

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 12

Student-Faculty Partnerships for Co-Constructing Learning

Nolan Schultheis (00:05):

Welcome to Making College Worth It, the show that examines engaged learning activities that increase the value of college experiences.

Jessie Moore (00:12):

In each episode, we share research from Elon University’s Center for Engaged Learning and our international network of scholars. We explore engaged learning activities that recent college graduates associate with their financial and time commitment to college being worthwhile.

Nolan Schultheis (00:27):

I'm Nolan Schultheis, a first year student at Elon University, studying psychology with an interest in law. I'm the Center for Engaged Learning's Podcast producer and a legal professions scholar.

Jessie Moore (00:37):

And I'm Jessie Moore, director of Elon Center for Engaged Learning and a Professor of Professional Writing and Rhetoric.

Nolan Schultheis (00:44):

In this episode, we'll focus on another example of student faculty partnerships in higher education. We'll talk to Olivia Chaplin, associate professor of French and Associate Director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning at Elon University, and Emily Ford, a 2020 alumna of Elon University in Elon's Teaching Fellows program. Currently, Emily serves as the community engagement specialist at the New Hanover County Senior Resource Center. While Emily was enrolled at Elon, Emily and Olivia collaborated on research on student faculty partnerships related to global learning experiences. Their work culminated in the publication of the article of Student Faculty partnerships as Intercultural Encounters co-constructing the Pathways to Global Learning, which was just published by Frontiers, the Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad.

Olivia Choplin (01:35):

My name is Olivia Choplin. I am an associate professor of French here at Elon, and I was tasked with teaching our pre, during and post study abroad course in the Department of World Languages and Cultures that is designed to help students integrate their study abroad experiences into their overarching sort of personal and intellectual trajectories at school, and really something that we hoped will allow the department to assess their gains in intercultural knowledge in addition to their linguistic proficiency, et cetera. But I taught the course to a group of grumpy students and I was convinced of its value, but they weren't, and they were really smart and they were thoughtful, but they were not really happy with the way that it worked. And so I chose one of the brilliant students in the class to help me think about how I could think through it and package it in a way that would be more palatable and more

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 12

Student-Faculty Partnerships for Co-Constructing Learning

convincing to the students so that not only would they demonstrate their learning, which they did kind of already in the first iteration, but that they would actually recognize their learning and feel a little bit more positive about the whole process.

Emily Ford (02:49):

So I'm Emily. I was a 2020 graduate and I was one of the grumpy students that was in that first iteration. So my interest was really, I was interested in the concept of a redesign in general. I think it's really a cool opportunity for a student to take part in a student faculty partnership and be involved in the curriculum and course design process. It's a really unique way of getting involved in your learning. So when Olivia asked me, I was really, really interested and very excited to get started.

Jessie Moore (03:23):

In your recent *Frontiers* article, which we'll link to in episode notes, you described some of the ways you redesigned the pre, during and post study away course sequence. Could you share which revisions you think were most influenced by your partnership?

Olivia Choplin (03:38):

I think a lot of them were in that we spent a lot of time, so Emily and I read together some of the literature around study abroad integration, and we sort of made a research project out of that. And I think most everything that I did with her was sort of a, here's what I'm trying to do. Why do you think it didn't really work in this first time around? And where is the disconnect with what the students are feeling? And so I think that sort of, that negotiation and that conversation process was really fruitful. I also remember a moment when Emily came to a meeting that the French and Spanish section coordinators were having with the chair of the department about the purpose of the class where we were really digging into what we thought it meant and why we thought it was necessary, why some students might not need it as much as others, but why those that did need it really needed it and how we could frame it in ways that would make it more palatable to students. And I remember Emily's reaction leaving that meeting, and maybe I'll let you speak for that. Do you remember that meeting, Emily?

Emily Ford (04:52):

I do, yeah. And I think that was a huge turning point in my understanding of participating in the class as a student. Olivia mentioned we were a bunch of grumpy students. We didn't really understand why we were doing what we were doing. And so even though we were getting a lot out of the course, we weren't necessarily recognizing that we were getting anything out of the course. And so I think having a conversation with the department and seeing why language majors and minors would be participating in something like this and the reason behind it as reintegration especially I think was a big part of that conversation. It was kind of eyeopening for me of like, oh, that is what we're doing in this course. And yes, I was getting that, but now I'm starting to kind of digest it and understand the purpose behind what

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 12

Student-Faculty Partnerships for Co-Constructing Learning

that project did or why I was involved in whatever assignments I had to do. It started to kind of piece together the bigger picture.

Olivia Choplin (05:50):

And I think the revisions that we made to the rubrics and the fact that we transitioned the class into a more ungraded format were things that really had a positive impact because students were sort of worried about grades in a way that in the end probably wasn't particularly relevant because no one got bad grades in the class, but they were sort of preoccupied with things. And so I felt less comfortable pushing them and their reflection because I feel like they were concerned that if they didn't do a good job reflecting they would get a bad grade. And I was kind of like, I just want you to do the reflecting and then I want to be able to ask you probing questions to make you do a better job in that reflecting without you worrying about what impact that might have on your grade. So I think that was a really positive shift.

(06:35):

But I also think that the ways that we talked about certain things and also the way that the ethos of partnership came down and we said, Hey, you tell us how these are the things we want you to learn. You tell us how you could show us that you have learned them. And so what started with mine and Emily's partnership at thinking about how we could frame things for students became also a way that we got students involved in thinking actively about how they might demonstrate their learning when they got back so that they could prep for that before they left. And I think that that was a big help to buy in

Emily Ford (07:13):

Yeah, I was going to say, especially for the buy-in the changes that were made as a result of the partnership, I think really was kind of filling in the gaps of, okay, as a student, you were part of this course, what wasn't clicking and how could we take away some of that anxiety? Because I think a big reason why a lot of us were not buying into the course was that grading anxiety, but also just a fear that we weren't doing it well enough and then we weren't really digesting the intercultural competencies that we were supposed to be learning because we were so afraid of how it was being perceived.

Jessie Moore (07:50):

It's interesting how the grading dimension impacts the learning experience there. I know that Nolan has some follow up questions, but before we jump into those, I'm curious. You talked a little bit about almost approaching this like a research project where you were reading together about how you integrate study away experiences into the university experience. You talked about meeting with the department, so Emily had a chance to hear how other faculty understood the goals of the course. And it sounds like there were several conversations between the two of you as you were working through this process. Was there anything else that you would flag as part of your partnership process that you want to make sure doesn't get lost in how we're glossing over this? What was probably a longer and deep collaboration?

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 12

Student-Faculty Partnerships for Co-Constructing Learning

Emily Ford (08:45):

What really stood out to me was how multifaceted the project was, the article that came out of it. We tried to cover everything that we went through, but it wasn't just talking about study abroad, it wasn't just about the intercultural learning exchange, it was also about a student faculty partnership and it was also about curriculum redesign and student buy-in. And I think it was really awesome that the project wasn't just one set goal, it was really, really exploring so many different areas of higher education, which I thought was really awesome from my perspective at least.

Olivia Choplin (09:21):

And it was great to have Emily in the classroom as sort of an advocate friend and advice giver to the students who were in the course. And I think her presence there and her positive energy were really positive parts of the partnership, but having her as a sounding board for all of my ideas as I thought about how should I reframe this and how might I reframe this? And then taking it to the students and saying, okay, so how do you understand this? How are things working for you? And what might we shift? Those were really important. The other part was the partnership in the writing afterwards and in the processing it and then looking at how the student learning evolved. And I think it was a partnership to fix this course, which I think was successful. And course design is iterative. I'm still tweaking the course.

(10:09):

I still think about ways to make it better in the midst of the course that we redesigned, covid hit. So those students went home halfway through the semester before they had completed their final portfolios. And that led to some other challenges, but the approach that we had allowed us to ask questions about those challenges and to move forward after that. And I've continued to work on the course since then, but I think student faculty partnership is really awesome in that it makes students better learners. So Emily was already a great learner, but I seeing what faculty think about makes you approach other classes differently. And I think we had some conversations about that. Emily was talking about, I'm sort of thinking about what was this professor thinking in this other class because of that? And I think that when we also include students in the designing of assessments or things like that in any course, then they start to ask themselves these questions about like, oh, well this professor is asking me to do these things. Well, I wonder what this other professor is thinking about why they're asking me to do these things when it's not transparent. And I think that that is a trickle effect that can be really, really positive. I like the idea that student faculty partnerships make faculty better faculty and they also make students better students.

Emily Ford (11:28):

I would 100% agree with that. I think, you know I was an education major, so I was already interested in that facet of being a learner of what the teachers were thinking. But seeing the course design and really talking through the syllabus and the purpose of every single assignment and class and what are we going to talk about during this session really made me think about my other classes and what professors trying to get out of things. Not just, Hey, this is your assignment, get it done. But what are the learners supposed to be getting from that? Which I think made me a better teacher, but also a better learner in the long run.

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 12

Student-Faculty Partnerships for Co-Constructing Learning

Nolan Schultheis (12:07):

I think the conversation you two have been having is kind of conducive of what my question was, but I think maybe whenever I throw it out there, it'll be a little more streamlined and we could get a nice answer. I'm very interested in the conversation you two have had so far, and it's did you both enjoy the dynamic switching between professor and student as you were redesigning the rubric?

Emily Ford (12:26):

I definitely did. I think as a student, it's really one, it's a huge honor to be asked to participate in something like this. I think I was really excited by that opportunity, but it did create this better understanding. I think this was my first class with Olivia. I was one of the grumpy students. I wasn't super buying into the class, but I thought she was a cool person. And you really get to see that and understand that professor on a better level, I think, and appreciate what they're doing. And I got to see how passionate she was not only about this course, but about language learning and being study abroad students and how you come back from that. And reintegration can be something that's so difficult, especially if you're studying abroad and using the language abroad. I think you become so immersed in that culture, it's a totally different experience. So it was really cool in that sense, but also you create a lifelong friend, I think.

Olivia Choplin (13:24):

Yeah, and I mean I loved all the aspects of the exchanges that we have, but also Emily was doing her student teaching when we did this, and so even just our human connection was really wonderful. I think she was student teaching in third grade classroom while my son was in the third grade. And we had a lot of conversations about, oh my goodness, what is happening in our education system? And in addition to, she helped me think about this course, but we also connected about life and things and she's a wonderful human, and it was a lot of fun and I think the course got better for it. And yeah, it was really great.

Nolan Schultheis (14:02):

That's really awesome. Yeah, I mean I've had definitely those kind of classes where I'm like, I don't really like the class, but I really do like the professor, so I almost feel rude to not show up. And I definitely think through a collaboration, especially on a grading rubric, it creates this really weird and interesting dynamic that I don't think you can see in many other spaces, kind of like the student is now in control and telling the teacher what exactly they want to be done and that's never really been heard of before. And so that's kind of a perfect segue into my next question, which is do you think that student professor collaboration should be a normalized process for all classrooms?

Emily Ford (14:42):

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 12

Student-Faculty Partnerships for Co-Constructing Learning

Yes, absolutely. Yes.

Jessie Moore (14:46):

So our listeners couldn't see that. Olivia just gave us a heart sign in responses to that question.

Olivia Choplin (14:54):

See, and Jesse got the heart to go up on the Zoom, but to me, the premise of our article is that student faculty partnerships are kind of like intercultural encounters. And as it's funny, I don't consider myself to be old. I am young at heart. However, I am significantly of a different generation than my students now. And the students that I have now are different than the students I taught when I first started at Elon 15 years ago. And so I think partnership gives a great opportunity for communication across the differences that these generations provide. If I say, Hey students, here's a thing that I want you to learn. Do you think this is a valuable thing to learn? If not, let's tweak it and see if you don't think it's a valuable thing. Because certain things that are non-negotiable in my discipline. But there are ways that it's important to have that conversation so that students have agency to talk about, alright, this is the learning you want me to do.

(16:01):

I'm not sure I can show you how I'm doing it in the formats that you've currently listed for me. But they can do many things that didn't exist when I was in college. All of the different things that students can produce, most of them didn't exist when I was in college. And so it's fun to talk to them about what the possibilities might be. How can you show me that you've learned these things that I think are important and that I hope that you think are important as well? And so the more conversations faculty can have with students about how they can demonstrate their learning, the better the learning experience is for everyone. I think.

Emily Ford (16:39):

Yeah, I would 100% agree. And I think from the student perspective being in college, we talk about how you're preparing for the real world and you are recognized as a semi adult. And like Olivia said, it gives you agency. And I think that that's so important. It's recognizing these students are not children, but even children are capable of making these decisions and knowing how they can best present what they know. And so it gives you this sense of feeling respected, that you are valued. And I also think that you just get a lot, it's like a better community that comes out of it as well. The students are going to be engaged. They know what they're learning, they have a vested interest in what they're learning because it's something that they are a part of. They've created this content. And so I do think it increases. I think that it also creates a better relationship between the staff and the students, which is so important for learning.

Nolan Schultheis (17:45):

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 12

Student-Faculty Partnerships for Co-Constructing Learning

What would you like college students and the people who support them to know about partnership like yours? I know you were just saying that they're great for community and it just creates a better sense of community in general. But what specifically would you like just the broad audience to know?

Emily Ford (18:00):

I think it's a great opportunity to have students work as critical thinkers. Obviously that is a huge goal for any college. Hopefully you want to create these critical thinkers. You want people to be able to form their own opinions and to problem solve, and that's going to be useful in the real world, but also just on a human level. And that student faculty partnerships kind of allow that to come naturally. They are a part of their learning, but they also have to figure out how they want to prove that learning that they're doing, which I think is a really cool aspect of it.

Olivia Choplin (18:33):

And I think student faculty partnerships are great ways to keep content young. When you're teaching something that you've taught many for many, many years, it keeps it fresh for you because students will bring a different eye to it every semester or over the course of a few years. But also, like Emily said, a lot of college is not just teaching students things, but it's teaching students habits of mind. And it's teaching them, we're not just dumping knowledge into them, but we're hopefully teaching them how to learn and how to be lifelong learners. And a lot of what you can get out of student faculty partnerships are some of those habits of mind asking yourself questions about, okay, did I learn this? Am I better at learning this? How could I learn this better? How could I show my learning and teaching students how to ask themselves the right questions that will serve them later when they're in a job or when they're out in the world, there'll be better humans. I think when they partner and collaborate. And we know that the world is so collaborative, it's really important for students to be able to do that.

Jessie Moore (19:39):

And you've already answered this in some ways of some elements of your previous response, but is there anything else that you'd like colleges and their faculty and staff to think about when they plan and implement partnership projects?

Olivia Choplin (19:57):

I think it can be intimidating to some faculty can be intimidating to some faculty to ask students their opinion on the teaching process. I would just encourage colleges to allow room for this type of experimentation to support it, to give faculty members and students opportunities to reflect on the process without being penalized in some kind of evaluation process. If things don't go perfectly the first time around, teaching is not a thing that you get good at and then you're good at forever and nothing changes because every year the students who come into your classroom are different. Faculty will always tell you, I teach the same class at eight o'clock, and nine-thirty, and I teach you the exact same

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 12

Student-Faculty Partnerships for Co-Constructing Learning

way to have the exact same materials. And one of them works great, and the other one works terribly, right? Because we're humans in rooms together, whether they're zoom rooms or real rooms.

(20:50):

And so taking into account those differences and allowing space for folks to experiment and to try and encouraging student faculty partnerships by helping faculty understand that they'll be supported as they attempt to be innovative, pedagogues, facilitating those types of encounters and creating a space where that type of experimentation is encouraged. I think those are things colleges need to think about, and faculty members should just know that student voices will only make you better and you may not implement everything that your students suggest to you. Students may suggest No homework. No homework, madam. And I'm like, well, cognitive science would indicate that probably you should practice these verb conjugations if you want to memorize them and be able to produce them spontaneously in conversation. But that opens a dialogue and education is about dialogue, and the more we talk to each other and exchange ideas, the better we all work, the better the educational environment works.

Emily Ford (21:52):

I think it's interesting. I think it can also be intimidating from the student perspective as well, even though we are, I joked about it earlier, semi adults, I think we still feel like we don't have that expertise or we don't have the degree to kind of follow up and be considered a expert on the matter. But when it comes to our learning, I mean, we understand how we learn the best because it's us. And so I think it's important that if students are getting involved and experimenting, exploring the possibilities of these student faculty partnerships, that they trust themselves a little bit. I think it's important that the students recognize that they do have valuable input and it is really going to make a difference in the course and their own learning. I mentioned it a little bit earlier as well, but I didn't really buy into the course until I got involved and I started to understand the whys and the how. And I think that that's really important because it does give me an opportunity for even deeper learning. And I feel like I benefited from that so much post project even during the project, honestly, I was like, oh, now I get it. This is really cool.

Nolan Schultheis (23:08):

So is there anything else you'd like listeners to know just in general about partnership projects and higher education that you haven't touched on so far?

Emily Ford (23:16):

I think for students, don't be afraid of undergraduate research. I think that that can be intimidating. So the first time I did undergraduate research in college was because I was forced to, and I was not thrilled about it. I was a teaching fellow and it's part of the requirements as a teaching fellow. It kind of got me started on, oh, okay, I know how to approach this. And when Olivia asked me to join her on this project, I was like, this is a lot of work. But I think you don't want to be intimidated by the fact that it's undergraduate research, and it may not be in other cases for student faculty partnerships, but it's such a

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 12

Student-Faculty Partnerships for Co-Constructing Learning

cool learning experience and I think it does go undervalued. So for students especially, don't be afraid to give that a shot and you'll learn something out of it. If you want to write an article, go for the article. I mean, look at us, we're published. That's really cool. So I do want to encourage that because I think a lot of folks are kind of hesitant. It seems really scary from the pre entering that project.

Olivia Choplin (24:15):

I think the other thing is don't be afraid to try something small. You don't have to redesign a whole course with a student consultant like Emily and I did. But you can write your rubric for your assignment and give it to your students for feedback, helping them as you're explaining to them the goals of an assignment, say, all right, these are the goals that I have. This is what I hope to learn from it. Here's the rubric I've drafted. What do you think? You can start small. You don't have to throw everything out and start over. You can incorporate student voice in many different ways as your partners in their learning in your classroom. And if you are really excited about redesigning something with a student partner, then that's great, but if you just want to give students a little bit more agency on how you're doing certain things, then you can take baby steps towards that. And they're always going to be fruitful because students appreciate being asked what they think about how things are going.

Jessie Moore (25:11):

I appreciate that both of your answers highlight that there are entry points that you can then build on. So Emily, you mentioned that you'd done undergraduate research for teaching fellows. There's actually research that suggests that once you've done one undergraduate research project, you're more likely to do another. You are an example of that statistic. Yes. But also to Olivia's point that it doesn't have to be a huge, daunting scale. You can start small and build from there. And I think those of us that do start small get hooked and end up building from there. So I appreciate your explicit acknowledgement of both of those elements of this project.

Nolan Schultheis (25:55):

I actually have a good example of seeing this being implemented already in my mandatory English class. I'm a freshman. I have Professor Ben Murphy, and he asked us about one of our writing assignments, which was a creative writing assignment. So automatically you're kind of like, how would I grade that? So he came to us and asked us what we thought about his rubric and if we wanted to make any changes. And I was like, okay, I really like that he came and asked us this because it's an assignment where it's kind of a flip up of how it could be assessed. And I felt seen, and I respected him even more as a student and even as a person for just allowing himself to step back from that position of being a professor exclusively and ask other people what they felt about it.

Emily Ford (26:45):

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 12

Student-Faculty Partnerships for Co-Constructing Learning

Yeah, it's a very validating feeling to be considered in that process, I think. Especially kind of being validated of like, yeah, you know what you're doing, and I trust you too. It's really cool. I'm glad that he did that. That's awesome.

Jessie Moore (27:00):

And I love that framing that you both offered in terms of it's validating your role and your learning, which is very cool. Olivia and Emily, thank you very much for joining us today. We appreciate you taking time to visit with us about your partnership and offer some insights that our listeners might try in their own partnership.

Emily Ford (27:17):

Thanks for having us. It was really awesome. I appreciate the invite.

Jessie Moore (27:31):

So Nolan, what stood out to you that you think students should know about this partnership example?

Nolan Schultheis (27:37):

I think really what students should consider the most is really the partnership just in general. I had asked about the dynamic between professor and student kind of being switched, and both parties really didn't mind it. And I think that's really important to consider, especially moving forward in higher education, especially the way we look at how we start to change the way we grade things. I know there's little shining's here and there of teachers starting to switch the way they grade. Just stuff in general. I mean, I was asked about a writing project I had recently and how we thought the rubric should be made, and I think these little breakthroughs are a great kind of preview of what's to be expected and to come in the future between students and professors kind of communicating with each other.

Jessie Moore (28:27):

That's a great point. I do think that there's growing interest in these types of partnerships and involving students and decision about decisions about their learning experiences. One of the things that I also appreciated was they both talked about the ways that it kind of opens your eyes up to why faculty do things in other classes too, or to being able to ask questions about why faculty are approaching something a specific way. So some ways gives students a language to reflect on and participate in decision-making in their education, but I think it also adds a little bit of appreciation for the work that faculty put into their teaching as well and the planning that they do for courses.

Nolan Schultheis (29:15):

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 12

Student-Faculty Partnerships for Co-Constructing Learning

Yeah, for sure. I thought like you had mentioned kind of just to hear a professor explain why they had something, the way they had it on the rubric and what they wanted the students to get out of it. I think that would help me a lot if I had that explanation from some of my professors because at certain points on maybe this assignment here, this assignment there, there's a little bit of gray area, but I wouldn't say it's too bad here. I would say I would've much rather preferred that in high school because the high school rubrics, those are a whole different ballpark. Those were always just read it and try and throw your best effort at it and hope that they, they're forgiving in their grading.

Jessie Moore (30:02):

Well, and you do get some of that in college as well. But hopefully we'll see more partnership projects, help open up examples of co-design, coqui co-construction, et cetera. The other reminder, or the other comment that I really appreciated was that this doesn't have to be a huge investment. People can start with a small scale project that is a collaborative inquiry between a faculty and a student or a faculty and several students. So you can start small and then build up from there as you learn what works for you. And I would imagine that that is helpful for students too. It may be intimidating for when a faculty member asks you to partner with them if that's not an experience you've had before. So being able to try it out on a small scale first might be helpful. Once again, I'm Jessie Moore.

Nolan Schultheis (31:02):

And I'm Nolan Schultheis. Thank you for joining us for Making College Worth It from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning.

Jessie Moore (31:09):

To learn more about student faculty partnerships and higher education, see our show notes and other resources@www.centerforengagedlearning.org. Subscribe to our show wherever you listen to podcasts for more strategies on making college worth it.