Benefits of Peer Leader Involvement in the New Leader Hiring Process

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Abstract

Hiring Peer Leaders with the highest potential to effectively serve as facilitators is essential for the ongoing success of any Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) program. Peer Leaders seek to uphold the PLTL philosophy while fostering a welcoming and productive work environment in their groups. There, students are encouraged to expand their understanding of course material and develop key group-learning skills. At Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri (WashU), current leaders are intimately involved in the selection process of new leaders. Leaders provide unique and valuable insights into the qualifications of candidates at every stage in the hiring process. Current Peer Leaders further the development of leadership in the program and gain vital professional skills to inform their later academic and professional endeavors.

Keywords: Hiring Process, Letters of Recommendation, Professional Development, Translatable Skills

Introduction

Balancing equitable hiring practices with recruiting and hiring the most qualified applicants for any position is an intricate practice that requires careful consideration and planning. Many schools and institutions provide resources for individuals applying for jobs to improve their chances of being offered a position, including resume workshops and mock interviews. Mock interviews in particular have become a common method to prepare for actual interviews, and research has shown that the method can be quite effective. In a study by Baruwal et al., (2021), students who participated in a mock residency interview (MRI) had higher Phase I match rates than the typical national average. By including a professional dress requirement and curriculum vitae submission, the MRI imitates what a student will experience on an actual interview day.

However, this benefit is not limited to students who are involved as interviewees. Another study conducted by Anaza et al. (2023) demonstrated that student confidence and skills were shown to improve when they are involved as interviewers in a mock interview setting. In this study, some students took on the role of "hiring manager" and were required to post job announcements and conduct mock interviews. Not only did students participating as interviewees find the process helpful, but a higher proportion of students acting as *interviewers* found benefits in the program. The students acting as hiring managers stated in post-research surveys that the experience provided them a better understanding of the hiring process and gave them an increased sense of comfort and confidence for future interviews.

Research by Bernstein et al. (1975) showed that utilizing student interviewers posed no significant difference in numerous parameters compared to utilizing faculty members. Other than perhaps more lenient ratings, college students produced similar results with respect to variance, intercorrelations, and interrater agreement. The judgmental process, content, and accuracy of a college student's interview appears equivalent to that of an actual interviewer (Bernstein et al., 1975). Eddins-Folensbee and colleagues' 2012 study compared interview results where two faculty members acted as interviewers as compared to one faculty member and one student. Over the course of five years with over 3800 samples, no significant difference was present between the two groups, and students had equivalent judgments to those of the faculty members. Therefore, since participants benefit greatly from this experience and interview results appear to be unaffected by having student interviewers, more emphasis could be placed on this hiring strategy.

In fact, this process is already practiced at Washington University in St. Louis (WashU) in the Peer-Led Team Learning hiring process, specifically in General Chemistry, and has been an ongoing practice (Kuehne et al., 2014). The process of selecting leaders for General Chemistry integrates the perspectives and evaluations of various sources, including current

Peer Leaders, throughout the several stages of the application and hiring process. Before the official application process begins, current Peer Leaders play a critical role in evaluating potential candidates. During the fall semester, these leaders assess all the students in their PLTL groups to identify those who they believe demonstrate the qualities and capabilities suitable for the Peer Leader role. This preliminary evaluation is crucial as it helps to create a pool of qualified potential applicants who have already exhibited strong performance and engagement in their coursework and group activities.

Following this initial identification phase, current Peer Leaders write formal letters of recommendation for students from their groups who apply to the program. These recommendations provide valuable insights into the applicants' abilities, work ethic, and interpersonal skills from the perspective of someone who has worked closely with them in a group-learning setting. Leaders are encouraged to use anecdotes to best illustrate the candidate's character. Due to the level of insight needed from the applicant's leader and the large number of applications received, only students participating in PLTL are invited to apply rather than all students completing the two-semester chemistry sequence (PLTL is offered optionally to students). The Peer Leaders also review application portfolios of candidates selected to be interviewed, which include academic records, personal statements, and external letters of recommendation. As Peer Leaders are paid for their work in the PLTL program, they are both employees and students of WashU. All application materials are labeled as strictly confidential. Peer Leaders are trained in both contexts to handle confidential materials in accordance with strict professional standards. Thus, while current Peer Leaders are able to see a student's fall course and spring exam 1 grade in the course they support, student confidentiality is upheld throughout this process.

Peer Leaders serve as panelists during the candidate interviews, bringing their firsthand experience and understanding of the program to the selection process. Following each interview, each Peer Leader provides the faculty with their recommendation.

After the selection process is complete, the Peer Leaders write reflection essays on their experiences of being part of the hiring committee. These reflections offer a unique perspective on the challenges and benefits of evaluating peers and contribute to the ongoing improvement of the hiring process. Group member evaluations, formal letter writing, interview participation, and reflections are required assignments of all current Peer Leaders, each contributing to their Practical Applications of Academic Mentoring (PAAM) course. This two-credit seminar also serves as the tangible "compensation" for a Peer Leader's participation in the hiring process. While the Peer Leaders are paid for facilitating their weekly sessions, they are not paid for this evaluation aspect of the program. This process is repeated yearly, with most hired Peer Leaders working for both semesters of this two-semester course sequence. The average time commitment of a leader includes their weekly two-hour PLTL

session, the weekly two-hour PAAM seminar, and assignments for the seminar (i.e., application packet review, interviewing, etc.) ranging from 30 minutes to two hours on a given week.

Overall, the involvement of Peer Leaders in each phase of the hiring process at WashU not only aids in identifying the most qualified candidates but also enhances the fairness and comprehensiveness of the selection process. The general timeline of this application process is outlined in Figure 1. The application process follows this agenda to gradually narrow the pool of applicants, as seen in Figure 2. Using student evaluations, applicant packets, and hiring process reflections, the description presented here aims to explore the multiple advantages of Peer Leader involvement at each stage of the hiring process and seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What criteria do Peer Leaders utilize to evaluate applicants? Do Peer Leaders apply these criteria consistently in their evaluations?
2. Do the criteria that Peer Leaders use to evaluate students match criteria characteristic of applicants most fit for the role?
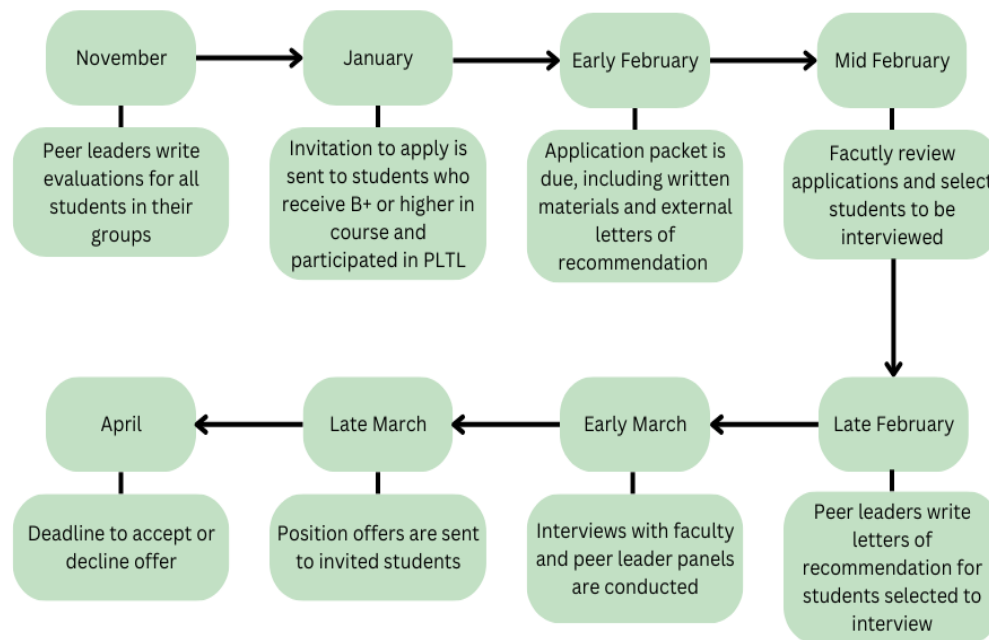3. How do current Peer Leaders benefit from being involved in the entire hiring process?

Figure 1. Outline of the components of the Peer Leader hiring process for General Chemistry at Washington University in St. Louis.

Fall 2018

Students enrolled in Gen Chem 111: 705

↓

Students invited to apply to PLTL: 237

↓

Student applications submitted: 116

↓

Student interviews awarded: 43

↓

Total students hired: 22

Fall 2019*

Students enrolled in Gen Chem 111: 445

↓

Students invited to apply to PLTL: 208

↓

Student applications submitted: 77

↓

Student interviews awarded: 35

↓

Total students hired: 9

*Note that in this year a second General Chemistry course was first offered, resulting in significant changes in enrollment/hiring data
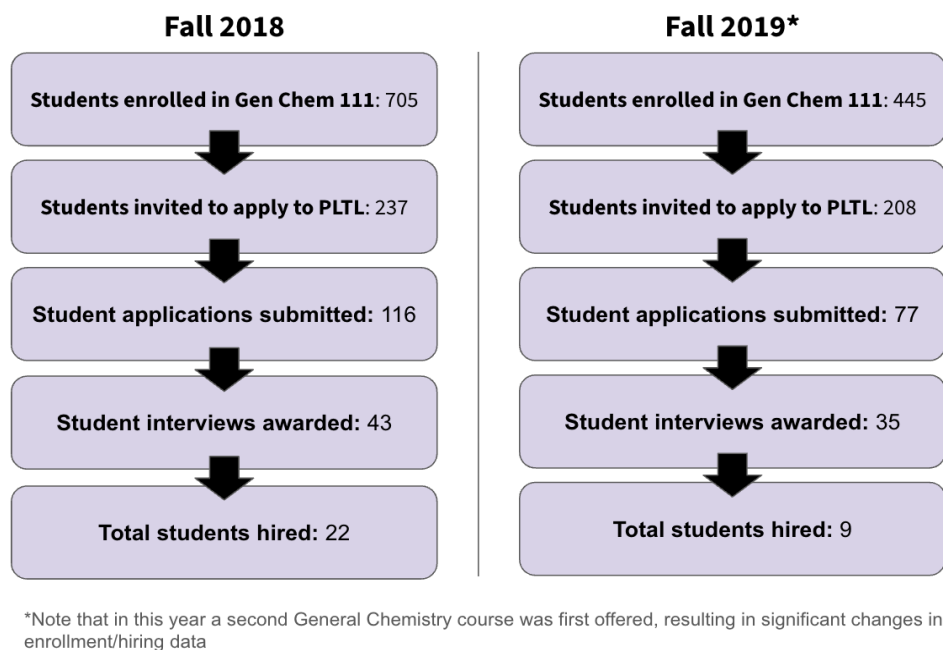
Figure 2. Size of Peer Leader applicant pool across two application cycles; note that there is a large number of applicants and only a limited number can be offered positions.

Methods

Responses from Peer Leaders were analyzed using fall student evaluations (n=640), applicant submitted materials (n=31), and hiring process reflections (n=61), looking for unique criteria in each and using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Based on availability, the fall evaluations were gathered from 2018 and 2019 applicants while the application materials and reflections were gathered from 2024. The hiring process has remained consistent between these years. All responses were anonymized.

Results

1. What criteria do Peer Leaders utilize to evaluate applicants? Do Peer Leaders apply these criteria consistently in their evaluations?

In the fall student evaluations, which each comprised of a few sentences about the student's performance in PLTL sessions as well as an overall recommendation for leadership, each response was coded for containing feedback across three major criteria: weekly content preparedness, interactions with peers, and engagement with the PLTL philosophy as well as the recommendation of the leader (recommend with no reservations, slight reservations, or major reservations). These criteria were selected based on the job description as provided to potential applicants:

Your primary responsibility as a group leader will be to guide your group to active engagement with the material through problem solving. Although you will be asked to field questions about the problems that are given in PLTL, you will not be expected to be an 'authority' on chemistry. Rather, you will be an experienced student who did well in the course and is now trying to help others do well also.

The first aim was to determine how frequently each criterion was mentioned in the fall observation. Across overall recommendations, interactions with peers was most recorded (82.9%), followed by engagement with the PLTL philosophy (69.4%) and weekly content preparedness (47.3%). Leaders mention these criteria with similar frequencies independent of their overall recommendation of the student (Figure 3). During this analysis, no other criteria stood out to the researchers as frequently mentioned.
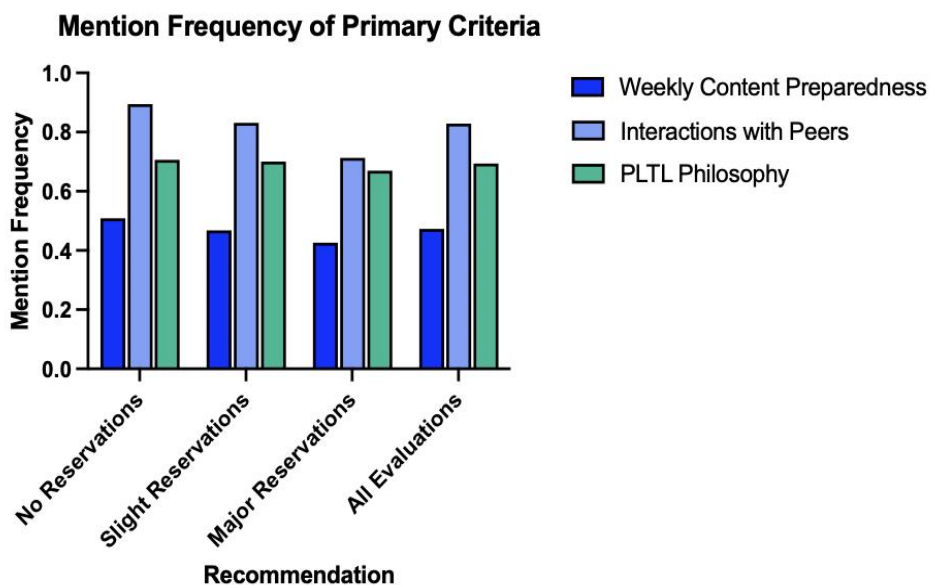

Figure 3. Leaders mention these criteria with consistent frequency across overall recommendation in their fall evaluations.

2. *Do the criteria that Peer Leaders use to evaluate students match those that are characteristic of applicants most fit for the role?*

The authors then sought to determine which of these three criteria had the largest correlation to the overall recommendation of the student. Each fall student evaluation that recorded a specific criterion was coded for containing positive (+1), negative (−1), or neutral (0) feedback about the student. *Positive* feedback includes comments about student behaviors or actions that improve the learning environment or move the group forward. *Negative* feedback for a criterion notes student behaviors or actions that distracted from problem-

solving or were a detriment to group cohesion. Responses coded under *neutral* feedback include evaluations mentioning the criteria, while presenting it either in a way that both helps and hinders the groups' progress, or that does not stand out as exceptionally positive or negative. Examples of positive, negative, or neutral feedback regarding the three criteria can be found in Table 1. If the leader did not mention a specific criterion, the data point was not included. After this data was coded, a Pearson's R test was performed to determine association for each pairwise correlation between overall recommendation and each criterion.

As expected, students who received a recommendation with no reservations, on average, scored highest across all three criteria. Conversely, students who received a recommendation with major reservations scored lowest on all three criteria, as seen in Figure 4a. This demonstrates that Peer Leaders look for strength in all of these categories when recommending a student to be a Peer Leader.

The Pearson R correlation analysis found that of the three major criteria recorded in the evaluations, positive feedback regarding engagement with the PLTL philosophy had the greatest correlation with receiving a positive recommendation from the Peer Leader ($r = 0.731$, $p < 10^{-4}$). On the other hand, weekly content preparedness had the lowest correlation with the overall recommendation by the Peer Leader ($r = 0.479$, $p < 10^{-4}$). Interactions with peers had a moderate correlation ($r = 0.662$, $p < 10^{-4}$) with the overall recommendation received. Between criteria commented on in evaluations, engagement with the PLTL philosophy and interactions with peers were weakly positively correlated ($r = 0.210$, $p < 10^{-4}$). There was no significant correlation between weekly content preparedness with either interactions with peers or engagement with the PLTL philosophy ($p = 0.380$, $p = .414$, respectively) (Figure 4b).

Table 1. Criteria, Feedback Designation and Examples of Responses from Peer Leader Fall Evaluations

Criteria	Feedback Designation	Example of Responses
PLTL philosophy	Positive (+1)	*is the first to remind the whole group of the PLTL philosophy, and is willing to take questions to help sessions if necessary*
Weekly content preparedness		*comes up to date on all of the lectures and course content videos… puts lots of time into the class outside of lecture and PLTL… often has a deeper understanding of topics than the other students in the group*
Interactions with peers, PLTL philosophy	Negative (−1)	*is often working ahead or seems distracted during the sessions… doesn't participate unless specifically asked to, and seems to get his group off task, or seem disinterested when he is in a small group, and doesn't take the work seriously*

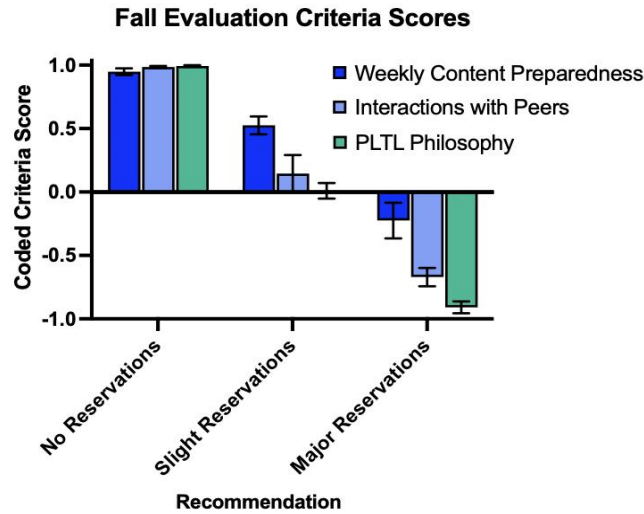| Criteria	Feedback Designation	Example of Responses
Interactions with peers	Neutral (0)	*is one of the more reserved students in my session… seem[s] to work well in smaller groups but often chooses not to participate, even when he has worked out the solution.*

Fall Evaluation Criteria Scores

Figure 4a. Scores across criteria were consistent with the overall recommendation.

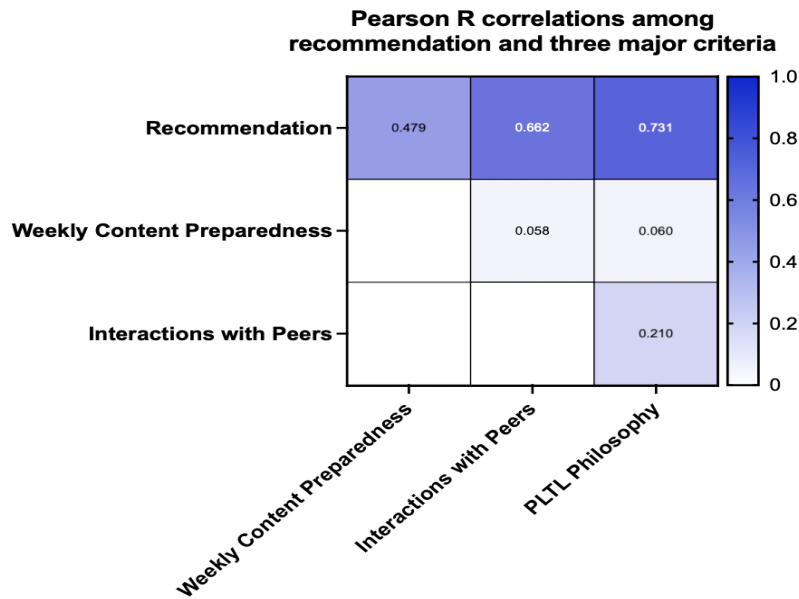**Pearson R correlations among recommendation and three major criteria**

Figure 4b. Pearson R correlation analysis between overall recommendation of leader and evaluation of three major criteria.

3. How do current Peer Leaders benefit from being involved in the entire hiring process?

Through the review of the hiring process reflections, the authors sought to decipher the various professional development lessons learned by Peer Leaders during each stage of the hiring process. The reflections were examined for major lessons learned from the review of recommendation letters, the review of application materials, and the participation in interviews. After sorting these items, those which appeared most frequently (greater than or equal to 10 times) were deemed to be a common take-away from participation. Results were organized into a table by the hiring process stage (recommendation letter review, application material review, and interview participation) and accompanied by a Peer Leader quotation as an example of data. While completing this process, the percentage of reflections mentioning specific examples of professional development benefits acquired from involvement in the new-leader hiring process (i.e., anecdotes regarding medical school or graduate school interviews, job applications, extracurricular applications, etc.) were noted.

During their composition and review of recommendation letters, Peer Leaders commonly cited the following anecdotes: letters of recommendation are to be written honestly, it is vital for a candidate to present themself positively around future recommenders, a beneficial recommender can provide specific personal anecdotes about the candidate, and a candidate should discuss the major qualities required by the desired position with the recommender. In reference to their review of written application materials, Peer Leaders commonly noted the importance of employing a "show" not "tell" approach to writing essays, incorporating unique experiences and strengths relative to the position, and creating an overarching theme throughout all application materials.

Finally, when reflecting upon their participation in the interview process, Peer Leaders often mentioned the benefit of implementing professional mannerisms (shaking hands, maintaining eye-contact, dressing professionally), answering all questions in full, arriving with a prepared "elevator pitch" about oneself, and concluding the interview with meaningful questions. These results are organized in Table 2. Overall, the majority of Peer Leaders (65.6%) specifically mentioned having acquired professional development benefits from participating in the new leader hiring process.

Table 2. **Lessons learned from each phase of the application and hiring process**

Letters of Recommendation	Written Materials	Interview
Letters will be written honestly	Use a "show" not "tell" approach in your essays	Implement professional mannerisms: shaking hands, maintaining eye-contact, dressing
Present yourself in a positive light around	All applications sound similar: unique experiences stand	

Letters of Recommendation	Written Materials	Interview
future recommenders Select a recommender who can provide specific personal anecdotes Discuss major qualities required by the position with the recommender	out Speak on strengths that are relative to the position Incorporate an underlying theme into your essays Re-read all essays in the eyes of an interviewer	professionally Answer all questions asked in full Come prepared with an "elevator pitch" about yourself Display passion for the position Ask questions at the end
Before, I thought recommendation letters were a fairly minor part of the admissions process for college or for medicine or for anything. However, now I see it as one of the most important parts of your application, even more so than your personal statement.	*As I prepare to apply to medical schools in a few months, I will try to come up with memorable anecdotes and examples to include in my essays and short responses. I will try to understand each school's mission and core values and try to touch on them through my application.*	*As I begin to start interviewing for post-graduate jobs, I now better understand that a large part of an interview's success depends on the minor details and pre-interview preparation.*

Discussion

　　Through this analysis, leader evaluations of students in the fall generally include three criteria: content preparedness, interaction with peers, and engagement with the PLTL philosophy. These evaluations serve as valuable parts of the application materials in that they highlight traits more distinguishable than recommendations from classes and other involvements. Importantly, leaders use these evaluations to write formal letters of recommendation, which provide context for how the applicant works in a PLTL setting. This process aids in selection of the most qualified applicants for open Peer Leader positions. The frequency that all three criteria are mentioned remains consistent across leaders regardless of the leader's recommendation. The data suggest that Peer Leaders evaluate their students equitably during the recommendation phase while maintaining consistent emphasis on each general criterion. This demonstrates that the involvement of students at multiple phases of the Peer Leader hiring process does not jeopardize the practice's integrity or consistency.

　　Peer Leaders are placing appropriate emphasis on criteria that are most important for the position. This means adopting the PLTL philosophy, evidenced by understanding the value of not having an answer key, of being willing to learn from the diverse group of students in

their session, and taking responsibility for their own learning. Engagement with the PLTL philosophy is the greatest predictor of receiving a positive recommendation while weekly content preparedness is the weakest predictor. These emphases align with the role of a PLTL leader. Resonating with the PLTL philosophy is the most crucial factor as a leader when leading a PLTL group. Engaging and advocating students to adopt the PLTL philosophy may not always be a smooth process, and it requires a leader who truly believes in the philosophy to accomplish such a task. On the other hand, while weekly content preparedness is certainly an advantage, it is less of a deciding factor during evaluation as leaders are not teachers, but facilitators. This research on criteria valued by Peer Leaders illustrates an understanding of applicants' potential to be effective Peer Leaders based on their performance in sessions. Serving as a Peer Leader involves continuous and intensive training; current Peer Leaders are advised to look for potential rather than perfection while screening applicants, aware that most applicants are in their first years in college.

The majority of Peer Leaders also report professional benefits from participating in the new leader hiring process. Specific lessons that have been acquired include selecting recommenders, writing application essays, and successfully completing interviews. Thus, it is probable that a student's involvement in other hiring processes would be of benefit to the student's professional development. Further research into student participation in candidate selection is needed to confirm this prediction.

Furthermore, among the cited lessons learned from participating on the interview panel, Peer Leaders frequently mentioned the benefit of implementing professional mannerisms (shaking hands, maintaining eye-contact, dressing professionally). When inviting the new Peer Leader candidates for an interview, however, attire was explicitly stated to be casual. This was done to avoid confounding variables such as socioeconomic status influencing the hiring process. Yet, since the Peer Leaders have reported the positive impact of dressing professionally on candidate perception, it is possible that labeling the interview attire as casual may have had unintended adverse consequences for certain applicants. Although further research is needed on this topic, based on this data, WashU's PLTL faculty will be taking steps to inform all interview panel members (including Peer Leader participants) of criteria that should be disregarded and not impact judgment of candidates.

One limitation of this study is that all application materials reviewed pertain to students who have passed the initial phase of faculty review in the mid-February phase. Applications of students who were not offered an interview were unavailable to us and therefore left out of the study. By including these applications in potential future analysis, more insights can be gathered not only on what makes an applicant stand out, but potential factors that significantly harm an applicant's application in this hiring process.

Another future direction for study is making connections between applications and students who eventually were offered the PLTL leader role. To maintain anonymity, no identifiable applicant information was used during analysis, and the authors had no knowledge which applicants eventually obtained the role. Further analysis can be done if that information becomes available, and a more in-depth analysis can be made to see how the recommendations translate into eventual offers of the PLTL leader role.

Additionally, further research into institutions that have their hiring process centralized in their school's Learning Center should be conducted. This would prove to be a useful comparison to hiring models that rely on current Peer Leaders throughout the process. Comparing similar data between the two processes would allow for strong analysis of the pros and cons of each and could thus lead to the design and implementation of an improved hiring system.

Overall, as represented throughout this research, Peer Leaders can provide valuable insight into the most vital qualities required by new Peer Leader candidates. Moving forward, a final possible area of study would include a reevaluation of the selection criteria used in the new leader hiring process, based on the observations of current Peer Leaders. This approach will further hone the hiring process on criteria correlated with the most effective PLTL leaders and provide new directions of focus in Peer Leader training programs.

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