**The excitement of academic learning**

*by Jeffrey White, Learning Commons Administrator*

Last year 1,180 UP students worked together with peer assistants in the [Learning Commons](https://www1.up.edu/learningcommons/index.html) to support and improve their learning for a total of nearly 4,600 visits. Wouldn’t it be great if even more students came early and often to the Learning Commons to support their thinking, learning, and the application of new concepts in the classes we teach? Imagine students engaging even more in our classes with more authentic questions, presenting course material with greater depth, and more actively working together in groups on projects after visiting one or more of the following programs in the Learning Commons in Buckley Center 163:

* The UP Writing Center
* Math Resource Center
* Speech and Presentation Lab
* Group Work Lab
* Chemistry Assistance Center
* Biology Assistance Center
* Nursing tutoring
* Language Assistance (for French, German, Mandarin, and Spanish)
* Economics, Finance, and Business Law tutoring

The Learning Commons’ peer assistance programs not only support students; they can support faculty by increasing student awareness of learning processes involved in mastering course material.

Our students write many papers, give presentations, and work in groups on projects during their undergraduate careers, and mathematics spans many disciplines on our campus. In addition to supporting students in content areas, we are now training our peer assistants to work with students on general study skills such as time management, reading difficult texts, and note taking. Greater student use of the Learning Commons can increasingly lead to positive consequences for you as a faculty member:

* More frequent student engagement with thinking and writing about the course material;
* Improved quality of written assignments, presentations, and group projects;
* Enhanced retention and recall of course material through added practice with peer assistants;
* More genuine questions during discussions and during office hours.
* A greater sense among your students of belonging to a community of academic.

So what can you do as a faculty member to support student learning through use of the Learning Commons? The following list is just a start:

* Model how your students can find the Learning Commons online though the UP website and on Moodle via the Learning Resources link;
* Recommend that your students use the Learning Commons early and often as a habit of mind.
* Encourage or require struggling students to visit the Learning Commons;
* Focus your messaging about the Learning Commons on the positives: the excitement of learning together with a peer, saving time by learning to approach assignments more effectively, improving grades through a social learning interaction with a more accomplished peer;
* Personally recognize the effort that any students put into working with peer assistants in the Learning Commons;
* Invite students who have benefited from using the Learning Commons to explain how the experience supported their learning.

By taking such steps in your class, you will also gain the satisfaction of knowing how you are supporting students’ active efforts to learn more outside the classroom for your course.

As you encourage your students to improve their learning through work with peer assistants in the Learning Commons, *it’s important to avoid*:

* Requiring that all of your students use a specific program for the same assignment. This can overload the system, as we have only so many peer assistants. Requiring visits should be used judiciously.
* Equating peer assistants with TA’s. The role of the peer assistant is to support the development of active and self-regulated learners. Our peer assistants are trained not to teach the material beyond the selective use of explanations. They will use questions and seek to have students use resources from classes (books, notes, Moodle page, etc.) to learn the material.

The vision of the Learning Commons is one of an evolving community of active learners at UP. To help fulfill our vision, the Learning Commons has initiated 11.5 hours of general tutor training of all peer assistants who work for us. This is on top of the content-related training that peer assistants receive from their discipline-specific coordinators. We are also applying to be able to certify our peer assistants through the [College Reading and Learning Association’s](http://www.crla.net/) International Tutor Training Program Certification process. We are piloting our Level 1 training this year. Our goal is to certify all of our peer assistants in the Learning Commons and to provide training and certification for peer tutors who work in various departments and schools within UP.

I invite you to learn more about how the [Learning Commons](https://www1.up.edu/learningcommons/index.html) can support your students by contacting me at white@up.edu or (503) 943-7141 to arrange a time to discuss how best to make the Learning Commons work for you and your students. The Learning Commons’ trained peer assistants can also come to your classes to present how the Learning Commons can support your students’ learning.

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Jeffrey White, M.A., M.S., is the program administrator of the Learning Commons within the Shepard Academic Resource Center, and he teaches third-year German, Maximizing Study Abroad, and training courses for interning foreign language peer assistants in the Department of International Languages and Cultures.