

Learning Assistants at the College of Southern Idaho

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Learning Assistants: A Brief Overview

A classroom utilizing a Learning Assistant Program looks more like a web and less like a line. In a course with learning assistants (LAs), experiences and content flow from and in between the instructor, LAs, and students.

A Learning Assistant Program is a pedagogical approach to pair instructors with undergraduate students whose sole purpose is to support learning activities both in and out of the classroom. Pedagogical approaches using peer-facilitated instruction have been found to increase student engagement and learning [1, 2].

The types of activities Learning Assistants (also referred to as embedded tutors) regularly facilitate are 1) discussions with groups of students about concepts and problems, 2) regular meetings with students outside of the classroom setting to delve deeper into concepts and clarify misunderstandings, and 3) regular meetings with instructors to reflect on how students are progressing in their learning in the course [3].

At the College of Southern Idaho, a modified Learning Assistant Program was deployed in Summer 2018 as an extension of the existing Tutoring Program housed in the Learning and Tutoring Commons. In collaboration with the Learning and Tutoring Commons and Academic Departments, there are now opportunities for faculty members to have a Learning Assistant embedded in their lecture, lab, or discussion section. A Learning Assistant attends up to four hours of course meetings per week and provides tutoring or leads review sessions in the Learning and Tutoring commons for another three to fifteen hours per week.

The Learning Assistant Program has been built using a co-creation model. Both the Learning and Tutoring Commons as well as Academic Departments play an active role in 1) identifying potential LAs, 2) providing mentorship and trainings that help the LAs develop the qualities of an effective educator, and 3) structuring the LAs outside of class hours.

Why Teach with Learning Assistants?

A common question at our college for faculty and staff in academic student services positions has been, “why is it that those students who are struggling the most academically seem the least likely to ask for assistance, including tutoring?” To better understand the barriers students at our institution faced in accessing tutoring services, we held focus groups. The most common comment from students in focus groups was that perceived stigma or self-stigma was a barrier to asking for help. Other barriers included schedule conflicts, lack of awareness of services, and a lack of belonging. Each of these barriers are not unique to our institution and have been noted extensively in literature [4-6].

We are using our LAs to promote interaction and collaboration among students, LAs, and instructors both inside and outside the classroom. By reaching students in their classrooms, we are removing the stigma of asking for help and are able to begin assisting students of all abilities with little problems proactively before they become huge learning barriers. Since implementing the LA model, we have more than doubled the number of students that are utilizing our drop-in tutoring hours, study space, and LA review sessions.

While it is too soon to tell whether we have substantially increased student awareness of our services or helped to build community, as assessed on the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE), students, LAs, and instructors are noticing positive changes. Many instructors have commented on the increased interactions they have with students and students have with each other in class due to the decreased student-to-teacher ratio, the immediate feedback LAs provide to them about challenging concepts, and the barriers that LAs can break down by modeling discussions and questions. LAs have commented that by working with students on a weekly basis, they are better able to build on concepts, use language that is familiar to students, and build relationships with students that they might not otherwise see.

How to Teach with Learning Assistants?

In our short time, we have embedded Learning Assistants in courses across many different disciplines, including Biology, Chemistry, Human Anatomy and Physiology, English, Medical Terminology, and Mathematics. We have also embedded LAs into many different contexts including lectures, labs, and recitation hours. Initial assessments of our LA program support the inclusion of LAs in a variety of disciplines and teaching contexts; however, key elements have emerged that are vital to the LAs' and the Program's success. Most notably, our preliminary data is showing that the LA model is most successful in environments where the course instructor regularly incorporates the LA into one or more high-impact educational practices—allowing the LA to actively facilitate student learning, discussion, reflection, or problem solving.

Based on these preliminary findings, moving forward, we are developing an application process and a short on-boarding process for faculty who want to use LAs. Specifically, on the application, faculty members will be asked to identify and reflect on how they will regularly incorporate LAs into at least one high-impact teaching practice in their classroom. Instructors who are already doing this are doing this in a variety of ways—some instructors deliver traditional one-way lectures and incorporate LAs into recitation hours, others utilize LAs to lead discussions and help students work on problems during their interactive lectures, and others have LAs facilitate lab activities, just to name a few. The goal is to help instructors foster environments where LAs can assist with higher order concerns, using questions and modeling as they help students integrate content and strategies.

Instructors have also shared that they have not mentored LAs or utilize them in gathering data to the extent that they wish they would have. To assist instructors in making time, during the application and on-boarding process, instructors will be asked to commit to meeting with LAs on a weekly basis in order to reflect on the previous week and prepare for the upcoming week. This time will be used to listen and solicit feedback from LAs about how students are interacting with the course material so targeted reviews can be created and the LA can perhaps be planted with questions to ask of the instructor in subsequent classes. Perhaps, most importantly, these meetings are useful for creating a sense of community to support LAs in the challenges of becoming an educator.

Research from other institutions has shown that in active-learning environments, students who are enrolled in a course with an LA have lower DFW rates, better scores on end-of-semester concept inventories, and an increased likelihood of enrolling in their second year if they had an LA experience in year one [7,8]. As we have begun looking at these same measures as well student usage, awareness, and perception of tutoring services, our preliminary results support the inclusion of LAs, particularly in those courses that are structured in manner that allow LAs to work with students in interactive environments and provide critical feedback to the instructor regarding student learning.

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