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# TO PLTL AND BEYOND!

A GUIDE TO PLTL AND PEER MENTORING

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## A Guide to PLTL and Peer Mentoring

Seminar in Academic Mentoring (SAM) Course  
Department of Physics  
Fall 2019

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*To PLTL and Beyond!*

## Introduction

Dear SAM student,

Congratulations on being selected for a PLTL leader position, and welcome to the Physics Seminar in Academic Mentoring (SAM) 2019 course! You have a very important job ahead: to be a good role model for Introductory Physics students, to guide them toward a path of success in their course and academic career. This is a very large responsibility, but do not fear! You were hand selected to do this job because you have displayed leadership qualities, and it is evident that you made a successful transition into college. The task at hand is not an easy one, but that's what training is for. Just like in the Toy Story movies, we will learn and develop our skills to help others!

The book you are about to read is the PLTL leader guidebook, written by students in last year's SAM course. It is full of practical advice, unique ideas, honest testimony, and reassurance, all from people who were in your shoes just one year ago. Those students chose the Toy Story series as a theme for this year's text; throughout the book, we'll have some fun exploring how ideas from the movies relate to your new role as a PLTL leader. At the end of this semester, you'll get to contribute to a book, just like this one, for next year's PLTL leaders, continuing this beautiful cycle of peer mentorship!

In the SAM course, and throughout this text, you will learn about mentorship, the learning process, metacognition, group dynamics, growth mindset, and a variety of other pedagogical ideas. But what makes this course special is that it is designed to promote cooperation, collaboration, and informative discussion between you and your peers about how to learn and grow as leaders. All these skills and values are things you can carry with you in your sessions, and in your life.

Now let's get rolling into a wonderful semester. Don't forget – you have what it takes to become a great PLTL leader!

Cheers,

Sheila Munsell

# I. Falling into PLTL with Style

## The First Session, PLTL Philosophy and Social Belonging

In this section, our PLTL Leaders/Peer Mentors discuss ways to start the semester off in the best way possible. They also give tips on how to begin integrating the PLTL philosophy in your group work, with special focus on social belonging.

To start us off, **Hannah McCall** gives some tips on how to prepare for your first PLTL session and recommends approaching your group with confidence.

For his first session advice, **Brian Sohn** thinks the most important thing is to encourage your students to talk to one another. He also recommends that you go through the PLTL philosophy carefully and to clarify your role as the PLTL leader.

**Katherine Tsay** suggests having your students decorate nametags that will sit on their desk to help foster a group dynamic. She also mentions to remember the PLTL philosophy; that you are there to help your group learn how to approach and solve problems and to think critically, not to give direct answers.

Checking the room location and layout before your first session is advice given by **Saryu Sanghani**. In addition, as a first step to encourage social belonging, Saryu advocates reminding your students about all the physics content related help resources that are available to them on the Wash U campus.

As a follow up, **Elizabeth Schwartz** continues the social belonging theme within the PLTL philosophy. She says it is important to create an environment in which all your students' individual identities are validated and supported. And that the PLTL sessions should be two hours in which your students feel a sense of belonging.

As demonstrated by Buzz, Woody and the gang, we can do our best work when we work together. The first sessions are the prime time to help establish the environment for collaborative work that will continue throughout the semester. However, there is always time to improve and reset if needed!

# 1. To Your First Session...and Beyond!

## Hannah McCall

It is time to prepare for your first session as a PLTL leader! Firsts of anything can be nerve wracking or exciting or both, but if you are prepared there is a better chance that everything will run smoothly.

The first thing you should do as you prepare for your first session is to send out an email to your group to introduce yourself and confirm the time and location of the session. Even if no one responds (and you shouldn't be worried if they don't!), this opens up communication between you and your PLTL group.

You might need to prepare a little more for your first session than you do for the subsequent sessions to make sure you have everything in order. Plan to go early to the first session so that you arrive before your students to assure them that they are in the right place. It is good to begin by writing your contact information--name and email address--on the board, just to make sure that everyone has it. When you hand out the PLTL packet at the start of the session, it is also a good idea to include paper that can be folded for name tags so that everyone can begin to learn names. PLTL should be a welcoming, comfortable environment for all students, and knowing everyone by name can help to create this atmosphere.

During my first PLTL session, I found it helpful to begin with an icebreaker. The one I chose was "Happy and Crappy". "Happy and Crappy" is a simple way of getting students to talk a little more about themselves. Each student (and the leader, too!) shares one good thing about their week--their "happy"--and one bad thing about their week--their "crappy". I prefaced our first round of "Happy and Crappy" by saying that everyone could share as much or as little as they would like. After the first session went well, I decided to start every session with this icebreaker. It was exciting to see students come out of their shells and share more details about how their lives were going as the semester progressed.

After you wrap up your icebreakers, it is a good idea to go over the PLTL philosophy with the entire group so that everyone understands the goal of PLTL and the absence policy. I gave printed copies of the PLTL philosophy to every student so that we could all read it together before we got started.

Following your name tag creating, ice-breaking, and philosophy reading, you are ready to begin the packet! Begin every question by asking the room at large to read the question aloud. Someone will eventually volunteer. On the first day, for those students who have never participated in PLTL, you should clearly explain the learning strategy that will be used for each problem as you reach it. At the end of your first session--and every session, for that matter--thank everyone for coming and tell them to have a good week. It is essential to always end on a positive note.

The most important thing to remember is to approach your first session with confidence! Even if you don't quite fly for the first session, you can totally fall with style.

## 2. Reach for the Process!

### Brian Sohn

Congratulations on being selected as a PLTL leader! I understand that you might be a little nervous about leading your first session. But don't worry, I am here to give you a few tips to make sure your first session runs smoothly!

In order to have a smooth first session, I think the most important thing you should do is to have the students talk to one another. Let the students introduce their names and share some other bits of information, such as hometown, year and major. I also would highly suggest you do an interactive icebreaker activity that allows students to talk to one another. For my first session, I did a BINGO icebreaker, where my students walked around the room until they found another student that matched the facts listed on a bingo-style sheet. There are a lot of other great icebreaker activities that will initiate conversations among students. A few other recommendations include Two Truths and a Lie, Find Someone who..., Dice Breaker, or Hidden Treasure. The more the students interact with one another and feel comfortable with each other, the smoother your first session (and future sessions) will be!

After your icebreaker activity, it would be a good idea to slowly read through the PLTL philosophy with your students. It is crucial for your students to understand your role as a PLTL leader: to facilitate and lead the group. PLTL leaders are not teachers, lecturers, or even tutors. Emphasize that the students will not be provided with the correct answer to group problems and that it is much more important to learn how to find, evaluate, and build confidence in answers! It is the process through which the students solve the problem that matters, NOT the answer key. I believe it is crucial for you to clarify your role as a PLTL leader and the PLTL philosophy in order for the students to understand how the sessions will be run each week: not like a Q&A lecture session but more like a collaborative, group problem-solving session!

The final tip I have is to learn how to be comfortable with silence. Rather than calling on someone or picking a person to read, simply ask for volunteers. Even though it may feel a little awkward at first if no one decides to read, silence is actually a very valuable tool. The more awkward the situation gets, the more the students will want to break the silence by participating and contributing to the group. In order to create an inclusive, friendly, and comfortable environment, I suggest that you use awkward silences in your first few sessions to your advantage to encourage students to participate!

You are now ready to lead your first session. Don't feel nervous. There is a reason why you were chosen for this position. Lead your students with confidence and have fun!

### 3. They've Got a Friend in You!

#### Katherine Tsay

First things first -- congratulations on becoming a Physics PLTL Leader! It's going to be a very exciting and rewarding experience, but it's also very natural to be slightly nervous about your first session and how your group dynamic will be. Hopefully, some of my tips might come in handy and you can enter your first session with more confidence.

An important thing to do before your session is to email all your students beforehand to introduce yourself and remind them of the time and place of the sessions. More than likely, your students won't respond, but that's to be expected so try not to be put off by it! You might also want to consider folding some paper to serve as desk nametags for your students. Knowing each student by name, and also having the students know each other's names, is very important in fostering a good group dynamic. You should also plan on arriving at your first session a bit early so you can be there when your students show up. Write your contact information on the board and make sure everything is in order. For some of you, there might be a PLTL group right before yours (making your room unavailable before your time), but you can still show up early and sit outside to greet your students when they come.

When all your students show up, you can hand out the nametags and each student can spend some time decorating it. It also might be a good idea to do a short icebreaker. I know students tend to dislike icebreakers, but it's really helpful in getting to know your students and getting them acquainted as well. If you wanted to, you could look up or ask around for more unique icebreakers that the students aren't already sick of. Food is, of course, 100% optional, but students tend to appreciate it a lot, and it also creates a chillier and more casual environment that the students might feel more comfortable in.

Your role as a PLTL leader involves being a facilitator, but it's also really helpful to present yourself as a friend. Make it known that you are a resource for your students if they have any questions regarding the course, if they need advice about studying, or about school in general. By placing yourself on their level and not as somebody "higher" than them, the vibe of the group really shifts towards a more friendly and comfortable environment in which students will be more inclined to participate and contribute ideas. However, while it's important to be a friend to your students, it's also important to make sure your students are aware of the PLTL philosophy. Spend some time going over the philosophy with them and emphasize that you are a facilitator and not a teacher -- your job is not actually to teach them the material, but to help them learn how to approach/solve problems and think critically. You should not be expected to give them answers, and while students may be angry about this at first, let them know that it will help them in the long run because problem solving skills and critical thinking that will help them do well on exams.

I also want to mention that it is okay to not know how to answer some of the questions that your students ask. I've had multiple sessions where I told the students I would get back to them on the answer. You can choose between telling your students to ask their professor or finding the explanation yourself and emailing your students. Since I wanted to build relationships with my students, I opted for the latter so I could play more of a direct role in helping them. My point is that sometimes, you won't know the answers, and that is totally okay. Learn to be okay with that because it can definitely happen, and it doesn't make you any less of a "good" PLTL leader. It may actually make your students trust you more if you point them towards resources or email them explanations yourself, further building that relationship between mentor and student.

It may take some time for your group to get comfortable, but if you continue to build relationships, it will get there! And when it does, PLTL will be a blast and your sessions will fly by. Enjoy your semester, and best of luck!

## 4. Hang Together

### **Saryu Sanghani**

Congratulations on being selected to be a Physics PLTL leader! This is definitely an exciting and gratifying experience, but if this is your first time doing this, you might be slightly nervous--which is totally okay! It's finally time for you to prepare for your actual first PLTL session. I remember being rather nervous, so I made a pretty thorough outline of how I wanted the first session to go so that I didn't forget anything while drowning in my nerves. If you're feeling as nervous as I did, I'd recommend making an outline to reference.

First, when you get a list of the students in your PLTL group, send them a friendly email introducing yourself and giving important information like location and time so they know what to expect and so that they have some impression of you before they get to their first session. Then, make sure you check out your room location before the session so that you don't get lost and flustered right before the session--and include directions to the room if it's especially confusing in the email to your students. During the first session, introduce yourself in person (name, year, major, hometown, etc.). I brought ten pieces of blank papers and markers to ask them to make name tags. I also asked the students to write anything they wanted me to know as their PLTL leader (about their learning style, relevant personal information, etc.) on the back since I was going to be collecting the name tags afterwards. You can follow this up with an ice-breaker activity. I personally chose not to come up with an elaborate activity, but instead thought it would be a great way to get to know each other if I asked specific, fun-fact questions. Most people don't know what to say if you just ask for a fun-fact, so I came up with questions like "What's your go-to guilty pleasure?" and "What's a skill/hobby you really wish you were talented at?" or "What's your favorite Wash U tradition?" The specificity led to a general avoidance of awkward silences.

After you break the ice, take some time to go over important logistical information regarding the PLTL program. Make sure you discuss the attendance policy with them, the 10-minute rule, and most importantly the PLTL philosophy. Talk to them about how your role as a PLTL leader is about being a facilitator, not a lecturer. Also emphasize that PLTL is not about finding the right answer, but rather the process of learning how to solve problems. It's okay to acknowledge that they might get frustrated by that initially, but they will get used to how it works! Also, take a few minutes to set some ground rules about respect and being considerate of one another. We want PLTL to be a place where everyone feels comfortable no matter what racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, cultural, educational, etc. background they come from. Take some time to ensure that everyone understands that there should be no interrupting, talking over each other, or other rude behaviors and that everyone should treat each other with respect.

Once they are familiar with all of this information, I would go over the first packet! Remember, it's totally okay if you guys don't finish and remind them that it's okay too. It's not about finishing the packet--it's about the process of problem solving.

At the end of the first session, I reminded the students the value of coming prepared: they should go over that week's lecture notes before each PLTL session. I also listed a few of the other resources that the Physics Department has - The Learning Center (previously called Cornerstone) Help Desk, graduate student AI Hours, and professor office hours and help sessions. End by telling them to have a great week! And, you...well, you did it! Continue leading with preparation and confidence and before you know it, you'll be rocking the PLTL leader role! Good luck and enjoy the ride to infinity and beyond!

## 5. Social Belonging and the PLTL Philosophy

### **Elizabeth Schwartz**

Central to the PLTL Philosophy is the concept of social belonging. I cannot stress enough how important it is to create an environment in which all your students' individual identities are validated and supported. This semester I was actually a Calculus I, not Physics, PLTL leader. Being a Calculus leader, all of my students happened to be first years. Coming to college is an extraordinarily stressful process. Students are under all sorts of new stresses, being away from home and their family and really learning how to live independently as a young adult.

As a PLTL leader it was important for me to keep all of this in mind when working with my students. I always remembered that often the two hours they spend in PLTL a week might be the few hours in which they are truly seen and validated (by you, their leader!).

One way to ensure that your students feel as though they belong in their PLTL group is being very aware of all their identities. One of my students this year practiced Orthodox Judaism. In observing her religion, she was unable to do any homework on Saturday before PLTL. This made her time on Sundays very valuable. Furthermore, she was unable to attend the first two PLTL sessions because they fell during the Jewish high holidays. She emailed me, very apologetically, and I responded, saying that I totally understood her situation.

At the last session I was able to bring food for my group (something you don't have to do, by the way, if your economic situation doesn't allow you to do that). I remembered that she kept kosher, therefore I made sure to bring a snack I knew she could eat. In doing so I was able to validate her identity while celebrating that we had finished PLTL for the semester!

I tell you all of this because your power to show your students empathy is so, so incredible. While the two hours in PLTL can seem like they are solely about physics; they can be, and should be, about so much more than that. They should be two hours about empathizing with and investing in others' well-being. They should be two hours in which your students are able to exist in an environment with a group of people who care if they succeed. They should be two hours in which everyone feels a sense of belonging.

## II. You've Got a Friend in Me

### Your Role as PLTL leader, PLTL Pedagogy, and How to Handle *Not Knowing the Answer*

Woody, Buzz and all the toys helped each other understand their role in the toy group and how to handle not knowing what to do next. You have help figuring it all out, too!

There are things you can do to encourage greater participation, and **Greg Dudick** points out a few of them. He also gives tips on how to be a good facilitator by asking good probing questions.

Even though we will surely all be friends in our PLTL sessions, **Tara Suresh** recommends thinking about how you will set boundaries as a Peer Leader. She also has suggestions on how to approach concept review in your sessions.

**Kevin Kim** gives several ideas on how as the PLTL facilitator, you can make sure your students are comfortable in your session. He also recommends maintaining the pace of the overall session in a steady and productive way.

Pedagogy and facilitation techniques are the subject of **Kristen Riedinger's** contribution to the SAM book. She states that every group is different and encourages you as PLTL peer leaders to try new things and to not be afraid to change gears if something isn't working.

**Ted Flaherty** lists all the resources available to the Introductory Physics students and thinks you should encourage your students to make full use of them. He reiterates that you are a facilitator and a peer, so you don't need to have all the answers!

Finally, **Henry Holtz** wants you to know that not knowing how to approach a physics problem is okay. He encourages you to embrace the feeling of not knowing. It is then that your role as a true facilitator comes to fruition.

## 6. Play Good Sheriff

**Greg Dudick**

As you've heard time and again, DON'T tell your students the answers or even hint at whether they're right or wrong. Something that I found useful was asking specific people who were quiet during the problem solving "Do you agree?" or ask the entire group "Is there anything we're missing/we've forgotten?" By asking this at the end of every problem, it encourages greater participation (and never forget, we do want everyone to participate) and people will always check back on their work regardless if their work is right or wrong. At the end of the day, you're not aiming for the Pizza Planet Truck: we're trying to make our students understand concepts, not the answer for one problem. To this end, sometimes it's best to question an answer that is right so the students can really delve into the problem and understand the whole concept rather than the snippet they need that lead them to the correct answer in the first place. Furthermore, questioning students at the end of a problem aids in slowing some group members down and allowing others to catch up.

As a facilitator, we should not directly intervene but rather hint at the direction we want the discussion to go. Of course, sometimes I slipped up and did a little bit of lecturing to help explain an extremely important concept. I've certainly had to remind my students that you can't have contact between objects and have no force, or even what cosine and sine means, but the key is to make sure they don't get dependent. Getting around this can involve very simple things like asking "What does the question ask exactly?" Or making them look back to the relevant concepts and maintaining silence to force someone to participate. You can be more specific and ask questions relating to the direct concept of the answer the students provide; aka good probing questions! We want our students to talk it out among each other and argue different points as they learn best from each other. Sometimes these questions may just be thoughts out loud, especially in the case where the leader doesn't fully understand or forgot the answer to a problem. That's the beauty of being a facilitator, we don't need to know the answers; we're part of the group too and we're all trying to understand the same question and come to the same conclusions together. As a facilitator, they've got a friend in you.

## 7. Sheriff, This Is No Time to Panic

**Tara Suresh**

One of the more uncomfortable things you will need to do as a PLTL leader is setting boundaries. It's not easy and it's not fun but it's very necessary. This means that you will need to spend some time thinking through various things.

The first is how you will interact with the student on a purely academic level during the session. It's important to tell your students in your first session that you will not be giving them answers to the problems. Don't be wishy-washy about it otherwise the students will find a way to get you to tell them if they are right. Your goal is to lead them in a discussion, not lead them to an answer. While this may seem harsh, allow me to put you at ease with this. If you lead the discussion only, make sure the general concepts are right, and the equations are used correctly, the students can come to the right answer every time.

The following step is to decide how you will interact with them as a PLTL leader. You are a *peer leader*, meaning that you are a peer who is also a leader. It's a difficult balance and you'll find yourself slipping one way or another at times. Our goal is to provide structure to the session but not to lecture or handhold them through the packet. On the other hand, it's fine to develop a friendlier relationship with the students but you shouldn't become so casual that you drop the PLTL philosophy. I found that towards the end of the semester I started slipping in the direction of becoming more of a peer. I caught myself allowing side discussions to occur for too long. While it was good bonding time, it was also time lost on solving problems in the packet. The best way to counter this is to just keep yourself in check. Note when you are no longer a leader and note when you are no longer a peer and re-calibrate. You'll become more sensitive to an imbalance over time and will be able to catch yourself earlier.

The next step is to decide if you want to do a concept review with your students. The students do get more out of the packet if they understand the concepts related to the material for that week. You may find it useful to do this review so that you know that the students are up to speed on everything and can focus on solving the problems rather than on learning the concepts. This review may include putting up equations. It can also include (if your students are open and aware of metacognitive strategies) noting mistakes that your students have made in the past.

Whatever it is, don't bank on leading the exact same concept review week by week. There are certain concepts that your students will have no time picking up and knowing how to use. In these cases, it may not be useful to do a concept review with the students as they won't find it useful and will be less inclined to willfully participate the following week. There will be other times that your students will not know about a concept or be thoroughly confused by what was presented in lecture. It is encouraged to come to

session prepared, and it is up to you, as the PLTL leader, to guide the discussion in a way that is not extremely time consuming yet pushes the burden of explaining the concepts more on the students. In other words, your goal is to not explain all the concepts to the students but have them look up the information, if need be, and practice reaching out to resources. You can confirm if the concept is correct (most of the time it isn't necessary).

Throughout the semester you'll be able to gauge the general capabilities of the students and will know if they understand the concepts before attempting the problems. For example, I started by doing concept reviews every session. However, by the third week, it became clear to me that my group understood the concepts completely and didn't find the review to be any help. In this case, I often times relied on reading the problems as a group and doing concept lists for each problem. This usually sparks a conversation on any concepts people have not totally mastered.

The last big decision you'll need to make is to decide if you want to be able to help your students outside your sessions. As a leader, you are not, by any means, expected to. However, if you are so inclined, you may be open to answers emails with questions or meeting a bit before or after each session to help anyone who is interested. Just make sure it's something you can keep up throughout the semester. I decided that, since my semester was busy, I would only answer emailed questions the weekend before exams. It's totally up to you.

Setting these boundaries may seem daunting but as Buzz Lightyear once told Woody, "Sheriff, this is no time to panic." Even if you decide on one thing in the beginning, you can always tweak things as you go along. Just be upfront with your students and honest with yourself and you'll know what you need to do.

## 8. We as [PLTL Leaders] See Everything

**Kevin Kim**

Remember, your role as a PLTL leader is to mostly be a facilitator for the students to learn with and from each other. Know the PLTL philosophy, and also know that you should be comfortable with pushing the role of being a facilitator in your PLTL sessions. You control the pace of your session!

As you get further and further into the semester, it can be easy to get very comfortable with your students and start slipping into habits of talking about non-physics related subjects. I've found that talking about anything other than physics is helpful to get students comfortable with participating in the PLTL sessions but also borders on the edge of wasting time that you could use getting through the packet. Sometimes even a break halfway in the packet to take some time off can do wonders for your students' motivation in the second half of the session. You decide for yourself what a healthy balance is between social and PLTL time. It gets easier and easier to get started if you have students that have consistently showed up to your sessions, so look forward to making good time later in the semester.

What remains the most important is that you are cognizant that your time is valuable and that your students' time is valuable. Don't be afraid to interrupt those lulls in concentration for your students and get them back on track! The students are here to work on the problems, and you are here to facilitate that process to the best of your ability.

I know if we had an especially long packet of problems to work through, my students would always want to stay longer to finish or were disappointed that they could not get through the whole packet. That's no problem at all! Focus on really diving into each problem and making sure that every student understands and learns. It's not an issue at all if you don't finish the packet; sometimes that means you've really spent some good time going in depth with the other problems.

There will always be students that work through the packet slower and faster than others. I found that it was really useful to pair the slower working students with the faster working ones and keep the similarly fast paced students from working with each other so that the group as a whole could go through the session as one. Try to keep all the students busy working or learning while maintaining the pace of the overall session steady and productive. It might seem tricky at first, but you'll get the hang of it in no time.

## 9. The Important Thing Is That We Stick Together

### **Kristen Riedinger**

By now, you're probably very familiar with the applications of each of the basic PLTL learning strategies: Scribe, Round Robin, and Pairs/Small Groups. Some of you may have already begun to experiment with modifying the original strategies as you figure out your group's dynamic, so I'm going to offer some additional comments about how you can make these strategies work better for your sessions.

My group had a mix of talkative and quiet students, with one student who was often more hesitant to talk and one student who was very willing to talk. One strategy that I tried to help even out the participation among these students was to combine the Scribe and Round Robin strategies. In using the traditional Scribe strategy, it would often just be the same few students volunteering ideas to contribute. The addition of the Round Robin aspect allowed me to spread out the responses among my group, preventing the more talkative students from overshadowing the more quiet students and allowing the more quiet students to share part of a possible solution rather (without feeling like they had to have the whole answer). The choice of a scribe can also be strategic. For example, if you have a particularly dominant student, you can ask them to be the scribe to allow the other students room to participate, or if you have a small group for a given session, you can be the scribe yourself to encourage more group interaction.

In using the Pairs/Small Groups strategy, I noticed that my students seemed less likely to collaborate with everyone in their group if the groups were too big, so I tried to keep the size of my groups to 2-3 people and made sure to change up the makeup of the groups throughout the session. For certain questions, I would also combine Small Groups with Round Robin, having each pair/group share out rather than each individual. This especially allowed the less-confident students to discuss their thoughts with just one or two people before presenting their thoughts to the whole group. The main issue that I ran into with small groups is that my groups would often work at very different rates. I never did come up with a foolproof way to prevent this, but I found that asking the faster-working groups some additional probing questions and having them put their work up on the board while the other groups finished worked relatively well.

Every group is different, so a strategy that works for one leader may not always work for another. As you continue to get to know your group better, it's important to pay attention to the dynamic among the students and how it changes throughout the semester. If you notice that something isn't working, don't be afraid to try something new. The most important thing is that your group is working together to advance their understanding of physics problem-solving.

## 10. Buzz, Gimme a Hand

### Ted Flaherty

Your students are undoubtedly going to come to you with a lot of questions as the semester rolls on, and as a PLTL leader you may feel like you must answer all of them. However, that is not what PLTL is for. Never fear! There are plenty of resources and places your students can go for extra help. For me, personally, professors have consistently been a great source of information and aid. Also, the stereotype that professors dislike helping students is completely false, at least at Wash U. Professors are not going to think students who ask to meet with them are less intelligent or looking for “brownie points” (as I’ve heard some students say). Professors at Wash U want to help students; they hold office hours for a reason. In addition, professors are great to go to for students who really want to be challenged. They can go more in depth into a topic than you, as a PLTL leader, may be able to. Professors, assistant professors, and AIs are a fantastic place for your students to go. Remember, you are a facilitator and a peer, so you don’t need to have all the answers (or give them to your students).

Another great resource for your students is each other. In high school, I’m sure it was the norm for people to study alone, and at other top-tier universities this may also be the case. Again, this is not so here! That was one of the main reasons I came to Wash U. Though it may take a while for your students, especially freshmen to be comfortable working and studying in a group. Luckily, they have a group of people they can study with that they see every week! This is an added benefit of encouraging a strong group dynamic and making sure your students work well together. I always told my students, especially when it came close to exams, to pick an open classroom and “attack a chalkboard with practice problems”. One way that I tried to get my students to work together was by making a GroupMe with all my students. Any group chat system or even email works the same way. This way, if we didn’t get to finish a problem, or some students still had questions, they could turn to the group, despite not actually physically being in PLTL. It was a portable PLTL!

Though it may initially feel like a cop-out to send your students to professors, each other, or other peers who have taken the class when they need extra help, it is not a negative on you. You are still a great peer leader, but sometimes you need to ask for a hand. If you have your own experiences with professors or an upperclassman that helped you out, share with your students! They will understand; you cannot possibly hold all the answers they seek. Sending them to outside resources is a great way to relieve the pressure off yourself.

## 11. Buzz, You're Not a Real Space Ranger

### Henry Holtz

Solving physics problems is a challenge, and after an entire year of not studying the material, it's even harder. You've probably figured that out by now. Some topics will come smoothly and easily back to you, others won't. Even after going to PAM, it can be a challenge to remember the flow of the problems in the packet while leading. For me, during a PLTL session, the answer to the problem may have been in plain sight on the completed packet right in front of my face, but all the little steps in the problem sometimes would slip my mind. I'd keep forgetting the next step in getting to the answer. I'd would get stuck not knowing where to lead the group. This is a reason it's important to prepare for PLTL sessions, but even with pre-PLTL review, you may still face the dilemma of not knowing the answer.

Despite ample preparation, physics knowledge can still seem to just poof out of your mind at random times. That's because when you're leading a PLTL session, most of the focus is dedicated to *leading* instead of solving the problem. Listening and responding to 8 or 10 rambunctious teens can take a lot of brain power. When you are in a fast-paced discussion or solving situation and this not-knowing uncertainty suddenly hits you, it can feel like the ground has been pulled out from under you in a split second.

What is the solution to not knowing? My personal strategy is to literally stand there in the feeling of not knowing and ask the group what they would do for the next step. Then you are genuinely asking the group "Where do we go?", "What clues do we have from the problem?", or "What do you think of this equation?" Not knowing the answer is completely okay, because now you can focus entirely on facilitation and the understanding of the group, and you are probably in the exact same boat as them—not knowing the answer.

Buzz Lightyear thought he was a real space ranger. Woody laughed at this, because he knew they were really just toys. It's not necessary to be like Buzz in PLTL. You and I are not professional physicists, so we don't have to act that way. If you lose some sort of footing while leading the group, that's fine. Even if you are lost, be confident that you will find your footing again in understanding the problem. The path is not gone forever, it might just be gone for forty seconds.

Your role is to be a PLTL leader, and the PLTL philosophy allows not knowing the next step. Teaching myself how to relax when the session got stuck in one place helped me become a better leader and helped me enjoy my sessions more. Truly, students will like a leader who knows they are not a space ranger or physics professor. They are just looking to improve their understanding (and improve their grade!) with the help of another student.

### III. There's a Snake in My Boot!

#### **Group Dynamics, Identity Threat, Conflict Resolution & Low Attendance**

Remember all the toys weren't big fans of Buzz at first. He was pretty clueless. But once they got to know him and understand where he came from, he became part of the group. You may have similar challenges and experiences in your PLTL group.

**Sim Ohri** states that a proper group dynamic can foster better learning, more enthusiasm and gives tips to begin building it during your first session.

While in the process of building your group's dynamic, **Jason Tang** reminds us to always respect people's identities, as students will learn the best when they feel their contributions matter.

Conflict resolution is **Royce Dong's** topic and he recommends leading by example and making a conscious effort to treat everyone equally.

The semester rolls on and everyone starts to feel a little worn out. **Riley Martell** and **Natalie Schanzer** give tips on how to encourage attendance and keeping students invested in your PLTL sessions.

## 12. Should Your Group Have a Friend in You?

**Sim Ohri**

Your group's dynamic can be one of the most daunting things to take on when you are first starting out leading PLTL. A proper group dynamic can foster better learning, more enthusiasm, and high participation in a friendly environment. For that reason, it is incredibly important to make sure that the dynamic you've struck is one that will continue to work for you and your group as the semester wears on.

The first session of PLTL, as I am sure you are aware of at this point, is integral to striking the balance you want for your sessions. Do you want a more relaxed, friendly vibe? A very focused lets-get-this-done vibe? Is it possible to have both? A large part of your group dynamic will depend on the actual students you get, which is completely random and something that you cannot predict. There are, however, a few things you can do to help guide your kids in the right direction. One of the most important things, in my opinion, is allowing your own personality to shine through. If you want the students to feel comfortable, make sure you act comfortably around your group members. If they feel like they know you a little bit and know you are not going to judge them, in my experience they are far more likely to keep coming back and participate more. A big part of this is small talk. Some leaders may not like small talk because it takes up time from the session, but I believe that during the first 10 minutes when waiting for everyone to file in, it can be a great way for you and your students to get to know each other better. When everyone feels like they know each other, it feels more like a study group and less like a session with a scary upperclassman.

One thing to be mindful of is how your group dynamic can shift as time goes on and circumstances in the semester change. I really liked how comfortable my students were with me, until they got very stressed around the second exam. At that point, due to the comfort level, they felt okay badgering me for answers or more help that I simply could not give as a PLTL leader. If something like that happens, keep in mind that it is never too late to refresh the PLTL philosophy and your role in the group. I took advantage of the arrival of a new addition to spend 5 minutes reminding my students that, although I sympathize with them and welcome questions, I am not their tutor, and that they are always welcome to go to office hours for more instructional help. It can feel awkward, but again, if that level of friendliness is there, your students will respect you enough to understand what you are saying, and most likely they had not even noticed what they were doing.

Throughout the course you will be learning a little bit about self-reflection – as you reflect on yourself and your leadership, make sure you also reflect on anything that may be working or not working in your group as well. It is never too late to correct a ship that has gone a little bit off course, and it will be better for both you and your students.

## 13. You Got Problems, and I Got 'Em Too

### Jason Tang

When Randy Newman sang this lyric in “You’ve Got a Friend in Me,” he was talking about something more powerful than I and many children who watched Toy Story realize: empathy. Nobody is perfect; everyone has their moments of pleasure, and everyone has their struggles. Realizing this, accepting your own and others’ struggles, and growing from them brings people together.

During your PLTL sessions, group dynamic is very important; it’s hard to work as a team when the individuals don’t mesh. A big part of fostering group dynamic entails making your students feel like they belong and making them feel comfortable with each other. That’s why I like to start off all my sessions with short life updates. I alternate between happies and crappies and poop sandwiches. A poop sandwich is similar to a happy and crappy, except you start with something good that happened to you this past week (the first slice of bread), something poopy that happened this past week (the poop), and finish with something you’re looking forward to in the coming week (the second slice of bread). I feel that these short intros help the students get to know each other more intimately. They get to share aspects about their life that probably wouldn’t have come up otherwise. Sometimes short conversations start over something that someone said, often validating their struggles or reinforcing their “happies.” I don’t find these conversations to be a distraction; they help the students bond in the long run and only take a few minutes.

These life update sessions can get pretty casual. Toward the end of the semester, my students started clapping for each other’s happies/bread slices. It’s perfectly fine, and I think preferable, if you are also equally casual at this time. If the students see you as one of them, they’ll start to grow closer to you and be more comfortable with you. After all, you are a peer leader. But during problems, it’s important that you be more authoritative. This includes cutting offside conversations before they snowball into drawn-out discussions and making sure that all group members are on the same track. Jokes are perfectly fine, as long as students get back on track relatively quickly and no one is offended.

Students learn best when they feel like they belong and feel like a regular human. Unfortunately, there are a lot of small actions that can act counter to this. That’s why it’s important to recognize identity threats and fight them whenever possible.

An identity threat is when an individual feels that they are acknowledged as a separate identity. This can manifest itself in stereotypes about how someone who holds a certain identity should perform in certain academic settings. For example, Asian students are expected to perform well in math and science courses like Physics, while Black students are not. These blanket statements are unacceptable, and you should be proactive to ensure that your students don’t feel like they are being subjected to them. Your PLTL students

will be very diverse and hold many different identities of their own. You do not want to “other” them, but at the same time it’s important not to homogenize the group; individual identities matter and are very important to people. They’re what make all of us so unique and beautiful. Additionally, it’s important to recognize the intersectionality of students’ identities. For example, being a queer person of color is different than being queer or a person of color; the intersection of these identities lends itself to even more unique experiences than holding any one of them alone. Everyone is distinct in that they are the intersection of a set of identities. If and when your students reveal one of their identities to you, it’s important that you don’t try to overly compensate for it, especially if they are part of a marginalized community. Make them feel human. This often occurs because we all hold implicit biases toward certain types of identities. It’s important to be aware of these biases. You might find your own biases to be disgusting to your conscious mind, but that’s perfectly normal. What’s important is that you are aware of your own biases and act against them if they further put down an already marginalized group.

Knowing this, it’s important to emphasize the growth mindset equally to all students. Students may start off on unequal footing in physics, but everyone has the potential to succeed in this course. PLTL may be only one of many things that some students use to study for Physics, but it’s important that the two hours that they spend with you are two hours well spent. As mentioned earlier, the students will learn best when they feel like they belong, that their contributions matter, and that asking questions won’t make them look stupid. Balancing your group dynamic and respecting people’s identities will not only gain you respect as a leader but will also lead to more fruitful PLTL sessions.

## 14. If You'd Help Us, One Toy to Another, I'd Sure Be Grateful: Conflict Resolution

### Royce Dong

Hopefully by now you've been starting to get the hang of PLTL, and your sessions are running more smoothly. But on rare occasions, you might run into a conflict between the students in your group. First, it's no one's fault. These kinds of things just happen when a bunch of sleep-deprived and stressed students are trying to grind through the PLTL problems as quickly as possible so that they can leave and study for an upcoming test. You know exactly how this feels. When students are in this irritable state, what may start as a little thing can escalate into a large conflict.

This could be an argument between two students about what the right answer is to a question. It might even get personal. One possibility is that the argument stems from discriminatory attitudes against certain students based on their race, gender, class, etc. Another possibility is students talking down to others because they think they're smarter, and their opinions are more important than those of others. No matter the case, your responsibility as the leader of the PLTL session is to keep things under control before they get out of hand.

Hopefully this doesn't happen to you, but in extreme cases the conflict might be urgent and aggressive. In these situations, it is best to intervene directly. Speak to the students involved in a calm voice and get them to settle down. Defuse the conflict by having all parties involved express their opinions and repeat their opinions out loud to make them feel valued and listened to. Objectively evaluate the arguments being brought to the table and have bystanders chime in too. Don't say one argument is completely wrong. Let all the parties involved have the feeling of being right, to at least some degree. Once the conflict is resolved, shift the discussion back to the PLTL packet.

More commonly, situations will be less overt. Conflicts might be temporary and passive aggressive. The students involved may indicate to one another some kind of disapproval in their normal conversation. Because these kinds of signals are subtle, it's important to stay aware of what's going on in your PLTL session to the best of your ability. Doing so will let you pick up on microaggressions amongst students.

One great way to resolve these conflicts is to lead by example. At all times, make a conscious effort to treat everyone equally. Don't pick favorites. When facilitating discussions, choose students equally and let them voice their opinions. This will make everyone feel valued. Whenever students say something wrong and seem to take it poorly, stay positive with them and promote the growth mindset. It's important to emphasize that everyone has equal and abundant potential. Over time this will help the students build confidence in their academic abilities. By staying positive, you also compel other students to think in this way, about not

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only themselves but others too. The biases and grudges that students may have towards others will fade over time if they're constantly exposed to more positive and less discriminatory thinking.

As you've seen, students in PLTL (and in general) have diverse backgrounds. When the ultimate goal is to learn, their differences should not get in the way of their collaboration.

## 15. How to Get Buzz and Woody Back...Attending Their PLTL Session

### Riley Martell

Just like Toy Story, things were originally great for you at the beginning of it all. With everyone showing up to your sessions and working diligently through the packets, you feel like you just had your birthday (maybe) and now not only own a Buzz Light year action figure, but also your favorite and loyal companion Woody. Then, disaster strikes. Half of your group stops showing up and each week they seem to be dropping like flies. With attendance dropping as you hit midsemester, you feel like you just lost Buzz Lightyear and Woody at the same time. How do you deal with this? Can you find your (metaphorical) Buzz Lightyear and Woody and get them to start coming to PLTL again?

My first piece of advice is to send out an email the day or a couple of days before (I would recommend after PAM ends so you have a time where this is on your mind) reminding the students that they have PLTL session and what topics the problems of that week will cover. This strategy is a two-for-one because this not only will help attendance for your group but also reminds the students to look over their notes and FlipIt videos for the relevant topics. Also, I would recommend mentioning during the session how specific problems are related to ones they will see on exams and homework sets. Doing well in the physics course is the main incentive for coming to PLTL so reiterating this to students can help them feel motivated to come to the sessions regularly.

As the group facilitator, you help make the sessions feel more useful and productive for the students by reminding the students to stay on task throughout the sessions. Reinforcing the PLTL policy of collaboration and making sure the students do not work ahead in the packet is helpful when there are smaller group sessions so that everyone is able to actively participate in the problem at hand.

Ask your students for feedback! I'm sure the whole mess of losing Woody and Buzz would have been fixed if Woody could have just talked to Andy about how he was feeling left out—communication is key! Getting feedback from your students at the beginning of sessions or by email about what they think is helpful and what is not useful about the PLTL sessions will help you as a leader to make the sessions more specific to your group's needs and overall more helpful for them.

Obviously, the group dynamic in Toy Story was completely changed for Andy and the other toys once Woody and Buzz got lost, and the same thing happens in your PLTL group if attendance drops significantly. One way to deal with this is with adjusting the collaborative learning strategies you use. Modifying the scribe strategy where the PLTL leader acts as the scribe instead of one of the students helps when there is a particularly small group. This allows the students to all voice their opinions rather than sacrificing one student's perspective from the group when it is already limited by the low number of students present. Also,

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focus more on developing and asking leading questions to the group when attendance is low. They may be more likely to miss a point on a problem or have conceptual confusion when there are fewer students there to contribute ideas. Formulating leading questions to guide the group towards a correct solution becomes even more important and helpful with low attendance.

## 16. Pull My String, PLTL is Today?

### Natalie Schanzer

The PLTL philosophy calls for a group of 10 individuals, ready to work together and learn. Unfortunately, we are all students with busy lives and various other responsibilities, and it is very unlikely that you will have a session where all 10 students attend and come prepared. As a facilitator, it is your job to make the most of the situation you are handed. In this section, I will address how low attendance can affect your group dynamic.

Likely every week you will have a somewhat different group of individuals. Students will be removed from your group due to low attendance and students will added from the waitlist. This is an unfortunate reality of PLTL, and although it may be sad to see students drop off, it's important to not take it personally and continue to strive to be the best leader possible for the students that do show up. Also, the size of your group may differ from week to week as your students experience midsemester slumps and midterm seasons. It is impossible to completely plan the progression of each session, and it is important that as a leader you are flexible and can roll with whatever comes your way.

One of the ways these differences is most evident is assigning groups for different question styles. Small groups may not be possible if you have a small number of students, and students may feel pressured to answer a round robin question in front of 9 of their peers. Walking through all these possible scenarios is beyond the scope of what I can do in this chapter, however, what I want to get across is that your group dynamic is not static, and will change week to week for a variety of reasons, including the number of students in attendance, the personalities of the individuals present, the level of preparedness of the students in the room, and more. This also means that you have the ability to change the group dynamic from week to week. Don't let yourself get stuck in rut— if there is something you want to change about the way you run your session, give it a try! The possibilities are endless.

## IV. Wheezy Got His Squeaker Fixed (and Felt Amazing)

### Growth Mindset, Midsemester Slump, Health & Wellness, Diverse Student Needs

Buzz, Woody, Jesse, Rex and the crew were about to be incinerated in the Tri-County Landfill. They held hands and supported each other when it seemed all hope was lost. Amazingly, the toy aliens, who were having a much better day, saved them with the help of the claw.

The message here is to first help yourself in the best ways possible. Next, at Wash U, there are mental health resources that can be like the toy aliens and their claw to help pull you out of a bad day.

Growth mindset is an essential part of physics PLTL. **Fred DeRosier** gives advice on how to promote growth mindset and help your students succeed in physics.

**Lisa Chionis** also talks about promoting growth mindset by clearing up misconceptions that students may have coming into Wash U.

Ahh, midsemester slump happens to the best of us. **Naomi Ahn** has some recommendations to help your students overcome it and be reenergized for PLTL.

Many PLTL students are freshman and their first round of finals can be hard on them. **Sammie Scott** makes this point and has ideas on how to help your students properly deal with the accompanying stress.

**Jay Schroeder** admits that Wash U students tend to overcommit and get overwhelmed. He offers reassuring advice on handling the feeling of panic when there is just too much to do and not enough time.

Wash U students have diverse needs and it is important that everyone in your PLTL group feels included. As a wrap up, **Heather Lee** gives advice on how to foster inclusive discussions that give everyone a chance to participate which is foundational to PLTL philosophy!

## 17. Tell Your Students Not to Be a Potato Head and Adopt a Growth Mindset!

**Fred DeRosier**

What is a growth mindset? In short, a growth mindset is the belief that the more you practice something the better you'll get. Physics, especially, seems to have a bit of a stigma around it. Many people seem to think that you either get it or you don't, and if you don't get it, you're screwed. That is not the case though, and it's very important that students approach the class with this mindset. There were topics in physics that I found challenging, but the more I worked at understanding the topic, the better I got. Seems pretty self-explanatory but many students, especially if they didn't do well on their first exam will say they just aren't a physics person.

Some things I did to promote this mindset were to share anecdotes of people who did poorly on their first exam, who struggled with physics in high school or who didn't even take physics in high school, but still succeeded in Physics 197 (now Physics 191). Many times, students just need to approach the material a bit differently than they have in the past, or simply practice more. I encouraged my students to try out all the resources that the school offers and told them to consistently use them. I also told them to study as much outside of PLTL as they would have if they had not gotten into the PLTL.

By the time the second exam rolled around, most of my students felt very confident about the exam and the ones that followed my advice told me they felt prepared. This helped them get through that midsemester slump that many other students were experiencing because they felt ready for the exam and spent less time stressing.

There were still students who said they were just not "physics people." I challenged them to do all the extra practice problems and extra practice exams before the final test. If they didn't do better: I'd get them a candy bar or clean their room or something. By the time the final PLTL rolled around, the students who followed my advice said they felt ready and couldn't believe how much better they got at solving physics problems.

Setting concrete study goals and sharing success stories of those who also struggled in physics initially or thought they weren't "science people" really helped change their mindset, especially when they started seeing the results of putting in the work. Hopefully this helps you get your students to adopt a growth mindset and succeed in physics!

## 18. A Growth Mindset Can Take You to Infinity and Beyond

**Lisa Chionis**

By this point, you've probably discussed the growth mindset concept in SAM, but I want to highlight why it's important to foster a growth mindset in your PLTL students and provide specific ways you can do so! Holding a growth mindset involves focusing more on processes than products (i.e., grades). When I was a first-year student, the only prior experience I had with a STEM course was in high school, where I could memorize equations, plug & chug, and violá: A+. After some low grades and lots of stress my freshman year, I realized this method is not practical in intro level college courses. By the time I took Intro Physics as a junior, I was lucky to have developed more of a growth mindset because physics is not a test of rote memorization but an application of interrelated concepts and processes. Most students taking physics are first years though, so it's important to help them make the growth mindset transition sooner rather than later!

PLTL students come from very different high school backgrounds and tend to show up to their first sessions with misconceptions about their leader, the course, and themselves. In order to promote a growth mindset, leaders need to rule out some of those assumptions. One of the most common misconceptions is that the PLTL leader is some natural physics genius. In order to erase this misconception, I shared personal anecdotes about not having taken physics before college, feeling overwhelmed during class, and scoring relatively low on the first exam. If you can relate to this experience at all, I would recommend sharing this with students. Some of them were shocked I hadn't taken AP Physics and still managed to succeed, and it boosted the confidence of students who could relate. If you can't relate and had a strong physics background before college, remind students that the study strategies they used in high school might not work effectively at Wash U, and taking AP Physics is not at all required for success in this course. In fact, sometimes students who did very well in AP underestimate this course and are surprised by the exams.

Students who have struggled with a STEM course in the past can fall into the trap of believing that they must not be a "science or math person," when really, they might just need to approach the material differently. During one session, a member of my group whose parent teaches physics commented that they "obviously didn't get those genes." It was my goal to convince them that being good at physics is not some genetic, predetermined ability, and that with good study skills and determination, they can crush this class. You can remind them about help sessions, AI and instructor office hours, and The Learning Center (formerly Cornerstone) to help them identify which academic resources and study strategies work best for them.

## 19. How to Tackle Midsemester Slump

### Naomi Ahn

It may vary depending on the group of students you have in your PLTL session but in the beginning of a semester, I am sure that many of your groups were as lively and energetic as Woody and a Buzz Lightyear when humans are not around. Once the fall break is over, however, your group might be dead silent just like toys when Andy enters his room. Perhaps it's that time of the semester: midsemester slump! Though it's challenging to be energetic and enthusiastic when you haven't been sleeping enough, and the amount of work and studying you have to do seems endless, there are ways that can help you escape from the midsemester slump.

Before talking about how to tackle midsemester slump, I would like to stress how important it is for peer leaders to stay passionate. Happiness is contagious but negative energy/emotions are contagious as well. Throughout my PLTL sessions, I didn't realize my volume was decreasing and overall my energy level was going down until getting the first feedback from observations. Even if you are not aware of a decrease in your own energy level, it's possible that students can notice. After reading the feedback, I tried to be louder, more enthusiastic, and more active in general. Whenever there was long silence that lasted more than about 10 seconds, I would be the one asking the group open-ended questions in a LOUD voice. I know it's awkward and challenging to encourage students to participate but it did work! You as a peer leader have the potential to spread energy to your students even if all of you have fallen into a midsemester slump yourself.

Do you remember in Toy Story 1 when the Buzz Lightyear first came to Andy's room? He believed he was a real spaceman on the mission! In reality, he was no different from other toys who fear losing Andy's interest. Just like him, we sometimes think we can do multiple things at once or underestimate the amount of work we have to do by the end of the semester. When I first came to Wash U, I signed up for many clubs, applied for many exec positions and registered for many classes to get as many credits as possible while at the same time, trying to go on weekend adventures to explore St. Louis. Did it work? Of course not. In the end, I had to quit some things and spend every evening doing homework and cramming for exams. Sleep, social life, and good grades: there is a famous online myth that as a college student, you have to choose two of three at maximum. Although it's debatable whether this myth is true, one obvious truth is that many of us experience pressure due to time constraints in college.

Although we are not able to dilate time, we do have the ability to evaluate our time commitments in clubs, classes, and part-time jobs and see whether we can change it to be manageable. Are you taking too many classes with heavy workloads? Do you have time to be involved in research when you have other stuff that takes up your entire week? It's best to reevaluate your time commitment in the beginning of the

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semester or before the semester even starts, but sometimes unexpected things can happen. The course workload can change, the amount of time and effort spent on your part-time job can be greater than what you expected. If that is the case, talk with your advisors, co-workers, and friends and prioritize your happiness! Also, make room in your schedule for something fun and exciting, such as working out, taking a nap at Art Hill, etc. You can also play fun music before your PLTL session starts to bring up your and your students' energy level.

## 20. Relax, Rex the T-Rex

### **Sammie Scott**

It's the end of the semester, and you have made it through midterms and the midsemester slump. You had a relaxing Thanksgiving break and are looking forward to going home after finals. Unfortunately, after coming back from break you find yourself swamped by a million papers, presentations, and exams. Spending all day and night in the library worrying about getting your work done is leading you to get almost no sleep, social time, or exercise. PLTL responsibilities seem to be the last thing on your mind, but your students are counting on you. So, what can you do?

Stress management is a very important skill to have, especially at a school like Wash U. Even with what feels like endless assignments looming, it is important to take care of yourself. Taking regular breaks while studying, going for walks outside, getting some exercise, and spending time with friends are all great ways to manage your stress. By practicing these techniques, you will increase your productivity and energy level and be able to study more efficiently.

It is also important to remember that many of your students are freshman, and their first round of finals can be very hard on them emotionally. Consider bringing in snacks for your last few PLTL sessions and taking some time to check in with everyone before your session starts. Keep a positive attitude around your students and remind them that they are at Wash U for a reason, and that they will do great on finals!

## 21. It's the PERFECT Time to Panic!!

**Jay Schroeder**

Now, panicking is not usually the best approach to a problem, but sometimes it happens...and that's okay. At Wash U, there is a tendency for people to overcommit and get overwhelmed, leading to all kinds of problems. It can be easy to focus in on schoolwork or other major commitments when times are busy and ignore things like your social life and taking care of yourself. When you start neglecting yourself, it becomes impossible to take care of and be attentive to others, like your PLTL students. As a PLTL leader, a role model and mentor for students, you need to pay special attention to your mental health and make sure that you're practicing self-care. Below, I'll share some of my strategies for self-care and how to recognize when you might be struggling, as well as how to address this with your PLTL students.

First, I want to reiterate that feeling off or not feeling like yourself is perfectly okay. It's okay to have bad days, days where you don't feel motivated to do things, days where you might constantly feel tired no matter how much you slept, days where you just want to be by yourself, etc. These are some of the ways that my struggles with my own mental health manifest themselves, but it's different for everyone. The important thing is that it's normal to feel like this occasionally. Knowing how to combat these feelings or deal with them is the next step in helping yourself, because I'm a firm believer in the fact that you can't help others or be attentive to their needs until you take care of yourself first.

For me, I deal with these feelings by going to the gym. Taking the time to be there by myself, listening to music, and just working out helps clear my head and put me in a much better mindset. Now, this is not a method that works for everyone. Some of my friends swear that spending time outside works wonders for them, or spending time with someone close to you, like a sibling or a significant other can also help, especially if you don't want to be alone. Finally, SLEEP. Seriously, I cannot recommend this enough. Getting proper sleep is SO much more important than getting another hour of studying in or doing another practice problem. Now, those are some methods for dealing with these feelings when they appear, but there are things that you can do to take care of yourself on a day to day basis, making these feelings appear less frequently.

First, make sure you are eating properly. Your body really starts to work against you when you aren't feeding it properly, so make sure you're eating enough and you're eating healthy food. Next, exercise. Exercising increases endorphin secretion in your body, which makes you feel good and it also has the added bonus of being good for your physical health. Also, make sure you take some time to interact with the people you care about. Being around people and just talking with them, whether it be about what's bothering you or something totally different to distract yourself, is so good for your mental health. Finally, and I really cannot stress this enough, SLEEP. The biggest thing I've learned throughout my college career is that you should not sacrifice your sleep for school, it's not worth the monumental negative effects that come with it. It took me until my senior year to get in this mindset, please don't let it take you that long too.

Before I end this, I just want to say that things are not always going to be easy, you're going to have bad days and that's okay. At the end of the day, what matters is that you take care of yourself. If the one person you manage to take care of today is you, that is ENOUGH, and don't you let anyone tell you otherwise. For, if you don't take care of yourself, how are you supposed to take care of your PLTL students? And don't worry, you don't have to panic, but it's perfectly okay to do so if that's what you need.

## 22. No [Student] Gets Left Behind: Inclusivity

**Heather Lee**

Students from Wash U come from all over the world and it's important to remember their differences in big ways and small. It's our job as PLTL leaders to make sure that all our students feel comfortable in the environment we create. It can be influenced by things we do and say, big and small. Obviously, we want to make sure everyone feels included. Doing things like encouraging small talk and bringing food can help create bonding opportunities. It's a fine line, however, between being inclusive and unintentionally singling the students out, if that makes any sense; I'll illustrate with examples.

You're making small talk with everyone asking what they did for break. We all know that Wash U has a high number of affluent students. One student who had a modest meal with their immediate family at home may feel uncomfortable sharing that while everyone else is talking about their trips. It's not bad to talk about students' lives in college; it's nearly unavoidable. It is important for students to celebrate their differences; they should be talked about. But the inclusivity, I would say, comes in the phrasing. "What did you do for break?" for example, has a connotation that it's normal for students to actually DO something for break. Also, it's hard to create an interesting conversation from that. Fostering discussion is our jobs and we can be more creative than that. A simple question that, I think, conveys things better is, "What was your favorite part of break?" with a follow up of "Why?" This is a general example of the nuances of creating an inclusive environment. Giving everyone the opportunity to participate and making sure they feel comfortable doing so.

Now for singling students out. You want to bring in food for the group. Great! Who doesn't like a good snack? But how to bring it in? Do you have each student bring something in every week? One of our videos illustrates the implications this can have on students who can't afford to. While the leader bringing in food for the student is an easy fix, the student may feel awkward because everyone else now knows they aren't participating. They might feel like they don't belong. A solution which does not single anyone out is that the leader brings in food for everyone all the time. It's important to make sure that, not only are you accommodating for everyone, but any special accommodations are made into a non-issue. If this is impossible, it should be handled as discreetly and dealt with as normally as possible. Anything that may single out the student, no matter how well intentioned, can make them feel uncomfortable.

I am focusing on the socioeconomic aspects, because that is what I have the most experience in. These ideas, however, apply to every situation and every student. Some examples of other things that fall under this umbrella of diversity are non-nuclear or dysfunctional families, and cultural differences. It may seem like a lot of things to account for and that any interaction with students may require lots of tiptoeing. You'll notice, however, that so long as you work towards making sure that students feel included and not singled out, you'll succeed in doing so.