

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING THE EXPERIENCE OF LEADING

PEER LEADER AND RHODES SCHOLAR

LEO GAFNEY

Rick Malins, a senior at Boston University, was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship and will study for a doctoral degree in neuroscience at Oxford University. He was a workshop leader for two different courses at Boston University. The following is based on a phone interview with him, conducted by Leo Gafney in January 2004.

Leo Gafney: What is the process for the Rhodes Scholarship?

Rick Malins: It's a three-tiered structure. First you apply for your university's nomination. That involves a written application and an interview. Then there is a state-level procedure that is very similar. The state level then sends people for regional interviews. There are four selected from each region, with a total of 32 from the country.

LG: I know you were a peer leader in Mort Hoffman's general chemistry honors course. Could you tell me about that experience?

LG: Yes, when I took the course we did not have workshops. Then at the end of the year Dr. Hoffman told us about the [workshop] program. We submitted applications and were interviewed. When the program started we met twice weekly with Professor Hoffman, at 8:00 AM, which is really early for college students, but we got there. On Tuesdays we had a discussion and developed different strategies for running the group; then on Thursdays we actually went through the workshops ourselves, and Professor Hoffman would act as the peer leader.

LG: How many students were involved?

RM: There were about ten leaders, and about six students in each group.

LG: How would you compare the workshops with other college experiences?

RM: I thought it was a great experience. When you have to explain the material, you get a grasp of the concepts that you never get just taking the course.

LG: Were the materials similar to textbook problems?

RM: They were totally different from what you find in a textbook. Professor Hoffman and a colleague wrote them so that they were very demanding and probably required input from everyone in the group in order to be done. No one could do them alone.

LG: Did the students work as a group of six or in smaller groups, of twos and threes?

RM: They worked as a whole group, and we acted as facilitators, not telling them the answers but helping them to work out the problems as members of the group. We knew what the goal was.

LG: Have you had courses with recitations? If so, how did they differ from workshops?

RM: One big difference is that workshops were two hours, rather than one hour. So it was a greater time commitment and required people to focus more.

LG: Did students complain about the time?

RM: They actually didn't. I was a leader twice for general chemistry and each time I saw members of the workshop groups become friends, and by the end of the semester you would see them working together. And I know that now, several years later, those relationships still exist.

LG: As you look back on your education at BU, leading to the Rhodes scholarship, how does the workshop experience fit in?

RM: It really helped solidify my knowledge of chemistry. I did this twice. As a sophomore, I was a leader for general chemistry. Then this past semester I was a leader for physical chemistry with Professor Dan Dill. It has really helped me learn beyond what you can get from a course. There were three or four of us who were leaders both times. It's a different dynamic in the more advanced course, because by this point the students were people I had been in class with. This is because there is no set sequence of courses. So people I had class with were in my workshop section, and this made things friendlier. But the application of the workshop concept was different. A lot of times we had to do more as leaders because people were not as familiar with the concepts, and they were significantly harder problems.

LG: Were the materials and process similar to that for general chemistry?

RM: Professor Dill created the materials to accomplish what he wanted. We met once a week to go through them. Sometimes we were more involved in the creative process because we would point out whether or not a problem was really useful, or took too long. So Professor Dill took into account our experiences on Monday night and edited the workshops.

LG: Do you think the workshops are at BU to stay?

RM: I had a really good experience. It works very well with the honors and advanced classes. I'm not sure how well it would work across the whole general chemistry course, with 600 students. But I think it's a great model. I think students come through with a better understanding of the material. They get closer to those in the group, and there is a valuable interaction between the student and the peer leader.

LG: What are your career plans?

RM: I'm not sure. I plan to earn my Ph.D. in neuroscience at Oxford, possibly teach and possibly go to medical school.

LG: Thanks and good luck.

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