

The Importance of the Student Voice

Jessi Kwek and Lauren Silvia

Much like the rest of the world, the way in which we interact with one another has changed over the last 2+ years and, as a result, there is an increasing disconnect between students and faculty here at EMU. To counteract this disconnect, the FDC aims to bring students and faculty together and to rekindle these bonds through our student-faculty partnership initiative. To begin, our student workers Jessi Kwek and Lauren Silvia have written this essay which aims to highlight the ways in which the students, faculty, and community as a whole can benefit from student-faculty partnerships.

No matter our role at EMU – student, teacher, or administrator – we are part of a single campus community. This community has historically prided itself on the rich opportunities we've offered for students, and as a place that is small enough where all your professors will know your name but can simultaneously provide the opportunities of a top research university. Professors and student affairs personnel have typically offered opportunities in which students could grow their interests and share a role in their academic experiences, through student organizations, travel courses, academic teams, and independent research experiences culminating in the Undergraduate Symposium. In each of these areas, student voices have been recognized as vital, and have been given agency to shape the programs in which they take part. These priceless opportunities that EMU has historically offered students have shaped the experiences of alumni for generations.

As a result of the turmoil that the world has undergone in recent years, our community has seen major changes and losses over the past two years – and we, as students, fear that EMU is losing part of what makes it so special. Among these losses has been the student voice and the agency that students once felt on campus. This feeling was present in a conversation between the Faculty Development Center's CONNECT conference keynote speaker, Dr. Mays Imad, and a group of EMU students. Jessi Kwek and Hannah LaFleur, student workers at the FDC, wrote a piece reflecting on this conversation, which you can read [here](#). The overwhelming consensus of the students in the conversation was that they didn't feel heard. This held true for all students, including those taking in-person classes, online classes, and for students who had various levels of involvement on campus. Students felt that it was harder to get to know their professors and they didn't know who to turn to if they were struggling. A large part of this experience is a result of extenuating circumstances from which no single person was unaffected, but students got the clear message that, as other university functions were being returned to fuller capacity, the students were not valued or taken seriously. This led to student frustration which ultimately hurt their learning experience and disconnected students from the university.

In response, our community can benefit from working together to lift each other up and listen to each other's needs and concerns in response to these frustrations. This includes a place for student voices to be heard and listened to, and for their perspectives to be seen and treated as valuable contributions to a broad range of campus issues and initiatives. However, for students to rebuild their connection to campus as a whole, students need to feel seen and heard in the classroom. As students, we argue that in order to rebuild the connections that students feel to the University as a whole, we must begin by increasing and amplifying close student-faculty partnerships in the classroom. The Faculty Development Center's student-faculty partnership initiative seeks to join a growing movement that highlights the importance of the student voice in building strong classroom and campus communities. As students who are part of this initiative, we see the importance of classroom relationships and partnerships in building a stronger student voice on college campuses as a whole. We also believe that the circumstances of the past two years have given the University a unique chance to rebuild these strong partnerships and help our campus community find a new normal. We are driven by both our own experiences as students here at Eastern Michigan University along with a body of research which focuses on how student-faculty partnerships can make students feel more connected to their education, and we wish to convey why this is integral for EMU to take part in.

Research shows that universities as a whole can benefit from legitimizing and listening to the student voice; this positive impact does not just affect students. [Hayley Burke](#), [Sophia Abbot](#), and [Linda Allin](#) each document the importance of legitimizing student expertise in student-faculty partnerships, and how this can positively impact the classroom. Their articles discuss the expertise students have at what it means to be a student in a particular moment of time. They argue that this expertise should not only be trusted but that it can be used to strengthen the classroom as well. Students are able to disclose what works for them in a classroom setting and their perspectives on how they best learn. When students are able to voice their wants, needs, and feelings about their learning environment in this way, faculty will then have the ability to facilitate the most effective learning within the classroom for their students. This gives students a feeling of ownership and connection to their education, and further provides faculty with the opportunity to make their teaching practices more well-rounded. It goes without saying that no student at EMU - or any other university - is an expert in their field. While acknowledging this lack of subject matter knowledge, students are experts in how they learn best; as such, their voices should be given consideration in pedagogical decisions. Because of this, we must realize that a very valuable part



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About the Authors

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Lauren Silvia

Lauren will be in her final semester at Eastern studying Public and Nonprofit Administration with a double minor in Social Work and Management. Throughout her time here at Eastern she has been involved in student government, collegiate DECA, and Greek life on campus. She looks forward to potentially working in higher education after graduation.

of the classroom experience is the give and take of knowledge from students to faculty as well as the other way around. As students, some of the best classes we've taken are those where faculty members facilitate open conversations in which students can share their knowledge. This active listening could be the first step to making students feel more connected to and visible in their classes.

A good example of what these dynamic discussions and active listening looks like is given by Louise Charkoudian, Anna Bitners, Noah Bloch, and Saadia Nawal. Their article documents different ways that students were given the opportunity to provide feedback to their professor on the material of courses they had taken, with the additional opportunity to work with this professor on integrating that feedback. They found that this partnership ultimately gave the professor insight into their students' needs from the student perspective and that students also reported feeling like they had a deeper understanding of the material along with stronger ability to both give feedback and build connections within their other classes as well. Similarly, Alice Lesnick and Alison Cook-Sather explored this non-hierarchical approach to expertise on a campus-wide setting, where they found that student voices can, "provide a practical agenda for change that can help fine tune or, more fundamentally, identify and shape improvement strategies," both in and outside of the classroom. Although this article focuses on community building on campus outside of the classroom, Lesnick and Cook-Sather note that the value in giving students and faculty a chance to get to know each other and to share feedback enriches learning experiences overall. We believe that student and faculty dynamics such as these can easily be translated to a classroom setting where students and faculty alike are able to openly communicate with each other and shape the classroom into an experience that is mutually beneficial.

Valuing the student voice in the classroom has wide-reaching impacts. What faculty value inside of the classroom has the potential to teach skills not only in students' professional fields, but that students can also use to advocate for themselves beyond the classroom and beyond college. Moonhee Cho and Giselle Auger, and Patrick McQuillan, draw attention to the importance of student empowerment on campuses as a way to increase student success and engagement within the university and beyond. Cho and Auger find that making deeper connections to a student's academic program, and how invested students perceive their professors to be, can increase retention and academic success while students are in college. McQuillan argues that when the student experience is empowered in academic settings, their ability to empower



Participants in discussion with CONNECT Conference Keynote Speaker named left to right: Luis Romero, Dr. Mays Imad, Anna Bowling, Sonya Liggins, Jessi Kwek, Cedrick Charles, Eamon Conner, Jeffrey Hoang, Hannah LaFleur

themselves and others in both political and social settings as well is empowered. This snowball effect is vital to influencing students' understanding of "real-world" concepts such as democracy, citizenship, and how they can affect real change in the systems they are a part of outside the classroom.

The empowerment of the student voice and the broad effects that it can have are especially important to consider at an institution like EMU. Compared to other midsize regional universities, EMU educates a disproportionate number of students of color, students from low income backgrounds, and/or first generation college students. Many EMU students come from educational and personal backgrounds in which advocating for themselves was discouraged, or where their self advocacy was less effective because they might not have had the pull or power that students who grew up in more privileged backgrounds may have experienced. Because of this, creating a platform for the student voice at EMU is all the more vital to long term student success and to encouraging personal empowerment at EMU and in our students' communities. EMU has the chance to empower students who may never have had a voice.

When students are given the chance to advocate for themselves in an environment that genuinely listens to their advocacy, we see great improvements in the classroom, but students also carry these lessons with them after graduation to see greater success in advocacy in all aspects of their lives. EMU faculty and administrators should prioritize building a platform for student voices - as shown, this could make a major difference in the academic and professional success of EMU students, and increase their sense of agency greatly. For generations, EMU's community has given underrepresented students the skills that they need to become leaders and agents of change. Now, EMU has a unique opportunity to be an agent of change and a leader in the realm of student empowerment. By taking part in this student-faculty partnership, EMU will solidify the role of the student voice in our classrooms and at our university as a whole.