

## PROMISING PRACTICE

# Student Voice is an Art

Theresa Cullen

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr. Theresa Cullen** is a tenured full professor at Arkansas Tech University and the director of the Center for Faculty LIFE (Learning Innovation and Faculty Engagement) since 2023. She has a master's and PhD in Instructional Systems Technology from Indiana University. She was the co-author and a director of the Arkansas Tech University Online Teaching Academy from 2021-2024, which was a grant-funded project from the Arkansas Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to assist K-12 teachers to learn how to teach online. She is a former department head and has extensive experience in designing and implementing large-scale technology projects. Her approach to working with students has been greatly shaped by her experiences working for TRIO programs as an undergraduate and graduate student.

### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

One of the biggest challenges on a college campus is finding a way to bring student voice to faculty in a way that is not intimidating to the students and creates a safe space for faculty to talk about their practices and how it affects students. This is a challenge that I have faced as the director of Faculty LIFE (Learning Innovation and Faculty Engagement) Center. The goal of our center is to support faculty in all aspects of their jobs, which includes connecting with students and helping to retain them on our campus. In that effort, our center seeks opportunities to bring students and faculty together to understand each other to improve learner experiences and increase retention.

### Why Does Student Voice Matter?

Student voice can be defined as listening to and valuing the views that students express regarding their learning experiences; communicating student views to people who are in a position to influence change; and treating students as equal partners in the evaluation of teaching and learning, thus empowering them to take a more active role in shaping or changing their education. (Seale, 2010, p. 995)

Student voice has been valued in both K-12 and higher education circles for a long time. Mitra

(2008) discussed that empowering student voice can invite students to work collaboratively with teachers and administration to improve the learning environment and teaching practices. Seale (2010) found that when students participated in focus groups to inform curricular designs, faculty held many misconceptions about students and the activity challenged those assumptions. This process allowed designers and faculty to use the student comments to improve the curriculum. Brooman et al. (2015) also found that students were empowered by being asked for their input, which helped them to be better engaged in the educational process. Increased engagement has been shown to be key in helping students to persist and complete their higher education degrees (Sá, 2023). Overall, success in college is greatly enhanced by the relationships that students form with faculty and staff through their college experience. One way to encourage forming these relationships is by having both faculty and students better understand each other (Felten & Lambert, 2020).

### The Inspiration

In 2020, a few days before the pandemic, I visited an interactive museum called Wonderspaces in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Wonderspaces, n.d.). The museum was a collection of interactive and participatory art installations. One of them caught my imagination. The piece was called "The Last Word" by Illegal Art (Illegal Art, 2020). The goal was for people to anonymously share what had not been said and leave notes to others. Participants were encouraged to take a note and leave a note. I took a picture of the art piece and the note I had picked out and thought I would like to use that idea someday (see Figures 1 & 2).

**Figure 1**

*Interacting With the Last Word Installation in 2020*



Note. Photo by Theresa Cullen.

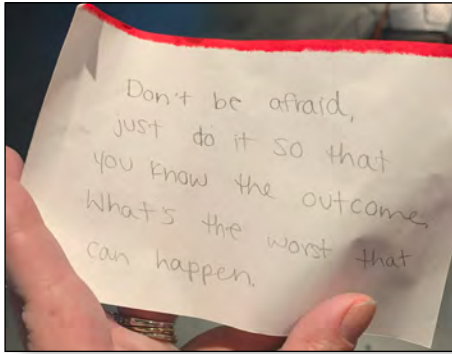
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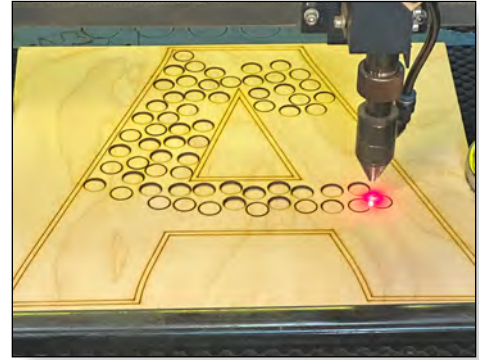
**Figure 2***The Note I Had Drawn From the Last Word*

Note. Photo by Theresa Cullen.

### Creating the Art

Jumping ahead to 2023, I am now the Director of Faculty LIFE and responsible for faculty professional development days. Our most valued sessions are those that involve student panels, but students speaking in front of the entire faculty can be really overwhelming for them. I have also questioned if students are sharing their real opinions in that setting. Since our goal for the 2023–24 school year was to improve retention, this art exhibition came back to my mind. I realized that I could successfully reproduce the idea of a board with holes in it to use for faculty development by allowing students an anonymous way to share their perspectives with faculty.

I have enjoyed using maker-spaces for years, especially laser cutters. Laser cutters allow users to design materials using software tools like Adobe Illustrator or Inkscape, which interact with a laser cutter to produce the designs. Using different colors, the user designs an image that either draws lines of varying thickness or makes a cut using the laser. Each makerspace is set up with its preferred software and usually has staff and tutorials to assist in creating the product. Our university does not have its own makerspace, but many makerspaces are open to the public. I was able to create this project at the makerspace housed at the University of Central Arkansas. To create the boards to hold the notes, I used a piece of birch plywood that was precut to 12x12 and 1/16th inch thick to make each of the signs the same size. After designing the sign, I loaded the file into a laser cutter and waited for the machine to create each letter. I was assisted in the set-up of the laser by the center staff to make efficient use of my supplies (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3***The Laser Cutter Creating the First Prototype*

Note. Photo by Theresa Cullen.

Overall, success  
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It took several attempts to make each of the signs. Some of the issues that needed to be modified included the overlapping holes or holes that were too small to fit a piece of paper. The first complete set did not leave enough space around the edges to attach it to anything for display. Each time a prototype was created, the file was edited to produce the desired effect on the next iteration. Design and iteration are a meaningful part of using a maker-space, which often relies on learning by doing and interacting with staff and other users to perfect a product (Tomko et al., 2018). After two complete prototypes, I was happy with each of the three signs to represent the three letters of our university. Creating the prototypes and final products required about 6 hours and two trips to the makerspace with revision occurring between the two visits.

I then realized I had to design a way to display the boards and make them portable. I worked with an agriculture professor and used three other 12x12 pieces of wood to create backs and wood trim and wood glue to finish out each letter as a box, which would allow the boards to sit on a table and travel easily to different locations. The entire process, from ideation to final product, took about 10–12 hours. The files used to create the boards were saved in case replacement boards were ever needed. Future iterations would include adding hinges to make the letters able to sit on a table upright and painting the boxes in school colors; however, the wood grain was so aesthetically pleasing that they were used unpainted (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**  
*The Finished Boards*



*Note.* Photo by Theresa Cullen.

Next, three questions were formulated and signs created to put each question in front of each letter. Small slips of colored paper were made to correspond with each question.

- What has been the biggest challenge to persisting in school?
- What do you wish faculty knew about students?
- What do faculty do to make you feel like you belong here?

**Method for Collecting Responses**

Our campus is a southern regional campus that serves primarily first-generation students and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The institution has a full-time enrollment of around 6,000 students and has been recognized as a champion for social mobility in the region.

The center utilized our student employee to take the artwork around campus to collect responses. The center was able to take a more accurate sampling of students on campus from different majors, as well as residential and commuter students. Having a student employee gather responses took the intimidation out of the equation, assuring that students were honestly answering the questions.

I obtained IRB approval and added the student employee to the protocol. The student was then able to engage in research and add to their educational experiences, which is a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008). After one week of data collection, it was noted that students were either not answering the question about faculty making them feel like they belong or had answered the prompt with phrases like “They don’t.” I changed the question to “What **could** faculty do to make you feel like you belong?” which yielded more and better responses. Data was collected for a total of 4 weeks—2 weeks at the end of Fall 2023 and 2 weeks in Spring 2024.

**Summary of Responses**

The response rate was low with a total of 57 responses; however, the goal was to foster communication and discussion, not necessarily to have a large response rate. See Table 1 for student responses to the questions posed.

**Table 1**  
*Student Responses*

Question	Responses	Frequency
What has been the biggest challenge to persist in school?	Work, life balance, and time management	8
	Teaching myself or unclear expectations	4
	Health issues (including mental health)	4
What do you wish faculty knew about students?	There is too much work.	5
	I need to move around during class.	4
	Everyone learns in different ways.	4
	Lots going on in life besides school	6
	Classroom comments (e.g., busy work, allow absences)	2
	First generation, need support	1
What could faculty do to make you feel like you belong here?	They care about me.	5
	They wanted the best for me.	3
	They helped me find love for the field.	2
	I just feel like a number.	4

**Using the Results**

After the initial data collection, I took an hour of our faculty professional development day to break up faculty into groups with a list of all student responses. I asked faculty:

- Does anything here surprise you?
- After hearing the student perspective, how could you change your classroom practices to better meet their needs?

Overall, the conversations were spirited, and the faculty had a lot of ideas. As an entire group, the faculty were struck by some of the responses. For example, one student said, “Somedays getting out of bed to go to class is the hardest thing I do.” Another student shared “I regret being a college student due to the number of assignments.” Students wanted faculty input and

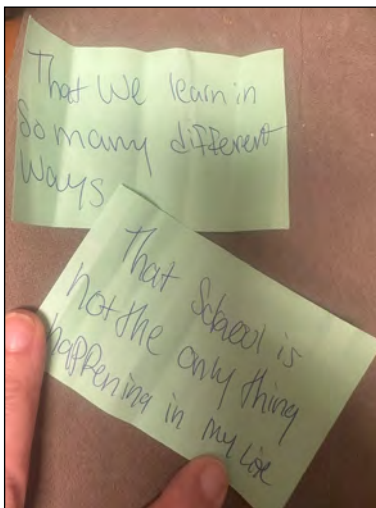


wanted to feel like more than a number; one student even said, “I am first-generation and I need guidance.” Faculty were able to share what they did to work with students in small groups. The groups then shared their results with the entire faculty at the end of the hour.

I was also able to use the activity as an introduction to our afternoon sessions, which included sessions on disability services, mental health services, and financial aid. This activity provided a good bridge between the academic and student affairs parts of our university and was very well received by the faculty. Access to the handwritten responses was shared as well. There is something more personal about seeing a student’s handwriting, and many faculty enjoyed unrolling and reading responses (see Figures 5 and 6). I used an online survey to gain faculty reactions to the activity, which were highly positive.

**Figure 5**

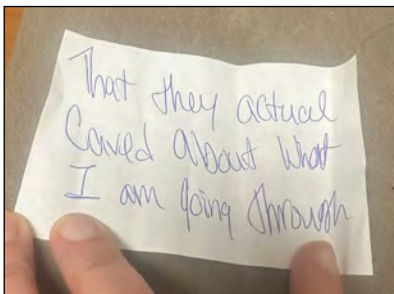
*Comments About What Students Wish Faculty Knew*



Note. Photo by Theresa Cullen.

**Figure 6**

*Comment About Belonging*



Note. Photo by Theresa Cullen.

### Moving Forward

The input boxes are a flexible and valuable tool to obtain and share student voice and have been utilized by others on campus. For example, the boxes have been used for recruiting to offer advice to future students and for experienced faculty to share welcoming messages

and advice for new faculty. The flexibility, novelty and anonymity of the method allows for sharing insights without intimidation. The ability to review responses and reformat them to share provides many opportunities to engage a variety of stakeholders. Although the boxes are stored at Faculty LIFE, other departments are welcome to use them. Faculty LIFE plans to continue to use this method with different groups of students as part of the overall goals to listen to, better understand, and adapt to the needs of the students served.

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