set of tasks than graduate students. Applicants expected undergraduates would review literature (23%), create and review course materials (15%), attend team meetings (12%), and write (12%), as well as a variety of other tasks listed below (Table 5).

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

Table 5

Breakdown of Undergraduate Tasks

Task	Hours (N)	Hours (%)
Reviewing literature	440	23
Creating and reviewing course materials	288	15
Team meetings	225	12
Writing	222	12
Other	220	12
Data analysis	118	6
Data collection	100	5
Contributing to project design	85	4
Administrative work	51	3
Designing visuals or videos	50	3
Workshop development	50	3
Workshop delivery	20	1
Recruiting participants	15	<1
Conference preparation or presentation	10	<1

Note. N = 1894. The number of hours in each row indicates the total number of hours allocated to the task listed. The total is the total number of work hours projected to be allocated to undergraduate student partners over the course of the Summer 2022 SPP term.

For graduate students, the largest categories were contributing to project design (22%), reviewing literature (17%), and data analysis (14%) (Table 6).

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

Table 6

Breakdown of Graduate Tasks

Task	Hours (N)	Hours (%)
Contributing to project design	137	22
Reviewing literature	109	17
Data analysis	87	14
Designing videos	71	11
Team meetings	67	11
Writing	47	7
Data collection	32	5
Workshop delivery	25	4
Creating course materials	25	4
Administrative work	13	2
Reviewing course materials	11	2
Ethics approval	5	<1
Recruiting participants	4	<1
Conference preparation or presentation	4	<1

Note. N = 637. The number of hours in each row indicates the total number of hours allocated to the task listed. The total is the total number of work hours projected to be allocated to graduate student partners over the course of the Summer 2022 SPP term.

There was a statistically significant difference between undergraduate and graduate students who were expected to complete the task "contributing to project design" ($p = 0.0191$). While 70% (N=7) of graduate student partners were expected to allocate some hours towards project design, only 24% (N=7) of undergraduate partners were expected to contribute to project design.

Survey

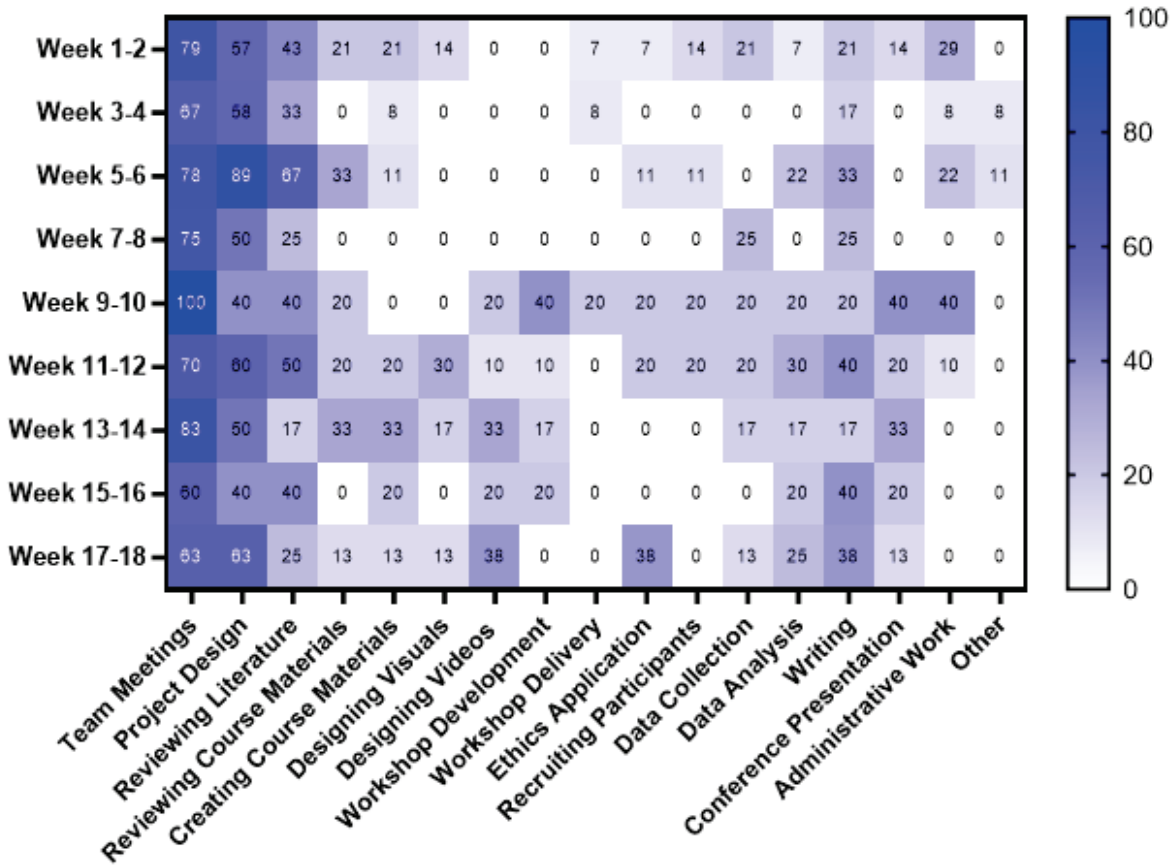
Stratification of Work Tasks

We were interested in how activities completed by partners varied week to week, what kind of work was being done, and if there were differences in activities based on partners' career stages. We found that partners were more likely to do some activities than others ($p<0.0001$, two-way ANOVA). Partners reported attending team meetings, completing project design tasks, and reviewing the literature more frequently than other activities like workshop development and delivery, applying for research ethics clearance, or recruiting study participants (Figure 1).

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

Figure 1

Trends in Project Activities Completed by All Respondents Stratified by Two-Week Periods



Note. N=4–14. The shade of blue indicates the percentage of respondents who reported completing the listed activity during that time frame. The exact percentage value is also written in the box. Examples of other activities include attending training sessions and meeting with potential collaborators.

For the total sample population, respondents were likely to complete different types of activities throughout the summer (p=0.0003, two-way ANOVA).

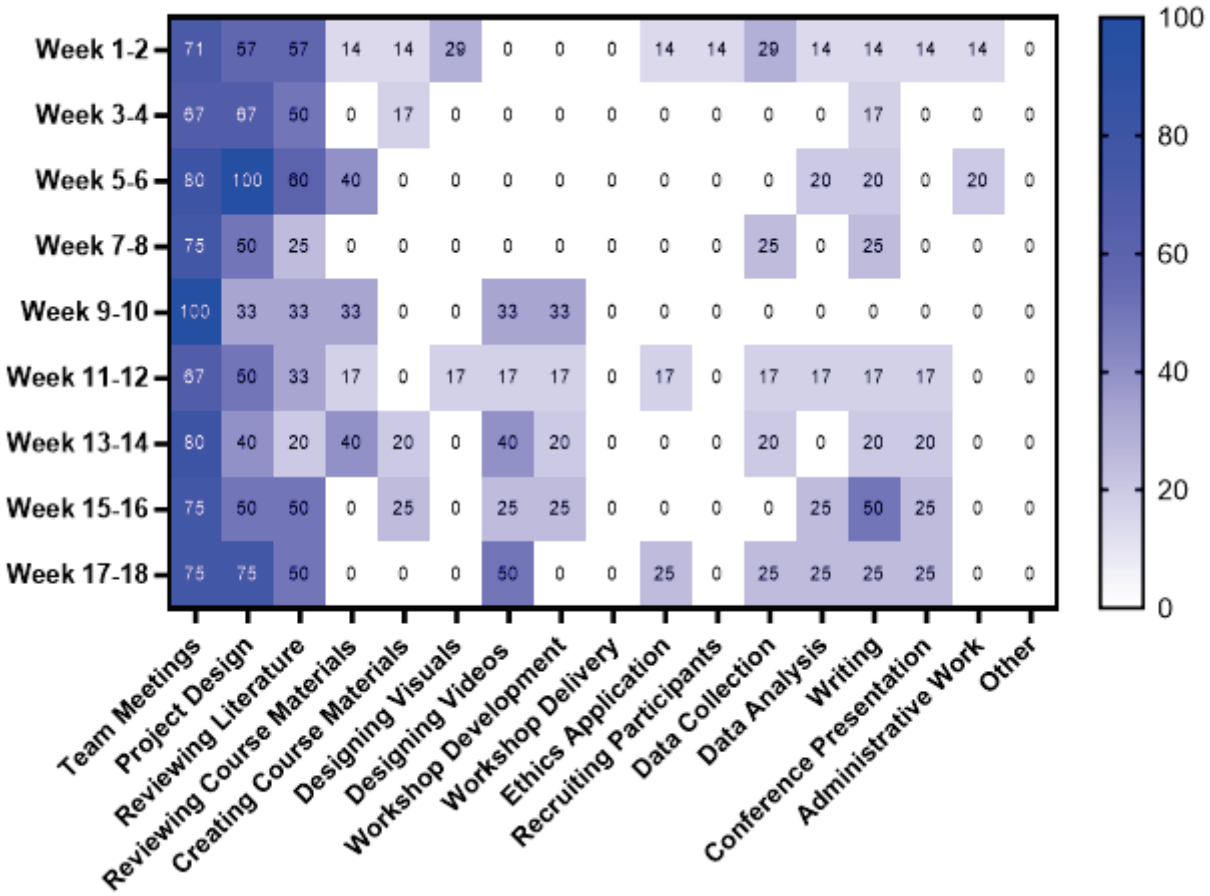
Differences emerged when we stratified activity data by the career stage of

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

respondents. Similar to the total respondent sample, student respondents were significantly more likely to perform certain types of activities ($p<0.0001$, two-way ANOVA, Figure 2). However, student respondents did similar activities week-to-week over the course of the summer, with the time frame not having a significant impact on activities ($p=0.1431$, two-way ANOVA, Figure 2).

Figure 2

Trends in Project Activities Completed by Student Partner Respondents Stratified by Two-Week Periods



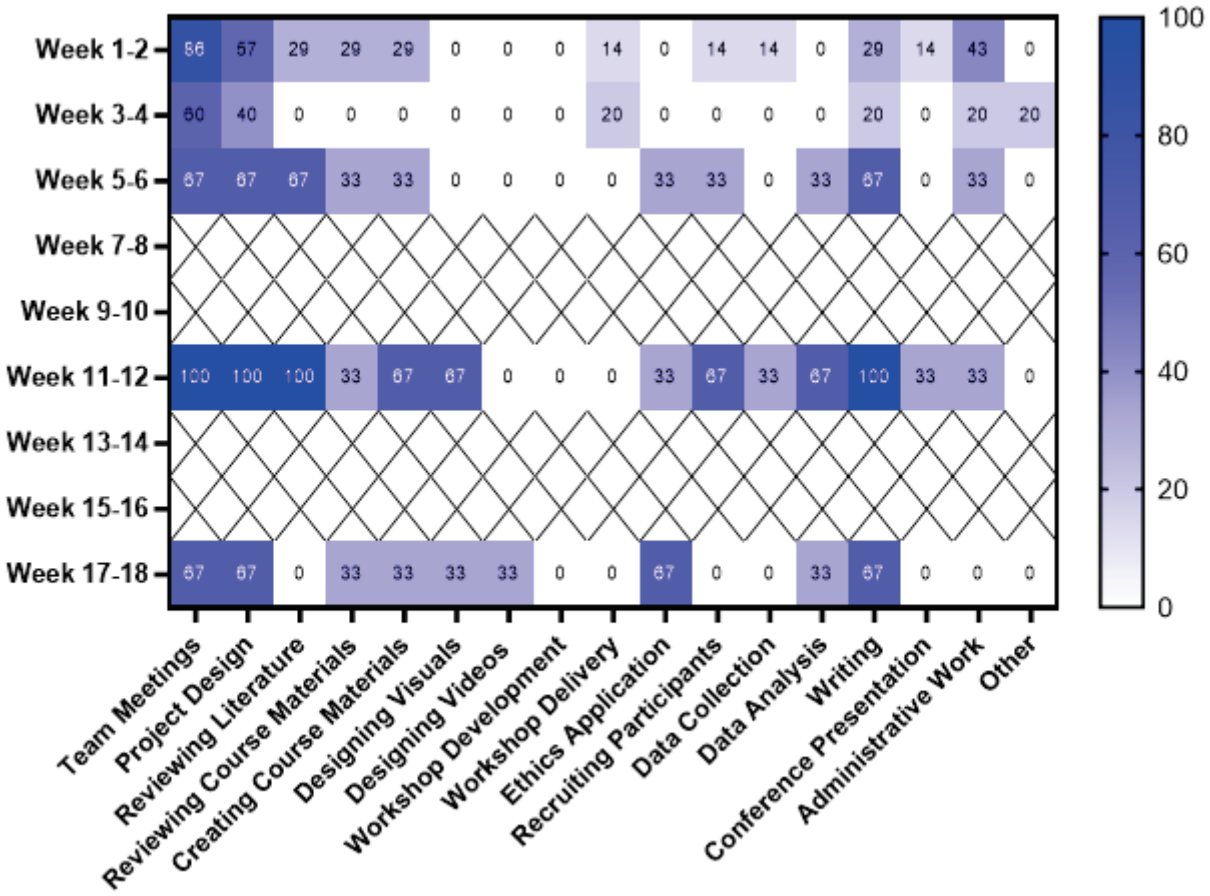
Note. N=3–7. The shade of blue indicates the percentage of respondents who reported completing the listed activity during that time frame. The exact percentage value is also written in the box.

Faculty and staff respondents also reported completing certain activities significantly more than others ($p<0.0001$, two-way ANOVA, Figure 3).

Figure 3

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

Trends in Project Activities Completed by Faculty and Staff Partner Respondents Stratified by Two-Week Periods



Note. N=3–7. The shade of blue indicates the percentage of respondents who reported completing the listed activity during that time frame. The exact percentage value is also written in the box. Examples of other activities include attending training sessions and meeting with potential collaborators. Crossed-out weeks indicate time periods where we received fewer than 3 faculty or staff partner respondents.

Unlike students, faculty and staff respondents had much more variable work activities each week ($p<0.0001$, two-way ANOVA, Figure 3). Students were more likely to do similar activities week-to-week, while faculty and staff were more likely to complete a variety of activities across their time in the program. Both groups were more likely to complete certain activities as part of their projects than others, regardless of time.

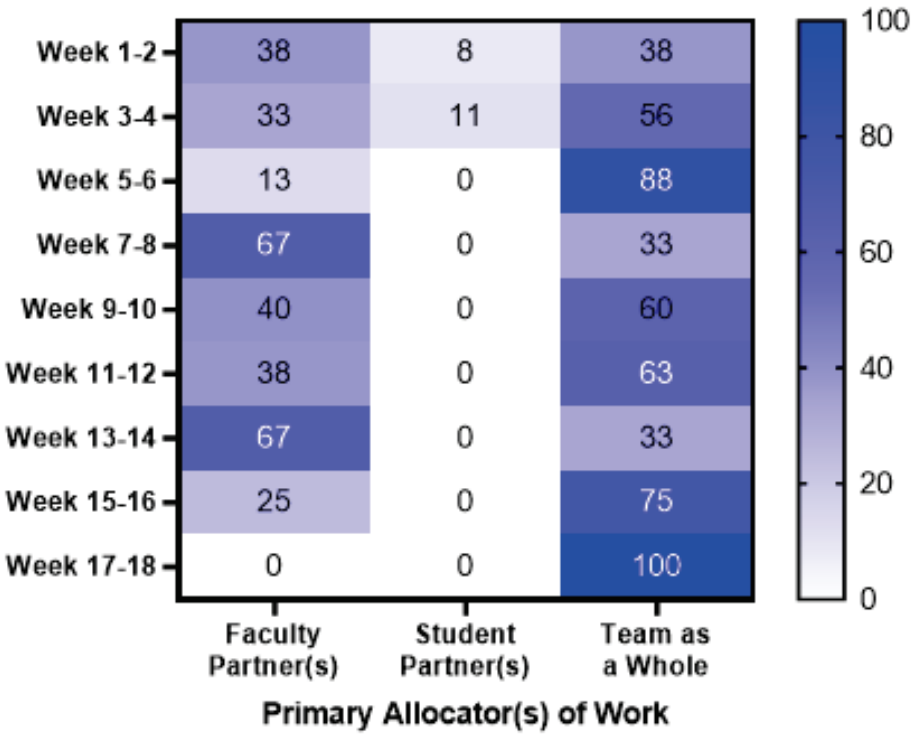
As 69% of projects were proposed by faculty or staff partners, we hypothesized that allocating work would similarly be dominated by faculty or staff partners.

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

Although there were some weeks where respondents indicated faculty or staff partners were the primary allocators of work, as the summer progressed more work assignments were made as team-based decisions (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Trends in the Career Stage of Primary Allocations of Work



Note. N=3–13. The shade of blue indicates the percentage of respondents who indicated the category of allocator of work. The exact percentage value is also written in the box. Primary allocator(s) of work is defined as the person or persons who were primarily in charge of deciding who did what work activities during a given time frame.

There were few instances of student partners being the primary allocators of work (Figure 4).

Changes in Perceptions

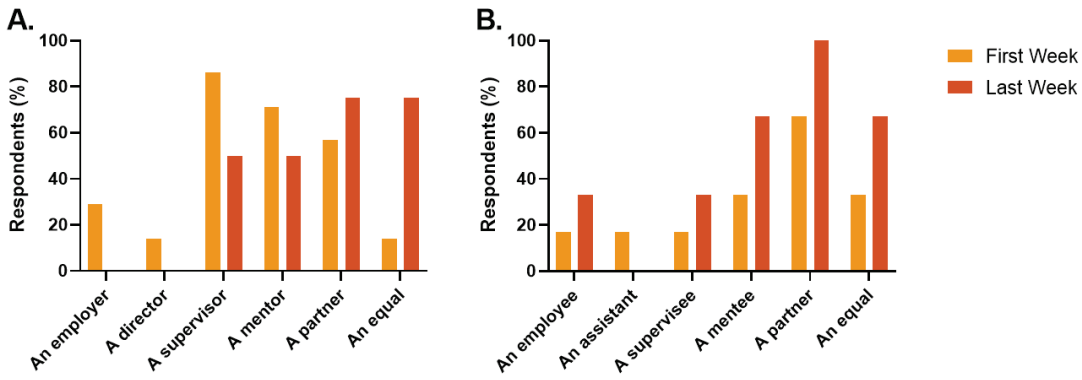
We explored how partners' perceptions of one another shifted while working together. We did this by asking students what kind of terms they would use to describe the faculty or staff partners on their team, and vice versa, at the beginning

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

and end of the Summer 2022 work period. Partners' language used to describe one another shifted from more hierarchical (employer, employee, director, assistant, supervisor, supervisee) to more partnership-focused terminology (mentor, mentee, partner, equal) (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Language Used by Respondents to Describe Their Project Partners



Note. N=6–7. A) Student partners' language used to describe faculty and staff partners. B) Faculty and staff partners' language used to describe student partners.

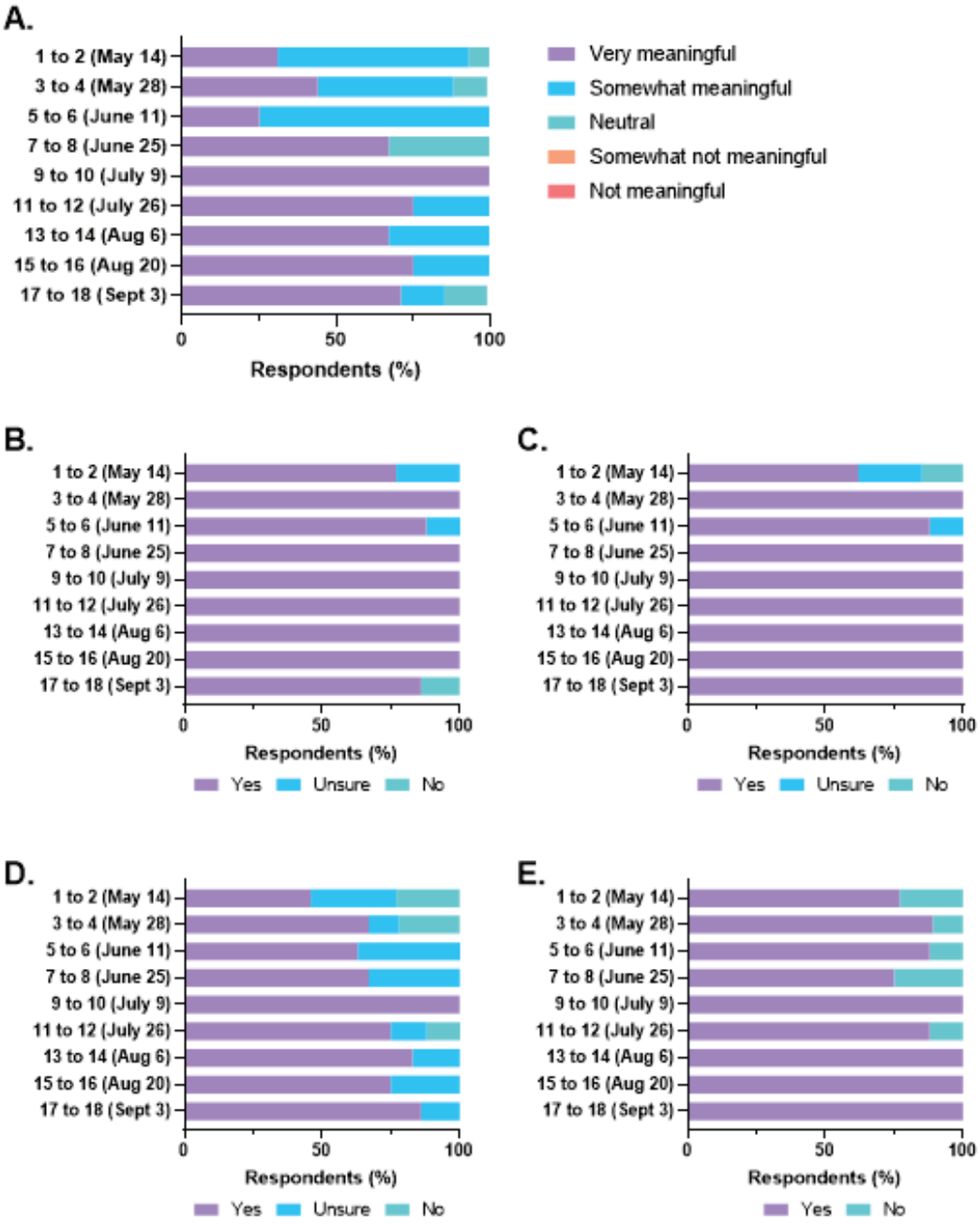
In the first two weeks of the student partners program, significantly more students described faculty partners as "supervisors" than faculty described student partners as "supervisees" ($p=0.0291$, Fisher's exact test). This difference was no longer significant ($p>0.9999$, Fisher's exact test) in the final week of the program. There were no other significant differences in the language used.

We also asked respondents about their perceptions of various aspects of the work they completed. Overall, respondents perceived the activities they completed weekly to be somewhat or very meaningful, with a greater proportion of respondents indicating their work was very meaningful later in the program than in the beginning (Figure 6A). Students, faculty, and staff partners felt that the activities they undertook made use of their expertise (Figure 6B) and helped them develop their skills (Figure 6C). Mirroring findings related to the allocation of work, 46% of respondents agreed that work was equitably divided amongst team members at the start of the program, versus 86% at the end of the term (Figure 6D). Respondents agreed overwhelmingly that the activities they undertook lived up to their expectations (Figure 6E).

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

Figure 6

Respondent Perceptions of Activities Completed in the Student Partners Program, Stratified by Two-Week Periods



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Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

Note. N=4–14. A) Respondent ratings of meaningfulness of activities completed. B) Respondents' perceptions that their expertise was used in the activities they completed. C) Respondents' perceptions that they developed their skills through the completion of project activities. D) Respondents' perceptions that there was an equitable distribution of work among project partners. E) Respondents' perceptions that the work they were doing lived up to their expectations for the project.

For all perception measurements, there were no significant differences between responses from students, faculty, or staff partners.

Interviews

WORK/TASKS PERFORMED BY PARTNERS

Students were less likely to be involved in the initial steps related to project development as most projects were proposed by faculty/staff. When students did collaborate with faculty/staff partners on the initial development, it was often in the context of building on an existing project. As a result, student partners were often hired to join a team already comprised of faculty/staff. Once part of the team, student partners worked as autonomous members of the group. As one faculty partner explained, "I gave them a lot of autonomy and individual direction" (FP3). A student partner described their responsibilities as follows:

At times, we were given our own tasks and we had our own time to do them, and then at times … we would meet up as a team in a meeting and then go through it together, and so some tasks we completed together and some of them were separate. (SP3)

Interviewees also compared student partner positions to working or volunteering in a lab (FP3, FP4, SP4), working as a teaching or research assistant (SP3, SP4), or undertaking a student thesis (SP4).

MEANINGFULNESS

Interviewees spoke about the meaningfulness of the projects on which they were working and the meaningfulness of working in partnership. Partners shared that their projects filled a need, such as a community or student need. In terms of the meaningfulness of working in partnership, interviewees' accounts focused on the benefit to students. Student partners shared that the SPP was "an amazing opportunity" (SP3) from which they had grown and "enjoyed … the collaboration" (SP2), thus suggesting that meaningfulness was derived by relationship building and personal development. As another student partner explained, "students are trying to break that mold through projects like the SPP projects and trying to find ways to connect with faculty and really form partnerships, relationships that they

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

can learn from and grow from" (SP4). Faculty/staff likewise shared that they hoped "to create a place where [student partners feel] like they can contribute" (FP1) and "get some kind of an academic benefit … whether it's skill building or knowledge building or whatever" (FP2). Again, partners described meaning as being derived by "giving students opportunities" (FP3) to collaborate with faculty/staff as opposed to working for faulty/staff.

Relationship Dynamics

Interviewees interchangeably used "partner" with other similar labels, often preceded by some form of ownership language, such as "my student" (FP4), "my manager" (SP1), "just undergraduates" (FP2), "supervisor" (FP2, FP6, SP2), "my professor" (SP3), and "my research assistant" (FP4). Hierarchical language was further reflected in other statements, such as "I've had student partners working under me" (FP2) and "I had a supervisor above me" (SP2).

FP1 expressed that it was "really hard to have like a purely, um, equitable sort of relationship" and "there's usually some sort of hierarchy." FP6 agreed, stating, "we tried to reduce the power differential as much as we could, you know, recognizing that you know we are faculty, that there is inherently, no matter what you do, … a power difference between faculty and students."

Despite the inability to fully eliminate the employer/employee hierarchy, some partners emphasized equality. Comparing partnership to extant hierarchies in post-secondary education, FP4 stated, "These are not students taking my order to do things. They are not my research assistant. … That's not appropriate in this context, right, because we are equal partners." These partners, like FP3, who embodied the ethos of partnership into all their relationships ("I see students as partners in all avenues in all arenas"), saw it as their responsibility to empower student partners. As FP5 explained,

On a couple occasions, [administration] did not invite [the student partner] to a meeting. And … I insisted that [the partner] be invited. I think that … helped kind of cement our relationship too, because I think [the partner] felt that I was … watching her back.

There was also reciprocity embedded in the accounts of FP1: "I feel like I am learning from them, just as much as they're learning from me," and SP2: "we were learning from each other." Students appreciated these efforts. Such was the case for SP1, who said "[the staff partner is] doing a great job of like trying to keep it really relaxed and making us feel like we're friends and like were working through this like kind of like a school project." This was echoed by SP2, who shared, "I think me and my partners have been able to relate to each other on a personal and professional level," thus blurring professional and personal boundaries.

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

While these partners attempted to reduce the power differential inherent in hierarchical relationships, other partners preferred to maintain a division. Consider FP2, who described their relationship with student partners as "kind of the same relationship that I would have with a thesis student," meaning maintaining a professional relationship, as they do not "socialize with students." Indeed, there was a clear distinction between "partners" and "colleagues." As FP5 stated, "working with [the student partner] was almost like working with a with a faculty member." Likewise, SP3 said, "I think it was pretty much almost like a peer dynamic." The word "almost" in these two accounts could denote that students are not colleagues with faculty and staff, implying students occupy a subordinate social position.

Expertise/Skills

Many faculty and staff believed that they had more disciplinary and methodological expertise and experience than students. For example, FP1 stated, "[I] have more experience obviously running projects and getting funding." Students respected the expertise and experience of faculty and staff, which undermined partnership. Such was the case for SP3, who felt their deference "hindered [their] ability to give feedback because ... [faculty and staff] had more experience." Similarly, some interviewees shared that students who had more experience, by way of an advanced degree (FP5) or higher level of study (SP4), were perceived as being better able to contribute to the partnership. SP4 internalized that sentiment, feeling that there "was a huge knowledge gap … because, as an undergrad, you don't know everything that needs to be put into a project. Like, you don't think of the funding."

As indicated above, faculty and staff hired student partners whose expertise, abilities, strengths, qualifications, and skills complemented their own. As FP2 explained, "When I'm working with student, they're offering either a functional advantage or a disciplinary advantage over me." Examples included qualitative analysis (FP4, FP6), grammar/proofreading (FP2), technological skills (SP1, SP3), or a background in a different discipline (SP2). Expertise, in this sense, also included expertise in being a student. FP3 stated, "I knew I wanted a second-year student because we're writing a first-year textbook, so I wanted them like fresh out of that first-year experience to be able to relate." But students also described opportunities to develop their own expertise and skills. For example, SP1 learned about accessible website design, SP3 learned how to use LimeSurvey, and SP4 learned how to apply for ethics.

Partners' Roles

Division of Tasks. Some partners described their roles in terms of a strategic division of labour between "student" and "supervisor" (SP2). For example, FP2

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

indicated that they "can't collect [their] own data for ethical reasons," so student partners working with FP2 would collect data while FP2 would manage other aspects of the project, such as ethics, because, as they said, "someone has to file for [ethics] and it's always easier if it's me." This was observed by SP3, who, in their project, also worked on data collection while the faculty partners with whom they worked managed the ethics application and coordination with external partners. Indeed, many faculty/staff partners perceived their role as dealing with the bureaucracy of project management and being responsible to institutions (e.g., departments, research centres) vested beyond the individual project. Student partners shared this perspective with faculty/staff, noting that it was not "their place to, to be doing that work" (SP2).

Partners' roles in some partnerships were more formal (FP2) while the roles in other partnerships were described as "fluid" (SP2), evolving to meet the emerging needs of the project. With a more formally defined role, SP1 felt they were "doing what my supervisors [were] telling me," based on the supervisor's vision, and SP1 would "provide input" from their perspective as a student. Conversely, SP4 worked in a more fluid partnership that they described as "very equal" and freeing: "In like a thesis project, … [the professor] wants it to go a certain way. But [in the SPP], I'm allowed to be creative. I can explore different things and things like that." Not all students agreed; some students working in more fluid environments craved more structure. As SP3 explained, "At the beginning of the project, I wasn't really sure what my tasks would be. So, kind of like a timeline or just a layout of my roles and responsibilities … would be ideal."

Duality Causing Tensions. Partners recognized their dual roles as a partner as well as a teacher or learner. A commitment to the ethos of partnership helped foster more equal partnerships. The ethos of partnership is embodied in SP4's statement:

You're working with a prof, and it can be intimidating. But, like, my partners have been great. They always ask for my input, and I do the same …. We always share our thoughts and opinions …. The dynamics, I would say, are pretty nice, and it's nice to be thought of as an equal.

However, interviewees also spoke about struggles with the dual roles of partner and teacher/learner. Faculty tensions revolved around the responsible use of power:

How do you still make sure that you're treating them as you would treat other students? … Let's say their grade was a bit lower than I know they would have wanted …. I feel like I was disappointing them in some ways, so that was hard to grapple with. (FP1)

Students also understood that their partnered relationship could impact classroom dynamics. This is exemplified by SP3, who stated, "If anything that

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

happens [in the partnership], I don't want it to influence how [the faculty partners] think of me in the classroom."

Expectations

For interviewees with no prior partnership experience, they were not sure what to expect. SP1 explained, "I didn't know what my expectations were going into the partnership, but it felt really comfortable working there and it felt like, really inclusive. It felt like a safe space [to] like, share my ideas." FP5 stated, "I probably [had] pretty low expectations, not knowing what it was about and not knowing what kind of student or who the student might be." For some, expectations needed to be redefined or adjusted. Such was the case for SP2, who "thought it was going to be more like a job," but found the work more collaborative and autonomous than expected. When reflecting on their experiences, partners expressed that their expectations were met or exceeded: "I develop[ed] like a lot of different skills that I wasn't expecting to develop. … It was a bit beyond my expectations" (SP1). For faculty and staff whose expectations were exceeded, they often cited that the student partners were able to take on and accomplish more than they had anticipated.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate whether students, staff, and faculty involved with the Summer 2022 SPP cohort at McMaster University worked in partnership or if their relational dynamics replicated traditional hierarchies. We found that partners compared the SPP to similar roles, like the positions of lab, research, and teaching assistants. We also found that partners undertook various tasks and work-related activities. Faculty/staff assumed the most varied workload and the tasks most related to project development and management. As such, faculty/staff contributed the most intellectual contributions at the outset of most projects. While undergraduates also completed more varied tasks than graduate students, we found that graduate students were more likely to contribute to project design, which suggests that graduate partners contributed to the intellectual directions of projects more than undergraduate partners. These findings demonstrate a hierarchy whereby greater career stage or level of study correlated to greater intellectual contributions. This imbalance complicates the ethos of knowledge co-creation and reciprocity of responsibility that underlie the students-as-partners framework (Cook-Sather, 2020; Healey et al., 2014). However, faculty/staff acknowledged that they occupy powerful and privileged positions and recognized that they bore more responsibility for breaking down barriers and sharing power (Freire 1974/2003; Gergen, 2009; hooks, 1994), which took time to

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

develop over the course of the partnership.

We found several shifts in the relational dynamic over the duration of working collaboratively. First, partners' language shifted while working together from more hierarchal terminology (e.g., "supervisor") to more partner-focused language (e.g., "partner"). Students especially employed more hierarchal terminology than faculty or staff and interviews revealed widespread use of both hierarchical and possessive language among all partners. Second, we found that the initial divisions of labour reflected a traditional hierarchy, whereby faculty and staff decided who would perform what tasks, whereas partners employed a more team-based approach later in their collaborative relationships. Students, at the start, craved a more structured relationship, but came to enjoy the more fluid and exploratory nature of working autonomously within the boundaries of the partnership, a process that students described as "freeing." Third, this resulted in a shift in partners' perceptions, seeing the division of labour as more equitable and the work more meaningful as the relationship progressed. These shifts further support the notion that equitable partnership is a process facilitated by faculty/staff partners gradually sharing more responsibilities with student partners (Bovill, 2017; Healey et al., 2014).

Finally, we noted that partners felt the work they undertook was meaningful, developed their skills, made use of their expertise, and lived up to their expectations. For faculty/staff, meaning was derived by supporting the students' development whereas, for students, meaning was derived by relationship building and personal development. Herein, co-learning underscored reciprocity in developing partners' skills (Cook-Sather, 2020). Co-learning likely occurred because partners' expertise, abilities, strengths, qualifications, skills, and lived experiences were complementary. Holistically, the complementary makeup of the team led to greater accomplishments, which contributed to exceeding partners' expectations of the SPP, and thus contributes to the larger body of literature expounding the benefits of the students-as-partners movement (Hanna-Benson et al., 2020; Kaur et al., 2019).

Despite these benefits, challenges exist (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Freire (1974/2003) described the co-learning process as a teacher-learner/learner-teacher relationship, thus blurring the boundaries between teacher and learner. This study highlighted some tensions regarding navigating the dual roles of "teacher/learner" and "partner." For faculty and staff, as teachers, this tension complicated the responsible use of power. For students, as learners, this tension undermined their ability to contribute as equal partners, as they took more subordinate positions. Extant students-as-partners literature speaks to power-sharing through dialogue and reflection, as well as ethical practices (Matthews, 2017). However, dialogue and reflection about difficult topics and ethical violations, such as grade scrubbing, are challenging and have the potential to harm relationships. Therefore, we believe that

Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

further research is needed on the impact that fostering partnered relationships in one context (e.g., SPP projects) has on relationships in other contexts (e.g., the classroom).

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Imagining SoTL, Volume 3(2) (2023)
ISSN 2563-8289

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