PLAdawgs: The University of Georgia Peer Learning Assistant Program

Summary

The primary goals of the University of Georgia Peer Learning Assistant Program are many: to improve student learning and content understanding in high demand gateway courses, to deepen the PLAdawgs’s expertise through experiential learning, to help promote an active learning style of teaching into our campus culture, and to give students the opportunity to teach their peers and explore teaching as a career choice. A critical component of the UGA PLAdawgs Program is robust assessment of the impact on the students in classes supported by PLAdawgs, the students who are PLAdawgs, and the faculty who teach classes supported by the PLAdawgs.

The largest comparable program among R1 public institutions in the U.S. is the Learning Assistant program at the University of Colorado-Boulder which has seen tremendous gains in effective teaching and deep learning in both STEM and non-STEM courses. The PLAdawgs Program is based on the Colorado model and is informed by the lessons learned by UGA faculty who participated in a three-year STEM pilot program funded by the University System of Georgia and shared among members of “Peer Learning Assistants: Strategies, Management, and Application” (PLASMA), the community of practice which assisted the Office of STEM Education (OSE) in coordinating that pilot.

PLAdawgs are students who, after successfully completing a course, return to support the learning of students currently enrolled in the same course. PLAdawgs do not assist with grading and are not teaching assistants (TAs). While TAs are tasked with helping faculty teach, PLAdawgs are put in classrooms specifically to help students learn. Research at Colorado and elsewhere has shown that incorporating PLAs into a course improves learner performance, promotes including more active learning strategies into the course, and provides skill growth in the PLAs themselves. A primary role of PLAdawgs is to facilitate discussions and activities among groups of students in classroom settings that encourage active engagement.

The PLAdawgs program is housed in the Office of Instruction which oversees the faculty application process and assessment of the program. The Division of Academic Enhancement (DAE) oversees the student application process, trains the PLAdawgs in pedagogy, and offers programmatic support informed by research around peer education. The Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) supports faculty with transforming their course/s to use the PLAdawgs most effectively. Faculty who are approved to be part of the PLAdawgs program agree to meet with their PLAdawgs regularly (preferably every week) to plan instruction and design activities for the PLAdawgs and also agree to submit information needed to assess the impact of the program. Students who serve as PLAdawgs will participate in the training course, meet program expectations for their time and effort, and submit information needed to assess the impact of the program.

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1 Contributors to this document include the following: Maggie Blanton, Timothy Burg, T. Chase Hagood, Alice Hunt, and Naomi Norman, with feedback from Norris Armstrong, Bradley Barnes, Jill Beyette, Peggy Brickman, Erin Dolan, Claire Kinane, Charles Kutal, Paula Lemons, Kristen Miller, and Rachel Pharr.
2 The University of Colorado-Boulder model (https://www.colorado.edu/program/learningassistant/) initially focused on STEM classes but has grown to include many non-STEM classes. The Rhode Island Institute of Technology and George Washington University have expanded their PLA program to foreign language and writing classes.
3 In 2016, the UGA Office of STEM Education (OSE) received a grant from the University System of Georgia to pilot a three-year PLA program that would address concerns about undergraduate student success in STEM core courses.
The Program Details

The University of Georgia Peer Learning Assistant Program supports PLAdawgs, faculty, and students. The Program is housed within the Office of Instruction and three of its units: the Division of Academic Enhancement (DAE), the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), and the Office of STEM Education (OSE).

The basic component of the PLAdawgs Program is an undergraduate PLA-enhanced course in which the faculty member uses PLAdawgs to facilitate discussions and activities among groups of students in that class. CTL offers instructional support programming designed to help faculty create new courses or convert existing courses into PLA-enhanced courses that use the PLAdawgs most effectively. DAE hires the PLAdawgs and provides a pedagogy course to help them acquire core knowledge about pedagogy, reflect on their own learning, and develop their experiences into new skills. OSE and DAE develop assessment protocols to track the impact of the program. The UGA PLAdawgs Board establishes the guidelines for the program and ensures that the use of PLAdawgs across campus is consistent, efficient, and effectively assessed. The Director of OSE chairs PLASMA, the UGA community of practice where faculty learn with other faculty and share resources, ideas, and experiences. The faculty teaching these courses support the PLAdawgs in understanding and delivering course content.

PLAdawgs

The PLAdawgs are not subject-matter experts; rather they are undergraduate students who have been successful in the class in which they are assigned. They take a pedagogy course during the first semester of their service as a PLAdawg to learn about teaching, reflect on their own learning, and develop their experiences into new skills. PLAdawgs, in every semester they serve, meet weekly with the course instructor to prepare for upcoming discussions and activities. They facilitate discussions and activities among groups of students in classroom settings that encourage active engagement. They are employed to assist learners, not instructors, and are expected to attend all class meetings of the class they are assisting.

Responsibilities of a PLAdawg will vary from class to class and from instructor to instructor. Each instructor will work with their PLAdawgs to set responsibilities and expectations. These responsibilities might include:

- work in the classroom side-by-side with students (e.g., facilitate interaction and discussion between students during clicker questions and activities, answer student questions, listen and ask questions as students talk through a concept/problem etc.)
- encourage students to reflect on their own learning
- facilitate collaboration between students in order to talk through the problems together to learn as a small group
- respond to online discussion boards

Instructors may not ask PLAdawgs to do the following:

- independently run class sessions
- grade, evaluate or assess student work
- assist students without faculty guidance.

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5 At present, the approved pedagogy courses are UNIV 1204, FCID 3100, and BIOL 3910. These courses share the same learning objectives.

6 A research study from the University of Colorado at Denver concluded that because students know that PLAs cannot give grades or evaluations they tend to put the PLA in a more “trusted position” which increased the impact of using PLAs in classes (Talbot et al. 2015). In addition, the UGA Registrar’s office considers it a FERPA violation for undergraduate students to assign grades to one another unless the grader is providing a grade for an assignment that is anonymous; and the Equal Opportunity Office recommends that the power dynamic be considered—for example, undergraduate students may know one another outside of class and may find it difficult to assign unbiased grades for one another.
Compensation of PLAdawgs will depend on whether a student is classified as a “Novice PLAdawg,” a “PLAdawg,” or a “Master PLAdawg” as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Compensation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Novice PLAdawg</td>
<td>Is serving as a PLAdawg for the first time and is taking the approved pedagogy course</td>
<td>Unpaid; time commitment of 7 hours per week; receives course credit for the pedagogy course and experiential credit (that may, depending on their school or college, fulfill the UGA Experiential Learning degree requirement); receives certificate of participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLAdawg</td>
<td>Has successfully served as a PLAdawg for at least one semester</td>
<td>Paid $9/hour for 6 hours per week (3hrs class time, 2hrs prep time, 1hr to meet with instructor) for one course or 9 hours per week if they assist a second section of the same course; receives a certificate of practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Master PLAdawg</td>
<td>Has successfully served as a PLAdawg for more than three semesters, serves as a mentor for other PLAdawgs, and participates in panels, faculty training, and other components of the program</td>
<td>Paid $10/hour for 7 hours per week (3hrs class time, 2hrs prep time, 1hr to meet with instructor, 1hr for peer-to-peer engagement) for one course or 10 hours per week if they assist a second section of the same course; receives certificate of distinction</td>
</tr>
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All PLAdawgss will be tracked as they proceed through their degree program and surveyed for insights into their own growth and development. The PLAdawg Program does not pay students in their first semester. In compliance with the U.S. Department of Labor regulations regarding internship programs under the federal Fair Labor Standards Act, novice PLAdawgs receive academic credit in the pedagogy course in lieu of financial compensation.8

Faculty
The PLAdawg Program is available to faculty of any rank who teach 1000- and/or 2000-level gateway courses at UGA.9 Any faculty member who wishes to use PLAdawgs begins by completing an application (see appendix), affirming their knowledge of the PLAdawg Program including the best practices for using PLAdawgs. Faculty who are not confident in their knowledge on how to use PLAdawgs effectively, are new to active learning and/or PLAs, and/or wish to learn more are encouraged to take advantage of CTL training on the use of PLAs to enhance teaching, active learning, and course transformation. This is to ensure that faculty using PLAdawgs are aware of the PLAdawg Program’s guidelines, that they commit to following those guidelines, and that they have an implementation plan before they begin teaching with PLAdawgs. Faculty are also expected to help recruit PLAdawgs by identifying students who have already been successful in the course.10 In addition, faculty who are approved are encouraged to participate in PLASMA, the faculty learning community focused on teaching with PLAdawgs.

Students must have the opportunity to know that they are enrolling in a PLA-enhanced class through a note added to the course in Athena and/or to the eLC unit for that course. Faculty are responsible for making sure

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7 A Master PLA may, if the faculty member wishes, help teach the pedagogy course for new PLAs, but will not do any grading.
8 Academic credit will come from the UNIV training course that is linked with the experiential learning associated with serving as a PLA. For more information see: https://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.htm.
9 At present, only STEM courses may receive PLAs. Eventually, the program will expand beyond STEM courses.
10 An independent evaluation of the UGA pilot program noted that students who struggled early on in a course and went on to earn a B or A in the course were often particularly effective PLAs for that course.
that this notice is given. Faculty are also responsible for informing students about the role of the PLAdawgs and the benefits of having them in their course. Ideally this should happen in the first week of class.

It is important that faculty not expect the PLAdawgs to be content experts and that they understand that the PLAdawgs are employed to assist students by guiding and supporting their learning in the course. PLAdawgs are not employed to assist instructors by grading student work or independently running class sessions. Students who perform such duties may not be called PLAdawgs and will not be employed by the PLAdawgs Program.

Students in Courses with PLAdawgs

Active learning strategies and PLAdawgs will be unfamiliar to many undergraduates who will need to be introduced to the value of having a PLAdawg assisting them either through an online module in eLC (currently under development) or by spending time during the first week of classes to articulate the roles, expectations, and benefits of the program. It is also important for the growth, evaluation and revision of the PLAdawg Program that the students enrolled in courses using PLAdawgs participate in the assessment protocol; this expectation must be articulated clearly to students, and time for the assessment instrument must be built into the course structure.

Students should know that they are enrolling in a course supported by PLAdawgs through a note added to the course in Athena during registration and/or to the eLC unit for that course. In addition, the PLAdawg Program Leadership Team will create a webpage to communicate the benefits of having PLAdawgs in courses and list the upcoming semester’s courses that will have PLAdawgs. OSE and DAE will design, update, and host the website; a current version of the student-facing site is available at [dae.uga.edu/services/tutoring/become-a-pla/](https://dae.uga.edu/services/tutoring/become-a-pla/). Students also need to understand that, although PLAdawgs have taken the course and have been successful in it, they are neither content experts nor tutors. PLAdawgs are there to guide and support students’ learning in the course, not to teach the course.

The Proposed Process

Overview

The PLAdawg Program will have tools and processes in place to recruit faculty and PLAdawgs; to process and approve applications from prospective faculty and students who want to become PLAdawgs; and to hire, supervise and pay those students serve as PLAdawgs. The program will also work with faculty, the PLAdawgs, and students to assess the impact of the PLAdawg Program. The Associate Vice President for Instruction, the Director of the Division of Academic Enhancement, and the Director of the Office of STEM Education will comprise the Leadership Team for the program. The PLAdawg Board, made up of the Leadership Team and six faculty, will help maintain the quality of the program and promulgate best practices across campus. The Office of Instruction will advertise the program to ensure that faculty and students understand the benefits of the program and view the PLAdawg brand as a prestigious position for which undergraduates will want to compete. Campus-team leads and members are organized as follows:

1. Leadership Team includes Director of the Office of STEM Education as the organizational lead, the Director of the Division of Academic Enhancement as the implementation lead, and the Associate Vice President of Instruction charged with student success as the strategic and sustainability lead.

2. The PLAdawg Board includes the Leadership Team and six experienced faculty. The Board is the standards lead.

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11 Students who need tutoring should be referred to DAE.
3. **On-campus Support Programs** includes the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and resources within DAE.

**PLAdawgs**

Students who are interested in becoming PLAdawgs begin by completing an application (see appendix). If accepted, students new to the program will enroll in a pedagogy course designed to help them integrate content, pedagogy, and practice either during or prior to serving as a PLAdawg.

The standardized learning outcomes for the pedagogy course are as follows:

- Students will be able to integrate active-learning techniques into their peer-to-peer instruction;
- Students will be able to engage and coach peers in developing instructional philosophies across varying levels of ability;
- Students will be able to employ effective critical thinking and problem-based learning techniques;
- Students will be able to coach their peers on the best practices of self-directed learning;
- Students will be able to use diverse assessment and evaluative practices to gauge student learning;
- Students will be able to implement the standards of ethical conduct required to create a respectful and equitable learning environment;
- Students will be able to work effectively as part of a teaching team (faculty, fellow UGA PLAs, etc.);
- Students will be able to reflect upon teaching and learning and the choices made as a UGA PLA.

The training that the PLAdawgs receive from this pedagogy course is strengthened by assisting instructors in the classroom, by participating weekly in instructional planning, and by providing formative feedback to the instructor.

PLAdawgs will also complete an online module on Academic Honesty and Ethics before they begin working as a PLAdawg and will update that training yearly. Novice PLAdawgs will dedicate 7 hours a week to this service; this includes their time in the PLA-enhanced class, prep time for that course, weekly meetings with the instructor and the pedagogy course. PLAdawgs will take the pedagogy course only once; in subsequent semesters, they will work 6 hours per week for one section of a PLA-enhanced course and 9 hours a week if they assist a second section of the same course. PLAdawgs will be centrally recruited and hired by DAE to ensure that all hiring procedures are completed in a timely fashion, that resources are dynamically reallocated across all PLA-enhanced courses as needed, that training standards are met, that hiring is consistent and equitable, and that accounting overhead is minimized. Faculty may refer students to DAE for a PLAdawg position, but the decision on hiring will rest with DAE to ensure that all of the necessary hiring paperwork is completely correctly and on time.

**For Faculty**

Faculty will apply to use PLAdawgs in their course/s (see appendix for the application). They must either demonstrate an understanding of the program’s guidelines including the best practices for using PLAdawgs or have completed training through the CTL to show they are ready to bring PLAdawgs into their course. As part of the application, they will describe (e.g., via a course outline/syllabus or a narrative) how they will use PLAdawgs in their course, articulating the expected benefits to the students and to the PLAdawgs, and describing how they will engage and prepare the PLAdawgs for each week’s work. They must also commit to using the assessment tools promulgated by the PLAdawg Program; failure to do so will suspend their privilege to apply for PLAdawgs in the future. Preferential consideration will be given to those faculty who either can include a departmental/college match (in dollars or “in kind”) or who are willing to teach a section of the same course without PLAdawgs to help with assessment. The Leadership Team will select the faculty and courses to participate in the PLAdawgs Program each semester. All faculty who apply for PLAdawgs will be asked to indicate how they used the PLAdawgs throughout the semester; they will also take a brief pre- and post-survey about their own mindset, in particular on how their thinking about what students can achieve may have evolved.
Timetable
The timetable is critical as PLAdawgs need to have ample time to plan their own schedules once they have been identified and selected to serve as PLAdawgs. Timing of advertising, recruiting, and hiring is more critical during the transition between fall and spring semesters. Ideally the Office of Instruction will solicit applications from faculty in the beginning of the semester prior. Faculty will be chosen and notified before the midpoint of the semester so that departments/instructors can load comments into Athena, announce their PLA-enhanced courses, and recruit PLAdawgs. DAE will begin taking applications and interviewing potential PLAdawgs from mid-semester and make its selections around the time that most students will be registering for their next semester of classes. Faculty will be consulted about the PLAdawgs hired for their course.

12 It is important that faculty identify potential PLAs and encourage them to apply.
Appendix 3: Best Practices for Faculty Using PLAs

Faculty will be required to complete an application to use PLAs for each course they teach, every semester they teach it in order to track the development and impact of the program. If faculty are unsure about how best to work with PLAs, they may take a training course at CTL on active learning, pedagogy, course transformation, and the essential elements of effectively working with PLAs. Faculty with unsuccessful PLA applications are encouraged to take the training and to meet with members of PLASMA, CTL and/or the Leadership Team of the UGA program.

The success of the PLA program depends upon the commitment of faculty to learn from, mentor, and work effectively with undergraduate PLAs. As such, the bulk of these best practices involve the professional development and responsibilities of faculty wishing to use PLAs in active learning environments. Successful and effective implementation of PLAs is dependent on numerous factors that must be considered prior to applying to teach a PLA-enhanced course, including:

- **What will the PLAs be doing?** Answering this question will dictate the amount of instructional redesign required before PLAs can be effectively used in a course. The UGA program prioritizes using PLAs in courses that have been designed to incorporate active learning strategies. It is critical that instructors carefully consider what it is their PLAs will be expected to do during class meetings, what kind of PLA-supported activities will be included, and how much time will be devoted to these activities. These expectations must be clearly articulated in the PLA application and to the PLAs themselves. Some faculty may need to take advantage of CTL training and/or spend a semester planning what a PLA-enhanced class will look like.

Important information for faculty to include in their application include the following:

- **In what physical space will the PLAs be working?** Different learning environments are suited for different types of student/PLA interactions. In large lecture halls, PLAs will likely circulate within a certain section of the room. It is important that they be able to access the students. In small classes, PLAs might be able to serve the entire class of students. In SCALE-UP classrooms, PLAs are often seen working with one or two tables of students. PLAs can also work in laboratory environments under the supervision of faculty or graduate teaching assistants.

- **How many PLAs are needed?** A 1:15-20 ratio is recommended, but a different ratio may be more appropriate for certain kinds of classes. For faculty, the key question is this: in a class session how much contact between students and a PLA is both realistic and effective. Both too few and too many PLAs could be worse than having no PLAs.

- **Instructional Materials:** It is important the PLAs have access, in advance, to any materials for which they are expected to provide support. This could include presentation slides, problem sets, discussion questions, and the like. During the pilot program, PLAs frequently cited the need for answer keys to help them support the students during the classroom activities. To support their PLAs, the faculty will need to prepare several class sessions ahead of time (e.g., if PLAs and faculty meet on Monday for a course that meets Monday/Wednesday/Friday, faculty should be prepared to work with PLAs on material for the entire week of classes).

- **Regularity of Meetings:** Faculty need to meet with their PLAs every week. Consistent and regularly scheduled meetings will help ensure that PLAs and their supervising faculty are on the same page. Faculty who are unwilling or unable to dedicate at least one hour a week to meeting with and preparing their PLAs are unlikely to have their application for a PLA-enhanced course approved.

Faculty are also expected to

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13 This section is drawn from the White Paper drafted by PLASMA, spring 2018.
14 UC-Boulder suggests a minimum ratio of 1:40-50 students.
1) Comply with the following Best Practices:
   a. Conduct a pre-semester course orientation for all PLAs;
   b. Inform students in their course about the role of the PLAs (what they will and will not do and how they will benefit them) and prepare them for the active learning strategies they will encounter;
   c. Get to know their PLAs as people and recognize that they are important members of the teaching team.
   d. Meet weekly with PLAs for at least 1 hour to plan instruction and to provide mentoring.
   e. Communicate clearly and directly to the PLAs their roles and responsibilities through a PLA contract (see appendix).
   f. Observe PLAs and provide constructive and concrete feedback to facilitate their growth as instructors.
   g. Encourage PLAs to reflect on their own teaching and learning through a journal or other community forum.

2) Contribute to the growth and development of PLA program by fully participating in the assessment plan.

3) Participate in PLASMA in order to grow professionally and enhance their teaching practices based on personal experiences and research on teaching. In addition, instructors experienced in working with PLAs are strongly encouraged to mentor less experienced instructors in order to ensure consistent quality of PLA use across the program.