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The Experience of Being a Council
Member and PULSE Fellow:
Interview Results
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Background

The Partnership for Undergraduate Life Sciences Education (PULSE) is a collaborative effort funded by National Science Foundation (NSF), National Institutes of Health (NIH), and Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) to catalyze change in undergraduate Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) education. As part of this effort, 39 Vision and Change Leadership Fellows were selected and charged with inspiring and helping departments undertake the necessary work of transforming their programs, following the blueprints laid out in the *Vision and Change in Undergraduate Biology Education: A Call to Action* report. These Fellows came from diverse institutional backgrounds, with representation from community colleges, liberal arts colleges, comprehensive universities, and research universities. The PULSE initiative began in September 2012. An evaluation of the PULSE program was initiated in June 2013 to assess how the PULSE program is working, to determine whether or not the PULSE program is achieving its intended goals, and to identify the challenges it faces or has faced to assist in the development of similar future programmatic initiatives. Four PULSE Fellows were nominated by their peers at the initial meeting to become a “Council Member”, who would then serve as the communication conduit between the entire groups of Fellows and the PULSE Steering Committee. The Steering Committee consisted of two representatives from each of the three funding agencies: NSF, NIH, and HHMI. The Council had regular conference calls with one another and, monthly conference calls with the Steering Committee. It also assisted KnowInnovation, Inc. in planning Fellows activities.

Methods

One of the evaluation goals was to gain an understanding of how being a member of the Council impacted the four members nominated. To achieve this goal, the evaluation team conducted one-on-one phone interviews with the four Council members. The evaluation team developed an interview guide to address how being a PULSE Council member changed the Fellows, what the impact of being a Council member is on the Fellows’ ability to initiate change, and what the Fellows’ overall thoughts are about being part of the Fellows program.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data were then analyzed for dominant themes using the constant comparative method. To ensure the validity of the results, the transcripts were content analyzed by a member of the team Courtney Owens, a graduate research assistant who had limited contact with the Council members. This report describes the major themes that emerged from the interviews.

Results

A summary of the major themes that emerged from the data is presented below. All major themes are indicated in **bold**, with subthemes *italicized*. Quotes were chosen selectively to illustrate the themes.

Involvement as a Council member

The PULSE Fellows were asked a series of questions designed to document their experience as a Council member. The first question focused on how each individual became involved as a Council member. Council members said they were either **asked to serve** or **volunteered**. The Council members reported they were *selected* from among their peer institution representatives through either means.

Several Council members described the disparities between how each of the institutional groups made their decisions. One recalled the experience as “[The Steering Committee] said, ‘Who wants to do it?’ Myself and somebody else wanted to do it, so the two of us left the room, they discussed and then asked me if I wanted to do it.” Another Council member said, “I put my name forward to be elected. There was a tie at first and so when we did the tie breaker run-off, I was elected.”

Another Council member felt that no one wanted the extra responsibility, so they volunteered in order to avoid the long awkward pause in the room. This individual recalled the experience in the following way:

I think when we started the conversation there was the classic pregnant pause that lasted maybe about two minutes. I'm not sure anybody wanted to do anything. At that point... when I'm on the podium side of a pregnant pause, I'm pretty good at being pretty patient, I'll wait until a student talks. When I'm on the other side I can't stand it and so I said, 'You know... I'll volunteer if nobody else wants to do it.' I think that at that point maybe one or two other people suddenly got a little interested, but as we talked about it, they seemed to lose interest and we didn't take a vote or anything. By acclamation I wound up being that person.

This Council member commented on how difficult this moment was trying to escape the pressures of having extra responsibilities associated with PULSE. Fortunately, someone agreed to volunteer and take charge of the situation to ensure there were no vacancies.

Role of the Council

Council members were asked to describe the role they felt the Council played in communicating with other PULSE Fellows. The two themes that emerged were **facilitating communication** and **directing traffic**. Communication seemed to be the most important aspect of the situation.

The first theme revealed from the Council members was facilitation. This is not a surprising finding considering that this was the role the Steering Committee wanted the Council to play – a conduit between the entire group of Fellows and the Steering Committee. Facilitation between the steering committee and the Fellows was an important role the Council had to engage in, however, the Council also served to facilitate communication between the Fellows themselves. They believed they “managed the disconnect.” One Council member said:

As a Council member, we tried to facilitate communication between working groups and also between the Steering Committee and us and then back to the Fellows. However, some Council members felt that we just direct traffic and try to keep people from killing each other.

One also noted:

What we tried to do is facilitate communication between working groups and also between the Steering Committee and us and then back to the Fellows. We've tried to just provide the kind of overarching support to the Fellows and their work. We have essentially no decision making authority other than administrative decisions, like we're going to have a call on Sunday 'x,' you know, other than that type of thing.

This Council member reported that each member served as an organizer providing two-way communication from one committee to the other. In essence the Council members were more like gatekeepers of knowledge that held a responsibility to simplify information and eliminate problems between the working group and Steering Committee as well as keeping the expectation of the Fellows.

The second theme that emerged was directing traffic. While this was not an original intent for the Council, it appeared it was an essential role in coordinating Fellows efforts. This was described by one of the Council members, who stated, “I think the role that the Council ended up playing was really largely just trying to coordinate and keep people from killing each other and direct traffic in a lot of ways.” Another Council member confirmed this, stating:

Again, a lot of what we did was just kind of directing traffic, especially early on when people there had a lot of conflict and the groups were storming... There was a lot of confusion about what the Fellows were

supposed to be doing and a lot of technological glitches [while] trying to figure out how we communicate as a group of 40 people across the entire United States.

Overall, the Council members were given very little in regards to structure and guidance of the program. Most of the conflict started from the lack of clear instructions and poor communication skills among other Fellows.

Assisting the Fellows moving forward

Council members were also asked to describe how participating as a Council member assisted them in moving the PULSE program forward. When it came to moving the group forward, the two themes that emerged were having **clear communication** and a **strong sense of responsibility**. One member stated, “moving the group forward, I think we did a good job [because of] our ability to communicate with each other and hold each other *accountable* on what was going on within the projects we’ve been involved with.” Another Council member mentioned the importance of bringing people together and being held responsible, claiming:

It was challenging enough as it was and then we have a core group of people who just kept on, you know, bringing people together to talk about where we are and trying to hold people accountable to each other, I think that proved to be very effective.

Two Council members described the role that clear communication played in holding everyone accountable to their responsibilities. In addition, the broader sense of community was established through the efforts of good communication skills.

Council Assistance in Fellows’ Goal Achievement

Two themes emerged while Council members discussed their role in assisting the Fellows to reach their goals. They included assistance in **advocating for funding** and assisting the Fellows group to see the **bigger picture** when developing and implementing the goals and objectives of PULSE. One Council member mentioned, “trying to keep our eyes on the bigger picture and move them into the workshop with a goal in mind on the other side [and] advocating for funding options.” Another stated, “Because I was part of the Council, I had that outlet to help us come together with the bigger picture because I could see it.” Another Council member mentioned:

I think my role was the big picture, because that’s what I do best and was being able to see and articulate how all the pieces could fit together with the change map, with the different things that I tried to bring out there.

In other words, the Council members believed that advocating for more funds created other opportunities for the future which in turn focuses more on the bigger picture, the vision and the mission of PULSE.

Additional Leadership Roles

Council members were asked to reflect upon whether or not they had intentionally stepped into leadership roles in their local institution or at the national level in addition to their role with the Fellows. While reflecting, the Council members discussed having a **new appreciation for leadership** and saw the benefits of *professional* and personal *self-improvement*. One member stated, “Yeah, it’s been really good for me in terms of just developing my own leadership skills and my own interest in serving in a more intentional leadership position was kind of a confidence booster.” Another Council member said, “Through that process I think I started to drift towards thinking about academic leadership in a different way than I had prior to the SACS stuff coming up.” Another Council member mentioned, “Now that I’m here, I see myself looking to more in terms of participation, you know, in national organizations.” Lastly, one of the Council members said, “I saw it as an opportunity to go to the next level for myself.”

On the other hand, some Council members felt the Council had not changed their ability to lead or did not provide them the opportunity to lead. This was reflected in statements such as:

Being a Council member hasn't really changed my ability to lead change at all actually. Being a Council member is a totally different role. Being a member of my working group and continuing to engage and continuing to speak up in favor of things that I wanted to see happen was more of it.

Another commented, "[The Fellows wanted us to [build a] bridge between them and the Steering Committee, but they didn't really, I didn't get the sense that they really actually wanted us to tell them what to do or set an agenda or actually lead." Lastly, one Council member mentioned, "...[It] didn't really feel like a leadership role to me in the way that I feel like a leadership role that I've had in other situations."

Ending the PULSE Fellows Steering Committee

During the interviews, Council members discussed their opinions about ending the formal role of the PULSE Fellows Steering Committee. All of the Council members believed the ending of the formal role the Steering Committee played was expected and timely. One Council member expressed:

It didn't surprise me. I thought that was going to take place. I think, in a way, it gives the Fellows a chance to own this project. I never saw PULSE as a project that was going to continue forever.

Another Council member mentioned,

I thought it was a little abrupt. But no, it doesn't surprise me the way the Steering Committee is but at the same time I think it was probably the best thing to do for the sake of the Fellows.

These thoughts were supported by another Council member, who stated:

So at some point, because conflict of interest issues are going to get in the way of them being really useful for us. I think [Steering Committee members] can serve as members of an advisory board in a different way than they are the Steering Committee. Because the original idea of the Steering Committee is that this was their project.

Another Council member agreed, saying, "I think that split with the Steering Committee, just because of the kind of relationship that everyone perceived, needed to end."

Lastly, one Council member stated:

I thought it was time, and I thought it was essential to having the Fellows be able to move forward in a coherent fashion... It was difficult to be effective. So I thought it was the right time and the right thing to do and I really respected and appreciated their courage for doing that.

Among the Council members many felt the Steering Committee served its purpose to the group. In addition, the effort to end the Steering Committee was perceived to be a positive decision, which was supported, by the Council members.

Continuing the Council

The Council members were also asked to describe how they felt about continuing the Council. All of them felt the PULSE Fellows needed an organizing body, but several felt it was time for new leadership in this role and were ready to pass the role onto someone else. One stated, "We needed to continue some coordinating group. We needed four people or five people who would stay on task to make sure the whole group was moving forward." Another stated:

I think there needs to be some type of organizing body. What exactly, I don't know. If it's an organizing body or governing body because I do not think as Council members we truly made any decisions about

what was going to take place or what the Fellows were going to do. We kind of facilitated what Fellows wanted to do. So, I think some type of organizational group should continue.

As discussed earlier, being a PULSE Fellow and Council member took a lot of time. While the Council members felt the Council should continue, several felt it was time to pass their role on to someone else. One member stated, “I really just want to be a Fellow. I just want to work on the projects that I have passion for and I don’t have time to devote to it like I did last year.” Another Council member said, “I don’t have the energy to maintain that level of engagement overseeing the whole project. Right now, I have other things I need to do at my home institution that I kind of put off last year.”

Given that several Council members were ready to step back, they were asked why they chose to stay on as Council members through March and possibly longer. Overall, the Council members agreed they were doing important work. One stated, “I think this is really important work to do, it needs to be done.” Another Council member mentioned, “I’m willing to stay on. Given all the other stuff that I have to do in my professional life, this is something I can do.” Another Council member chose to stay on “... because honestly it’s hard to say goodbye. You know, and I really like working with them. I liked having that connection once a week that...it really did go beyond just the work of PULSE.”

Fears about Sustainability

On several occasions, Council members discussed their fears about sustainability of the PULSE Fellows activities. One Council member said, “My only concern would be that the [PULSE Fellows] need to broaden its base.” Another Council member concern was with the functioning of PULSE organization and how it has similarities to other existing entities. S/He noted:

My concern is PULSE becoming just another entity that is out there. So, we’re going to add to the mix of places that people can now join. So, in addition to joining professional societies it’s just going to be another one. I don’t think that plays to our benefit, to form another group. So, it’s more of just being split apart rather than becoming a group that comes together.

Another participant described the **energy** level required to **maintain** the PULSE Fellows activities. S/He felt it would become difficult to justify this intense of a commitment to their home institution:

I am concerned about the Fellow’s ambitiousness. One year of energy was easy to justify, but it will be hard for us to maintain that going into the future. So I’m hoping that we are mindful of how to maintain the Fellows and set up structures with our current collection of grants that support the Fellows.

Long term sustainability was the main concern for the Council members. Typical comments surrounding these issues addressed the concerns about future collaborate efforts related to the PULSE Fellows. Most of these concerns focused on how future efforts will maintain and move the PULSE forward.

Barriers

The Council members discussed the major barriers they tackled during their time as a Council member broadly. Broad barriers they felt Fellows faced included **logistics** and managing different *personalities*, *leadership styles*, and *communication practices*. They also felt it was difficult to balance the needs of being a Fellow with their other professional responsibilities. Regarding the challenge of communication, one Council member stated:

I think the communication was hard. Communication is a big one. Some people just are not good with communicating via email or other electronic communications, and time. These are all really busy people. If you’re running a department or you are a dean, you know, there are just so many hours in the day and there are these things that sometimes come up that even though you said you were going to be on the call, you just can’t. I think that’s a big thing. I think also 40 people in leadership, whether they be chairs or deans, everyone has good ideas, but at some point you kind of have to be willing to be a foot soldier and not always be in charge and realize that, you know, these are all people that are in charge. So someone

has to sort of say, 'Okay' I'm going to follow through on this idea and work on it, rather than be sort of that top down person and tell everyone what to do, if that make any sense.

Council members were faced with tremendous struggles while they participated as PULSE Fellows. Several felt problems arose from the lack of effective communication from one person to another. This issue was considered to have the most impact on their experiences as Council members.

Another Council member described the challenge of diverse personalities as follows:

If there were barriers at all it would be, again, the individual personalities. The fact that you have 40 leaders with varying degrees of self-confidence serving as a change agent or a leader. I mean we saw that people resisting to step up in the sense because they felt small or [PULSE Fellows] don't know why they were chosen for this or that. So what I found challenging just from my personal experience was a barrier to effectively function as a group of 40 Fellows, and with the few really strong personalities that just didn't quite know how to mix with everybody else.

Another Council member goes on to clarify how some personalities developed into an issue. The response mentioned:

Barriers were just the fact that certain personalities were so strong and they struggled and they still struggle to get past this John Wayne faculty mentality, that I'm a faculty member and I do everything myself and if I'm going to be a leader then I have to do it. Probably the [Council members] don't even think about it in terms of being a leader they just think their world is an isolated world and if it's going to be done, and they got to do it themselves.

According to one Council member different personalities effected the way Fellows interacted with one another. Difficulties continued to exist keeping the group from working with each other.

Another Council member responded offering this insight:

I think this has been, you know, sociologically, a completely dysfunctional group. A lot of bitterness, I think, has emerged in various people working in this group who tried very hard to form a cohesive group and then you know could not manage the various egos that wanted to do their own thing.

Unfortunately, Council members felt disappointed about the level of negativity amongst some of the group members. Certain egos transformed a positive group into a negative nonfunctioning one. As a result it made it difficult to accomplish the goals of the PULSE Fellows.

However, one Council member stated:

Well, you know, logistically, it's really hard to have an effective, functional four person conference call or even 8 people can do that and still get a lot done if you have a good agenda. But 40 people on a conference call are ridiculous.

Council members also discussed the challenges of working with the **Steering Committee**. For example, one fellow mentioned:

Well, of course the fact that we had no idea what we were supposed to be doing. I mean the Steering Committee, in a lot of ways, was a barrier because they didn't have the context and it wasn't given very well. I mean I would be the last person on earth to say that you have to know what you want in order to launch something, because I'm always building the airplane while it's flying. But the fact that they implied that they knew what they wanted, but then didn't know what they wanted. It was just the way that it was set up which made it challenging and I would say it was a barrier just to function at first.

Summary of their Experience

The Council members were asked to summarize their experiences. All Council members felt their experience allowed them to become good friends with excellent colleagues. One fellow stated, “I want to stay engaged and this is something I can do that I kind of see as fits in with the picture of my life as right now the interim dean of a college.”

Another Council member felt that their experience was great for professional growth. Their observation was formalized by their experience in the following statement:

I liked having that connection once a week. It really did go beyond just the work of PULSE. It was a team that was functioning, and so I didn't want to be the first one to rotate off. But even last night after the phone call, we had the emails that went around with the four of us that was like how are we going to get to continue to work together.

The Council members formed long lasting relationships. As a result, members of the Council valued and respected what each of the colleagues contributed.

In addition to being a Council member, they enjoyed being a PULSE Fellow. Council members celebrated who they had become during the process. This was reflected in the following quote from one Council member:

I have more self-awareness and I'm kind of aware what my strengths are. I know there are plenty of other places where I'm a disastrous mess, I'm under no illusions. It's just what I actually have to offer, I kind of felt like this is something that it doesn't surprise me that PULSE would want that or that could be helpful.

Individuals that represented the Council members gained confidence in their ability to conquer other personal and professional career aspirations.

After participating as a PULSE Fellow many Council members consider their involvement to be a rewarding professional experience. One Council member felt that they believed they were a key player on a national team. They stated:

You know, I've never been really a national player. I've never been involved in anything national and so in terms of having people listen to me or in terms of having people ask me to participate or be involved, the participating as a Fellow is absolutely, fundamentally essential to that.

Many Council members felt out of touch with national initiatives in biology education. After their experience, the PULSE Fellows felt more able to converse with like-minded individuals on the national level.

One Council member acknowledged the PULSE project helped them reveal hidden professional talents, aspirations for continuing work on national organizations, and numerous new resources that were not previously brought to their attention. Some members reflected on their past experiences and mentioned:

I learned that some of my personal attributes that work really well actually are suited to both. We are suited to both jobs in ways that I had not appreciated before. But now that I'm here, I see myself looking into that more in terms of participation, you know, in national organizations.