

HOW TO BE A GREAT PROBLEMS SEMINAR PLA

Christina Noyes & Tatiana Huet de Bacellar
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Congratulations! You have been selected to be a Peer Learning Assistant (PLA) for a freshman Great Problems Seminar (GPS). This job is not only exclusive, but highly rewarding. This guide, written by PLAs for PLAs, will equip you with a few ideas and tips to be the best PLA you can be. Though every experience is different, we hope that this guide will help you understand the role and be comfortable making it your own.

SECTION 1: Relationships

PLA TO STUDENT

You are the liaison between the students and the professors for this course. Students will have questions and concerns about the material that they may only feel comfortable bringing to their peers. They can express concerns about the course material that they would normally bring to friends to you as a PLA. Therefore, it is important to be viewed as one of the student's peers, and not one of their professors.

In order to be a peer, the student-to-PLA relationship is key. The PLA must balance the friendly and informal with the serious and reliable. A few tips that may help you accomplish this balance are:

- **Participate** - Share your opinion in class and comment on points made by students to show you are actively involved. This also helps you to be engaged in class content and be able to give better feedback on work.
- **Talk it out** - Is the workload overwhelming? What are their thoughts on the last class or the course? This shows that you are a trusted peer and they can come to you when needed.
- **Give feedback like a friend** - When going over work or presentations, explain the feedback using personal experience and tell stories of each situation. This will show them that you have also been in the situations as a student, and are passing along the wisdom gathered.
- **Be yourself** - Make jokes, laugh at yourself, talk about sports, connect with the students as a friend. However, be careful since there is a fine line. Be aware about what you talk about and whether it is appropriate. While you are their peer, this is your job, and you must always remain professional to be taken seriously.
- **Stay on the ball** - Never fall behind on what the students are supposed to be doing. The students won't rely on you if you are not able to help them or point them in the right direction. Keep the class syllabus on hand, and be ready to answer questions quickly through e-mail.

PLA TO PROFESSOR(S)

The relationship between the PLA and the students are very important, but the relationship between the PLA and the professor(s) is just as important. It is good to set up a weekly meeting with the professor(s) so you are all on the same page. This is a good time to talk about upcoming assignments and presentations as well as how the groups are doing with their projects. It is also a great time to be clear on your specific responsibilities as a PLA (grading,

office hours, being present for class, etc.). There are many responsibilities you have as a PLA in order to help the professor(s) with the class. Though each professor prefers different shared tasks, here are a few tasks that you could suggest to take part in:

- **Coursework** - Make an effort to get involved with the course and know the material that was assigned as homework so you can help with the discussions. It is also your job to be very clear on what is assigned and expected in case students ask. If there is assigned reading, ask the professor if it is appropriate for you to partake in it as well.
- **Grading-** If you are asked to grade, make sure to go over the way to grade with the professors. Rubrics and designated point values are good ideas to remain consistent and fair in grading. When you are grading a student's work, don't be afraid to defer judgment on a grade to the professor(s). If the student has completed the work in an unusual manner, it is best to put a tentative grade on it, and check with the professor(s). The professor(s) will want to know about assignment abnormalities. *Always grade with honesty and fairness.* Some PLAs prefer to grade an assignment without looking at names in order to assure consistency. In your PLA workshop, you will learn your legal and moral grading responsibilities as well as campus academic honesty policies.
- **Working with the groups** - this is a very important role as attending group meetings, you become the connection between the students and then professors. Later, we discuss the possibility of attending weekly group meetings and giving your advice to the students. This forces an interaction, while not making yourself too involved. It is important to observe how the groups work together to see if everyone is contributing and if they are making progress with their research. If you see things that are red flags like no new research or a team member didn't do their part, these are things to tell the professors *and only the professors.*
- **Confidentiality** - grades and comments about the students are for you, the other PLAs and the professors and student him/herself only. Be sure to respect this policy and keep grades and comments private. Sometimes, when you are grading student work, you may encounter funny or unusual responses. Even if the responses are comical, you cannot share them with your friends.

PLA TO OTHER PLA(S)

This only applies to those in large classes working with other PLAs. If you are working with another PLA, keep in mind that they also have their classes and extracurricular activities. In order to have a team, it is important to get to know your PLA partner and be flexible with their schedule. When planning times to meet up, be as open as possible to find a time that works for both of you. As students at WPI, some days are more stressful than others. If your PLA partner has a lot on their plate, be understanding and work things out so they can also focus on their own academics. It is also helpful to get to know the other PLA. Find out their strengths (as well as your own) and learn to utilize the best of each other. Perhaps one is excellent at brainstorming with a group and another has more experience with posters. Trust is key to having a good PLA team. Don't be afraid to ask your PLA partners questions about the assignments, or how they have been handling grading work. If you have any issues with your PLA partner, be sure to tell the professor you are working with of the issues that arise.

SECTION 2: In Class

WHAT TO DO IN CLASS

Depending on preference of the professor, you may be asked to sit in on classes. Your attitude, attentiveness, and demeanor in class must set the tone. A helpful hint is to take a seat in the back of the room. This way, you encourage students to sit closer to the professor (by not occupying those seats) and you can make sure that students are engaged. In most GPS classes, discussion will be common, and you are included in this. Asking questions and giving opinions can help the entire class. Be sure to stay informed of the things being assigned and the exact due dates and expectations in class; students may direct assignment-based questions your way. In class, it is also a great opportunity to observe how students are interacting and learning cooperatively. Faculty may want your opinion on what worked well in a given class period and what could be done to improve the class. Take note of when students seem engaged, when they are drifting – provide feedback to faculty to help them improve the course.

WORK DAYS

A day in class that is designated to project work is essential for team-PLA interaction. Here, you should check in with all of the groups for at least a few minutes each. Keep the tone light by asking open ended questions about their project. Once you have a feel for where they stand as a group, help them to consider the next steps that they are comfortable making. This way, groups are constantly progressing and using class time efficiently. It is always a good idea to ask the group if you can do anything for them, as they may be leery to ask on their own. Remind them of their resources (the library website, their research librarian, the archived projects, etc.). Relating your experience to theirs can be helpful in this class time to keep them relaxed and see the finish line of the project.

SECTION 3: Outside of Class

PLAs can interact with students in many ways outside of class. Each PLA should decide the best methods with their professors, but a few ideas are as follows:

- Emailing
- Sitting in on/facilitating group meetings
- Office hours
- Practice presentations

EMAILING

As a PLA, you will most likely be contacted often with questions. It is important to check your email regularly and respond quickly to give students enough time to understand and complete the task by the assigned deadline. Share your email with the class on the website and/or syllabus. Emailing the entire class is easy through the blackboard site to remind students of events and due dates (emailing feature will be in tools as soon as your professor adds you as a teaching assistant or grader to the course).

SITTING IN ON GROUP MEETINGS

Come second term, groups should be meeting at a **minimum** of once a week. This gives you and your fellow PLAs an opportunity to note the progress of each group, and group dynamic. Ask your group when they plan on meeting in the next few weeks and plan a time that you will “visit a meeting”. It is best to stay at the meeting for only about 15 minutes then leave, so that they can have their scheduled time to work together. It is recommended to do this for as long as the groups seem to need it (but especially in the project forming times). Keep an eye on:

- equal contributions from each member
- that every member expresses his/her opinions
- that every member has his/her opinions heard
- that progress is occurring in the correct direction
- that they have all necessary resources

Take notes on how the meeting seems to be going and discuss with the professors how each group is working especially if there seems to be a problem. As soon as a conflict in a group arises, it is crucial to address the situation, intervene with help and mediation, and notify the professors.

OFFICE HOURS

Office hours are not always necessary, and are up to your discretion. During the first term, when the workload is heavy, it is helpful to have at least one PLA hold office hours for homework support. Another time that office hours are helpful is when individual feedback can be provided. For example, if students all present and you have taken notes, it may be nice to hold a few sessions of “office hours” to give this feedback confidentially to anyone who would like to improve their skills. Office hours should always be in an on-campus location that students feel comfortable. Library tech suites or quiet study areas in buildings are ideal. Typically, it is most helpful for students if office hours are held a few times a week as they are just as busy as us. If you are planning on having office hours, poll to see which time may be more convenient for your students.

PRACTICE PRESENTATIONS

For big presentations, it may be helpful to invite the students to additional specialized office hours. This would be the time students can practice presenting in a real classroom at the front of the room with you as their audience. To do so, book a room (preferably one similar to the class in which the course is held in) for a few hours. The more groups that come to this practice session the better; it will help them see other projects and learn from what they see. Keep the environment relaxed and casual so they feel comfortable.

Critiquing the students’ work may be difficult. Constructive criticism is the best way to go about giving advice when it comes to projects. The two major things you will be critiquing are presentations and posters. Combine both positive points of their strong suits and areas to improve upon to keep their morale up while improving their work. Here are a few things to look at when critiquing.

Posters

- Is it too cluttered? Too empty?
- Do the colors contrast?
- Are fonts consistent?
- Will all text be visible?
- Is the amount of text appropriate?
- Are all graphs and pictures labeled and appropriate?
- Does it “flow”?
- Is justification/alignment consistent?
- Typos/Grammar
- Professors names and departments correct
- Departments correctly abbreviated

Presentations

- Volume/annunciation
- Tone (sound excited and enticing)
- Posture (stand up straight, shoulders back)
- Sharing speaking time among members
- Placement of hands (do not move hands too much or have them in pockets)
- Looking interested while not speaking
- Eye contact (looking at the back wall of the room is a good way to fake it)
- Suggest ideas/possible next steps

WHAT MAKES A GREAT PLA?

Being a great PLA is a combination of being knowledgeable, relatable, patient, creative, and helpful. In class and out of class, you are expected to be a trusted advisor. That being said, it is an extremely rewarding job where you can draw from your own experiences to make it your own. Good luck and have fun!