

Leading, Education and Advising Fellows (LEAF) Program: A Transformative Strategy to Increase Classroom Engagement & Student Success

Dr. Phitsamay Uy, Dr. Colleen E Tapley, Shaima Ragab

University of Massachusetts-Lowell, United States

Abstract

Higher education institutions continuously face challenges retaining first-generation, low-income, marginalized students in their classes. First-generation students are those whose parents do not have a 4-year college degree. These students are 71% more likely to leave college than their non-first-generation college students (Pratt, et al., 2019). At the University of Massachusetts-Lowell (UML), 40% of the undergraduate students are first-generation college students. One transformative teaching strategy to address marginalized students' retention is utilizing learning assistants to provide in-the-moment learning (Maggioire et al., 2024).

Learning assistants are undergraduate students hired to assist in a course they have previously taken, and their role is to help faculty members increase student engagement and interaction in the classroom. The presenters will discuss initial findings from the first year of implementing UML's learning assistant program, LEAF (Leading, Educating, Advising Fellows). Data was collected through pre- and post-surveys, focus groups, and interviews of faculty members and their learning assistants (i.e., LEAF fellows). Initial findings suggest that having LEAF fellows positively impacted LEAF class sections. LEAF fellows gained confidence and professional working skills. At the same time, LEAF faculty were more open to feedback about their instructional choices, and utilizing former students as educational engagement consultants proved beneficial. The LEAF fellows helped faculty members make their courses more student-centered, interactive, and collaborative—factors that have been shown to improve student performance (Patti et al., 2019). We will conclude with best practice recommendations for others interested in increasing retention of marginalized student populations and engagement in classrooms.

Keywords: learning assistants, classroom engagement, marginalized students, first-generation students, faculty pedagogy