

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION

FINDING ALLIES ON CAMPUS...LOCATING THE ELUSIVE LEARNING SPECIALIST

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How can faculty find “learning specialists” on their campus to help them with the training of leaders, and possibly the dissemination of the Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) Model? The best approach to this topic is to relay how I was found. A chemistry faculty member who had participated in a summer Chautauqua* course on PLTL approached me, the Assistant Dean of Students and Director of the Learning Assistance Center. He scheduled an appointment and we met in my office. During that meeting he outlined the model and asked if my office could help in any way. In retrospect, that was a very smart approach. I was first struck by the fact that this faculty member was initiating contact with my office. Typically it is the other way around. Secondly, he didn’t tell me what he wanted me to do. Instead, he gave me an overview of the program and asked me if I thought it complemented the mission and goals of my office, and if we could support his effort in any way. He was diplomatic and charming in his presentation. I was baited and hooked! Since that initial meeting we have worked together for over four years. I helped him raise money in support of the program and my office adapted and teaches a section of its tutor-training course to train peer leaders. We have presented together at national conferences and meetings; we are the coauthors of a chapter** on PLTL, and we co-facilitated a Chautauqua short course on PLTL. I can honestly say we have a true partnership.

My story sounds easy enough to replicate, but many faculty have indicated that they are unaware of comparable services on their campuses. How do you find the elusive learning specialists on your campus? First, the title, “learning specialist,” is a generic term. You will probably not find a person with that title on your campus. Because many of us wear so many different hats and we come in many different forms on college campuses, the PLTL leadership created a term to encompass us all. One sure place to find a learning specialist is in your learning assistance center. It, too, comes under a variety of titles, i.e., academic support center, academic enhancement center, teaching and learning center, to name a few. If you don’t have a center, find the office or unit that provides tutoring services of some kind. Most campus tutoring programs provide some type of training for their staff. This is a readymade resource for PLTL training.

If you don’t have this type of academic support program, another resource for training assistance could come from your residence life program. Residence life has a long history of hiring and training students to serve in various capacities. This is a rich source to tap for cross training, especially in some of the “soft skills,” i.e., communication, working in groups, diversity, campus resources, etc. Another resource that can support leader training is your campus leadership programs. This is a growing area of interest in co-curricular programming. Some schools have established leadership programs and centers. Again, student training is central to these programs. The key here is identifying

sources on your campuses that hire large numbers of students, i.e., peer educators, peer advisors, etc. Inevitably, training is a part of their hiring practice. You may want to start by looking at your campus web pages. I found this to be a useful exercise.

Once you have identified some possible resources, the challenge will be in persuading that unit to support your effort. In many instances, it will simply be a matter of asking for help. Many of these resources fall under the category of student affairs. Most divisions of student affairs welcome opportunities to form partnerships with faculty. On my own campus, the Vice President of Student Affairs places a premium on collaboration efforts. Her goal is to create a seamless web between academic and student affairs. The PLTL model complements this goal in many ways. But I am not naïve enough to assume that this is the case on every campus. There are political implications depending on the climate and culture of your campus. The approach described above that was taken with me worked like a charm. I suggest you do a little homework on your own campus to gauge who and what your resources are, to understand what they do and how they work, and to ask for their help.

There is a saying that if you want something done right, you better do it yourself. I think we have all experienced this at some time. Finding allies for implementation and on-going support for PLTL may be challenging. And it may feel easier if you go it alone, but the rewards of cross-campus collaboration far outweigh the effort. Collaborating with learning specialists on your campus models the philosophy of the Workshop Project. Workshop is a team effort and the learning specialist is an essential component of the team.

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Notes

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** Sarquis, J., Dixon, L.J., Gosser, D.K., Kampmeier, J.A., Roth, V., Strozak, V.S., Varma-Nelson, P. (2001). Chapter 26: The Workshop Project: Peer-Led Team Learning in Chemistry. In Miller, J.E., Groccia, J.E., Miller, M.S. (Eds.). *Student-Assisted Teaching: A Guide to Faculty-Student Teamwork*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Co.

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