

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION

STEM DISCIPLINES AND BEYOND! BUILDING A NEW CAMPUS PROGRAM AT MIAMI DADE COLLEGE

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Amid a global financial crisis and a time when educational funding in the U.S. has endured severe reductions, the outlook for new and emerging educational programs may seem a bit daunting to stakeholders at institutions of higher education. Consequently, leaders of such programs must be both proactive and innovative in their approach to ensuring the sustainability of newly developed programs. This task, though it may seem simple, is indeed one of the most crucial aspects of any new educational program's probability for survival. For an up-and-coming Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) program, the challenges may prove harsher in comparison to previously established programs; however, with effective management, both desirable outcomes and program sustainability are feasibly attainable.

The PLTL program at Miami Dade College (MDC) – North Campus in Miami, Florida, is an emerging program aimed at providing enhanced educational support to a largely diverse student population. MDC-North's PLTL program is an integral component of the U.S. Department of Education's Title V Grant, Project *PUENTES* – an Environmental Science articulation program that matriculates Associate of Arts Degree students from MDC-North into the Bachelor of Science program at the University of Puerto Rico-Rio Piedras. As with any new or emerging program, several challenges arise during the planning and implementation phases. MDC-North has targeted the top seven challenges associated with building a new campus program and has developed several solutions for combating such challenges that would otherwise prove detrimental to a new program's level of success.

Challenge #1 – Multicultural Populations

Miami Dade College's total student population across its eight campuses is quite diverse and reflective of the surrounding residential area. During the 2007-2008 academic year, MDC's total student population was 161,668 (Figure 1). Of the total student population, 68% of the students were Hispanic, 19% were Black-Non Hispanic, 9% were White-Non Hispanic, and 4% of students comprised other ethnicities (Figure 1).

The variances in ethnicities and cultural backgrounds play a pivotal role in determining the most succinct approach to constructing a PLTL program that is inclusive of pedagogical practices that adequately serve multicultural students. In some cases, language barriers may become existent between Peer Leaders and Workshop

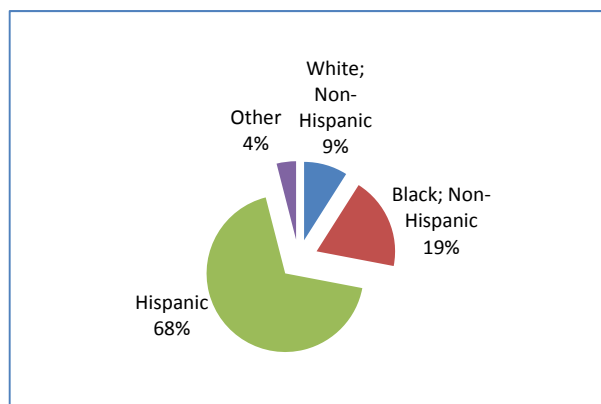


Figure 1: MDC's Student Ethnicity Percentages for the 2007-2008 Academic Year. Total student population for 2007-2008 was 161,668.

students. In this case, careful consideration is emphasized in developing strong collaborations with related departments within the College that provide services to such students. Additionally, Peer Leaders receive sufficient training on working with students of multicultural backgrounds.

Challenge #2 – Workshop Structure

Developing a comprehensive Workshop structure is a critical component of building a new campus program. Both the number and type of Workshops offered influences how effective a PLTL program will be at reaching target student populations. MDC-North's Workshop structure includes courses in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), particularly general chemistry, mathematics, and biological sciences. Workshops are in cohort format and are facilitated by six Peer Leaders who conduct sessions for each cohort twice per week for one hour per session. A maximum of eight students is enrolled in each workshop. Within the Workshop structure, Peer Leaders also receive additional time to meet with their respective faculty advisors and program coordinators along with additional time for developing Workshop materials.

In this model, Workshops are voluntary for students and include strict contractual obligations for attendance. Students who enroll in Workshops are provided incentives for regular attendance such as supplies, graphing calculators, and other educational related items. This PLTL structure serves 144 students and operates 18 sessions among the six Peer Leaders.

Challenge #3 – Finding and Retaining Peer Leaders, Students, and Faculty

Finding and retaining highly qualified Peer Leaders is fundamental for developing a solid PLTL model. Peer Leaders concentrate most of their time on working with students and should be carefully selected, as their influence will determine the effectiveness of Workshop sessions. Peer Leaders at MDC-North are recruited via several mechanisms. The program relies heavily on faculty recommendations of potential Peer Leaders. Faculty members who have strong interactions with their students can likely provide solid analysis of the skills and aptitude of prospective Peer Leaders. In addition to faculty recommendations, Peer Leaders at MDC-North are also recruited via invitational fliers, Web briefings, and informative sessions. A competitive application process is conducted that includes emphasis on academic performance and leadership aptitude. Peer Leaders at MDC-North are official College employees and are compensated at an hourly rate for ten hours per week. Opportunities for service learning credits are also available to students who participate in the PLTL program.

Students are enrolled in Workshops on a voluntary basis at MDC-North. Available Workshops are advertised in classrooms and via information sessions held at the start of each academic term. Maximum enrollment is achieved on a first-come, first-served basis. In an effort to achieve optimum retention of students, rewards are given to students who achieve perfect attendance during a given term. Additionally, students are rewarded with a supply package during their first Workshop session. Careful monitoring of student attendance by Peer Leaders and active intervention for students with chronic attendance issues is paramount for achieving the goals of the PLTL program.

At MDC-North, faculty members who participate in the PLTL program serve in the capacity of an advisor to Peer Leaders. Each Peer Leader is assigned a faculty advisor for the respective course. Both the Peer Leader and faculty advisor meet weekly to discuss workshop materials, course content, and general issues and topics. To retain faculty in this role that is above and beyond their regular workload, the Title V - Project *PUENTES* grant awards faculty advisors monetary stipends each term and also provides additional support with the allocation of supplies necessary for carrying out the respective Workshop sessions.

Challenge #4 – Physical Space

Ascertaining physical space to operate a PLTL program is necessary for conducting daily Workshops. In addition to general operations, maintaining physical space provides a sense of permanence for the PLTL program and provides the program with an identity that fits in with the scope of operations at the institution. This identity can prove advantageous for a new campus program that is working toward sustainability at its institution. At MDC-North, PLTL Workshops are conducted in a brand new, state of the art science complex that is equipped with two PLTL labs. The PLTL labs include ten computer workstations, electronic whiteboards, and ample space for student interaction.

Challenge #5 – Money, Money, Money

Although some of the components of a viable PLTL program can be achieved without funding, the need for adequate financial support remains necessary, particularly for personnel related costs and the acquisition of supplies and materials required for Workshops. At MDC-North, the PLTL program is currently grant funded. However, the need for financial sustainability beyond a grant award is a fundamental aspect of a new program's chances for survival. In this case, continuous search for new grant opportunities proves valuable and can provide much needed financial support for a new program.

At MDC-North, cross-departmental collaboration may provide additional funding sources. Several departments use a proportion of their budget to purchase services of course tutors. If the new PLTL program is successfully institutionalized, other departments may be enticed to use the model, thus providing more opportunities for both Workshop development and financial support. Collaboration among departments at any institution is a surefire practice for increasing educational opportunities for students.

Challenge #6 – “Fitting In” and Establishing Allies

Like the United States government, any higher education institution can benefit from creating allies. No different can be said of a new PLTL program. In PLTL, potential allies can come in the form of other departments, grant programs, administration, as well as other institutions. A new campus PLTL program may be posed with difficulty when attempting to blend in with other thriving campus programs; however, with sufficient institutional support, the process can be painless. At MDC-North, a recent meeting with the Honors College revealed an unexpected opportunity for Honors College students to receive monetary stipends for participating in the PLTL program via a related grant program. This new collaboration not only provides additional support for the PLTL program but also establishes an ally with a highly recognized honors program and further proves the importance of working within the institution to develop new opportunities for students in the PLTL program.

Challenge #7 – Marketing and Branding the PLTL Program

One of the most effective strategies for building a new campus PLTL program is to create both a name and niche for the program that will stand solid over time. The best way to achieve this is through marketing and branding. In a business sense, the PLTL program can be treated as a product with endless possibilities for students, and like almost any product on the market today, no gain can be achieved without total buy-in from stakeholders. To that end, the need for communicating the benefits of this great product is essential for receiving adequate institutional support.

Several mechanisms exist for marketing PLTL program accomplishments, one of which includes publications. At MDC-North, the PLTL model includes the publication of a semester newsletter that highlights the accomplishments of the PLTL program. College administrators, faculty, students, staff, and

selected community organizations will receive the newsletter, which is also made available online via the PLTL Web site – another great tool for marketing the PLTL program. An interactive Web site provides members of the PLTL community the opportunity to learn more about the program, download Workshop materials, and gain access to urgent news and information. At MDC-North, the accomplishments of the PLTL program are also communicated through informative presentations to various audiences, such as academic administrators, board members, community officials, and campus student support departments. This marketing strategy keeps stakeholders informed and interested in the outcomes of the campus PLTL program, particularly positive data and results that contribute to the overall success of the institution. Lastly, marketing via apparel, such as branded shirts for Peer Leaders and disseminating informative program brochures present MDC-North's PLTL program with added tools for marketing and branding a dynamic product.

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