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PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING
INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

The Peer Leader

Issue No. 14 Contact: info@pltlis.org

- **Announcement: Position Open at UT-RGV**
- **The Importance of Leader Contracts**
- **Profiles: University of Houston Downtown**

Message from the President

Dear PLTLIS Community,

We are back and going full speed into the Fall 2021! I hope everyone is having a refreshing time this semester, as PLTLIS practitioners and students are certainly taking advantage of the opportunity to get back in the classroom!

There is a position for a full-time staff member for the PLTL program at the University of Texas, Rio Grande Valley – See the first item below this message for more information. Also featured below: the importance of contracts for Peer Leaders. And in our continuing series, the University of Houston-Downtown's PLTL program is profiled.

Coming attractions: Save the dates of June 1-4, 2022 for the *Tenth Annual PLTLIS Conference*! One of the upcoming activities next month will be an *Open House*. This virtual event allows Peer Leaders to share their experiences in the workshops. Also next month: the debut of the PLTLIS journal, *Advances in Peer-Led Learning*. Stay tuned!

Do you have an event to publicize? Is your PLTL program listed on the Contacts page? We invite you to review our website and give us suggestions to improve it. And there are several committees that you may be interested in joining. For more information and to make suggestions, email us to info@pltlis.org

Enjoy the fall semester!

Milka Montes

University of Texas Permian Basin

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Looking for a Position Where Your PLTL Skills are Needed?

PLTL is growing at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (with campuses in Brownsville, Edinburg, Harlingen)! Applications are now being accepted for a fulltime staff position for a Program Coordinator to oversee day-to-day operations for PLTL in Mathematics. We are looking for someone with a bachelor's degree, preferably in a STEM field or Mathematics. Here is the link to the job posting: <https://careers.utrgv.edu/postings/29826>

For further information, contact:

Hector Leal, MA

Program Coordinator, The Learning Center

Hector.leal@UTRGV.edu

Why Leader Contracts Are So Important!

Before the start of training each semester, formally hire your Peer Leaders under university contract! A possible financial disaster was avoided this fall at the University of Texas at El Paso because the Head Peer Leaders, who organize and direct Leader training, had all the returning and new-in-training Leaders sign Contracts as the first Item of Business on Day 1. The reason this is important became evident on Day 2 when an injury occurred during a Team-Building activity. During the "Ultimate Frisbee" event on campus scheduled as part of training, two Peer Leaders collided, one fell on top of the leg of another and severely broke her ankle in four places. This required expensive orthopedic surgery. She was in hospital for four days and now is recovering nicely. The very significant concern was whether UTEP as an institution would cover medical expenses with Worker's Compensation coverage because the injury occurred before the start of the Academic Year and Fiscal Year. The answer was "Yes" only because those Leader contracts had been signed and witnessed.

The difficulty is compounded by the fact that Peer Leaders have traditionally had Orientation before the official start of the semester; the PLTL program cannot wait until the start of the semester and certainly not until the fiscal year starts in order to start the training. Somehow, some way, this particular year the Head PLs decided to have the PLs sign their Peer Leader contract in the first hour on the first day of training. Thank goodness!

- James E. Becvar

PLTL: The Way of Collaborative Learning and Leadership Training at UHD



1 - Mitsue Nakamura, M.S.

Mathematics and Statistics Department University of Houston Downtown

How time flies.

It has been 20 years since we started implementing the Peer Led Team Learning (PLTL) workshops in College Algebra course at University of Houston Downtown (UHD). In 2000, I attended the LSAMP Conference at the City College of New York because I was investigating ways to support and train students to become good leaders. I met Dr. David Gosser's Chemistry Peer Leaders manning the PLTL booth during the conference. That is when our PLTL journey at UHD began. I was very impressed with the leaders' knowledge, outgoing personalities, conversational skills and of course their big smiles. Hearing about our conversation from his Peer Leaders, Dr. Gosser offered me a small grant to pilot PLTL workshops in some Mathematics courses. Many students at UHD were having a difficult time retaining the concepts and passing the College Algebra course at that time. We implemented PLTL workshops in two sections of the College Algebra course, following two out of six critical components very closely. We created interesting materials that promoted discussion and the Peer Leaders were trained weekly with concepts and pedagogy of facilitating the collaborations. The PLTL sections averaged 71/100 on the common College Algebra final exam versus non-PLTL sections which averaged 60/100. It was not too difficult to become a PLTL believer seeing these results.

That is when our PLTL journey at UHD began.

To share some history, we have implemented the PLTL workshops in sections of the following courses: College Algebra, Introduction to Computer Science with C++, Introduction to Data Structures and Algorithms, Calculus I, Calculus II, Discrete Mathematics, Linear Algebra, and the Freshman Seminar course. We depended on many small grants to fund these endeavors until we collected enough data. Promoting a new idea with passion, grit and good data always helps. The UHD PLTL project is currently supported by the Office of the Dean of College and Sciences and Technology, and Dr. Mary Jo Parker, the Executive Director of the UHD Scholars Academy (SA) – a competitive scholarship program for STEM

students. Dr. Parker reminded me of the original impetus about nurturing students to become good leaders through the PLTL Project Training Program. We have been training SA peer mentors and research leaders using the PLTL Project Training Program and methodology, and we have been very successful.

In conclusion, I am happy to report that the PLTL Project at UHD is moving forward stronger than ever after 20 years.

Peer Leaders' Experiences



2 - Allison McKee

Allison McKee

Peer-Led Team Learning Training Coordinator, University of Houston-Downtown (UHD)

Major: Chemistry with concentration in Industrial Chemistry

I am in the second year of serving as the PLTL Project Training coordinator at UHD. I get to interact with many students from different backgrounds and majors as they transition to becoming full-fledged Peer Leaders. I began shadowing our former training coordinator during the Spring 2020 semester when we had to conduct the training sessions virtually due to the COVID-19 problem, so part of my task was to convert some of the training materials to better suit the new online environment. When I started facilitating the training sessions on my own, I adjusted the remaining training materials and looked for ways to optimize the students' interaction through Zoom.

It was important to consider not only the new online environment and features that came with it, but also how to get these future Peer Leaders to bond with each other and fully grasp the importance of teamwork and potential scenarios that they themselves will encounter. Luckily, having gone through the training myself, it was easier to be in the shoes of the Peer Leaders-in-training when it came to the group work that is involved in our training sessions. The first group that I trained was also my "guinea pigs" in this sense; if they didn't seem to react to the first few tasks we would cover, then I could tweak the tasks before the next session. The actual content was not changed in any way - the issue with going from a face-to-face training to virtual was trying to capture all the good points of being face-to-face.

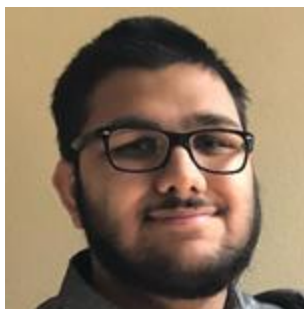
Luckily, having gone through the training myself, it was easier to be in the shoes of the Peer Leaders-in-training when it came to the group work that is involved in our training sessions.

Every group of students that I had the opportunity to work alongside has always managed to teach me something new. Many of the trainees join the training having experiences with tutoring in some capacity, and they all bring unique perspectives to share in relation to the concepts and scenarios we cover in our training. They help me in that sense, because when I learn something new from them, I can take that knowledge with me and pass it along to the next group.

In addition, I want to share the experience that I had this summer being one of the Peer Leaders who helped to conduct the Pre-Conference Workshop during the Annual PLTLIS Conference in June. I am very pleased to report a growth of my peer leader skills and my confidence; I was surprisingly not nervous facilitating the group discussions that consisted of faculty, staff, and administrators.

Coordinating the training has been such a fulfilling learning experience. Many thanks to Professor Nakamura and the UHD Scholars' Academy for their continuous support and encouragement.

Azfar Vahidy



Peer Leader, University of Houston-Downtown, Houston, Texas (UHD)

Major: Data Science

I am entering my second year of being a Peer Leader where I help the students in the Scholars' Academy, a competitive scholarship program in STEM disciplines, with any issue they might have in classes I have previously taken. My journey to becoming a Peer Leader began with me engaging in the START program before my first semester. This was the first time that I encountered a Peer Leader who helped me get used to life as a new Scholars Academy student. During the START program, Peer Leaders helped me and my classmates complete two group projects that we had to present at the end of the week.

My Peer Leader continued to have an effect on me in my freshman seminar class. My Peer Leader helped by making sure that I was always on schedule to complete all of the necessary requirements for Scholars Academy. Additionally, since we had been working in this same group since the beginning of the START program, we were able to form strong friendships with the people in our group. They were able to assist us with any questions and concerns we had about settling into our UHD and Scholars Academy experiences.

After my first semester, I wanted to become a Peer Leader.

After my first semester, I wanted to become a Peer Leader. My positive first-hand experience in the START program as well as my freshman seminar compelled me to want to ensure that younger students received the same benefits as I had. Becoming a Peer Leader meant that I had to go through the training sessions with other future Peer Leaders for a semester. The PLTL Project Training Coordinator helped guide us on how to properly help students while also focusing on teamwork.

The following semester I worked with a group of students in their freshman seminar class. It was a rewarding experience as I had now been both a student and a Peer Leader. I was also able to understand their needs better since I had shared their same struggles. There were some challenges due to the fact that the semester had been moved to fully online and had to be conducted over Zoom. Thankfully, the training enabled me to help build relationships among the students so that they could work together successfully. All of these skills and experiences have helped me greatly in my academic and professional career.