



Power, Access, and Policy: Reflections on the Women's Center Internship Program

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Higher education institutions are inherently gendered organizations, manifesting in gender imbalances in institutional leadership, differential access and persistence in degree programs, pay inequity, and other forms of gender-based discrimination throughout the life of the institution (Acker & Van Houten, 1974; DeWelde & Stepnick, 2015; Sayce & Acker, 2012). These historical gender inequities—made sharper by the intersection of other social identities including race, age, and sexual orientation—persist in policy development and execution, reinforcing structural inequalities and cultural practices in academia that disadvantage women (DeWelde & Stepnick, 2015).

While workplace policies and practices are felt throughout the institution with specific consequences for women-identified faculty and staff, they are made largely *invisible* to students. Although students are not immune from experiencing the impact of gendered institutional practices in the classroom vis-a-vis faculty representation or sex segregation

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in degree programs, among others, institutional decision-making often operates independently of student input and critique. In the development of a policy-focused internship program for students, I sought to disrupt these divisions by using the university itself as the foundation for problem-based learning.

Bridging problem-based learning approaches (Duch, Groh, & Allen, 2001) with feminist theory and praxis (Kark, Preser, & Zion-Waldoks, 2016), this chapter explores my personal experiences developing and facilitating a year-long internship program in the University of Dayton's Women's Center. This internship gave students an opportunity to create and revise new and existing policies related to work-life balance, within the frame of a specific, real-time university need. In providing a real-world problem with the potential to have a marked positive impact on employees at the university, I aimed to create not only a unique and transformational experiential learning opportunity for students, but also sought to develop a sustainable model resulting in a more gender-equitable campus.

FEMINIST PRAXIS AND PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING

Numerous scholars (Hora, Wolfgram, & Thompson, 2017; Simons et al., 2012) have emphasized the value of internships as a crucial “real world” complement to classroom learning, resulting in critical skill development and increased employability, as well as increased cultural competency (Gushue, 2004). Similarly, feminist scholars (Bethman, Cottledge, & Bickford, 2018; Davie, 2002) have written about the role of Women's Centers as vital spaces that provide invaluable opportunities for students to engage in meaningful social justice activism. Women's Centers—which began opening at universities across the country in the 1960s and 1970s in response to the women's movement—also function as advocacy organizations to promote systemic change and improve the climate for women on campus, as well as provide access to needed resources (Byrne, 2000; Wetzel, 1988). By their unique placement within higher education, Women's Centers also enhance the goals of feminist pedagogy and provide a space for intellectual empowerment, where “learning and knowledge are jointly constructive, integrative, and complex” (Byrne, 2000, p. 49). Feminist pedagogy is both a methodological and theoretical practice that encourages critical consciousness-raising and social transformation, as well as is defined by its “commitment to incorporating the voices and experiences of marginalized students into the academic discourse as

well as educating all students for social justice and change” (Mayberry & Rees, 1997, p. 57). The relationship between Women’s Centers and Women’s Studies/Women’s and Gender Studies academic programs provides another avenue to sharpen the connection between the curricular and the co-curricular through field placements, shared educational programs, and coalition building.

Feminist praxis and pedagogy are inherently experiential in nature (Mayberry & Rose, 1999; Naples & Bojar, 2013), but its problems are not necessarily neatly defined, organized, or easily solved. Still, the tenant of problem-based learning is useful to frame the methodological underpinnings of this internship program. Under the umbrella of experiential learning, project-based learning (PBL)—also described as “inquiry-based learning”, “problem-based”, and “discovery-based” learning—is a core methodology in experiential education. Duch et al. (2001) define PBL as a teaching methodology in which “complex, real-world problems are used to motivate students to identify and research the concepts and principles they need to know to work through those problems” (p. 6). A connection to a real-world problem is a critical component to providing a meaningful PBL experience. A strong PBL problem must motivate students to seek a deeper understanding and require students to make reasoned decisions and defend them; the problem should build on and connect to previous knowledge and still be complex enough to require a collaborative approach in order to solve it (Duch, 1996; Duch et al., 2001). PBL promotes critical thinking skills and helps students develop problem-solving and communication skills, as well as the ability to work both independently and in teams. While PBL has the potential to transform student learning, it requires instructors to shift their own pedagogical approaches and teaching practices, as well as create authentic, meaningful problems for students.

DESIGNING THE INTERNSHIP: BACKGROUND AND GENERATING THE POLICY PROBLEM

This inaugural policy-focused internship was a partnership between the Women’s Center and Women’s and Gender Studies (WGS) program, where it counted as credit toward the academic major or minor or could be applied toward general credits for any major. Our goal in facilitating this partnership was to bridge feminist theory and praxis, that is, connecting classroom discussions to on-the-ground action, leading to

social change. We also wanted to give undergraduate students exposure to career options—to be able to see the utility of a degree in the humanities, to shadow a professional engaged in gender-focused work, and to explore the multiple workplaces in which a social justice mindset was a necessity. It was also an important collaboration between our units which, despite being co-located in the same physical office space, had not created such an arrangement in their shared history. When we began conceptualizing this partnership in early 2018, the WGS program had just celebrated 40 years at the University of Dayton and the center celebrated 15 years. While the two units had long maintained a strong working relationship, new leadership in both the WGS program and WC provided an opportunity to re-imagine its partnership and create new avenues to strengthen student learning on campus; the internship program also had strong support from the Dean's Office in the College of Arts & Sciences, which paved the way for us to offer academic credit to students participating in this program.

I designed this internship with several guiding principles and assumptions in mind. First, the student experience does not function in isolation of university business operations—instead, students operate within a broader institutional structure of which decision-making has a real impact on their education. Policies and practices around hiring and promotion of tenure-track faculty, for example, do have an impact—both directly and indirectly—on what and how students learn. Second, while structural inequalities are entrenched and pervasive throughout society, inequitable institutional structures are not static—they can and will shift and evolve over time. Policy is one way in which inequitable structures are preserved (or dismantled). Third, some policies are explicitly gendered (i.e., maternity leave) and others are seemingly gender-neutral but still have implications for gendered bodies (i.e., telecommuting). Our task was to unravel both and identify ways in which either form could potentially contribute to gender-based inequities in the workplace. Fourth, while gender was our central tool of analysis, we explored policies using an intersectional framework meaning we took into account multiple interlocking social identities. Finally, students are both learners and knowers, and we must utilize and value their knowledge, as well as provide opportunities to help them build knowledge. Using the University of Dayton's definition of "equity," that is, the process of modifying structures and practices that have intentionally or unintentionally advantaged or disadvantaged groups of people, we sought to create policies, practices, and traditions that support just outcomes for all genders.

The internship was competitive, and students had to apply and interview for a spot in the program. While being a women's and gender studies major or minor wasn't a requirement for being selected, students had to have had at least a preliminary understanding of gender-related issues and a desire to engage in social justice-related work. Policy experience also wasn't a necessary prerequisite—it was more important that students had a willingness to learn and were able to work collaboratively on complex problems, as well as work independently. In its inaugural year, we selected three women undergraduate students to participate in the internship program.

IDENTIFYING OUR PROBLEM

My initial goal in building this program was to simply provide students insight into how policies are developed and implemented at the university level and to develop critical thinking skills that would be beneficial for the university in some way. In the midst of creating this internship program, a “live” problem emerged that challenged me to re-imagine the internship and the work the students would do. By way of background, shortly before I arrived at the university in 2017, the institution experienced a flurry of leadership changes, including a new President, new Provost and inaugural Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion—all with a shared commitment to positioning the University of Dayton as a university for the “Common Good” with a strategic focus on diversifying the student body and workforce, and in creating an affordable and accessible institution where all students could thrive. Amidst a wave of several institutional-wide diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, a university working group comprised of both faculty and staff (of which I was a part) had just completed a report identifying recommendations for recruiting, retaining, and promoting underrepresented racial and ethnic groups and women faculty and staff. From that report, a small subset of priorities was identified, including a directive to: “Critically evaluate current policies and benefits related to work-life balance, and develop a list of specific, feasible recommendations for policies and practices that promote gender equity.” From there, our real-world, real-time problem was born, as was the institutional need that allowed students to engage in an authentic and complex problem of deep institutional significance. The timing could not have been more ideal.

The interns had to take a very large social problem—gender inequity—and identify a small subset of recommendations centered on work-life balance to solve it. And they had to enter into the problem knowing that policy alone could not address the full scope of gender-related concerns within our institution. This required a rich understanding of the organizational structure of our university, an understanding of the subtleties in roles at the university (staff vs. faculty, tenure-track faculty vs. non-tenure-track faculty, exempt staff vs. non-exempt staff), as well as an ability to tease out the nuances between policy development and implementation, accounting for its unintended consequences and costs, and its potential for differential distribution given the decentralized nature of our campus. What I didn't take into account initially was that students also had to learn about the challenges of being both a working professional and a caretaker—a role they were not familiar with as traditional-age students without their own children or dependents to support. Students began to understand the magnitude of the problem early on as we began unpacking the myriad of issues facing women in academe.

STRUCTURING THE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

I didn't expect the problem to be solved in a week or month. Knowing we had an entire academic year to tackle this larger problem, I organized this internship like a course—including creating a syllabus each semester that established learning goals, outlined required readings and set deadlines for our main deliverables. Learning goals included: (1) gain a greater understanding of gender equity issues within higher education (and other employment sectors); (2) develop understanding of how policies are developed within a university environment; (3) understand best practices related to benchmarking research; (4) create guidance documents to assist policy makers with applying a gender lens in the development of policies; and (5) make meaning of your experience through participation in experiential learning lab and written articulation of work experience on resume. We met as a team weekly and interns each spent 6–10 hours each week in the Women's Center over the academic year. Interns first began with a deep dive into the issues facing women in academe—spending the first few weeks reading relevant research and case studies on work-life balance concerns, representation in leadership positions, tenure and promotion, and gender bias in the classroom. We then

reviewed current university policies. Our discussions centered on complex questions: *Why does policy matter? What is aspirational versus what is achievable? What are the costs of implementing vs. the cost of not? In what ways do power and privilege materialize in policies?*

As they began to develop a foundational understanding of university operations and governance, the nature of the internship began to shift to a specific deliverable related to this institutional mandate. To begin generating the tools needed to solve the very complex problem with which we were charged—as well as provide students with an opportunity to see university decision-making “in action”—the interns spent the year meeting with multiple senior leaders, including the Vice President of Human Resources, the Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, the Associate Provost for Faculty and Administrative Affairs, President of the Academic Senate, the Equity Compliance Officer, and numerous other leaders from legal affairs, human resources, and the academic units. Campus experts shared their perspectives on the costs of policy implementation, how to get stakeholder buy-in, the process for reviewing academic policies, best practices for benchmarking, lessons learned from previous policy roll-outs, and the legal landscape. They were also required to attend Academic Senate meetings and meetings held by the University Policy Coordinating Committee, the primary group responsible for reviewing and approving new policies and changes to existing policies. For many, this was their first foray into understanding the university *is* an organization with its own infrastructure, practices, and policies.

By the end of the first semester in the program, interns worked collaboratively to conduct benchmarking of 19 work-life balance-related policies and family-friendly practices at 32 peer institutions and aspirational institutions (those universities and colleges known as leaders in diversity, equity and inclusion efforts). By the end of the academic year, interns drafted a revision to the university’s existing telecommuting policy, a new family leave policy including the institution’s first-ever paternity leave that also expanded leave for other caregivers, and produced an analysis of flexible work schedules. The interns had to present their final recommendations to senior leaders, as well as defend the choices they made. At the time of this writing, the proposed policies were still under review by the university’s senior administration.

REFLECTIONS ON FACILITATING STUDENT-LED POLICY WORK

At the end of the academic year, I asked the three interns to each draft a written reflection of their experience. One student wrote:

The internship allowed [us] to see into a completely different world ‘behind the curtain.’ My perspective has shifted massively since before the internship started. I have learned so much about myself in a professional setting, UD, gender equity, higher education administration and policy making.

One student described the internship as “more impactful than any class you would take,” adding “this experience allowed me to see possible job opportunities for myself outside of what I had previously thought possible.” A third reflected on specific skill development: “I believe I have become more confident and secure in my ability to speak candidly about an issue to authority figures....my writing and researching skills have improved drastically. This has helped me convey my thoughts to others in a more productive and thoughtful way.” It was tremendously rewarding to see the ways in which students made meaning of their experiences and grew personally and professionally in different ways, and the ways in which they work effectively together and built off each others’ strengths. All three expressed an interest in a career in policy after completing the internship.

When the interns began this experience, they had a limited understanding of how higher education institutions operate. Looking back on my own experiences as an undergraduate, I didn’t either—in fact, I didn’t truly understand the function of institutions outside of my classroom experience until I had been working in higher education for several years. I reflected on this often over the course of the year, of the ways we in higher education intentionally or unintentionally create these invisible divisions between the student experience and the employee experience, and the ways we seem to operate in isolation of each other even in the same physical space.

As a sociologist, I approached this internship as an opportunity to “make the familiar strange” (Mills, 1959)—that is to critically interrogate what seems known, in this case, the university itself. As a result, I sought to disrupt norms around the student experience—one typically framed

as protected by and separate from institutional authority and decision-making—to allow students to become agents of change. But what happens when institutions and its agents expose their own vulnerabilities to students? On a basic level, engaging in this work was predicated on the assumption that current policies and practices at the university were not sufficient or, in their present state, were somehow reinforcing gender inequity. This opened the door to exposing students to climate concerns expressed by employees, which revealed inadequacies in our institution's current practices. While I was transparent about these realities, I also felt compelled to temper these discussions, often framing them as endemic to higher education at-large. As a sociologist, I wanted them to always consider the broader social, historical, cultural, and political context, not to just consider this as a local problem. Still, I wrestled with an inherent tension around the need to allow students to engage this problem through their own lens, not mine, while also preserving my core job function to advocate on behalf of women-identified faculty, staff, and students. I also needed to manage institutional politics. I wondered if I too was protecting the institution and my role within it? And what or who was I protecting?

While Women's Centers—and similarly situated identity centers—function in part to disrupt institutional practices and policies (Patton, 2011), its work is also embedded within patriarchal institutions and must confront the contradictory and paradoxical demands of functioning both with and against these structures while also providing learning opportunities for students. Kark et al. (2016) write: “Pursuing gender equity and a feminist agenda within organizational contexts creates a need to cope with competing demands. As the complexity and ambiguity of the environment grows, leaders of social enterprises experience increased pressures to manage embedded dualities and contradictory demands” (pp. 295–296). It is in this space of tension and paradoxical demands which challenged me to view my own role not only in facilitating this internship but in the university at-large. At times, it was a careful dance as I struggled to make meaning of the experience: How do I negotiate the tension of my own role—as one that critiques existing systems and structures, while simultaneously operating within them? And how do I (de)sensitize students to the challenges in living in this space of tension? How do I empower students when I myself am restrained by institutional limits?

I was entering into this partnership as a relatively new member of the campus community with the strategic long-term goal of expanding the reach and scope of the center's efforts beyond services and programming

into research and policy work. I felt well-equipped to manage this change, but it was a stark contrast to the way the center was run over the course of its 15-year history on campus. I sought to provide interns with a meaningful experience and the opportunity to work on an authentic problem that had the capacity to make a significant impact on the university. But this also presented a challenge in that it created a tension in traditional notions of hierarchical and gendered decision-making at the university. In other words, *who* gets to create and implement policy, and who is implicated in it? The Women's Center had historically only served in a consultancy role when it came to policies that affect women-identified students, faculty and staff, rather than occupying a central role in decision-making. Shifting this framework, essentially flipping hierarchy on its head, was, ironically, only made possible *because* of the student involvement in this work. As a student-centered institution, our campus has long been open to hearing student voices and engaging in innovative teaching practices. In fact, engaging students in this project was enthusiastically received by senior leaders who welcomed the interns' ideas and unique perspective and frequently expressed their appreciation for the interns' efforts. This response emphasized, at least to me, the *necessity* of involving students in this work. Still, because policy-making is a complex endeavor, requiring a multi-tiered vetting system in existing structures and committees, there were limits to how far we could carry this project. While the interns understood the inherent limitations—i.e., that their suggested policy revisions would not be approved or implemented automatically—there was still some institutional disappointment to manage.

CONCLUSION

Experiential learning opportunities not only provide transformational spaces for student learning, they also have the capacity to transform institutions themselves, as well as the practitioners that guide these efforts. But this transformation is only possible if we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to expose the inherent messiness of our own organizations and be transparent around ways we as practitioners must function within existing structures—visible and invisible—to affect and sustain positive change. For identity centers in particular, engagement with students through internships can deepen our own practice as we co-create knowledge and work collaboratively toward creating a just campus community.

Problem-based learning, combined with feminist approaches to knowledge creation, has the potential to solve institutional problems, not simply abstract ones. But the challenge in focusing on high-stakes, live problems are multi-fold and perhaps not always easily accessible depending on the institutional context. At UD, the relational aspect of the campus, the generosity of institutional leaders, as well as the emphasis on providing experiential learning opportunities for students, coupled with a time-sensitive institutional need, presented a perfect storm of opportunity and access. This may not always readily available to others, nor potentially to me in the future. The challenge for me—and other practitioners building similar models—is to replicate and sustain this program by presenting an original problem that is meaningful for students and the institution—both have to see the necessity and value in the partnership to continue. Finding an institutional problem that is both manageable and of significance is an important component, requiring creativity and adaptability. Still, this internship model provides a useful framework for deepening student’s competencies in critical thinking, writing, and communication, while exposing them to gender equity issues of which they have the capacity to change for the better.

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