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# The Community and Structure of Sacramento State's Peer Assisted Learning Program

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## Abstract

The Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Program at California State University, Sacramento serves its diverse student body to increase academic success in STEM courses. Our program encourages students to learn collectively alongside their peers and carve out their own understanding of coursework. As previous and current Facilitators in the PAL program, we provide insight into our program's unique structure, extensive training, and the great sense of community developed by the several PAL program facets and unique aspects described. The PAL program nurtures a sense of belonging and growth among Facilitators and students alike by fostering an environment that serves as a “Third Space,” a supportive community beyond the traditional academic environment.

Keywords: Peer Assisted Learning (PAL), Facilitators, STEM Education, Training and Development, Third Space and Community

### Introduction

California State University, Sacramento (also known as Sacramento State or CSUS), is a large public university serving over 30,000 students. It has been ranked the Second Most Diverse Campus in the West and is a proud Hispanic-Serving Institution and Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (Wall Street Journal, 2023). Sacramento State has also recently been recognized as the first Black-Serving Institution in California (Sacramento State, 2024). Our Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) program at CSUS was established in the Spring of 2012. Uniquely, we refer to our program as Peer Assisted Learning, or PAL. PAL was originally composed of four Peer Leaders, or as we call them, Facilitators, and one faculty member serving only Introductory Chemistry students. At present, our program serves 17 major gateway STEM courses with 50-65 Facilitators. Originally funded with a federal grant from the National Science Foundation in 2011, approximately 75% of current program funding comes from the University's Division of Academic Affairs. The remainder is supported by other grants. Facilitators are employed part-time and work 8-10 hours per week. Facilitators are compensated for hosting their workshops, attending lectures for the parent course their workshop serves, and holding office hours and exam review sessions.

All Facilitators enroll in a two-unit upper-division seminar course where we have time to engage in preparatory workshops, troubleshoot any issues we run into, practice scaffolding and adherence to the PLTL model, and even conduct our own research projects. During the first half of our seminar course, we engage in run-throughs. Here all Facilitators go over the worksheet content and practice scaffolding.

The PAL program maintains a leadership structure consisting of Facilitators, Lead Facilitators, and Supervisory Facilitators, who are all undergraduate students employed in the program. Lead Facilitators oversee a specific course; they lead run-throughs and ensure scaffolding practice, maintain communication with course instructors, coordinate recruitment, regularly check in with Supervisory Facilitators, frequently touch bases with new Facilitators, and schedule exam review sessions. Supervisory Facilitators oversee an entire STEM discipline; they maintain communication with Lead Facilitators; recognize and troubleshoot any issue that may arise; organize Facilitator office hours; conduct observations; and engage in other administrative duties. Supervisory Facilitators also conduct observations following a structured observation protocol assessing a Facilitator's interpersonal qualities, classroom management skills, and facilitation while adhering to the PLTL model (Shanbrom et al., 2023).

An integral part of serving as a Facilitator is demonstrating empathetic behavior while supporting the academics of our peers. These are key characteristics our faculty and current Facilitators look for when interviewing candidates to join our program. Individuals are

considered based on their academic background and references, as well as being intrinsically motivated to serve their community. Having that solid foundation as a Facilitator is vital to providing our students with quality learning environments and supporting the learning of our peers. Additionally, our training and the seminar course equip us with the tools necessary to support our students, both academically and emotionally. As Facilitators, we develop skills like professionalism, leadership, and group management. Our training and PAL community teach us how to create comfortable environments so our students can learn and flourish without hesitation.

Being a Facilitator at California State University, Sacramento also comes with a keen sense of community and belonging. We regularly think of being a part of the PAL program as our Third Space, providing us with a home away from home. This idea of Third Space, which has been introduced by Bhabha (1994), depicts a Third Space as a hybrid space that brings diverse backgrounds and perspectives together, promoting growth and interaction outside of the academic environment. This concept has been developed further to show how a Third Space can support students both in social and cognitive development (Gutiérrez, 2008).

### Hiring process

The hiring process for Facilitators is centered on identifying students who demonstrate a strong sense of empathy, as this quality is fundamental to effective peer support. While we consider other qualifications such as dedication for helping other students succeed, intrinsic motivation to serve this community, and understanding of course material, we have found that prioritizing empathy and providing training in additional skills result in Facilitators who are better equipped to help students succeed in their college courses. Applicants who previously were students in PAL workshops are frequently hired due to their familiarity with the PLTL model.

A critical aspect of our hiring process is the active involvement of current Facilitators. These experienced individuals are vital in evaluating candidates, utilizing their firsthand knowledge of the responsibilities and challenges associated with the role. They participate in interviews, provide feedback on applicants' suitability, and assess their potential to thrive as Facilitators. Additionally, they create the scenarios presented to interviewees, which are based on real situations Facilitators have encountered. For example:

*In your workshop, your student is upset with you for not providing the answers and tells you it would be so much easier if you told them. How would you approach talking to the student to help remedy the situation?*

This scenario is specifically designed to test the candidate's kindness towards difficult students. Another was designed to test the candidate's adaptability when their workshop does not run as planned:

*Your students David and Michael are in the same course and the professors are on different topics in their class. Michael is absent today and David must navigate the session with other students who are not on the same topic or worksheet as David. What would you do in this situation?*

This approach allows candidates to be assessed on their ability to handle practical, real-world challenges. Current Facilitators also develop interviewing skills.

### Before semester training

The Friday before the start of each semester, the PAL program holds a mandatory eight-hour training session for both new and returning Facilitators. There is also optional training for new Facilitators and Lead Facilitators on the Wednesday before the semester starts. The session prepares Facilitators to develop integrity, professionalism, and most importantly the necessary skills, knowledge, and confidence to lead a workshop. Skill-building workshops like icebreaker activities (name games), communication exercises (role-playing scenarios), interpersonal skills activities, and group management sessions, such as conflict resolution workshops are presented. These activities allow Facilitators to build trust within the group they are working with, learn how to be active listeners, develop a collaborative learning environment, ask students effective questions, resolve conflicts, and engage in an interactive role-playing session. Facilitators then come together to reflect and discuss their experiences.

Another part of the pre-semester training is a group mentorship activity, where small groups of four to five new Facilitators are paired up with experienced Facilitators to address difficult classroom scenarios that could potentially happen in a Facilitator's workshop. The most important activity during the pre-semester training is the "scaffolding" workshop. Scaffolding is when a Facilitator asks guiding questions only when their students are stuck on a problem or concept, to help their students think through the problem and find a solution. An example of scaffolding is when students ask their Facilitators questions such as "Where do I go from here?", in which a Facilitator would first turn questions to other group members before trying to scaffold. If group members need further help, their Facilitator would "scaffold" with a response along the lines of "What were the steps we have done so far? What are we trying to do? What have you tried already? What should our desired answer look like?" Questions and responses such as this example are practiced within the "scaffolding" workshop.

### Weekly workshops: Preparation and research

Throughout the semester, Facilitators meet for two hours every Wednesday night for our two-unit upper division graded seminar: Honors Seminar in Peer Learning (NSM 197). For the first hour, Facilitators engage in subject-specific course group meetings. Our program refers to this first hour as "run-through" where Facilitators work within their disciplines to prepare for the week's upcoming workshops by discussing the course material, reviewing

worksheet questions, and practicing workshop techniques by holding a mock session, using the coming week's worksheet. Here Facilitators go over key concepts, the common difficulties students face, and effective ways to scaffold complex topics. Facilitators also take time during the first hour to talk about any difficulties, conflicts, or concerns they have regarding their students or the material with their Lead Facilitator and other group members. Faculty and Supervisory Facilitators check in with groups during this time as well. The second hour of NSM 197 consists of one of the following activities: PAL panels, embedded undergraduate research as described below, leadership development or cultural competency workshops, or holiday parties or special events. In PAL panels, Facilitators can ask a panel of 5-6 experienced Facilitators, selected by faculty, any questions they have.

A significant part of the Sacramento State PAL program is the embedded undergraduate research project, in which all Facilitators participate. This is beneficial for Facilitators because it is early exposure for undergraduates to experience STEM education research at low stakes. Facilitators get to build a cohesive group dynamic while having assigned roles and responsibilities within the project. They get to understand major aspects of research, and practice skills such as adaptivity, problem-solving, and critical thinking. Faculty also work with Facilitators on their research by providing advice and assisting them in developing an effective plan. The undergraduate research project is a year-long project which is broken across two semesters. Research meetings make up more than half of the NSM 197 semester agenda, which take place during the second hour of the course, contributing to the Facilitator's grades in NSM 197.

During the Fall semester, the first research meeting allows Facilitators to come together within their disciplines to create ideas for the project. Here Facilitators follow the steps of Backward Design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005) and discuss within groups what they want their students to do, how to measure whether they can, and what classroom interventions can cause that effect. In the following research meeting, Facilitators are briefly introduced to how backward design can be used to achieve these educational goals. Here Facilitators get to vote on which group's ideas they like best, and they can choose to join another group if they are interested in the project. Once groups and projects have been finalized, *subsequent* meetings consist of building background including a literature review on the topic, and methodology. Groups have until the end of the fall semester to finalize their background and methodology. The spring semester is when Facilitators start their interventions, collect data, analyze their data, and form their overall conclusions. They also work within their groups to create a poster with their introduction, methodology, results, and overall conclusions, which they present at the annual PAL Research Symposium. For examples of the projects, where the last three years of posters are available (Shanbrom et al.,

2023), please visit the CSUS PAL Research page, <https://www.csus.edu/college/natural-sciences-mathematics/peer-assisted-learning-program-pal/pal-research.html>.

### Program subdivision groups

Workshops during the second hour are currently hosted by two of the three subdivision groups within our program: the Leadership Development Team (LDT), and the Cultural Competency Ambassadors (CCA). These groups are recent additions to the PAL program and are funded by grants. Facilitators are given the option to join one or more subdivision groups in the first few weeks of the semester but are not obligated to participate. These groups are guided by a faculty member who oversees the group sessions and facilitates discussions. The Leadership Development Team creates workshops that are focused on helping Facilitators recognize and be able to discuss the leadership and workplace skills they are developing as part of the program, including how these skills translate to success after college. The Cultural Competency Ambassadors create workshops and events that spread cultural awareness, teaching Facilitators how to interact, understand, and appreciate cultural differences. The last subdivision of our program is the Research Activity Discussion (RAD) group. In the RAD group Facilitators meet to discuss STEM education and focus on analyzing research projects, reading and discussing research papers, and developing research ideas and skills. The RAD group has analyzed the impact that the PAL program has had on the STEM population at Sacramento State by interviewing recently graduated Facilitators and asking them what type of impact PAL had on their careers.

An example of an LDT workshop is the “adaptability” session where a Facilitator in a mock PAL workshop is introduced to different student types and behaviors, followed by a discussion. In a recent iteration of this workshop, Facilitators were split into different groups and each Facilitator was given a card with a role. Roles included problem student, golden student, student glued-to-their-phone, and Facilitator. Individuals who were given the Facilitator role were tested on their ability to maintain and run the session filled with different types of behaviors expressed by students. Another workshop led by LDT was the "Living into Your Values" activity from *Dare to Lead* (Brown, 2018), where Facilitators identified their core values, examined conflicting behaviors, and proposed actions to live by these values. For example, a Facilitator could identify integrity as a core value, with aligned behaviors like being truthful and conflicting behaviors such as telling white lies. Actions to embody this value might include admitting mistakes openly and providing honest feedback.

A workshop planned by CCA that emphasized these principles was the “station” workshop. Facilitators were split evenly into groups and rotated through interactive stations which each had their own activities such as a language exchange corner, interactive culture posters, and an intersectionality activity. For example, in the language exchange corner,

Facilitators learned basic phrases in different languages with native speakers, while in the interactive culture posters, Facilitators displayed their culture by making a small mural with symbols and depictions of traditions. The “intersectionality” activity involved scenarios and discussions about how identity can impact experiences. CCA also hosted two culture fairs in the 2023-2024 school year. The fair consisted of a cultural fashion show, an artifact station, music and dance, food, and presentations. The fashion show showcased traditional garments worn by Facilitators. The artifact section consisted of items such as books, traditional clothing, photographs, handcrafted artwork, traditional instruments, and anything else Facilitators found important to their culture. The music and dance station included traditional performances such as Debke (an Arabic dance) and Tinikling (a traditional Philippine folk dance). The food section offered a variety of international cuisines, and the presentation section covered cultural holidays. The culture fair, attended by Facilitators as well as STEM faculty members, encouraged mentorship and also enhanced networking opportunities for Facilitators with faculty members.

#### Community: Third Space

An additional strong focus of the PAL program is fostering a sense of community within the program. One way the program does this is hosting holiday parties or special events every semester during the second hour of the Wednesday NSM 197 course. The program uniquely names these celebrations by punning the holidays and events, e.g. “PALiday Party” for our December party, “PALoween” for Halloween, and “PALentine’s Day” for Valentine's Day. A few other special events our program has are “PALcademy Awards” and “Name that Baby,” which take place on the same day as our PAL graduation ceremony. The PALcademy Awards are given to Facilitators based on different categories such as those “most likely to PAL someone on a daily basis” or “most welcoming Facilitators.” “Name that baby” is a game played by all Facilitators, where graduating Facilitators provide their baby pictures, and everyone has to guess which baby picture belongs to whom.

Our program also participates in CSUS intramural sports with names that also use the “PAL” pun, for example, our previous volleyball team was called “PALleyball” and our basketball team was called “LePAL James.” Within our program, we also have PAL social events such as movie night, bowling, cafe night, and a highly popular evening barbecue cookout. Our program’s community would not be as strong as it is if it weren’t for our program office, which we call the “PALace.” This space is unique to our program because Facilitators hold office hours there. The PALace is populated almost exclusively by students. It is a student-centered space where Facilitators and students can talk to each other while working on coursework. Often Facilitators bring extra treats, such as pizza or doughnuts, from their workshop into the PALace to share.



Following the methodologies of CCA, the PAL program at CSUS strives to be a Third Space for Facilitators and students (Gutiérrez, 2008). A Third Space is a social environment separate from the usual social environments of home, school, and work. It is a home away from home that gives people a sense of belonging, community, and feeling comfortable being themselves. The PAL program strives to create a supportive environment for both facilitators and students, which is similar to Vadeboncoeur's (2006) description of how an informal learning environment can foster personal development through engagement.

To some, the PALace is a Third Space, but to most, the PAL sessions themselves are a Third Space. Many students, especially those who come from diverse cultural backgrounds, feel the need to adapt their behaviors to fit university culture or modern culture, which can be stressful. The PALace offers social interaction and support in an informal environment, which can be helpful for students trying to adapt to college life (Oldenburg 1989). A Third Space in PAL is when students and Facilitators together build a supportive community, and a safe environment to share experiences, challenges, and emotions. Having access to environments as such can help students focus on course material, by reducing stress and fostering open communication between Facilitators and students. A Third Space is a place that empowers students to take ownership of their growth and learning (Baxter Magolda, 2004). A Third Space in PAL promotes students' emotional well-being and supports their academic success.

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