

May 31, 2023

Institutional and Programmatic Context

The Learning Assistant Program at the University of Iowa provides support to students through embedded peers in historically challenging courses. Learning Assistants (LAs), undergraduate peer leaders, support faculty with implementation of active and collaborative learning activities. The LAs serve as an additional resource for students during class. To both effectively serve in the role and to help Learning Assistants feel supported and confident, Learning Assistants participate in a pre-semester day of training and a required weekly credit bearing course *Pedagogy: Creating Collaborative Learning Environments*. The pre-semester training and pedagogy course cover topics like effective helping skills, questioning techniques, diversity, equity, and inclusion in learning environments, and metacognition.

In the LA role, LAs are expected to help students who signal that they need help and students who do not actively request assistance. It is common for LAs to assume that students who do not seek help may already understand the material and do not need support. A student may not seek help for a variety of reasons (e.g., embarrassment, social anxiety, motivation). To promote help-seeking behaviors, effective classroom habits, and relationship-building among students, Learning Assistants are trained on strategies to approach and assist students who do not actively seek assistance during classroom activities.

At the start of the semester, LAs share they are overwhelmed the first few times they facilitate activities in class. With the fear of making mistakes and the nuances of navigating peer dynamics, many Learning Assistants struggle approaching students who are not seeking assistance or engaging actively in class. When an LA musters the courage, they often ask the close-ended and dialogue-stopping question “Do you need help?” To aid Learning Assistants in better understanding student experiences, *Chapter 1: Start with One in Connections are Everything* will be incorporated into the required pedagogy course. Learning Assistants will be assigned to read the chapter prior to class to prepare for a classroom reflection and discussion about their own experiences with college connections and how to help the students they support. Learning Assistants could be a student’s “one” that is a catalyst for that student’s sense of belonging and college success!

Pedagogy Course, Lesson Details

Pedagogy Course Context:

Small group discussions in class are led by undergraduate Peer Mentors. Small group sizes range from five to nine students, with the total class size ranging from 17-30 students.

Objectives:

Learning Assistants will...

- Develop an understanding of the impact of college connections on student success.
- Determine strategies for developing connections with the students they serve.

Small Group Discussion

Prompts

- What from the reading relates to your own college experience?
- Based on the chapter, your reflection, and this discussion, what might you consider when supporting the students you serve in your role?
- For students who appear less engaged in class and/or do not request assistance, how could you reach out to help them engage? [Depending on the discussion that occurs, the Peer Mentor could guide the conversation towards specific phrases to use, nonverbals, possible conversation topics the Learning Assistants could incorporate into the conversation with the student, and ways to offer resources as a warm handoff.]

Individual Reflection Time in Class (prompts will be shown on the board)

Prompts are from the “Ask Yourself...” section at the end of Chapter 1

- Have you met anyone yet who might be the “start” to your relationship-rich education? If you have, how will you deepen this relationship?
- If you haven’t found that person yet, make a list of people who could potentially be an initial connection for you. If you don’t have specific people in mind, you might just list categories of people (for example, a professor, or a student who has already been admitted to the nursing program). How can you begin to establish connections with this person or these people?

Small Group Share Out

Prompt

- Folks can share as much as they are comfortable. Based on your reflection, what next steps can you take to build your college connections?

Assessment

We plan to incorporate this content into our current assessment approaches for the LA program: LA observations, pedagogy course discussions, and pedagogy course assignments. LA observations consists of the LA being observed while facilitating in the classroom, meeting one on one with the observer to discuss feedback, and writing a reflection paper about the experience. The observer looks for how the LA builds rapport with students, how the LA asks questions to foster student learning, and how the LA navigates the physical classroom environment. Through one-on-one meetings and written reflections, LAs practice critical thinking and perspective-taking to determine how they can further develop their facilitation skills and support students. Additionally, LA understanding of and strategies for developing student connections will be demonstrated through on-going pedagogy course discussions and assignments such as journal submissions.

Closing

The University of Iowa Office of Academic Support and Retention appreciates Dr. Felten's and Dr. Lambert's inclusion and support of our programs in the development of *Connections are Everything*. His partnership provided opportunities to expand our understanding of student experiences both in and outside of our institution. We are excited to incorporate and implement the book into the Learning Assistant Program to help students further develop connections for belonging and success.

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