

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING SUSTAINABILITY

THE ROLE OF THE PLTL CHEMISTRY WORKSHOP COORDINATOR

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Part of the academic support system in the Science Division of The City College of New York (CCNY) is the Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) program. The PLTL model was created to help students and to make learning the sciences enjoyable. From the students to Peer Leaders and faculty, everyone benefits from this model. It is a program that is student-centered. In fact, the reason why I am writing this article is to lay out how the PLTL program is for the students and is run by the students at CCNY. Here is a quick glance at the leadership hierarchy of the PLTL program (see Figure 1, next page).

The PLTL model at CCNY is currently institutionalized in General Chemistry. At the base of the chart are the chemistry students (over 800 per semester). Every semester 60 to 65 Peer Leaders are hired to conduct workshops in General Chemistry I and II, and about a third are first-time Peer Leaders. A “faculty liaison” (at some campuses this position is called “superleader”) supervises a group of 10 to 12 Peer Leaders, and is the intermediary between the faculty member and those Peer Leaders. Such a position is assumed by an experienced leader who has been selected to undertake more of an administrative role. This involves such tasks as collecting student grades, assessing their Peer Leaders’ performance and attendance, and guiding workshop preparatory meetings along with the faculty teaching the course. At the top of the student leadership hierarchy is the PLTL Program/Chemistry & Tutoring Coordinator, a post that I occupied for over a year. I was an upper junior heading into my senior year when I was promoted. Needless to say, I had an excellent time working with and for all the PLTL participants.

As the Coordinator, my responsibilities were divided into three areas. First, for a typical semester, I had to put together teams of first-time and experienced Peer Leaders assigned to each of six professors teaching General Chemistry (I also coordinated the hiring and scheduling of Chemistry tutors). Part of the routine involved contacting students who have done well in the course, preparing application forms, scheduling interview sessions that the Learning Specialist, A.E. Dreyfuss, and I conducted, sometimes with the help of experienced leaders. The interviews have three components: (1) information is provided regarding responsibilities and time commitment as a Peer Leader and questions regarding major and expected course load for the upcoming semester; (2) discussion of their experience in workshop and what techniques their leader used to help the group learn; (3) each applicant is given a “scenario” of something that might arise in workshop, and asked how the situation should be handled; the other applicants are asked to discuss their ideas as well. As the Coordinator, I send out the acceptance or (very rarely) rejection letters, and maintain constant contact with the semester’s group of Peer Leaders and Liaisons.

Those interviews were also used as an indirect feedback tool for the PLTL program since almost all of the applicants participated in workshops as students. The training and assessment of the new Peer Leaders always

started with an entire day of Orientation which is partly led by the Liaisons, and continued through the semester with a one-credit course, listed in the Department of Secondary Education.

Second, I was in charge of room scheduling and planning for all the workshops. Maintaining decent workshop size and sharing appropriately the allocated space – where two workshop groups have to share a room - are key elements in creating a healthy learning environment. I distributed to each leader his/her roster with all the important instructions included before the beginning of the semester. It was crucial to ensure that each workshop was taken care of and each team of peer leaders, faculty liaison, and professor was working in concert from the “get-go.” Then, each week, I monitored the “Prep” meetings where faculty, Liaison, and Peer Leaders meet to review content for the coming week’s workshop. Our goal was always to contribute to the enhancement of the learning experience of the Chemistry Workshop students and we strove to do this every day.

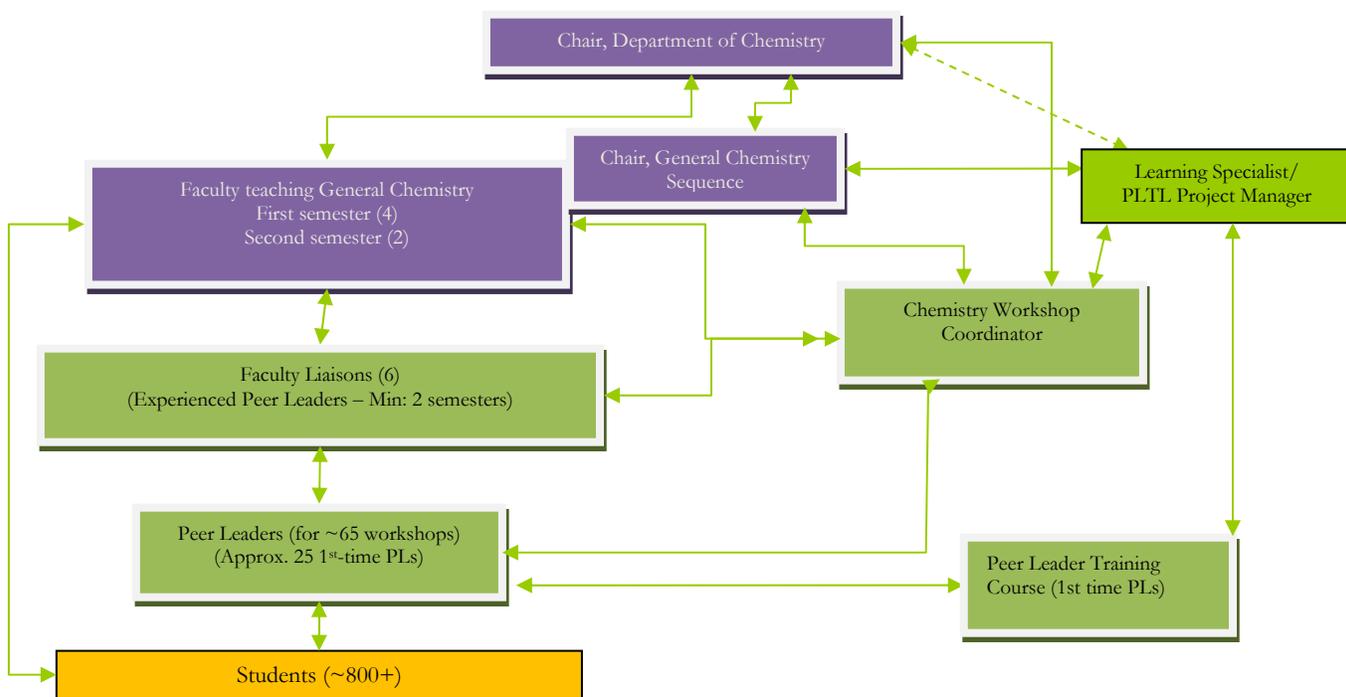


Figure 1. The PLTL Program in General Chemistry at CCNY

The last significant component of my job that needs to be highlighted is that I reported directly to the Chair of the Chemistry department. As my supervisor, we held periodic meetings to discuss matters, from workshop-related issues to chemistry workshop leaders’ payroll activities. I worked closely with the PLTL Learning Specialist, and the General Chemistry faculty as well. “Before everything else, getting ready is the secret of success” said Henry Ford, and in this fashion, to be a successful Coordinator is to be ready to quickly intervene when needed and to maintain a strong relationship with all the PLTL entities.

The best way to sustain the PLTL model is to have the full participation of students in the management and the decision-making process regarding the program. To help the program continue to thrive, the need for the help of students to implement PLTL across boundaries into new disciplines and departments could not be more essential. A simple strategy to have a more popular PLTL program is to raise its visibility on campus by promoting the expansion of the program through a grassroots movement. At the center of this strategy are the workshop students, the Peer Leaders, faculty Liaisons, and the PLTL Program Coordinator. Our common task is to be an ambassador of the Peer-Led Team Learning program and that is our pride.

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