Peer-Assisted Learning at Sheridan

Overview

Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) is an academic support program available through Library and Learning Services that primarily targets first-year, historically difficult courses. Courses are determined as "difficult" if historically they have a combined drop-out, withdrawal and failure rate of 20-30% or more; alternatively, PAL can target a "gate-keeper" course, a course that requires completion before a student can move forward in his or her program. At Sheridan, we are exploring PAL to determine how it might best meet the academic support needs of our students and faculty.

PAL is a non-remedial approach to learning. It offers regularly scheduled, out-of-class review sessions to all students enrolled in a targeted course. Study sessions are informal seminars in which students review notes, discuss readings, develop organizational tools and prepare for examinations. Students learn how to integrate course content with reasoning and study skills. PAL leaders facilitate the sessions. The leaders are students, chosen by the faculty who have taught them, and who have previously and successfully completed the targeted course. The leaders attend all class lectures, take notes, and act as model students for their classmates.

All leaders attend an intensive two-day training session before the beginning of the academic term, provided by the Centre for Teaching and Learning and the Tutoring Centres. This training addresses issues about how students learn and presents facilitation strategies aimed at strengthening student academic performance. Leaders attend all or most class sessions, take notes, read all assigned material, and conduct regularly scheduled study sessions each week.

A Sheridan PAL leader is paid through Library and Learning Services. They work between 6-10 hours per week, submitting time sheets to the Tutoring Centre on their campus. A typical weekly schedule for a leader might look like the following:

- 1xhr preparing for the study session(s)
- 3xhr re-attending lectures and labs to take notes, to participate in class as a peer, and to model good student behaviour
- 3xhr hosting study sessions (eg. 1x3hr session; 2x1.5hr session; 1x3hr session per week—the frequency and length of sessions is determined by the Professor, leader and the students in the targeted course)
- 1xhr connecting with the faculty member teaching the course section (this may be done in person or via email)[i]

The amount of time preparing, re-attending, hosting and connecting may vary per week, but faculty are asked to inform their potential PAL leader to be prepared to work an average of 7

hours per week. Since Library and Learning Services began piloting the model in 2014, the weekly schedule has been modified for different programs and Faculties, depending on experience, feedback and need. Curious if your Faculty is running PAL? Ask your Associate Dean or contact the Tutoring Centre.

The Tutoring Centre coordinator supervises the leaders. Together with the Manager of the Learning Centres, the Tutoring Centre is responsible for identifying the targeted courses, gaining faculty support, selecting and training leaders, monitoring the quality of the study sessions, evaluating the program, and reporting results to faculty and campus administrators.

PAL Key Elements
- Targets historically difficult courses rather than "at-risk" students
- Attempts to help students develop essential academic skills
- Participation in the PAL program is voluntary and open to all students in the section of the course PAL is being offered
- Begins during the first week of the term, before students encounter academic difficulties
- Offered only in classes where there is support from the faculty member
- The leader is trained in specific teaching/learning theory and techniques
- The leader re-attends some or all of the lectures for the targeted course
- The leader does not lecture, grade nor have any interaction with evaluation
- The Tutoring Centre oversees the program

Professor Information
Professors with PAL in their course(s) are asked to:
- Allow the leader to make weekly announcements in class regarding study sessions or availability in the Tutoring Centre
- Send e-mails to students enrolled in the course to promote study session attendance or visits to the Tutoring Centre
- Post study session schedules in classroom and on SLATE
- Meet with the leader to review session materials and discuss class content (either in person or via email, but frequency is determined by the professor and leader)
- Provide student data to the Tutoring Centre for program review

Professors are not responsible for training, supervising the leaders, or for enforcing student participation in any study sessions. Professor support is vital to the success of the program and each faculty member is encouraged to promote study sessions and PAL leader interaction to students enrolled in the course.

What are the benefits of PAL for my students?
- Leaders can provide feedback about difficult course content
- Leaders can be used for in-class peer-to-peer activities
- Leaders can help students prepare for class lectures

- PAL can contribute to the retention, progression, and graduation students
- Evaluations can improve
- Data can be used as information to support research grants

How will PAL affect my class time?

Professors are asked to promote and allow leaders to use a brief amount of time to introduce PAL and announce times and locations study sessions, if applicable, as well as and conduct brief mid-term evaluations of the program.

Tell me more about the study sessions outside of class time.

The PAL program either offers whole-class study sessions or drop-in, smaller group sessions in the Tutoring Centre on campus. The sessions attempt to integrate how to learn with what to learn. Students who attend the sessions develop study strategies for note taking, graphic organization, questioning techniques, vocabulary acquisition, and test preparation as they review course material. Students have the opportunity to become actively involved with their classmates as they process the text, supplementary readings and lecture notes. The leader uses the course content as a vehicle for helping students to develop learning skills. Students attend sessions on a voluntary basis. Since the sessions are introduced on the first day of classes and are open to all students in the class, the program is not viewed as remedial.

Study sessions typically occur just before and right after a class lecture, outside of class time. Session times are offered one to three times per week, depending on student preference (students are surveyed by the leaders to determine best times). The scheduling of sessions aims to be located in the same building or in close proximity to the class lecture to make attending the sessions convenient for students.

How do I recommend leaders?

If you would like to recommend a student as a leader for your course, please connect with the Tutoring Centres. A faculty recommendation is required to complete the leader application. Email: tutoring@sheridancollege.ca.

Questions?

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Danielle Palombi, Manager, Tutoring Centres or Sonali Banerjee, Tutoring Centres Coordinator at sonali.banerjee@sheridancollege.ca, ext. 5328.

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[i] Connecting with the faculty member teaching the course section is considered preparation for the course. PAL is an academic support requested by faculty, provided to faculty interested in offering the program; it is understood that by requesting the program, there is a vested interest in using the program to enhance the course for the faculty member and his/her students. The time does not have to be regularly scheduled, and may function in the form of an "FYI", where the leader emails his/her study session plans to the faculty member for the week. The faculty member, if he/she wishes, can review the content for the purpose of ensuring the leader is on the right track for the sake of upcoming assignments and tests.