PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR PLTL LEADERS: HOW TO MAKE THE INTERVIEW PROCESS BOTH A SELF-EVALUATION AND TEAM-BUILDING EXERCISE FOR LEADERS

LISA KUEHNE, REGINA FREY, AND MEGAN DASCHBACH

Abstract: Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) is an integral part of the first-year experience for many calculus and chemistry students at Washington University. Each year, as many as fifty new leaders are hired. An effective selection process is essential to the program's success, and has been developed to be part of the ongoing leader training. Current PLTL leaders are directly involved in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the interview process. A short overview of the process will be presented and results from a post-interview leader survey will be shared, including observations from the PLTL leaders.

Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) is offered as a voluntary component of course instruction for four large lecture courses at Washington University each semester: General Chemistry I/II (Fall/Spring, respectively) and Calculus I/II/III (Fall and Spring). The program is administered by the departments with the support of Cornerstone: The Center for Advanced Learning, the campus learning center (Hockings, DeAngelis, and Frey, 2008). The popularity of PLTL has increased steadily over the last decade. Each fall, approximately 50% of the students enrolled in a calculus course and 75% of the students enrolled in general chemistry at the beginning of the semester elect to participate in the program. In recent years, the number of peer leaders employed for the fall semester has grown from 51 in Fall 2007 to over 100 leaders in Fall 2013, doubling the size of the program. Each spring, approximately 25% of that year's team of leaders graduate, and a few others either choose not to return or are asked not to return.

The Interview Process

Application Overview

Leader selection occurs each spring. Each student who applies to be a PLTL leader has been prescreened and invited to apply based on course performance, overall GPA and participation in the program as a student. The application is submitted online and consists of three parts: a demographic section, an essay section covering experience, motivation and expectations, and a reference from a university professional. Besides commenting on the student's overall suitability for the position, the reference writer is asked to rate the applicant on a scale of 0-5 on the

following areas: intellectual maturity, flexibility, patience, time management, collaboration and responsibility.

Each application is then reviewed by the respective department, and a subset of applicants (typically, 50-75% of the applicant pool) is invited to interview for the position. Program staff vet the applicant pool to ensure that all of the interviewees meet the most fundamental requirements for the position. As a result, the interviewers can focus on other skills and traits during the interviews, including subject expertise, mentoring experience, interpersonal skills, enthusiasm and commitment, realistic job expectations and adaptability. Leaders are initially hired for at least one semester (usually two) and many work 4-6 semesters as PLTL leaders.

Terminology

During the first year that a student works as a PLTL leader, s/he is considered a "new leader." A student who has worked more than one year as a leader is called a "veteran leader." "Current leaders" refers to all leaders working for a given academic year. Interviews for chemistry positions are conducted by a panel consisting of educational faculty, course support personnel and two or three current PLTL leaders. One applicant is interviewed by the panel at a time, and interviews last twenty minutes on average. This will be referred to as "panel"-style. Interviews for calculus positions are conducted in hour-long sessions. During the session, each candidate speaks for ten minutes with interviewers at four different tables. Three of the tables are each staffed by one or two current PLTL leaders and one table is reserved for educational faculty. This will be referred to as "speed-dating"-style.

Leader Contribution

Current leaders are expected to contribute to the selection of new leaders as part of their responsibilities and training for the spring semester. For the Calculus program, this includes submitting questions to be used during the interviews, actively participating in discussions about interviewing during the weekly seminar, and interviewing at least five candidates. Information about the candidates is also collected from the PLTL leaders who have had them as students in a PLTL group. All PLTL leaders who participate in the interviews are expected to contribute meaningfully to a discussion at the end of the session with the department representatives and other leader interviewers.

Selection Process as Professional Development Tool

Motivation

Students who work as PLTL leaders benefit from the experience in various ways (Blake, 2012). During the interview process, the program administrators' first priority is to hire enthusiastic and capable leaders who will be active contributors to the existing team of leaders. It is reasonable to consider the usefulness of the leader selection process as a training exercise for the current leaders, encouraging them to reflect on and evaluate their own performance as a leader ("self-evaluation") and challenging them to form new relationships within the team of leaders and in preparation for the next year's team ("team-building").

<u>Survey Deployment and Results</u>

In April 2013, to initiate an assessment study of the interview process as a training tool, a survey was administered to the leaders who interviewed applicants for PLTL leader positions. There were three required Likert scale questions and five optional open-ended questions on the survey, targeting attitudes in the areas of preparation, organization and personal experience as related to the leaders' involvement with the interview process. The survey was distributed electronically at the end of the interview period and three reminders were sent subsequently to encourage a timely response. Of the 81 eligible participants, 67 responded, a response rate of over 82%. The responses were distributed evenly across subjects, with 32 Calculus leaders and 35 Chemistry leaders completing the survey.
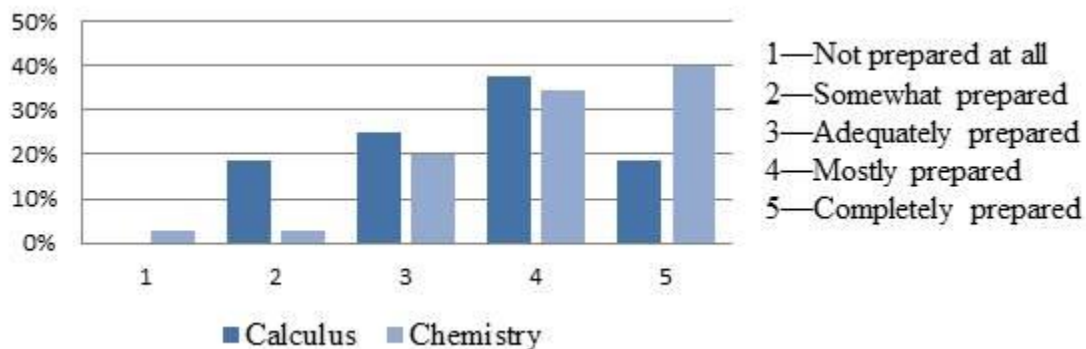

Figure 1. How prepared did you feel when the interviews started?

Two factors might account for the visible difference between the two groups of leaders. Several of the new Calculus leaders were unable to attend all of the training sessions for the interviews. Additionally, in contrast to previous years, many of the teams for the speed-dating interviews consisted exclusively of new leaders, with no experienced veteran leader there to provide guidance.

When asked, *What would have helped you to be more prepared?*, one student answered: "I don't think there needs to be any significant preparation in advance other than to look at the compiled interview questions and maybe think about how people might answer them or what to look for in an answer." Others echoed this sentiment, suggesting that practicing answering the questions as leaders would be informative.

1—It was a complete shambles.
2—It could have been much better.
3—For the most part, things went well.
4—I would only change one or two things to make it better.
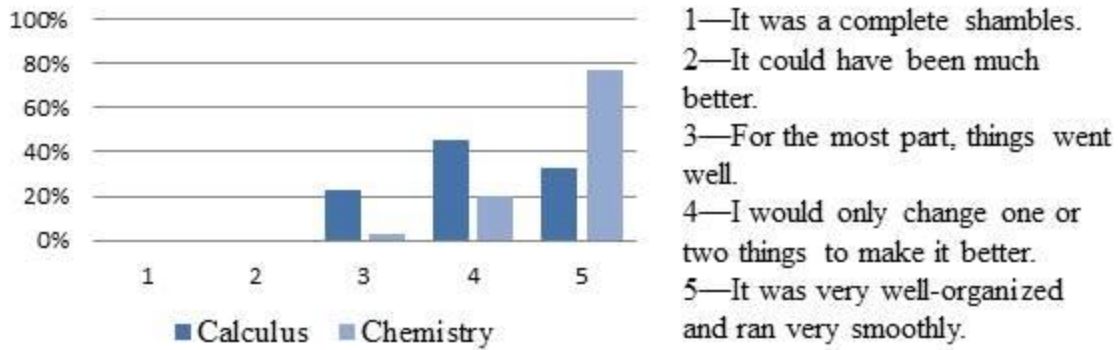5—It was very well-organized and ran very smoothly.

Figure 2. How did the actual interview process go?

When answering the question, *What suggestions do you have for improving the logistics of the interviews?*, both sets of leaders indicated that the interview process was not in need of major improvements. Constructive suggestions about scheduling and time-management during the interviews were shared. The speed-dating style elicited more comments about the importance of using a consistent time-keeping method during interviews, which may explain the different results shown in Figure 2.
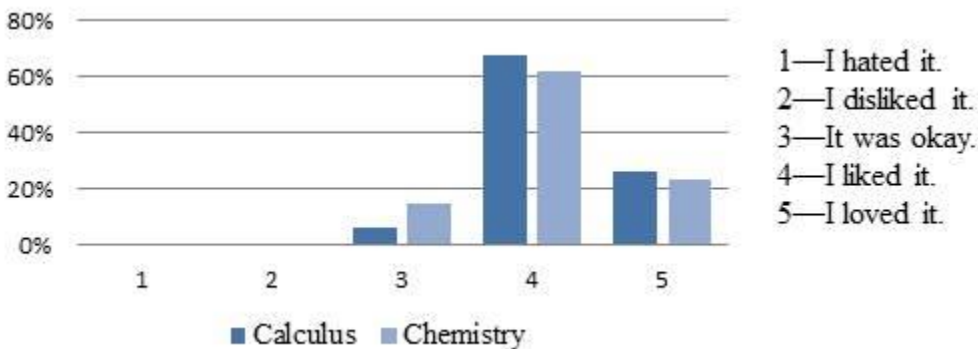

1—I hated it.
2—I disliked it.
3—It was okay.
4—I liked it.
5—I loved it.

Figure 3. *Rate the overall experience of leading the interviews.*

Responses to this question were positive overall. Leaders were then given the opportunity to respond to three more questions:

Q1. What did you get out of this experience?
Q2. What surprised you about the process?
Q3. What would make this more of a learning experience for leaders?

Respondents were most likely to answer Q1, with 50 students submitting answers. Q2 and Q3 were answered by 30 and 37 students, respectively. Selected comments demonstrating the development of self-evaluation (SE) or team-building (TB) are included below.

Many of the responses to Q1 mentioned interview experience as the primary benefit. For example, one student wrote, "I got to see the other side of the table."The leader then continued, "I also reevaluated certain aspects of my approach as a PLTL leader based on the group conversation at the end of the interviews."(SE) Leaders also reflected on the benefits of working with and talking to other students, commenting, "I enjoyed getting to talk to the possible leaders and getting to know them a bit."(TB) and "It was nice having input on what we're looking for in leaders as a team." (TB/SE)

Introspection was a common theme in the responses to all three questions. "It (the interview process) made me think about what my answers would be after being a leader. Made me reflect on what I have learned from being a leader this past year." (SE)

In their answers to Q2, leaders reported being surprised by particular interview experiences. Some of the answers illustrate how different individual interview sessions can be:

"That a lot of the candidates answered fairly similarly on many of the questions and it wasn't until asking for their reasoning or for a more in depth answer did I actually get to see what made a candidate stand out or not stand out."

"The diversity of student responses, also many students came prepared with questions for us." (TB)

"How unprepared or unenthusiastic some answers were."

Some applicants seemed really prepared! I could've envisioned them leading a session right away." (TB)

Introspection was also observed in comments on the background that they felt they brought to the interview table. "How I could use my experience and relate it to their answers to questions." (SE)

Responses to Q3 indicated that although already very involved in the process, the leaders would welcome even more responsibility and input. One leader suggested, "One thing would be to have us make the actual final decisions on who gets in and then for us to recognize what decisions were good and what were bad." (TB)

Two leaders questioned the value of the process for the current leaders. "The interviews are useful for leaders to be able to assess whether we think new students would be good at leading. I don't think it needs to be a large learning experience for leaders."

In general, however, leaders found the process encouraged them to be more introspective about their role:

"It helped me to see what qualities we really want in a PLTL leader and adjust how I deal with my group." (SE)

"I think it already was kind of a learning experience because listening to the candidates really forces you to think about what an ideal PLTL leader should be like."(SE)

"What I got out of this process was a sense of security in my own ability as a PLTL leader. Listening to the responses of the interviewees provided some insight into how far we have all come in the process of becoming effective leaders." (SE)

The discussion between department personnel and leaders about the viability of each candidate at the end of each session was often mentioned as an important team-building exercise.

"I enjoyed the group conversation because I got to learn more about other leaders' approaches to and opinions on different scenarios. It could be a result of my feeling more comfortable as a leader, but I think this conversation felt more relaxed than those we had in SAM (the first semester training course). I think it would be cool to have more conversations about approaches to leadership with other PLTL leaders." (TB/SE)

"I enjoyed the discussion at the end about whether each interviewee was qualified or not, with emphasis on the reasons and match to the PLTL goals." (TB)

"I thought the discussion at the end was a good way to gauge what we should look for in good leaders and see if we can implement those traits during our sessions." (TB)

Conclusions

Regardless of the style of interview, leaders viewed the process as beneficial and expressed satisfaction with their roles during the interviews. Modifications to the process that might encourage more self-evaluation and team-building will be explored. The reintroduction of mock interviews, or an assignment to encourage leaders to practice answering questions in anticipation of the actual interviews would be a means to address concerns voiced about preparation and logistics. The pilot survey could be replaced with a self-evaluation form to be completed after the interviews and reviewed with the department administrator. Team-building could be further encouraged with the development of a role-playing component to the interviews, a suggestion made by many leaders.

References

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