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I am excited to talk to you about: Plants, Pilates, and, especially, PLAs! I love sharing how I've incorporated PLAs into my large-enrollment STEM courses and chatting with faculty about how they might include these peer leaders in their own classrooms!

MOST USED PLA MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES:

Include PLAs when planning your course lessons and classroom activities! I ask PLAs to reflect on the time they were learning the course content (especially difficult concepts) and think about what helped the information “click” for them. They learned the content more recently than I did, so they might have better insight into how current students are learning and what they might be struggling with. Consider these things when planning your courses.

BIGGEST SURPRISE IN YOUR PLA MANAGEMENT AND MENTORSHIP:

PLAs are so observant and notice things in the classroom that I sometimes don't see. I always try to carve out a few minutes during our weekly meeting to ask PLAs to share any observations about the groups of students they are working with. They often have great insight into how students are doing in the course.

GREATEST TRIUMPH IN YOUR PLA MANAGEMENT:

After incorporating PLAs into my classes, I noticed a significant improvement in the course environment and, when engaging with the course content, students felt more comfortable asking questions and discussing concepts. There was a noticeable “shift” in the climate of the course compared to previous semesters and, when surveyed, over 80% of students agree that introducing PLAs greatly improved their understanding of the course content and facilitated in-class learning.

MOST MEANINGFUL PLA MEMORY:

After a class session where I introduced a particularly difficult topic (the directionality of RNA transcription), one of my PLAs stuck around to answer student questions. I noticed they were using a Macbook laptop charger and a lanyard as props to explain the process of RNA transcription. The confused students immediately understood the process with this simple demonstration, so I asked the PLA to share this experience in our next weekly meeting. After a little brainstorming, we developed a “skit” that utilized streamers and student participants as a way to model this process. I use it every semester when I teach transcription!

ADVICE FOR OVERCOMING ROADBLOCKS:

Communicate with your PLAs on a regular basis. Check in with them before and after class and try to get some immediate feedback about how the course activities are going. When they are answering student questions (especially if they are first-time PLAs) let them know that it's okay to say “I don't know” and reassure them that they can check-in with you before explaining concepts in case they themselves have questions. Try to make yourself accessible to both students and PLAs during class.

WORDS OF WISDOM:

Don't be afraid to be transparent with your PLAs. Remind them that teaching itself is a "learning process" and that we *all* make mistakes! Find ways to discuss the setbacks that occur during your class activities and emphasize the importance of learning from those mistakes and using them to inform change in your course!