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TRAINING AND SUPERVISION: REDEFINING THE ROLE OF THE PEER LEADER

JOSE LUIS ALBERTE, ALBERTO CRUZ, NATALY RODRIGUEZ, AND THOMAS PITZER

Effectively managing the systematic growth of a structured educational program, like Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL), is a daunting task with many challenges. Managing a pilot or a small program is feasible for an instructor with proper guidance. Once the pilot stage is completed and PLTL is expanded into more sections or courses, it can become an administrative challenge. How a program manages these developmental obstacles can make the difference between creating a sustainable, successful program or having a program that dissolves. At Florida International University (FIU) in Miami, Florida, the solution to the challenges of a growing program was to strengthen the partnership between the instructors and Peer Leaders (PL). This partnership allows for the PLs to become more invested in the program, while simultaneously advancing their own development.

Effective PLTL programs have similar characteristics, which are essential to program longevity (Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2007; Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2008). These critical components are centered on the active participation and development of the instructor, PL, and fostering a partnership between them to facilitate learning. In a traditional PLTL program, it is the role of the instructor, in collaboration with a learning specialist, to manage the administration of the program. This is essential to program sustainability and integrity. The expectation for an instructor is to perform the following tasks:

1. Create weekly workshop modules
2. Collaborate with a learning specialist to disseminate pedagogical information
3. Train Peer Leaders weekly on workshop module content
4. Supervise workshop sessions and the administrative duties of Peer Leaders
5. Collect data on the program for research purposes (i.e., retention rates, passing rates, surveys, interviews, etc.)
6. Coordinate weekly administrative duties (i.e., duplicating materials, finding space, scheduling workshops, etc.).

These tasks are manageable for an instructor within a small program (one to two courses; 25-30 PLs; 250-300 students). As a program grows, these tasks require more rigorous efforts to keep the program appropriately challenging for the students while increasing success rates. To maintain quality control at all levels of a growing program additional support is needed. At FIU, PLs have the opportunity to advance their engagement in the program through various other roles including supervising workshops, training and mentoring new PLs, and assisting in the function of the PLTL program (Alberte, Cruz, Rodriguez, & Pitzer, 2013b). These advancements in PL development came about due to the challenges

that arose with program growth at FIU in Biology. In the spring 2013 semester, there were approximately 2300 students in 210 workshops in 9 courses, led by 147 Peer Leaders, with 23 Peer Supervisors, 12 Group Discussions Leaders, and 15 instructors.

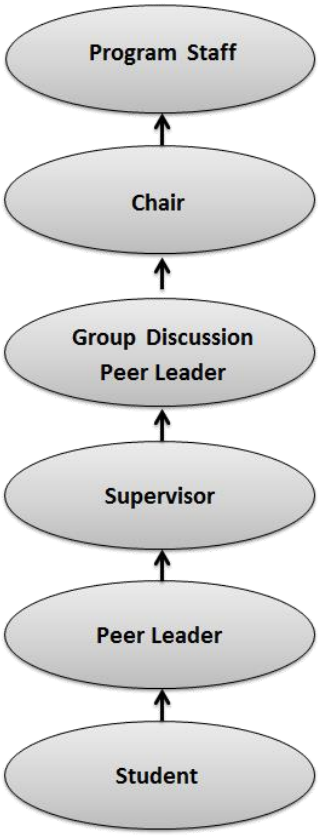

Figure 1.FIU PLTL for PL development. A schematic of the hierarchy from student to program staff

Challenge 1: Quality Control of Workshop Operations

The instructor ensures that the modules developed and the activities recommended for the workshop are properly administered. Without proper oversight, the time dedicated to workshop development and PL training holds little value. To overcome this challenge, instructors are expected to regularly supervise workshops. This task may be cumbersome once the program expands past a workable threshold for one instructor.

Ideally the instructor would supervise a PL at least twice in a semester. If the program has 25 PLs, each leading two sessions, this would equate to 75-100 hours of supervision, depending on the length of that program's workshops. This additional time commitment is more than twice the amount of time required to lecture a three-credit course. Realistically, this demand may not be possible for most instructors to take on unassisted. Furthermore, maintaining a properly prescribed model functioning in an expanding program becomes a notable concern. A solution to this problem requires a reflective analysis of attainable resources within an institution.

FIU's PLTL program began as a small pilot with one lecture course in 2000. It took seven years to expand PLTL to additional courses, and mentoring thousands of students and hundreds of PLs. This expansion was possible due to changing to a centralized administrative model (Alberte, et al., 2013b). To address the challenge of supervising a large number of workshops (e.g., over 200 workshops in a semester), we looked to our experienced PLs. By expanding the role of the traditional PL to include the supervision of workshops, we lifted the burden of work from the instructor. The distribution of responsibility helped maintain the quality of the program, making expansion a realistic possibility while strengthening the partnership between the PL and the instructor.

Supervisors are recruited via e-mail and through end-of-the-semester announcements during Group Discussion. PLs apply for the position by submitting an application prior to the start of the next term. PLs are eligible to supervise workshops once the following requirements are met:

1. Previously led for at least one semester
2. Satisfactory evaluations
3. In good academic standing within the University
4. Endorsed by the program staff

Once qualifications are met and PLs are selected, there are a series of duties a PL supervisor must fulfill. We require our supervisors to attend the pre-semester Orientation with all PLs. This initial training is a time-efficient start to expose supervisors to higher-level pedagogy, as it is their second or third time attending. FIU PLTL has developed a number of subsequent workshops to enhance active learning techniques (Alberte, Cruz, Rodriguez, & Pitzer, 2013a). Advanced and intermediate pedagogical workshops at Orientation offer more insights to effective learning, enabling the supervisor to offer informative feedback to the PLs they supervise. Orientation also includes a 3-hour mock workshop session where PLs get their first opportunity at applying newly-learned concepts gained throughout the day. We find this part of Orientation particularly helpful for supervisors to begin formulating constructive critiques and producing informative feedback. The workshop trains supervisors to (1) address what they should be looking for in their observations, and (2) how to provide informative feedback to properly mentor their PLs.

Supervisors must attend an initial supervising meeting once the semester has begun, followed by biweekly meetings to further train and discuss their observations with program staff. Only courses a PL has previously led for can be supervised by that individual. Supervisors are trained in how to use two documents: The Leader Rating Form and the Supervisor Comment Form (See Appendix I & II). The Leader Rating Form includes a series of Likert Scale and dichotomous (yes/no) questions to rate the PL and the workshop as a whole. A Supervisor Handbook is provided to explain the Likert Scale rating. The handbook serves as a means to standardize the supervision of PLs. The Supervisor Comment Form is a pros/cons analysis of the workshop, with extra space provided for additional comments.

Each workshop section must be supervised a minimum of two times: once in the first half of the term, and once in the second half of the term. All supervisors are expected to arrive to their workshops on time and remain for the entire session. If a supervisor observes a PL struggling or straying from the model, they are authorized to intervene as they see fit. At the end of the workshop, supervisors are expected to initiate a discussion with the PL to provide informative feedback. The discussion should address what went well in the workshop, and what still needs improvement. This provides an opportunity for one-on-one mentorship from a more knowledgeable other in a large program. Once a supervision session is completed, the forms are sent electronically to the PLTL staff for immediate review. The staff will intervene and potentially supervise a PL further, if necessary. This solution addresses the issue of quality control, while strengthening the partnership between the instructor and the PL. This also created a peer-to-peer mentorship opportunity which enriches the student experience in a way that was not intended in the original model.

Challenge 2: Overcoming Training Large Numbers of PLs

The instructor's role in training is to develop and disseminate course content. Training is essential to workshop success. PLs are required to have taken and successfully passed the course they are leading. However, this is not sufficient experience for these students to effectively run a peer-led workshop. A PL must also: (1) be given the opportunity to refresh their knowledge of course content, and (2) must be guided on how to approach the module pedagogically. This will allow for a better learning environment where students are actively engaged in the learning process and have workshops run effectively. As a program expands, the quality of the partnership between the instructor and the PL tends to diminish, just as the engagement between a student and instructor is lost in a large lecture.

In the traditional model, the instructor trains all of their PLs in a preparatory meeting lasting 1-2 hours per week. The PLs are trained to effectively facilitate discussion and engage a diverse group of students using various pedagogical techniques (Alberte et al., 2013a). PL training is crucial in the development of an undergraduate as a facilitator and intermediary between the student and instructor. The instructor, in collaboration with a learning specialist, trains their group of PLs. The larger the program, the more time is needed for training. In a small program of 25 PLs, the instructor and the learning specialist invest 3-6 hours to training per week. Therefore, an instructor who takes on more than 25 PLs would also take on the formidable task of allocating additional time to properly train all PLs on a weekly basis.

In the fall 2007 semester, as the program at FIU exceeded 25 PLs, seven years after the start of the program, this task became less manageable. In order to maintain a high quality training program for the PLs, we focused our efforts on developing the experienced PLs to fulfill the role of the trainer for content and pedagogy. After a series of trials and errors we created the role of the Group Discussion Peer Leader (GDPL).

Group Discussion Peer Leaders are PLs who have been leading for at least two years (six semesters). It is their responsibility to run the weekly PL training sessions (called Group Discussions [GD] at FIU). The GDPLs do not apply to assume this role; instead, they are recruited only as a direct request of the PLTL program administration and approved by the Director. Their role is to disseminate content and pedagogy in the GD, thus distributing the responsibility of training PLs. The GDs are conducted fully in workshop format, which helps to reinforce the PLTL model to the PLs. The GDPLs also address any questions from the PLs, assist in weekly administrative duties, and supervise their own PLs at least twice in the semester. The GDPLs must also complete a mid-semester and end-of-semester report on each of the PLs in their GD. These reports are then reviewed and filed by the PLTL program staff, for future evaluation of PLs. This is another opportunity for the undergraduate PL to further develop their skills and facilitate the increased engagement between the PL and the instructor. This also provides a realistic solution to the challenge of training by distributing that responsibility as a program expands.

An Emergent Challenge: A Large and Growing Infrastructure

Our solutions to these obstacles brought about a newfound challenge. The new teams managing supervisions and training call upon the need for further management of these systems. In order to better manage more aspects of the program, some PLs have become program chairpersons. Currently, there are two chairpersons working in the FIU PLTL program: the Chair of Group Discussions and the Chair of Supervising. The Chair of GDs is a GDPL who has shown exceptional leadership in running GDs. Biweekly meetings with GDPLs and PLTL staff are arranged to discuss PL performance and workshop feedback. The Chair of Supervising is in charge of scheduling biweekly meetings for supervisors and PLTL staff, and relaying instructions of how to supervise, provide feedback, and complete forms.

Conclusions

Each of our solutions was instituted as a result of specific events in our program history. In fall 2007, an increase in the number of lectures implementing PLTL led to an increased number of students, PLs, and workshops. This gave rise to the necessity for the implementation of the PL supervisors. An increase in the program's course load proposed the challenge to accommodate more PLs in GDs. We created the role of the GDPL in spring 2010 to facilitate the training of a larger number of PLs in various courses. As

the FIU PLTL program continued expanding and certain staff positions were lost, we looked again to our PLs for the solution. In spring 2012, we formalized the duties of a chair. This timeline is depicted in Appendix III. The timeline also includes the history of the development of our centralized administrative model (Alberte et al., 2013b). Although the program staff at FIU is crucial to the success of the program, the utilization of Peer Supervisors, Group Discussion Peer Leaders, and Peer Leader Chairs can be adapted and used by any institution with a peer-facilitated learning program.

A growing PLTL program brings about many challenges in regards to maintaining workshop quality and regular training of an increasing number of PLs. Experienced PLs have served as the solution to the challenges of the PLTL program at FIU. By addressing these challenges the role of the PL evolved to include more responsibility in program administration, broadening their professional development. Additionally, expanding the role of the PL also enhanced the partnership between the PL and the instructor in a novel way. This serves as a sustainable model for expansion of peer-facilitated learning programs at other institutions.

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Appendix I: Peer Leader Rating Form

Appendix II: Supervisor Comment Form

Appendix III: FIU PLTL Program Timeline

Appendix I:

Peer Leader Rating Form

Reset Form

Leader Rating Form

1. Did the leader show up on time? Yes ☐ No ☐

2. Did the leader bring their notes? Yes ☐ No ☐

3. Did the leader use their notes? Yes ☐ No ☐

4. How much did the leader have to rely on their notes? 1 ◯ 2 ◯ 3 ◯ 4 ◯ 5 ◯

5. Did the leader bring their book? Yes ☐ No ☐

6. Did the leader seat the students in a circle? Yes ☐ No ☐

7. Were the students allowed to use their textbooks or outside sources during the readiness survey? Yes ☐ No ☐

8. Did the leader ask the students questions? Yes ☐ No ☐

9. Was the leader answering questions? Yes ☐ No ☐

   -If Y, rate 1-5 (1 = least, 5 = most) 1 ◯ 2 ◯ 3 ◯ 4 ◯ 5 ◯

10. Were the student's reminded to sign in? Yes ☐ No ☐

11. Did the leader collect the surveys on time? Yes ☐ No ☐

12. Were the students presenting solutions? Yes ☐ No ☐

13. Did the students seem to feel comfortable about asking the leader questions? Yes ☐ No ☐

14. Did the leader provide a good learning environment for the participants? Yes ☐ No ☐

15. Did the leader control the class noise throughout the session? Yes ☐ No ☐

16. Was the leader dressed appropriately? Yes ☐ No ☐

17. Did the leader use appropriate language? Yes ☐ No ☐

~On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being the worst, and 5 being the best, answer the following questions:

18. How organized was the leader?	1 ◯	2 ◯	3 ◯	4 ◯	5 ◯
19. How helpful was the leader?	1 ◯	2 ◯	3 ◯	4 ◯	5 ◯
20. How effective was the leader in driving the discussion through the questions?	1 ◯	2 ◯	3 ◯	4 ◯	5 ◯
21. How was the leader's use of time?	1 ◯	2 ◯	3 ◯	4 ◯	5 ◯
22. Did the leader rush through questions in which more time should have been spent?	1 ◯	2 ◯	3 ◯	4 ◯	5 ◯
23. How well did the leader consider the different learning styles?	1 ◯	2 ◯	3 ◯	4 ◯	5 ◯
24. What was the quality of the questions asked by the leader?	1 ◯	2 ◯	3 ◯	4 ◯	5 ◯
25. How effective was the leader in promoting student participation?	1 ◯	2 ◯	3 ◯	4 ◯	5 ◯
26. How actively were the students engaged in the session?	1 ◯	2 ◯	3 ◯	4 ◯	5 ◯
27. How effective was the leader in using techniques taught in orientation to conduct the session?	1 ◯	2 ◯	3 ◯	4 ◯	5 ◯
28. Overall how comfortable did the leader seem with the questions on the worksheet?	1 ◯	2 ◯	3 ◯	4 ◯	5 ◯
29. Overall assessment of the leader?	1 ◯	2 ◯	3 ◯	4 ◯	5 ◯

Any additional comments are to be written on the Comment Form

_____

Leader Name

_____ _____

Supervisor Date

Appendix II:

Supervisor Comment Form

Supervisor Comment Form

BSC1010 BSC1011 PCB2099 PCB3063 BSC2023 PCB3043 PCB4674 BSC4934 MCB2000 MCB3200

Section: _____
Day: _____
Time: _____
Room: _____

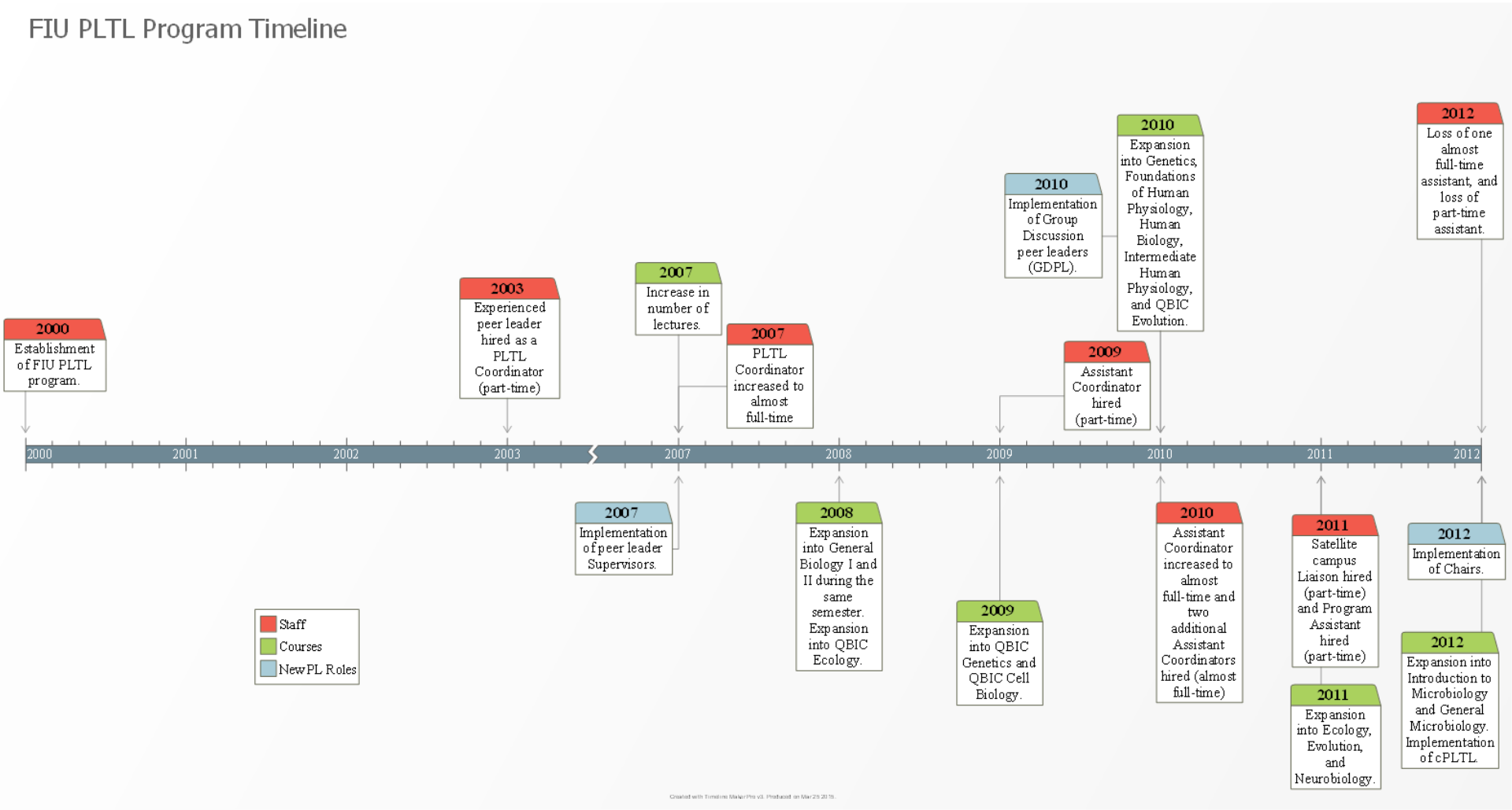
Leader Names: _____ & _____

Pros:	**Cons:**

Additional Notes:

_____ _____
Supervisor Date

Appendix III:

FIU PLTL Program Timeline

FIU PLTL Program Timeline