

Why the Faculty Development Center Is Pursuing a Student-Faculty Partnership Initiative

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Like so many people who grow up to be university professors, I had meaningful mentoring when I was an undergraduate. I attended a research university, where I was fortunate enough to have professors who took the time to get to know me, worked with me on my burgeoning research ideas, checked in with me when I was going through personal challenges, and guided me through the graduate school search process, and beyond. I brought much privilege with me to my elite university (for instance, both of my parents had post-graduate degrees) but, even accounting for my relative advantages, it was those connections with my professors that truly made my university education what it was.

When I hit the academic job market, I wanted to land at a school where mentoring students was an expected and important piece of the job. I had visions of doing research with students, engaging with them both as scholars and as people, and mentoring them as they went through their college careers, and afterwards. As an EMU faculty member, I have been blessed to have the opportunity to do just that, and it has made all the difference; my students have brought much joy and meaning to my life, personally and professionally. More importantly, I know my story is not unique – for so many of our students, and for so many of my faculty colleagues, forging close relationships between students and faculty has been a hallmark of our time at Eastern Michigan University. These relationships are the soul of this institution.

As I write this, in June of 2022, I find myself worried about this aspect of Eastern. As you well know, our world has been torn asunder in the last 2+ years. The pandemic has upended society completely, sweeping along colleges and universities in its wake. As students and faculty were forced to work remotely, it became harder to forge these kinds of meaningful partnerships. Moreover, as we all struggle with a wide variety of issues, include economic upheaval, political polarization, manifestations of racism, the threat of climate change, increased pandemic-related family responsibilities, and so many other things, many of us have simply lacked the bandwidth to pursue anything “extra” in life, including forging these connections.

Our students feel both this disconnect, and the resultant loss. I hear it from them in my classes. I hear it from my student workers at the Faculty Development, who co-authored [this blog post](#) about how students feel invisible on campus. I hear it from our colleagues in student affairs, who talk about how

students struggle to relate to faculty inside and out of their classes. Our faculty also feel this loss, as so many of us here at EMU went into this line of work, at this particular institution, because we **want** and **value** student contact. Ultimately, few of us have found the last two years as professionally fulfilling as we would have wished.

Our university is at a critical crossroads right now. Our students have lived under COVID conditions and precautions for most of their time here – for example, our rising senior class has had just one normal semester here, compared to five semesters of COVID-driven conditions on campus. The connective features we have all come to love about Eastern, such as the Undergraduate Symposium, have been canceled or scaled down in recent years due to COVID. Student-faculty contact has been harder to build and to sustain, such that I have begun to fear that students do not know enough about being a college student, and about our university’s culture, to expect to make these connections during their time here. When these connections are not made, we lose a significant competitive advantage that we have as an institution. And, I believe we lose a piece of the soul that is EMU, at a time when we can ill afford to lose enrollment.

I could worry, and complain, but I’d rather try to address this problem head on. As such, **under my leadership, the Faculty Development Center will devote itself to working with students and faculty to help “hit the reset button” and rebuild the connections between students and faculty.** Few things are more important at this critical juncture for EMU, as we all seek to enhance the quality of the student experience, as well as the faculty experience. Connecting students and faculty will provide more meaningful experiences for our students and faculty, and encourage student learning and success, which are significant components of EMU’s Strategic Plan.

Our immediate aim is to form a learning community, composed of students and faculty, that will work together next year (2022-23) to identify ways to connect students with faculty. I will ask this group to put together a document, to be shared with the campus community, that will offer EMU-specific ideas for forging stronger connections and mutual understanding with students and faculty, and for supporting student learning and success. This will be done in close dialogue with students and faculty, and with input from broad cross-sections of the university community. We will use the findings from the Learning Community to encourage these stronger connections between students and faculty, and to support faculty as they work to support student learning.

The work of this group will be informed by a strong working relationship between the students and faculty in the learning community, with full respect for the expertise each brings to the teaching and learning process. I have spent my career believing that student voices have much to contribute to conversations about teaching and learning, and about engagement and a sense of belonging at the university, and I trust this ethos will inform our process. (Two students at the FDC, Jessi Kwek and Lauren Silvia, have written [this essay](#) about the benefits of these partnerships, which I strongly encourage you to read.) For this work, we have identified a “Lead Student,” and are currently seeking a “Lead Faculty Member” (see the [Call for Applications](#) here). We will solicit other students and faculty for this group later this summer.

In the years to follow, we hope to fund student-faculty research partnerships focusing on effective practices in teaching and learning. Such partnerships will offer examples to other faculty of how they can leverage the expertise of students to become even more effective mentors and instructors, and to help students to develop closer ties to the people who teach them and, by extension, to their university.

We also intend to gather data on our efforts, in an attempt to enable others to learn from the work we are doing. Our ultimate goal is to produce significant scholarship coming from our faculty and students, and to host a national conference (perhaps in 2026) on student-faculty partnerships.

As I noted above, I worry about the student-faculty connections at EMU right now, and am fortunate to be in a position where I can work with others to act to address these concerns. It will take hard work and fortitude to restore these connections between our students and faculty. Such work is of tremendous importance, and will be a major priority for the Faculty Development Center in the years to come. I welcome your support as we work, together, to meet this critical challenge confronting EMU.