

PLASMA November Meeting
Tuesday, November 14th, 2017
Office of STEM Education; 4 – 5 PM

In attendance: Jill Beyette, College of Engineering; Brad Barnes, Computer Science; Malcolm Adams, Mathematics; Naomi Norman, OVPI; Norris Armstrong, Kris Miller, Biological Sciences; Kris McWhite, Economics; Tim Burg, Cole Causey, OSE

Agenda Items:

- Report from International LA Conference in Boulder, CO
- Review of feedback from PLAs re: advice for new adopters
- Planning for spring

Norris Armstrong and Jill Beyette recently attended the International Learning Assistant Conference hosted by CU-Boulder and provided an overview of their takeaways.

Norris reported that the status of the nascent program at UGA is on par with or even ahead of many other institutions represented at the conference. Elements of our program not found at many other schools include the efforts we are currently working on to develop training for new adopters. We are also ahead of the game in terms of structure for veteran PLAs, particularly in Life Sciences as they have developed several tiers with distinct roles for returning PLAs, including PLA ambassadors and mentors.

Jill highlighted the fact that implementing PLAs can serve as a *stealth mission for institutional change*. As faculty develop methods for utilizing PLAs, instruction is typically redesigned to include more active, collaborative learning. She provided a helpful handout from the conference that new adopters can reference as they plan for PLAs in their learning environments. A copy of that document can be found at: http://www.ose.uga.edu/projects/peer_learning/ILAA_2017_Materials.pdf

Some things that we need to consider at UGA include better branding in order to increase visibility. This would also help add prestige to the PLA role that would assist with recruitment and wider adoption across campus. Suggestions for enhancing brand included posters, bookmarks, as well as name tags for PLAs.

Norris and Jill reported that most schools using LAs pay their LAs. They described that many schools use a matching program in which a department or college must pay a share of the PLA cost. Malcolm noted that most departments in Franklin have no resources for cost matching. They also reported that CU Boulder limits the number of times a student can serve as a PLA in order to allow more students to participate as PLAs.

This led to a wider discussion regarding how we can ultimately sustain and grow the PLA program at UGA, not just in STEM disciplines. Ultimately, this will require centralized organization with administrative support. Norris noted that this is an area where we trail other institutions that were represented at the conference. Naomi reiterated the need for quantitative performance data. Biological Sciences will be gathering data in spring semester BIOL1107 by looking at performance on certain learning outcomes for students with and without PLA support. Another product that this group can produce is a guide for best practices in implementing PLAs.

CU Boulder is currently developing a web based system called 'LA Central' for which institutions will be able to purchase licenses. This system is being designed to handle the application and recruiting for PLAs. It is not known when that system will be in production, or how much it might cost. We have currently been utilizing Qualtrics to handle these processes. Naomi emphasized that we need to consider how to get the best bang for whatever bucks we might be able to get – it might be more effective to pay for PLAs as well as enhanced branding materials and things like name tags rather than the central software. A key feature, which we may consider implementing with or without the software, is that faculty apply to have a PLA section and must answer questions about how the PLAs will be used, what is their role, what will they do.

In terms of development and training for new PLA adopters, Naomi noted that CTL is ready to offer workshops during spring semester for faculty who want to begin using PLAs next fall.

Members of the PLASMA community are also encouraged to attend talks presented by CTL Fellows for Innovative Teaching - Challenging Gateway Courses:

Monday, December 11th
9:00 – 11:30 AM
MLC 369

Kris Miller solicited feedback from her PLAs in the BIOL 3910 pedagogy group, both veterans and new PLAs, asking for advice they would provide to faculty who want to begin implementing PLAs. Many of the respondents highlighted the critical element of weekly content meetings, which is one of the three pillars of the LA model. This includes making sure PLAs have advance access to materials, worksheets, answer keys, etc. Also appearing on multiple surveys was a need for faculty to recognize that in order to effectively use PLAs, instructional approach and teaching methods will likely need to be redesigned. A third common element was the importance of setting and maintaining clear expectations from the start. This includes informing students what they should and should not expect from PLAs. Cole and Chuck confirmed that similar feedback has been gathered from the PLAs in the FCID 3100 pedagogy group.

Planning for spring is underway, with applications already open for Biological Sciences, Chemistry, Math, and Physics. Cole is monitoring incoming applications and can provide reports to the departmental coordinators.

Some minor policy considerations have been identified over the course of the current semester that the group should consider. The first is a conflict of interest consideration, as PLAs in Life Sciences noted the potential that some students might also be employed by Science Guys, a tutoring service not affiliated with the university. In response to this issue, Norris has drafted the following policy statement:

Peer Learning Assistants and Private tutoring.

PLAs have experience with and are adept at helping other students learn. As a result, some students may find themselves in a position of being both a PLA and a paid tutor, either as part of a business or individually. Because this raises potential conflicts of interest and involves a vulnerable population (students in need of help), we ask the PLAs to abide by the following guidelines. Note that these guidelines do not apply to University managed tutoring programs, such as those administered through the Division of Academic Enhancement (Milledge Hall) and the UGA Athletic Association.

- *PLAs may not receive compensation for tutoring students in the class that they are currently working with as PLA.*
- *PLAs may not actively promote or advertise private tutoring services for the class that they are currently working with as PLA.*

If a PLA refers to a private tutoring service for any class, they need to make it clear that this referral does not reflect an endorsement by the instructor, the department or the University.

A second minor consideration also presented itself this semester, as one PLA in the FCID pedagogy group inquired as to whether or not they would need to take the BIOL pedagogy course if they were to apply and be accepted as a Life Sciences PLA. It was agreed that either pedagogy course would satisfy that element in the case of this PLA migration. As of this semester, we have one PLA who has served in both MATH and PHYS. As the program continues, it is likely that more of these issues pertaining to returning PLAs will need to be monitored.

Cole will be distributing survey links to departmental coordinators to be shared with students in PLA-supported courses. This will be the same instrument that was utilized in spring semester. A PLA Experience survey will also be shared with all current PLAs.