

# What One Student Learned by Teaching His Peers

By Goldie Blumenstyk April 25, 2016

Studies show the effectiveness of peer teaching — asking students to instruct their fellow undergraduates. The approach has [proved especially effective](#) in serving underrepresented minority students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

The approach can also pay off in many ways for the peer instructors themselves. "I understand completely why people would want to do this for the rest of their lives," says Randy Juste, a 23-year-old chemistry major at Florida International University who teaches math as part of its learning-assistant program. He says the experience has also taught him a lot about being a better student himself.

The university says it has one of the largest peer-teaching programs in the country, with 300 learning assistants, known as LAs. In several disciplines, courses are being redesigned to reflect the role of the peer instructors. For some math courses, for example, students are regularly assigned to take one class a week as a less-formal "math gym" session with their learning assistant.

As part of the [preparation](#), learning assistants are required to complete a one-credit seminar that gives them some teaching basics, and they do other continuous training throughout their teaching assignments. They are paid about \$10 per hour.

*The Chronicle* recently spoke with Mr. Juste, a senior who has been a learning assistant in the math program since the fall of 2012. This semester he is working 15 hours a week. The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

## **Q. What got you interested in becoming a learning assistant?**

**A.** I was taking a Calculus II course. That class was an active-learning class.

They had learning assistants who would sit in the class, and then maybe the last 35 minutes of class, we would break up into groups and work with LAs. Then they would go over problems with us in the class. I got to see a little bit of what they were doing. Then it just so happened that, right around that time that I'd been told about it, the applications were opening up for the following semester. I applied, and they accepted me.

## **Q. Were you a good student in that class? Did you get an A?**

**A.** I did. I did really well in pretty much all my math courses while I've been at FIU. It was a smooth transition into being a learning assistant.

**Q. What's been surprising to you about being a learning assistant?**

**A.** One of the things that's really surprising is how strong an effect we have on the students. I don't know if I realized how big a role I was going to play when I initially started out. Then to see the trust that our faculty puts in us, and the degree to which we get to work with students and interact with them, and how great an effect we have in their success in the course, is really inspiring to me. It's one of the things that makes me really want to consider doing this as a profession.

I understand completely why people would want to do this for the rest of their lives because it's awesome just to be able to help somebody like that. It's one of the coolest things about being a learning assistant. I have students who, they just light up whenever I explain something to them in a way that they get it. It's like, "Wow."

**Q. What's the hardest thing?**

**A.** Some people are just — they're just not feeling it that day. Maybe they had a tough week, or they're not understanding the material, and they're just discouraged. Trying to feed someone who doesn't want to be fed can be challenging sometimes.

**Q. These are students who have complicated lives as well. How much of what you do is teaching them math, and how much of it is coaching them on life skills?**

**A.** Wow, that's a good question. I would say it's almost half and half, but it seamlessly flows from one to the other. I could be helping a student with a problem one minute. Then the very next minute, I could be answering a question that they could be having about the school, or how to register for an exam, or how to approach a certain friend in class. I think it just depends on who I'm talking to.

**Q. What have you learned about teaching? Are there some things that you didn't realize that your professors were doing, now that you've been trained in these techniques?**

**A.** One of things that I realized is that our professors, they're guides. They've been leading us in how to think and how to follow a schematic to get to the solution that we want. As LAs, one of the things that they encourage us to do is that when you're helping a student, don't just give them the answer, but build a bridge so that they can get to the solution.

I realized that even when you're in class or when you're speaking to a professor, they're guiding you, and they're helping you in moving you along. This whole time, as a student, I just think that I'm sitting in class and I'm receiving information, but really I'm being led by my professor on how to think, on how to approach the problem, and how to get to the solution.

**Q. When you were describing how this has made you a better student, I was thinking that, as a reporter, being an editor made me a better writer. Is there something specific that you learned that now makes you a better student?**

**A.** As a student, especially when you start off as a new student, getting ready for class before class is not something that you normally get used to.

**Q. You just get up at 8 o'clock and go.**

**A.** Exactly, you just crawl out of bed and get to class. I never realized how much the material is opened up to you when you go to class if you just prepare before. Maybe you read through lecture notes. You read the text. I know, who would've thought? It's a novel idea to a lot of students, especially people who just got to the university. This is how you went through high school. Then of course, it's going to be the way that you approach college.

**Q. How important is it to you that LA jobs are paid?**

**A.** Very important, because I don't have to pick up extra work to supplement me going to school. My parents do what they can, but the majority of my expenses are taken care of by me. The fact that I can get such awesome practice and help by being a student, and I get to meet so many people within my department, all without having to leave the campus again to get another job — it's great.

*Goldie Blumenstyk writes about the intersection of business and higher education. Check out [www.goldieblumenstyk.com](http://www.goldieblumenstyk.com) for information on her new book about the higher-education crisis; follow her on Twitter [@GoldieStandard](https://twitter.com/GoldieStandard); or email her at [goldie@chronicle.com](mailto:goldie@chronicle.com).*

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