

# **Learning Assistants in the Classroom**

**Produced by Administrative Boards Subcommittee on Learning Assistants in  
the Classroom**

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## **Introduction**

In 2015, a committee of faculty and staff issued a report on the background, definitions, and potential of peer support models. This report (see attached) determined that peer course support is valuable. It recommended that additional work should explore current use of Undergraduate Learning Assistants on campus and consider how to expand, organize, promote, and support this high-impact practice. Under a charge by Abigail Panter, Senior Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education, a new committee convened during the Fall of 2016 to continue exploration of the Undergraduate Learning Assistant landscape on campus.

### **Key areas explored by the 2015 committee include:**

- Undergraduate peer course support has the potential to benefit both instructors and undergraduates engaged in these roles
- Relevant models of this approach exist, most notably in support of science courses at the University of Colorado at Boulder (<http://laprogram.colorado.edu/>)
- Roles and names for peer course support are varied; they include:
  - Supplemental instructors
  - Peer tutors
  - Lecture assistants
  - Supplemental content providers
- There is a need for training and faculty involvement in organization and ongoing supervision of this support
- A variety of student compensation models exist; students may work as volunteers, receive course credit, or be paid

The 2016-2017 committee moved forward from this initial exploration of the undergraduate learning assistant concept. With an awareness that various departments have already involved undergraduates in various course support roles, we surveyed Directors of Undergraduate Studies across the University to develop a better understanding of how undergraduates are already deployed in these roles. In addition, we sought to gather additional information on models and standards of best practice for placing undergraduates in course support roles to ground recommendations for next steps across the College. This report will summarize those survey results, catalog elements of best practices, and offer recommendations.

Initial survey results suggest that undergraduates are already involved in significant ways in providing course support within a variety of departments - particularly in the STEM disciplines - and that additional departments have expressed an interest in learning more about this option. Given the current level of activity and interest throughout the College, a review of present and future approaches is both timely and important to shape this promising learning opportunity for students.

### **UNC-CH Survey Results**

To learn more about the use of undergraduates in course support roles, in March 2017, our committee distributed a survey to all Directors of Undergraduate Studies across the University. Thirty-one respondents, representing twenty-eight unique departments, completed the survey. We summarize our findings below. Note: from here on, we will refer to undergraduates who are offering support in the classroom as ULAs (undergraduate learning assistants).

#### **Use of ULAs at UNC-CH:**

- Thirty-five percent of the respondents (from 11 departments) reported that their departments were currently using ULAs. Although a majority of these departments represent NSF approved STEM fields (BIOL, CHEM, COMP, ECON, MATH, PSYC), we also learned that ULAs are serving students in our professional schools (e.g. Kenan-Flagler Business School) and within the humanities (e.g. Department of Romance Studies).
- Thirteen percent of the respondents had “considered or pursued development of undergraduates in course support roles” but were not actively using ULAs in their classrooms.
- Twenty-three percent had never used ULAS, but expressed an interest in the idea.

To learn more about the use of ULAs across campus, we posed a series of questions to the 11 respondents who reported that their departments were currently working with ULAs. A summary of their responses follows.

- ***ULAs are used inside and outside of the classroom in a variety of ways across campus.*** ULAs are being used by eighty-two percent of the responding departments to provide in-class assistance and by seventy-three percent of the responding departments to provide out-of-class assistance. As in-class assistants, ULAs primarily facilitate learning in student groups. This function allows instructors to incorporate more active learning into their classrooms and allows students to receive more individual attention. ULAs that serve in this capacity are labeled teaching assistants, lecture assistants, or undergraduate learning assistants. There is no common name used across campus. ULAs who provide out-of-class assistance are used to perform the following duties: offer supplemental instruction, lead study groups, serve as peer tutors, write supplemental content for course instructors, offer peer mentoring, and lead foreign language conversation groups. For a description of these roles, see the 2015 report that is attached to the end of this report.
- ***The use of ULAs is most prevalent in lower-level courses.*** For example, our respondents reported that ULAs are providing assistance in forty-one different courses within their departments, of which twenty-three are either a first-year seminar (1), a 100- or 200-level course (22), or a lab associated with an intro-level course (2). ULAs are also supporting ten 300- and 400-level courses, and six 500- and 600-level courses. Several of the courses mentioned above are honors sections.
- ***ULAs are usually handpicked by the faculty members that they support.*** Over half of the respondents used this method to select their ULAs. Applications (27%), invitations to enroll in a course designed to prepare students for this role (13%), and open course enrollment pending approval (7%) were less common methods used to recruit ULAs. The selection criteria used by faculty who handpicked their ULAs varied. One department only limited selection to students who were majors with a minimum GPA and who had completed nine credit hours within the major. Other departments required only that the student had done well in the course in which they would serve as a ULA. One professor said that he purposefully targeted students who were underrepresented in the major (e.g. women and minorities) to serve as ULAs, with the objective of attracting them to the major. Per the instructor, early evidence suggested that this strategy was leading to an increase in the number of majors from these underrepresented groups. Another department recently changed their selection criteria from faculty invite to an application process. Final selection was based on faculty interviews and performance in the class in which the student

would serve as a ULA. It was noted that the application led to more females being selected to serve as ULAs in a department where they are heavily underrepresented.

- ***Compensation to ULAs varies by department and includes course credit, payment, and volunteerism.*** Across the university, compensation of ULAs varies. Four of the respondents only offer ULAs course credit for their services. Credit hours range from one to three credits. ULAs who earn three credit hours are generally enrolled in a pedagogy course in the same semester that they are performing their ULA duties. When ULAs earn only one credit hour, it is usually because they are serving a second or third semester as a ULA. Most of them have taken a pedagogy course in a prior semester.
  - ***Almost half of respondents that currently house ULAs ask students to enroll in a course.*** Of the 11 departments who used undergraduate learning assistants, five (BIOL, CHEM, ECON, GLBL, and SPAN) reported that undergraduate learning assistants enroll in a course taught by faculty in conjunction with their academic support role. Of these five departments, three offered pass/fail credit and two offered graded credit. All reported “regular contact with faculty” and “weekly meetings” as part of the course. All five reported reflective writing assignments for undergraduate learning assistants. Since the survey was conducted, Computer Science has added a pedagogy course that all ULAs are required to take. In addition to course credit, students who take the pedagogy course fulfill the experiential-education requirement of UNC’s general education curriculum. This is the only pedagogy course respondents mentioned that awards EE credit.
  - ***Some respondents offer ULAs monetary compensation.*** Four departments offer their ULAs an hourly wage or a semester stipend and do not offer their ULAs course credit. An additional two departments offer ULAs course credit during the first semester that they serve and pay them a stipend thereafter. The departments that offer their ULAs paid compensation are generally funding their services from their undergraduate instructional budget.
  - ***One department only accepts volunteers and offers them a letter of recommendation in return.*** It was brought to our attention that the use of volunteers may be a violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and should be discussed with University Counsel.

As survey responses indicate, a uniform model does not currently exist on our campus. However, ***forty-five percent of survey recipients reported that they would like to know about “effective models from***

*other departments,*” suggesting a significant interest in this topic around campus. This interest underscores the need to develop a shared, sustainable campus-wide approach to ULAs.

### **Essential Elements of Effective ULA programs**

To better understand best practices in developing such an approach, the current committee has researched ULA programs and models. We reviewed standards in academic student support offered by professional organizations specializing in this work, including the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA), the International Center for Supplemental Instruction (SI), and the Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS). In addition, one committee member attended a workshop focused on ULAs to better understand elements of model programs.

Our research revealed that national professional organizations make similar recommendations regarding the core elements of effective ULA programs. These elements include:

- Selection criteria and process
- Training program and ongoing support
- Supervision and accountability
- Assessment and evaluation

#### *Selection criteria and process*

Defining a transparent process for participation as a ULA provides fair access to students interested in these roles. The criteria for consideration, timelines, and paths to participation (e.g. course enrollment, prerequisite experience, GPA, application and/or interview process) need to be made available to students on a website or other readily accessible location.

#### *Training programs and ongoing support*

Professional standards for training and support offer multiple examples of key elements that apply regardless of the ULA’s discipline or role. Students need formal, structured guidance in University policies and safety, effective pedagogy in their setting (classroom, small group, one-on-one), learning theory, diversity, and other elements central to educational roles. Students also need opportunities to practice offering learning assistance to fellow students with support from more experienced faculty and staff. Expertise with disciplinary content is not sufficient on its own. However, ULAs can provide effective support with training and ongoing guidance. ULAs are chosen to fulfill an important role in promoting academic success, and it is important that they understand how.

#### *Supervision and accountability*

ULA roles within a course/discipline vest students with responsibilities and tasks as defined during selection and training processes. Once they are in place, it is important that ULAs have a supervision structure and clear forms of accountability to support their success. This supervision and accountability may take the form of participation in a course, maintaining and reporting records of interactions with students, and/or regular, formal check-ins with the instructor or professional staff. This supervision helps students problem solve in timely ways and ensures that ULAs and students they interact with are receiving the support they need--to the benefit of all.

### Assessment and evaluation

Individual ULAs need feedback loops in order to grow and develop. Regular evaluation from students they serve and supervisors is critical in this process. Likewise, defining and enacting learning outcomes and assessment measures provides critical data to understand the impact of the ULAs on student learning. This larger, formal ULA program assessment drives improvement of and provides direction for future efforts.

### University of Colorado Learning Assistant Model

In researching ULA programs at other universities, our committee determined that the University of Colorado at Boulder (CU Boulder) provides the most robust model of a centralized and standardized form of peer learning assistance. Its Colorado Learning Assistant (LA) Model program is supported by three full-time staff, supplemental part-time staff (including a faculty Executive Director), and 13 faculty/staff department coordinators (who are sometimes paid a stipend, depending on availability of funds). Faculty must apply to be assigned Learning Assistants. About 90 faculty members per year use the LA model at CU Boulder; each faculty member receives three to eight LAs.

The CU Boulder LA Model defines a learning assistant (LA) as a facilitator in the classroom. LAs serve as an extension of the instructor; they assist or facilitate student learning. They do not tell students how to do problems, nor do they teach new material. LAs provide guidance and hints, answer student questions, and act as sounding boards.

The CU Boulder LA Model includes 3 main themes: pedagogy, content, and practice. Every LA is required to attend a special seminar in which they reflect on their own teaching and learning and make connections to relevant education literature (pedagogy). LAs meet weekly with their faculty instructors to plan for the upcoming week, reflect on the previous week, and analyze student assessment data (content). This interaction between the course LAs and their faculty instructor is extremely important and cannot be

omitted. Finally, LAs help teams of students collaborate on group activities by formatively assessing student understanding and asking guiding questions (practice). LAs may facilitate small discussion groups in classes and/or in recitations/help sessions; they strive to involve all students in meaningful group work.<sup>1</sup>

The CU Boulder LA Model has become the standard of practice in the STEM fields, and from it has emerged the Learning Assistant Alliance (LAA). Per their website (<http://learningassistantalliance.org>), “The Learning Assistant Alliance is a community across institutions sharing resources, information and experiences to further the objectives of transforming courses ... through the use of Learning Assistants. The LAA promotes the use of Learning Assistants in accordance with the Generalized Program Elements.” Every year the LAA holds a series of regional workshops and hosts one international conference to teach the generalized principles of the model and present results that assess its effectiveness. The research results presented on the LAA website support the effectiveness of the CU Boulder LA Model.<sup>2</sup> We present some of this evidence below.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://laprogram.colorado.edu/node/8>

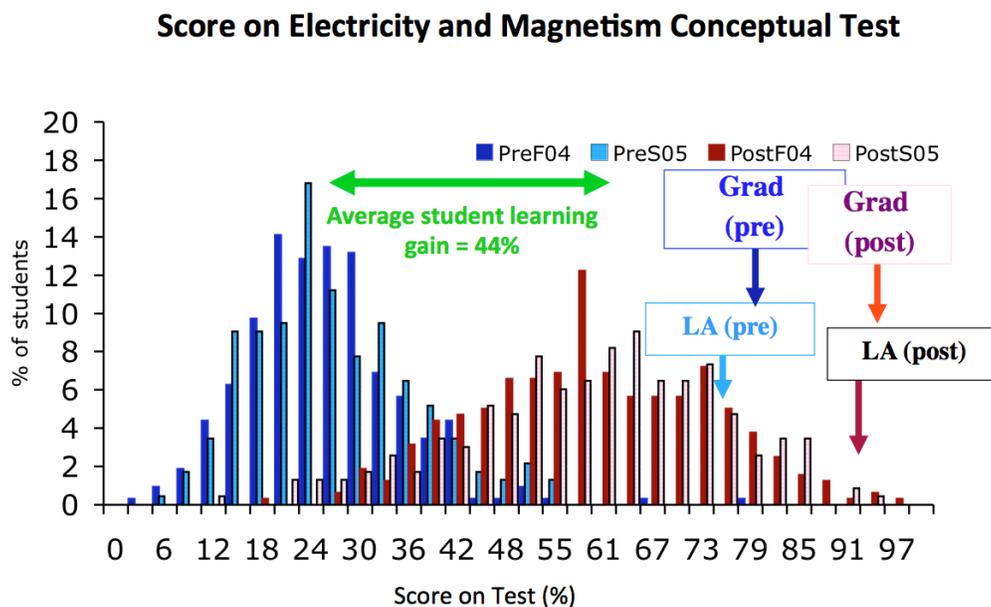
<sup>2</sup> <https://sites.google.com/a/colorado.edu/la-resources/research/products/data-slides>

## Evidence of CU Boulder LA Model Effectiveness

The effectiveness of the CU Boulder LA Model has been evaluated using several different approaches. These include measuring pre- and post-learning gains, DFW rates (percentage of D's, F's, and W's), and the reduction of traditional performance gaps between majority and underrepresented minorities in classes that use LAs versus those that do not. In total, the LAA website includes 39 peer reviewed publications, 25 posters, and slides from a handful of conferences. We present a few of the highlights below.

Figure 1 shows the learning gains on the Brief Electricity and Magnetism Conceptual Inventory (BEMA) for students enrolled in an LA-supported introductory electricity and magnetism course. Gains for enrolled students are significant and roughly double the national average, e.g., 44% higher versus 24%. Gains are not confined to the enrolled students, however: the LAs' understanding of the course content is also vastly improved. While already representing the top 10% of their class when they were first enrolled in the course, LAs also achieve large learning gains, and their scores on this assessment are more closely aligned with the scores of physics graduate students than with their undergraduate peers after only one semester of serving as a LA.

Figure 1<sup>3</sup>

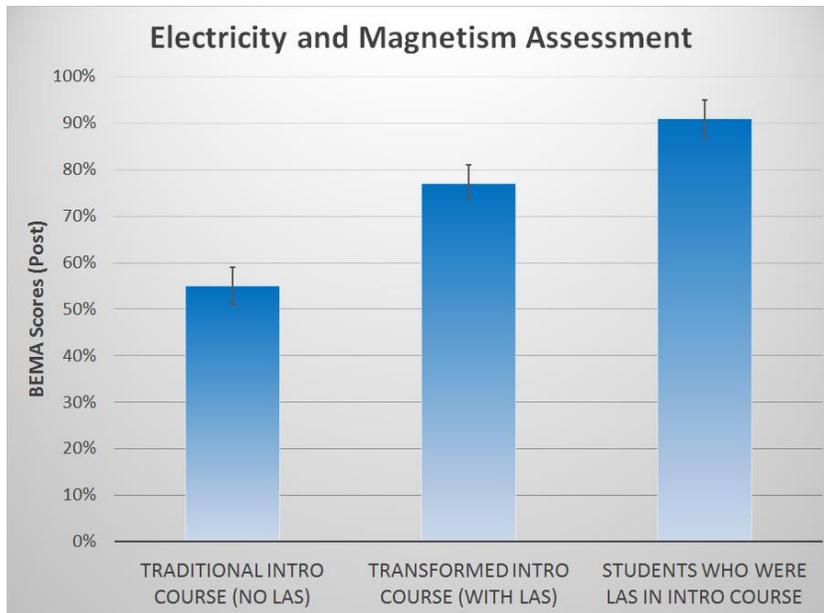


Longitudinal effects of the CU Boulder LA Model have also been documented. Figure 2 depicts the differences in student understanding that are seen in upper division physics courses based on whether or

<sup>3</sup> (n.d.). Data: Students and LAs Learn More (Physics II). Retrieved September 14, 2017, from <https://sites.google.com/a/colorado.edu/la-resources/research/products/data-slides>

not the students took their **introductory** physics course with LAs. Figure 2 shows BEMA scores for students who have just completed a junior level electricity and magnetism (E&M) course. The first two bars in the graph indicate that the average scores of student who were enrolled in an LA-supported course as first-year students scored, on average, 20 percentage points higher than those first-years who were not enrolled in an LA-supported course.

Figure 2<sup>4</sup>



Students designated as LAs in the figure helped teach the introductory level physics course for first-year students, sometime prior to enrolling in E&M, and were purposefully separated from their non-ULA peers because of their extraordinary additional contact with the material. One assessment reports that “While it is true that LAs tend to be among the top performers of their class, which may account for such high scores on BEMA, not all were hired because of outstanding academic credentials. For example, many departments look for potential LAs who struggled (but passed) when they took the freshman-level course so that they can connect more with the students and inspire those who struggle by sharing their success stories. This along with the fact that there is such a large difference between E&M students based on their

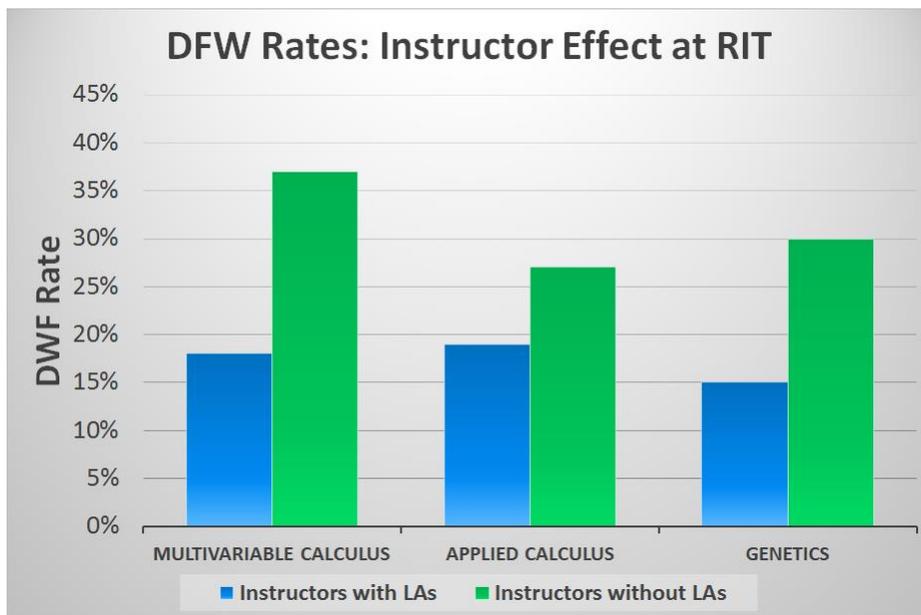
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<sup>4</sup> Pollock, S. J. (2007). Electricity and Magnetism Assessment. Retrieved September 14, 2017, from [https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/153ZqmpQFjRSWrb6YOjtGw847haMDMDhptR6UTLHIFLY/edit#slide=id.g11e7450f2c\\_0\\_41](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/153ZqmpQFjRSWrb6YOjtGw847haMDMDhptR6UTLHIFLY/edit#slide=id.g11e7450f2c_0_41)

experience with the introductory physics course (traditional vs. transformed) strongly suggests that the LA program immensely helps with understanding both for the students and for the LAs themselves.”<sup>5</sup>

Finally, evidence from the Rochester Institute of Technology (which uses the CU Boulder model) demonstrates that the effectiveness of ULAs can extend beyond physics courses. Figure 3 shows that ULA-supported course in multivariable calculus, applied calculus, and genetics at RIT have lower DFW rates (percentage of D’s, F’s, and W’s) than classes without ULA support.

Figure 3<sup>6</sup>



Although the CU Boulder LA Model was initially developed for use in STEM classrooms and continues to be a recruitment tool for K-12 STEM teachers, it is flexible enough to be adapted and used in non-STEM disciplines. In a conversation with Valerie Otero, Faculty Executive Director of the CU Boulder LA Program, we learned that CU Boulder has expanded its program beyond STEM disciplines to include the English and Psychology departments.

<sup>5</sup> Pollock, S. J. (2007). Electricity and Magnetism Assessment. Retrieved September 14, 2017, from [https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/153ZqmpQFjRSWr6Y0jtGw847haMDMDhptR6UTLHIFLY/edit#slide=id.g11e7450f2c\\_0\\_41](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/153ZqmpQFjRSWr6Y0jtGw847haMDMDhptR6UTLHIFLY/edit#slide=id.g11e7450f2c_0_41)

<sup>6</sup> (n.d.). DFW Rates: Instructor Effect at RIT. Retrieved September 14, 2017, from [https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/153ZqmpQFjRSWr6Y0jtGw847haMDMDhptR6UTLHIFLY/edit#slide=id.g8593a52b6\\_2\\_10](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/153ZqmpQFjRSWr6Y0jtGw847haMDMDhptR6UTLHIFLY/edit#slide=id.g8593a52b6_2_10)

## **The Adoption of a University-Wide ULA Model at UNC-Chapel Hill**

Our committee took away several key ideas from our research on the CU Boulder model and from our participation in the 2017 Pacific Northwest Regional Learning Assistant Alliance Workshop (LAA Workshop), which was held at Oregon State University on June 28th and 29th, that we believe would be relevant to the creation of a university-wide ULA model at UNC-Chapel Hill. As preparation for presenting our recommendations, we describe some of the most important information about best practices here:

### *Role of ULAs*

A key feature of the CU Boulder LA Model is that the LAs, course instructors, and students collectively participate in a learning community, which is best described as a web of interaction between students and LAs, LAs and instructors, and students and instructors. The interaction, however, between the students and LAs is fundamentally different than that of the interaction between the students and instructors.

In a successful ULA model, ULAs are seen by students as helpful peers, friendly faces, and a non-intimidating source of help, whereas an instructor - in the traditional role of teacher - may be viewed as authority figures, enforcers of class policies, etc. ULAs should never be put in those positions.

ULAs should be used to assist learners rather than teachers. At the LAA Workshop, we learned that ULAs should not, for example, be used to proctor exams, monitor the usage of electronic devices during class, or grade student work because this might destroy the peer relationship shared between the ULA and student. These relationships are obviously not unique to STEM disciplines.

### *Pedagogy course*

We also learned at the LAA Workshop that it is not necessary for each department to offer its own pedagogy course. It is recommended that the course be run from a central location and not by department. At Oregon State University, for example, ULAs in the biology, chemistry, and physics departments collectively enroll in a pedagogy course that is offered by the School of Education. When we asked whether such a course would be appropriate for ULAs from the humanities or social sciences, the response was a clear yes. The instructor of the pedagogy course at OSU, Dennis Bennett, felt strongly that the course content was universal and that students could benefit by sharing experiences across disciplines. It was highly recommended, however, that the course be capped at 25 students and that the students be given 2 credits of experiential education credit on a Pass/Fail basis. At CU Boulder, LAs from all departments take a two-credit “Mathematics and Science Education” seminar course as part of their training. Six sections (four of them online) are taught each year.

### *Weekly prep meetings*

Another reason why the ULA model can allow for an interdisciplinary pedagogy course and is flexible enough to be generalized across disciplines is that the weekly prep meeting that the ULAs hold with their faculty instructors are course-specific (i.e., discipline-specific). A representative meeting might work as follows: the ULAs are given a worksheet that contains the upcoming course activities and are asked to work on it during the prep meeting. This allows the ULAs to determine whether they understand the content and whether the questions need to be rewritten before they are distributed to the enrolled students. During the prep meeting, ULAs discuss their positive and negative experiences from the previous week (e.g., stumbling blocks, interactions with student groups), and they listen to each other and provide feedback. Meeting time can also be used to simulate classroom interactions. Some ULAs can play the role of the enrolled students, and the other ULAs can help them work through a problem. A third group of observing ULAs can provide comments.

The weekly prep meeting, which is expected to last one hour, may be a deterrent for some faculty because it does not provide compensation. Therefore, proper compensation - whether in the form of a stipend or recognition during an annual review - should be given to instructors who integrate ULAs into their classrooms. Oversight of a ULA program is also important, and including a paid faculty/staff department coordinator, as is done at CU Boulder, is recommended.

### *Selection and assessment of ULAs*

One criterion that is generally agreed upon is that undergraduates are prepared to become an ULA for a course once they have taken it. Participants at the LAA Workshop said that students who have made Bs and Cs can serve as the best ULAs. A students are not necessarily the best because they have often not struggled with the material.

A rubric should be used to asses ULAs. For first time ULAs, the grade should be a combination of the pedagogy and practicum part of the course. Generally, the weight is 2-to-1. The faculty member who uses the ULA should play an active role in monitoring the ULA and assessing their effectiveness. The faculty member could observe the ULA directly during class or could oversee a review session during the academic year. Returning ULAs do not need to take the pedagogy course and will receive 1 credit hour for their participation in the program, and/or be paid.

### *Compensation of ULAs*

LAs at CU Boulder are hired to facilitate small-group interaction (6-20 students) and are paid \$1500/semester to work 10 hours/week. Not everyone who attended the LAA Workshop could afford to

pay their ULAs. However, it was emphasized that paying ULAs was the best practice. Students from lower socioeconomic groups may not be able to pay for a class and work ten hours a week for course credit when they could have been working for pay. In order to make serving as a ULA an opportunity for all students, a model that allows us to pay ULAs should be incorporated.

## **Recommendations**

### For the College of Arts and Sciences

- Define clear campus standards for course-credit, paid, and volunteer ULA models. Outline requirements for in-class and outside-of-class roles.
- Develop and publish a transparent process for participation as a ULA that provides fair access for all interested students.
- Expand existing, well-structured peer tutoring/mentoring programs to create stronger departmental ties, greater support, and pilot models of best practices.
- Hire a College coordinator and other staff to support and guide departmental initiatives and stay abreast of both best practices and local developments.
- Hire departmental coordinators (permanent staff or TAs) to liaise with the College coordinator (described above).
- Develop a manual or set of guidelines and resources for departments interested in developing a ULA program.
- Provide resources for ULA initiatives. Fund staff, ULAs, course development, etc.
- Assess the impact of ULAs on student learning. Assessments would measure how ULAs' learning, as well as student learning, is enhanced. Faculty could apply for grants to fund their research. To do effective research, investigators will need to be able to acquire student-level data from the Administration.

### For courses and faculty

- Align existing departmental courses to meet agreed upon standards.
- Standardize course numbers used across departments when course credit is awarded.
- Institute and sufficiently staff a training course (perhaps listed in EDUC) to provide general, non-department-specific guidance for undergraduate learning assistants.

- Train faculty on best practices for weekly ULA prep meetings, selection criteria, training, supervision, and evaluation.
- Offer EE course-credit for ULAs related courses.

## **Appendix A**

For additional details regarding models and national standards, consider these resources:

**College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA)** certifies student assistance programs across the country according to their published standards. Programs within universities apply for and are granted certification based on meeting prescribed standards/best practices.

<https://www.crla.net/index.php/certifications/about-crla-certifications>

**The International Council on Supplemental Instruction (SI)** also offers program training and certification for its 40-year old model. This model, founded at the University of Missouri--Kansas City, is in use in over 3500 certified programs around the country. <http://info.umkc.edu/si/>

**The Council American Standards in Higher Education (CAS)** offers standards and guidelines on Learning Assistance Programs (note sections on student staff)

<http://standards.cas.edu/getpdf.cfm?PDF=E86D2FCA-DBEC-AD47-33AB941E185E1E67>

## Appendix B: 2015 Committee Report on Learning Assistants in the Classroom

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[Roles for an LA](#)

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[Peer Tutor Role:](#)

[Lecture Assistant Role:](#)

[Supplemental Content Provider \(SCP\) Role:](#)

[Key Components of an LA Program](#)

[Selection](#)

[Training](#)

[Compensation](#)

[How to Get Started](#)

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# Overview Document

## What is an LA and Why Do We Care

Learning Assistants (LAs) are undergraduate students, chosen for their talent and ability to provide support for student learning in a specific course. They are students who took the course in a previous semester. After being selected, the LA receives training on how to facilitate learning and then works with an instructor to enhance the learning experience for current students enrolled in the course.

With one instructor to many students in a classroom, instructors utilize LAs in four general roles (and sometimes it is a combination): To facilitate group conversations with peers in interactive classroom environments, to hold group review sessions outside of class time, to provide one-on-one help to students, and to help innovate and create new materials in the classroom. (More on these roles in [Roles for an LA](#) below.) It is important to note that LAs are not used as graders. While some departments do indeed use the same students as both graders and LAs, the roles should be separated.

No matter what role an instructor utilizes LAs for, incorporating them into a course often translates to better support and an increase the number of learning opportunities for individual students enrolled in the course. Student may also find interacting with a LA far less intimidating than speaking to an instructor. Instructors often find personal benefits, such as more time to focus on the “big picture” goals of their course or a fresh perspective of their curriculum. LAs benefit too-- those chosen to become LAs often feel honored by being recognized as talented students, they have a deeper learning experience with the material than when they were enrolled in the course, they become better skilled at thinking about their

own learning (metacognition), and often become more effective communicators. For many LAs, it is a transformational experience, in the way other High Impact Practices can also be in their education (such as study abroad, research, internships).

## Who Uses LAs

The LA model was made prominent with science courses at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Many other universities around the country use LAs in a variety of disciplines with variations on the original model. A sampling of universities and their associated courses are registered with the Learning Assistance Alliance (see their [website](#) for programs around the country.) At UNC many departments have established LA programs across their curriculum, a few of those include Economics, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, and Computer Science. Other UNC departments have a handful of instructors using LAs, yet these instructors often don't know other faculty on campus also utilizing them.

## Roles for an LA

We identify four primary roles for LA's: Supplemental Instructor, Peer Tutor, Lecture Assistant, and Supplemental Content Provider. Please note that this taxonomy of roles is not necessarily exhaustive, nor is it mutually exclusive, in so much as one LA may hold several of these roles simultaneously. In the following, we provide a very brief description of each role, and reference \_\_\_\_\_ for further details.

### **Supplemental Instructor (SI) Role:**

Supplemental Instruction is a non-remedial approach to a learning environment designed to supplement the classroom experience. Supplemental Instructors offer regularly scheduled, out-of-class informal group-learning sessions in which students work together to achieve a higher-level learning objective. The primary goal of the SI is to facilitate higher-level thinking in the SI session without re-lecturing, helping with homework, etc. As part of the facilitation, SI's should help students learn how to incorporate reasoning and study skills into the course, as well as share strategies to be successful in the course.

### **Peer Tutor Role:**

Peer Tutoring is a remedial approach to a learning environment designed to assist self-selected students who desire additional one-on-one help. Peer Tutors offer regularly scheduled, out-of-class individual-tutoring sessions in which specific course topics are explored in greater detail. The primary goal of the Peer Tutor is to facilitate learning course content, without explicitly helping with homework. As part of the facilitation, Peer Tutors should help students learn how to incorporate reasoning and study skills into the course, as well as share strategies to be successful in the course.

## **Lecture Assistant Role:**

Lecture Assistants offer support for higher-order learning activities within the classroom. Lecture Assistants design and offer in-class assistance for individual and collaborative learning activities. The primary goal of the Lecture Assistant is to facilitate active learning in a student-centered classroom.

## **Supplemental Content Provider (SCP) Role:**

Supplemental Content Providers create additional resources to supplement in-class content. The resources include, but are not limited to, video tutorials, on-line resources, video solution keys, and practice problems. The primary goal of the SCP is to identify and/or develop content fully aligned with the primary course materials.

## **Key Components of an LA Program**

### **Selection**

Most faculty who use LAs, begin with outstanding alumni of the class. Aside from the practicality of this approach (knowing the LA and the LA knowing the course content), there is a powerful message to the students in the class that this person who is helping you was in your seat just a year ago. When faculty rotate through courses, a significant number of LAs are required, or the class is for non-majors, this may not be a viable route for selecting students.

When needed, the selection process may include applications, recommendations, or an interview. The Chemistry Department, for example, uses an application and an interview. While it seems an obvious statement, the best predictor of a successful LA is the “sparkle in their eyes” when they talk about helping people learn. Depending on the roles they are being asked to take, much of the LA work is one-on-one and therefore speaking to a large audience may not be necessary. Likewise, truly brilliant students are not necessarily the best LAs: the LAs must be able to relate to students who may be having difficulties in the class.

### **Training**

Learning assistants can be used in a broad range of disciplines and in very different manners, but all successful LA programs have some things in common. Aside from the direct contact with students, the successful programs all include a pedagogical component where students learn about best teaching practices, regular contact with the faculty member teaching the course in order to discuss the content and content-specific teaching techniques, and feedback for improvement. The latter two of these tends to flow naturally from the class environment. The first of these is handled very differently in different universities and departments.

The good news is that there are a large number of courses and [resources](#) that can be used as models. The bad news is that it is a course that needs planning and preparation and many faculty and departments do not have the resources to devote to this endeavor. Two important observations: (1) A significant portion of the needed content is not discipline-specific and it therefore should be possible to create a course that can be used by multiple departments. (2) Providing this content in a self-paced model would allow students and faculty to adjust the pace to their particular needs. Addressing this component of the LA experience is the key to successful expansion of an LA program at UNC.

### **Compensation**

To the best of our knowledge, there are currently three models of LA compensation being implemented at UNC-CH: Volunteer, Credit, Paid. Model choice hinges upon the needs of the implementing instructor as well as the available resources of the supporting department. In the following, we briefly list each model, along with some suggestions for best practices.

1. Volunteer: Students may volunteer (i.e. no direct compensation) to serve as LA's. We recommend that these students be required to attend the associated lecture. Moreover, we recommend that these LA's work no more than 4-5 hours per week outside of lecture on their associated duties.
2. Credit: LA's may be compensated via course credit. The program would consist of two components. The first component is a one-semester practicum wherein the LA works for an implementing instructor as per the roles defined previously. The second component is a pedagogical seminar, which demonstrates best practices inside and outside of the classroom. Upon successful completion of both components the LA would be awarded 3 credits. We recommend that the LA's be permitted to reprise their roles in future semesters for 1 credit, without having to repeat their pedagogical seminar.
3. Paid: LA's may be compensated monetarily for their service. The amount and billing structure is dependent upon the supporting department's resource constraints. We recommend that students complete a semester long pedagogical training seminar (see # 2 above) prior to engaging in for-pay LA service. The practice that we have seen within the university is that the more dependent a department is on LAs, the more likely they are to pay them.

## How to Get Started

Web <http://laprogram.colorado.edu/content/getting-started>

## References

Miller, Judith E., James E. Groccia, and Marilyn S. Miller. *Student-Assisted Teaching: A Guide to Faculty-Student Teamwork*. Bolton, Mass: Anker Pub. Co, 2001.

# Recommendations for the University

## *Separate document for OUE*

Working with LA's can provide meaningful learning experiences for students in the classroom, the students who serve as LA's and the faculty who work with them. This group has the following recommendations to promote the use of LA's more broadly across the campus.

### Short-term goals:

1. It should be made clear to instructors and students that the practice of using LA's is a valuable one and that there are guidelines for roles, selection, training and compensation.
2. It should be made easy for instructors to offer students course credit to be an LA. Each department should be required to create a course through their undergraduate curriculum committee that will serve as an LA course credit. Procedures for how instructors can request course credit, the requirements, and grading should be outlined.
3. There should be a website dedicated to LA's at UNC. This website should contain basic information about LA's (what they are, who uses them, how instructors can begin using LA's, etc.). It should also serve to capture a mailing list of instructors who are interested or currently using LA's. This mailing list can connect faculty and it can demonstrate the prevalence of this practice across the campus.

### Medium-term goals:

4. It would be helpful to have some high-quality promotional materials to promote the practice of using LA's. There should be a short document that will serve as a handout for face-to-face meetings with departments or faculty. There should also be a brief video highlighting individuals from the following groups: LA's, students in a course that uses LA's, and instructors that use LA's. This video should discuss the benefits for all and make it clear that this is a high impact practice that the university wishes to promote.
5. We need to better understand how we currently use LA's. At this point, very little is known about how many departments, courses, and instructors use LA's. We recommend surveying individuals to determine the extent that LA's are being used and how they are used. Are there types of courses where LA's are most beneficial? Are there certain roles for LA's that work best for certain courses or course structures? Are there students who are best suited to be LA's? Ideally, this should be information that is collected and reported to the Office of Undergraduate Education on an ongoing basis.

### Long-term goals:

6. If we want to expand the use of LA's we should have a permanent advocate for the program. This advocate will periodically assess the extent to which LA's are being incorporated into courses and suggest best practices as they evolve.
7. Lastly, it will be important to continue understanding best practices in this area by either asking key individuals to attend conferences and bring back what they learn or to bring experts in to discuss models, evidence, or strategies for using LA's most effectively.

Using an LA is a high-impact practice and much like other high-impact practices such as study abroad, the honors program, and undergraduate research, it offers students the opportunity to excel at Carolina.

However, unlike these other high-impact practices, we don't have a clear understanding of who uses them, how they get used, and how we can maximize participation. It is hoped that these recommendations can begin expanding LA's in a systematic and rigorous way to tap into existing potential on our campus and offer more students richer learning experiences.

Meeting notes from 4/27/15

- 3 tiers for the Peer Tutoring/LA/TA: (independent of pay)
  - Peer tutoring -- EDUC 387 (or the like)
  - LA --- EDUC 387 + department specific piece of pedagogy.
  - Undergrad TA --- the above + FERPA, etc...
- Could we use the Educ department to host a course that fits our needs?
  - Perhaps instructors from various departments could volunteer instructors for a session.
  - Or perhaps the general training could be in the Educ department or in the Learning Center, then each dept hosts a subject specific training session.
  -

Contact: Kim Abels and Bob Pleasants from Learning Center.