Tutoring More Than Just a Job to Peer Leaders

INFORMATIVE, INSPIRING AND rewarding. These are just some of the reactions from the young peer leaders in City College's Peer-Led Team Learning program that is rapidly spreading to many campuses around the country.

Says Elina Yusufova, a senior majoring in biochemistry: "Being a peer leader and interacting with students in a workshop environment has helped me to understand the fundamentals of chemistry better."

Ms. Yusufova, who plans to pursue a teaching career, is one of the longest-serving peer leaders at CCNY. She started as a freshman.

"In my first semester I took a chemistry class and had a workshop with a peer leader. I thought it was fun and informative so I signed up when I was asked," she says.

The Brooklyn resident represented CCNY at a peer leaders conference in Florida in 2000 where she was offered teaching positions after graduation.

Ricardo Gonzalez, a physics junior who resides in Fort Lee, New Jersey, believes that he has benefited as much from the workshops he leads as his students. He has seen his own grades improve and his understanding of chemistry expand.

"It's a very friendly environment where you're able to make mistakes and not feel bad about it. The workshops simply reinforce what is done in the classroom," he says.

Oleg Survillo, who took a chemistry class taught by PLTL innovator David Gosser, calls it "learning while you help others learn. I became a peer leader because chemistry is useful in chip design," says the computer engineering sophomore. "Workshops help you to remember the material."

In Marven Lamarre's case his experience as a student in two workshops, whose peer leaders made the material interesting and interactive, was so rewarding that he decided to give back by becoming a peer leader himself.

"I liked it and wanted other students to experience what I'd experienced in these workshops," says the biochemistry junior from Brooklyn. "It was a way of giving back to City College."

One of the PLTL's strengths as a teaching tool, according to post-baccalaureate student Kin Ping Koo, is the academic intimacy that develops between the peer leaders and the students.

"Peer leaders help to break down information better in smaller groups," Ms. Koo, who lives in Elmhurst, notes. "Size matters as workshop leaders are able to communicate better with students in more intimate, relaxed settings that are not possible in the conventional classroom setting."

Okason Morrison, a mechanical engineering major in his junior year, concurs. "I firmly believe that the workshop atmosphere stimulates group-learning, enthusiasm and possibly love for chemistry," says the Laurelton resident. "The small and informal group setting provided me with a better opportunity to present my ideas."

PLTL also seems to have another impact on the peer leaders. Besides Ms. Yusufova, more than a few of them are mulling teaching careers.

"I'm considering it," says Mr. Gonzalez. "Peer-leading gives you a good feeling of self satisfaction when you see students succeed as a result of you having helped them."

"It's something I feel I ought to do. The peer-leading program is a springboard to teaching," Mr. Lamarre adds.

Each semester, City College assigns 50 peer leaders for workshops in chemistry 103 and 104. The peer leaders are recruited from current students who have good grades and good interpersonal skills. After the interview, selection and training process, new peer leaders begin by leading workshops while taking a one-credit course in Group Leadership. In addition, they are required to meet weekly with a workshop coordinator (an experienced peer leader) and the Professor teaching the course to review the week's work. ■