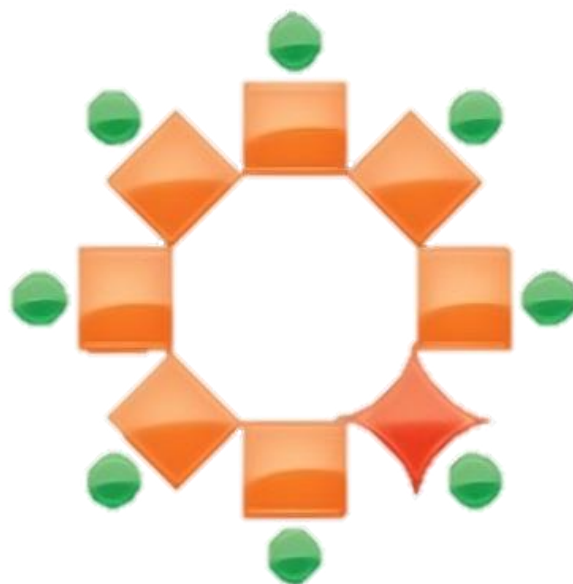


The Peer Leader March 2026



PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING
INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

Issue No. 47 Contact: info@pltlis.org

- 📄 Have you responded? Survey on PLTL Programs
- 🍎 Conference Panelists: Cooperative Learning, PLTL, PBL
- 🎓 Profiles: Where Are They Now?
- 💡 Short Takes

✉️ A Message from the President

Dear members of the PLTLIS community,

As I write, we find ourselves between meteorological spring, which started on March 1st and the astronomical spring, defined by the spring equinox on Friday March 20th. Having had some particularly harsh winter weather across the US (particularly down the Eastern coast, and with snow fall in Texas) and a particularly mild winter across Europe, I hope that we will all soon be enjoying the first signs of spring with flowers and trees in bloom, and the air filled with bird song. Days will be getting longer, and for the next two weeks, the time difference between

Europe and the USA has been (temporarily) shrunk by one hour; the UK at least doesn't move to daylight savings (British Summer Time) until Sunday March 29th.

As is customary at this time of year, we are firmly focused on this year's annual conference. The program is once again characteristically strong, drawing together experts and practitioners in various forms of active and collaborative peer learning. I very much hope that you'll contribute to this year's discussions, whether in person or online when we meet in the last week of May.

Did you have an opportunity to look at Issue 5 of the Society's open access journal, *Advances in Peer-Led Learning* (APLL), yet? Available at <https://journal.pltlis.org/>, it contains nine provocative articles. and if you plan to make a presentation at this year's conference, consider sharing your work by submitting a paper for Issue 6. The deadline is July 17! We all benefit from sharing our practices and strengthening our community.

And if you haven't done so already, complete the survey with information about your campus program: you'll find the link and QR code below. This will provide an updated picture of not only peer learning, but programs that surface leadership through peer leaders.



I hope that you head into spring and summer inspired with fresh ideas on how to extend and evolve your practice in peer learning. As always, PLTLIS is keen to hear how we can help and better support that ambition.

Sending every best wish for a fruitful spring in which new ideas blossom alongside those spring flowers,

Tony

Prof. Tony Michael

PLTLIS President, Board of Directors

www.pltlis.org



Respond to the Survey on Your PLTL Program

PLTLIS needs your help in creating Institutional Profiles for institutions that have Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) programs. We want to understand how different institutions implement PLTL. The results will help identify best practices and variations in PLTL programs across institutions. With your help, the survey will gather information about your PLTL program structure, training methods, and assessment strategies.

The survey is being administered by **Innovatek12** and should take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Your responses will be valuable in developing a comprehensive understanding of PLTL implementation in higher education. These profiles will be published on the PLTLIS website (pltlis.org) and aggregated information will be included in the Society's next Impact Report.

You may have received an invitation via email, but if you have not yet responded, or did not receive an invitation, you can access the survey through this [link](#) and through the use of this QR code:



Announcing Conference Panelists from Models: Cooperative Learning, Problem-Based Learning, Peer-Led Team Learning, and Impacts

Practitioners and developers of active learning curricular models are coming to the Big Apple to share stories, pillars of practice, challenges, successes, wisdom on themes of Implementation, Facilitation, Assessment, Sustainability and finding common ground for the promotion of active learning. Four of the panelists share their motivations below.

Cooperative Learning

Karl A. Smith

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Karl A. Smith is Emeritus Professor, Purdue University and the University of Minnesota. His research and development interests include building research and innovation capabilities in engineering education; faculty and graduate student professional development; and the role of cooperation in learning and design. Karl has over 40 years of experience working with faculty to redesign their courses and programs to improve student learning. He adapted the cooperative learning model to engineering education and has helped many faculty and graduate students with implementation. He wrote or co-wrote eight books including *How to model it: Problem solving for the computer age*, *Cooperative learning: Increasing college faculty instructional productivity*, *New paradigms for college teaching*, *Strategies for energizing large classes: From small groups to learning communities*, *Active learning: Cooperation in the college classroom*, and *Teamwork and project management*.



1 - Karl A. Smith

Why I Chose to Use Cooperative Learning

After facing challenges with the lecture-homework-exam model as an early career faculty member, I searched for better ways to help people learn. Cooperative learning aligned with my experience as an engineer and researcher due to the emphasis on positive interdependence, especially a common goal, and individual and group accountability. Cooperative learning not only resulted in more engaged and deeper learning, but also a sense of belonging and membership in a community. Additional benefits included preparation for professional practice, especially teamwork skills.

Peer-Led Team Learning

Pratibha Varma-Nelson

Indiana University, Indianapolis, Indiana

Pratibha Varma-Nelson is Professor of Chemistry and founding Executive Director of the STEM Education Innovation and Research Institute (SEIRI) at Indiana University, Indianapolis (IUI). Dr. Varma-Nelson is known for her contributions to the development, evaluation, and dissemination of the Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) model. Her research group at IUI also worked on the development, evaluation, and dissemination of cyber-PLTL (cPLTL). This work informs how students learn chemistry in online environments as well as in face-to-face environments. In addition, she was a founding Co-PI of the NSF funded Center for Authentic Science Practice in Education, (CASPiE). Varma-Nelson has received James Flack Norris Award (2008), Stanley C. Israel regional award from the ACS (2011), George C. Pimentel Award (2018), Indiana University Bicentennial Medal, among others. In 2017 she was selected as the ACS Fellow. Her Ph.D. is from University of Illinois at Chicago and her B.Sc. from Pune University, India.



2 - Pratibha Varma-Nelson

Why I Chose to Work on PLTL

There are two reasons: PLTL encourages students to work with other students in groups every week. These students learn content through teaching others as well as the importance of coming prepared to the workshop sessions. And, students who serve as peer leaders develop skills transferable to the workplace such as leadership, collaboration/teamwork, self-confidence, coping with challenges and problem solving (see, for example: Chase, A., Rao, A. S., Lakmala, P. & Varman-Nelson, P. (2020). Beyond content knowledge: transferable skills connected to experience as a peer-leader in a PLTL program and long-term impacts. *International Journal of STEM Education*, 7, 29. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-020-00228-1>)

Problem-Based Learning

David Kornack

University of Rochester, Rochester, New York

David Kornack is an Associate Professor in the Department of Neuroscience at the University of Rochester School of Medicine & Dentistry (URSMD). He is a lecturer and laboratory instructor, teaching human anatomy, histology, and neuroscience to undergraduate and medical students. Through the Office of Curriculum & Assessment, he also serves as the Director of PBL Tutor Training for the Double Helix Curriculum at the URSMD, training tutors to facilitate small-group PBL sessions in the first- and second-year medical courses. He also participates in campus-wide faculty development workshops, presenting sessions on the use of PBL in educational settings.



3 - David Kornack

Why I Chose Problem-Based Learning (PBL)

Problem-based learning (PBL) is a small-group instructional method that uses patient cases to engage and drive student learning of basic and clinical sciences. It provides a supportive environment that fosters the development of competency in core skills students will need as future health care providers, including professionalism, problem-solving, communication, and other teamwork skills. PBL works by using the “3 C” learning principles -- it is constructivist, contextual, and collaborative. Each student group has an assigned “PBL tutor” to facilitate and guide group discussion, ensure information quality control, and provide formative and summative feedback of group performance. Accordingly, PBL plays an invaluable role in professional development that may not be sufficiently addressed by more traditional methods in medical education, e.g. large-group lectures, laboratory exercises.

The Impact of Active Learning

Joanna Li

Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, Missouri

Joanna Li is a current medical student at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis (Class of 2027). She received her B.A. from WashU in Anthropology: Global Health and Environment, graduating summa cum laude in 2023. As a former PLTL leader in General Chemistry and Learning Assistant in Organic Chemistry, she continues to implement strategies

from multiple active learning models throughout her medical training—as well as within her mentorship toward current undergraduates pursuing careers in medicine and early MD students. One of her greatest passions is guiding students in developing effective, multi-disciplinary learning strategies and growth mindsets, in addition to initiating supportive teaching philosophies that foster lifelong commitment to learning.



4 - Joanna Li

Reflection on the Continued Impact of Active Learning

In my early undergraduate years, participating as a student in PLTL and LA (Learning Assistant) sessions taught me what it means to learn actively, curiously, and collaboratively. Extending from the sessions to my classes, then into my clinical extracurriculars, I found myself deeply engaging with new ideas, pushing to expand my understanding, integrating across disciplines, and translating knowledge into real-life experiences. I fell in love with the *idea of constantly learning*, the prospect of growing as a thinker and person, and always asking the question “why?” as I delved into new concepts.

Experiencing this impact on my own growth, I was determined to serve as a PLTL Peer Leader and a LA leader to support students’ potential and contribute to their unique development as learners.

Across my years of mentoring STEM/pre-medical/MD students, I continue to draw upon active learning models because of how they encourage *struggle*: struggle that is coupled with *growth* and *resilience*. Beyond mentoring, skills in critical reasoning, communication, teamwork, and personal lifelong growth contribute to my daily patient care. As I have transitioned from student to leader to future physician, I hold the impact of active learning as a core component to my life and development—and strive to help more individuals along their own journeys to achieving self-growth.

 **2026 PLTLIS Conference: New York City & Online**

Wednesday – Saturday, May 27-30

Hosted by City Tech (New York City College of Technology, City University of New York)



Celebrating Active Learning: Shared Missions and Practices in Models of Student Engagement

REGISTER NOW: <https://pltlis.org/pltlis-conference-registration/>

Wondering about the active learning models to be featured at the Conference?

Learn about the models with a bird's eye view by reading: Active Learning: Eight Models That Shape Instructional Practice in *Advances in Peer-Led Learning*, written by AE Dreyfuss, Ana Fraiman, & Karmen Yu. Online at <https://doi.org/10.54935/apll2025-01-03-07>

 Profiles: Where Are They Now?

These profiles examine the impact of participating in PLTL programs years after graduation. Those profiled are former Peer Leaders.

From Johns Hopkins University, Maryland to Various Paths

Ariane Kelly, Director of Academic Support, Johns Hopkins University (JHU), forwarded the three profiles below. The program at JHU, named PILOT, was started in 2008 in Calculus courses, and expanded to various disciplines, including courses in Economics, Genetics, Molecular Biology, and even foreign languages like Spanish and Portuguese. More information on the PILOT program is detailed in *Advances in Peer-Led Learning (APLL)*, Issue #5: <https://journal.pltlis.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/4-Unite-et-al-2025.pdf>

Nisita Dutta

I was a PILOT Leader throughout my undergraduate and Master's year at JHU, from September 2016 – May 2020. I had a great time leading sections for both chemistry and calculus courses! During my senior and Master's years, I was an Advisory Board member where I helped lead and re-design workshop trainings and the interview process for hiring new leaders.

Currently, I am pursuing an MD/PhD with the University of Maryland and the NIH Oxford-Cambridge Scholars Program. I spent the first two years after my Master's at JHU in my preclinical years, after which I moved to the UK to start my PhD research in engineering nanobody-drug conjugates at the Department of Chemistry at the University of Cambridge. I had a wonderful three years learning and exploring in Europe, and have recently moved back to Bethesda, MD to complete my PhD research at the NIH where I am testing my synthesized conjugates in pancreatic cancer mouse models.



5 - Nisita Dutta

PILOT helped me realize how much I value mentoring and teaching students! It inspired me to continue pursuing academia where I would have a similar opportunity to mentor young scientists. PILOT also taught me the importance of collaborative learning, from leading sessions where students work together to making Advisory Board decisions as a team, I've learned to incorporate this respect for others' perspectives during my training and travels in different international environments. I'm grateful for the values PILOT has instilled in me during my undergraduate years and look forward to continuing my educational journey with these ideals in mind!

John Schwarcz

I joined PILOT for its initial launch in microeconomics in Spring of 2016 and became the head PILOT leader for the launch in macroeconomics in Fall of 2016 and continued in that role in Spring of 2017. I'd heard about PILOT from my roommate Erik, who was already a PILOT leader for STEM courses. I have always been passionate about teaching and helping my fellow classmates, so I was eager to join the program's launch into the economics department.

PILOT was an important part of my academic development. Teaching both my fellow instructors and students certainly prepared me for my experience after undergraduate as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant in Germany. Even after my time in Germany ended, the skills I gained as PILOT instructor in public speaking and distilling concepts into teachable forms have helped me succeed in law school and in the courtroom.



6 - John Schwarcz

Currently, I serve as a captain in the United States Air Force as an Assistant Judge Advocate. In this role, I am both an officer and an attorney. I assist servicemembers, dependents, and retirees with legal questions, and advise dozens of commanders on military justice and discipline matters. I also represent the United States in the courtroom as a prosecutor in federal courts-martial proceedings.

I still look back fondly on PILOT as one of my favorite undergraduate activities. Receiving positive feedback from students and seeing smiles on faces after passing or excelling on exams was always heartwarming!

Erik Tan

I was a PILOT leader from Fall 2014 through Spring 2017. I believe I led General Chemistry for 2014-2015 and Organic Chemistry 2015-2017.

I am currently an Assistant Professor of Clinical Medicine in the Division of Hospital Medicine at Penn. I am also co-course director for the Foundations of Health Systems Science course in the medical school.



7 - Erik Tan

PILOT helped me grow in so many ways! First, it solidified my knowledge in the courses I was teaching while improving my critical thinking skills, which can be extrapolated to other fields and situations. As a Head PILOT Leader, I developed my leadership skills, balancing being a peer and a supervisor at the same time, something very common in the medical field when you are

working with co-residents or as a young attending. It also provided me an incredible mentor in the faculty (Dr. Falzone) who I met with weekly throughout the last couple of years of college! The experience in teaching is something I continued throughout medical school and residency, having completed medical education tracks at both levels. Now, as a course director in the medical school and with hopes of developing further curricula in the medical school, my path in education continues.



8 - Last day of Residency at UPenn

From the University of Texas at Dallas to Sports Medicine

Michael Saenz, Director of Peer Tutoring, Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL), Supplemental Instruction (SI), and Web Services in the Student Success Center, University of Texas at Dallas, recommended Dr. Haris Vakil as a former Peer Leader and notable alumnus.

Haris Vakil, MD, CAQSM

Primary Care Sports Medicine Physician

Houston Methodist Hospital



9 - Haris Vakil

I served as a Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) leader at UT Dallas from 2013–2016 for Biology and Organic Chemistry. This experience played a pivotal role in shaping both my academic path and professional identity. Now a Sports Medicine physician back home with Houston Methodist at Clear Lake, I credit the PLTL program with developing the communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills that allow me to connect meaningfully with patients and guide effective management of orthopedic care. I rely daily on the same skills that I developed in PLTL that include breaking down complex concepts into practical steps, fostering trust, encouraging active participation, and tailoring strategies to each individual, or in my case, patient. The program taught me how to listen first, meet people where they are, and guide them toward solutions rather than simply giving answers - an approach that now supports how I evaluate injuries, educate patients, and build effective and personalized management plans for a wide range of musculoskeletal conditions.



Left to Right: Haris Vakil MD, CAQSM, with his Athletic Training Manager Jeffrey Collins, and colleague Theresa Phan, MD, CAQSM



Halloween Fun at Friday Night Lights!
Haris Vakil (**center**) with his main high school
athletic training staff at Santa Fe High
School, Johnathan Utsey (**left**) and Leesa Verdone (**right**)

From the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to Careers and Marriage

From 2008 until 2015, the College of Engineering and Applied Science at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee ran a PLTL program designed to help incoming first-year students thrive in their mathematics courses. John Reisel, Professor of Mechanical Engineering, who guided the PLTL program wrote: “Here is some information about two of our former peer leaders who got married after meeting in the program.”

Jared Thede

Jared Thede graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in Mechanical Engineering with a Bachelor of Science in 2011 and a Master of Science in 2014 and received an MBA degree in 2023 from Marquette University. He currently is an Engineering Manager, High-Voltage Battery Sub-System at LiveWire.



10 - Jared Thede

Temenuzhka “Violet” Thede

Violet Thede graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in Computer Engineering with a Bachelor of Science in 2013, and from DePaul University with a Master of Science in Cybersecurity in 2017. She currently is a Senior Manager in Security Engineering at Docker, Inc.

Jared and Violet met as math study-group leaders while tutoring students who needed help navigating calculus proofs and tricky problem sets. In those quiet hours of guiding classmates, they learned patience, clear communication, how to break down complex ideas, and the importance of meeting people where they are—skills that quietly shaped who they would become.



11 - Temenuzhka Thede

As the study sessions turned into friendship and eventually marriage, those same strengths carried into their careers. He went on to become the Manager of the battery team at LiveWire EV, an electric motorcycle company, where analytical thinking, structured problem-solving, and mentoring engineers became part of his daily work. She grew into a Senior Manager of Security Engineering at Docker Inc., applying the same calm clarity she once used to explain integrals to lead teams in securing software, navigating risks, and building resilient systems.

Their journey—from whiteboards and study groups to leadership roles in cutting-edge technology—reflects how the simplest skills learned early on—patience, empathy, listening, and the confidence to teach others—can become the foundation for a life built together and careers grounded in purposeful leadership.

Short Takes

- Advances in Peer-Led Learning: Issue #6!
 - **Deadline for Submissions: July 17, 2026**
 - Submission guidelines: journal.pltlis.org
- [New Instagram Account](#): SHARE NEWS FROM YOUR CAMPUS!
- [Follow PLTLIS on LinkedIn](#): Share your enthusiasm and spread the word about PLTL!
- Minding Your Q's and T's (Quick Tips!) Contribute a strategy to spark collaboration and increase participation. If you are a Peer Leader and have a strategy useful for learning (for example, in PLTL Workshop), please submit it as a QT to journal@ptlis.org.
- TIP: Making a presentation? Include a final slide that mentions the PLTLIS Annual Conference and the Society's website: www.pltlis.org
- TIP: During Peer Leader Orientation at the beginning of every semester, each new Peer Leader signs up for "The Peer Leader" newsletter on the homepage of PLTLIS with their personal email (to keep in touch after graduation): Go to www.pltlis.org and sign up!

- SHARE this Quick Link to the PLTLIS Website:



*Learning Today,
Leading Tomorrow!*