

PROMISING PRACTICE

Harnessing Talent: A Tiered, Accelerated Leadership Model for Academic Support Programs

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Student Learning Assistance Center (SLAC) houses several academic support programs, including the SI program, a Learning Lab (walk-in tutoring), a Veteran Academic Success Center (a holistic academic and social integration program for student veterans and military connected students), and an Online Writing Lab. With only 7.5 full time staff members and two graduate assistants supervising a staff of more than 110, each of SLAC's components espouses similar leadership structure and development among its undergraduate and graduate student personnel. Texas State SI is accredited by the International Center for Supplemental Instruction.

While student-leadership models are not uncommon among Supplemental Instruction (SI) programs, Texas State University has developed a tiered leadership model providing real-world paraprofessional experience to the undergraduates and graduates who serve as its leadership (Skalicky & Caney, 2010; The International Center for Supplemental Instruction at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, n.d.). The intention of this model is to increase the responsibility of each tier, creating more marketable new professionals while allowing full-time staff members to focus on larger programmatic objectives. Under Texas State's tiered SI leadership model, undergraduate student leadership is primarily responsible for front-line program coordination while graduate student leadership functions as a half-time professional, coordinating personnel management from recruitment to onboarding and managing initial program assessment each semester. Professional staff members closely monitor and concentrate on the work and development of the student leadership through weekly team meetings, individual bi-weekly meetings, and annual leadership retreats focused on needs assessment and larger program goals. The outcome is a heightened professional development experience for student leadership with greater ability of full-time staff members to better allocate time to other administrative tasks, metaphorically creating "hours" in the workday.

Leadership Pyramid & Position Responsibilities

Supplemental Instruction (SI) leaders form the foundation of the Texas State program's personnel pyramid and begin facilitating collaborative group study sessions after completing 20 hours of pre-semester training. During each long semester, SI leaders attend monthly 2-hour training meetings for the purpose of continuing professional development, receiving updates or reminders, and tackling relevant discussion items. SIs attend one special topic training each fall semester with topics ranging from Active Shooter to ALLY training. SIs also participate in the annual Student Academic Support Programs (SASP) training conference for personnel from various centers across campus each spring. Pre-semester and monthly trainings are prepared and facilitated by "upper" leadership comprised of team leaders, senior leaders, and a graduate assistant.

The first tier of the leadership team consists of 4 to 6 team leaders. A team leader possesses the dual roles of SI and SI mentor, having applied for and been selected to take on additional responsibilities while continuing to serve as an SI. These additional responsibilities include designing and leading

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components of pre-semester and ongoing training and performing SI session observations, which increases the number of times an SI leader is observed facilitating study groups and ensures consistent, timely, growth-oriented feedback to SIs.

A team leader also becomes a member of one of four committees tasked with meaningful work on behalf of the department. Current committees include the Social Committee (tasked with creating social engagement opportunities and an inclusive work environment), the Social Media and Marketing Committee (tasked with generating social media content for multiple platforms and marketing services to students), the Recruitment Committee (charged with targeting and contacting potential employees), and the Care Committee (charged with identifying community service opportunities for personnel). A team leader commits 3 to 5 hours per week of work in addition to their 8 hours of SI leader responsibilities.

Senior leaders (or seniors) comprise the next tier of leadership in the pyramid. These former SI leaders apply for and are selected as an undergraduate supervisor (Stone & Jacobs, 2008). Each of the 3 to 5 seniors work in an entirely administrative capacity for 20 hours each week and provide supervision to an assigned cohort of 12 to 20 SI leaders for the semester. Seniors perform a weekly review of job duty completion for each SI in their cohort (submission of session plans, attendance at office hours or other meetings, etc.), inquire as to missing items, and resolve performance concerns from the straightforward conversations to the more complex creation of performance improvement plans. Familiarity with the work of their cohort members allows a senior leader to provide a holistic performance overview of each and then make recommendations to the leadership team about re-hire for subsequent semesters. Seniors assist the graduate assistant in recruitment and selection of SIs, conduct session observations, plan and facilitate training, and assist with compiling program statistics at the end of each semester.

The program's graduate assistant (GA) has the opportunity to tailor job duties based on existing skillsets and what they hope to gain from the one to two-year appointment. Target skills and tasks are identified by the GA and SI coordinators at the beginning of each academic year. All GAs, regardless of previous experience, oversee the program's hiring process, a 1- to 2-day selection conference requiring the GA to vet candidates, collect references, schedule group and individual interviews, assign interviewers

from the leadership, and participate in the interview process before overseeing selection decisions. Additionally, the GA creates and compiles the results from beginning-of-term scheduling surveys and end-of-term qualitative feedback surveys, as well as supervises the team's completion of quantitative and qualitative data compilation at the semester's end.

Professional Benefits of Leadership Positions

SI leaders attain knowledge through trainings about topics such as academic self-efficacy, the information processing model, multicultural and diversity topics, continuous partial attention, and more. As a result of this work, SIs frequently report gains in self-confidence, communication, and facilitation (Congos & Stout, 2003). Facilitating sessions provides practice in classroom management, public speaking, and course content while post-observation meetings provide opportunities for self-evaluation followed by processing and implementing the constructive feedback received (Lockie & Van Lanen, 2008).

Team leaders gain experience assessing performance and delivering constructive feedback to peers. They also receive presentation and public speaking experience by delivering components of trainings known as Discipline Specific Training, and their refined skills are demonstrated in an end-of-semester presentation to the SI leadership team. Team leaders grow in ability to function as a team member working toward a common goal through committee work and may volunteer to gain interview experience by conducting SI selection interviews.

Senior leaders leave their positions with managerial and supervision skills uncommon in most part-time college positions (Campbell et al., 2012). In addition to assisting with evaluation and assessment, senior leaders learn to manage conflict and resolve concerns while being provided guidance from professional staff during team and individual meetings. Each senior receives extensive supervision experience with a cohort of 12 to 20 SI leaders directly reporting to them, thereby learning what it means to handle small (e.g., finding a session a substitute for a sick SI leader) and large (e.g., managing interpersonal conflict) common within academic programs. Skills necessary for successful program management such as organization, prioritization, time management, and attention to detail are ingrained in all aspects of the senior leaders' position. The experience of being a senior leader holistically prepares students for graduate school, internships, and professional jobs.

Graduate assistants gain experience in recruitment, interviewing, and large-scale programming. They receive

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additional event planning experience by helping plan departmental events such as the SASP Conference and bi-annual recognition and appreciation banquets. Planning and executing trainings are two additional skills reinforced through this position. Classroom outreach presentations, recruitment, and training help GAs develop strong communication and presentation skills. This paraprofessional position serves the SI program and SLAC while directly preparing the GA for the job search process (Campbell et al., 2012).

All levels of program leadership gain practice in logistics and procurement of the often small but vital items necessary for staff to work effectively (e.g., spiral notebooks, index cards, or bottles of hand sanitizer); this provides the most accurate understanding of “what it takes” to handle day to day needs of 60-plus members of a staff. All levels of leadership practice setting goals and objectives, as well as the need to review roles and responsibilities regularly. Senior leadership and graduates frequently conduct needs assessments, focusing on program policies and procedures and what can and should be improved. Seniors, the GA, and the program coordinators design training protocols while team leaders participate in the process by presenting selected topics at various meetings. Each training component conducted by the leadership team benefits the individual, and the program benefits from a more involved, connected program of student leaders (Kiersch & Peters, 2017).

The seniors and graduate assistant often propose and complete major program initiatives during the summer months. Examples of previous projects include the creation of online training modules, a custom SI leader training manual, and procedures for selecting senior and team leaders. Program coordinators also encourage and mentor seniors and the GA through the process of proposing concurrent sessions for professional conferences, and members of leadership have presented at SASP, Texas A&Ms Regional Conference on Supplemental Instruction, University of Northern Georgia’s Virtual Conference on Supplemental Instruction, and the International Conference on Supplemental Instruction.

Conclusion

The accelerated leadership model implemented within Texas State’s SI program creates an environment rich for meaningful professional growth and nurtures skills aimed at making its membership workforce ready upon graduation. Each tier of leadership has meaningful and unique facets of responsibilities that contribute to the health and efficacy of the organization as a whole. This model only requires that rather than relying solely on their own abilities, professional staff have a willingness to harness the strength and talent of a staff ripe with high achievers and individuals who strive to excel (Bardou et al., 2003).

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