

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION

PLTL CONNECTIONS AND RETENTION AT MIAMI DADE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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While doing some research for a marketing piece I was putting together, I came across the following data on the college for which I work:

According to the National Center for Education, Miami Dade Community College is now the largest college in the country. Last year (2002) we exceeded The University of Texas at Austin by more than 1,100 students. We had been the largest community college in the U.S.; now we are the largest college. Last year 150,000 individual students took credit and noncredit classes at the College. Since the beginning in 1960, the College has enrolled over a million students. Miami Dade College awards more Associate degrees than any other college or university in the country, including the most degrees to minorities; the most degrees to Nursing and Liberal Arts and Science students; and we graduate the 3rd largest number of students with health related degrees. We host the largest number of international students of any college or university in the country. It should be noted that we are not just in the business of cranking out degrees and diplomas because the research tells us that our students do as well as, or better, than the native students of the universities or colleges to which they transfer.

That all sounds very nice, impressive, and it is. However, there is another bit of data that is not too often shared. And that is only 20% of the students who originally enroll with the intention of earning an AA or an AS degree graduate within five years. The national average is about 20-22% so statistically speaking, we are not atypical. Also, if you look at the national data, most of the freshmen students who do not return for their sophomore year are academically qualified to do so. What's keeping them from coming back? One major factor is a lack of connections. I am talking about connections to their fellow students, to their professors, to a career goal to name but a few possibilities. You see, most of these students we lose at the very beginning of their college careers do not complete programs because of feelings of isolation. Many colleges and universities make a considerable effort toward recruiting new students but let me tell you something: If we can take that 20% retention and make it 25%, we'd have more students than we've ever wanted. Our classrooms would be overflowing. In order to raise the success and retention rates without inflating grades we must effectively address that connectedness issue.

Several years ago when two of our chemistry teachers came back from a PLTL conference and asked for money [to get involved in PLTL], I allocated \$3,000 from my division budget to get them started. Almost all of this money was used to hire and train peer leaders. The next year, they asked me for twice the amount and I was willing to do it because they showed me data that the PLTL students in

Organic Chemistry and General Chemistry were getting higher grades and the retention rate was significantly higher. These differences in success and retention caused me to take a closer look at the rates across the disciplines.

For social sciences the combined success rate was 89% with a 7% withdrawal rate. The success rate for biology was 62%; chemistry 63%; math 69%. But the withdrawal rate for biology is 16%; chemistry 14%; math 17%, compared to 7% in the social sciences. Are our social science teachers better? Are they getting the better prepared and brighter students? I don't think so.

About four years ago I got assigned the task of putting together a grant proposal that was going to the Department of Education. The target audience in this proposal were students in various mathematics, chemistry, biology and engineering courses that traditionally had lower success and higher withdrawal rates. The primary interventions were smaller classes using a learning community pedagogy, a major technology component including real time on-line activities and peer tutors. We were awarded the funds (\$1.7 million) to begin the project in the Fall 2001 term.

For the last three years we have moved the PLTL model from chemistry to biology, to math: General Biology 1 and General Biology 2, Calculus I, Calculus 2. And this year we moved it to Engineering. The results have been phenomenal. The success rates for chemistry went from 63% to 80%; for biology 62% to 87%; for math 69% to 81%. This project has been so successful that the highest levels of management have started to pay close attention to the results we have been getting. In fact, plans are now being discussed that will institutionalize the program at some level so that funding may continue once the grant has expired. Often times programs such as the one I described are not considered for institutionalization because of the expense. Smaller classes are more expensive. Peer leaders can be costly. Training faculty will cost money. However, when one compares the initial costs with the gains of raising retention and increasing the number of graduates, it is indeed a small price to pay.

*Alan Berkey
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Discussion following Dean Berkey's presentation (Annual PLTL Conference 2003)

Question regarding retention and recruitment:

Answer: "If it is our intent to go out and recruit students, it is immoral and unethical to get them there and not provide them with the resources they need to succeed. And that is a whole different argument than the dollars and cents; not that the dollars and cents are not important." *Alan Berkey*

Comment: "The pitch that I gave to my administrator is the development of leadership skills and critical thinking skills of the leaders. So I have very easily gained support from my administrator." *Susan Barrows, Penn State, Schuylkill*

Question: "My department chair was thinking about making all chemistry majors serve as leaders. Has anybody ever had an experience with that?" *Lucille Garmon, State University of West Georgia*

Answer: “You probably are not going to be successful with that. Have a couple of different ways that students can contribute - choose some for peer leaders. That way you don’t leave others out.” *Pratibha Varma-Nelson, Northeastern Illinois University*

Answer: “The leaders have to be self-sold on it.” *David Malik, Indiana University/Purdue University at Indianapolis*

Question: “Are students resistant to the idea of helping their peers? Because in my institution there’s a competitive attitude.” *Tracy Morkin, Emory University*

Answer: “The students in my class had that competitive attitude, but it disappears as they move along in the class...It’s important for them to see their progress with regard to PLTL. If they don’t see that they are progressing as a result of the PLTL model, your program is dead.” *Jack Kampmeier, University of Rochester*

Answer: “I would say that what premed students are competitive about [is] becoming a peer leader. Because it helps them in applying to medical school in terms of experience and recommendations from the teachers who get to know them and can write better recommendations for them than any teacher that they have taken classes with through Organic Chemistry.” *David Malik*

Comment: “Another thing is that my students need to know that it helps everybody, the strong and weak students; the strong students learn probably even more.” *Maria Tamargo, Dean of Science, The City College of New York*

Comment: “I’ve heard from the interviewer in the Medical School that they wanted to know, ‘What is this thing that we’re doing that was causing so much enthusiasm among our students?’ So it helps in the interview process.” *Pratibha Varma-Nelson*

Comment: “From the perspective of the community college, [the students] first want to know what this will do for them. But it’s key to have good training for the team leaders. The students don’t know the answer to the problem and so they make the students work through a problem and develop that critical-thinking skill.” *Nancy Kegelman, Interim Dean-Academic Affairs, Brookdale Community College (NJ)*

Comment: “To change the culture on your campus, turn the students loose. The students’ ability to convince other people about this model exceeds ours by orders of magnitude. They have the credibility that we don’t have, even with our colleagues.” *Jack Kampmeier*

Comment: “Also, the way you can convince people is that PLTL students are candidates for undergraduate research. Faculty like that.” *David Malik*

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