

K-State First

CAT Community Program

Learning Assistant Guide

2012-2013



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Table of Contents

Introduction to K-State First4

 Mission4

 Core programs5

 History5

Purpose of CAT Communities 6

 Who we are6

 How they work6

 CAT Community philosophy7

 Student learning outcomes8

 Common components for all CAT Communities8

 Types of CAT Communities9

The Role of the Learning Assistant 10

 What is an LA? 10

 Learning assistant SLOs 11

 General expectations12

 LA training program12

 The LA inside the classroom 13

 The LA outside the classroom 14

 Establishing boundaries 15

 Working with your CAT Community professor 16

 Topics for discussion: CAT Community faculty & LAs17

Research on Peer Mentoring 19

 Benefits of peer leading 19

 Research from former LAs20

Community Building and Active Learning Resources21

 Using the KSBN book21

 Community building activities 22

 Ideas for building relationships 23

 What is active learning?25

 Lesson planning 10127

 Lesson plan template28

Additional Resources29

General Timeline30

Chapter 1: An Introduction to K-State First

K-State First Mission

K-State First is an integrated effort to create an outstanding university experience for every first-year student at Kansas State University. The program provides new students with a transition to college-level learning and college life in four important ways:

- By fostering campus community and feelings of belonging
- By offering opportunities for diverse activities and interactions
- By raising academic expectations with engagement and compassion
- By empowering students with a strong sense of personal responsibility and social agency

Bringing together exciting small classes taught by exceptional faculty with a vibrant student life experience, K-State First helps students establish the foundation for a successful college career.



We know that the first year of college is a big deal for our incoming students. A positive transition to university-level learning and the college experience in general can set students on the path to academic success, degree attainment, as well as satisfaction and achievement in their careers and personal lives. The first year is also the place where students are most likely to encounter obstacles that could deter them from the learning and degree they seek.

Core Programs

K-State First has four core programs:

- CAT Communities
- First-Year Seminars (FYS)
- Guide to Personal Success (GPS)
- K-State Book Network (KSBN)

K-State First is also an advocate for first-year students and an important source for connection and communication among the various programs and opportunities for incoming students.

CAT Communities

Designed around students' academic interests, these learning communities allow first-year students to meet friends and work with experienced faculty in a specialized area of study. The same 22 students are enrolled in two general education classes together and a one-hour connections class.

FYS

A small group of 22 students fulfill a general education requirement while making the academic and social transition to college life.

GPS

A mentoring program for first-year students, GPS matches a first-year student with a faculty, staff member, or graduate student to serve as a professional point of reference throughout the student's first year.

KSBN

An all-university reading program that selects a common read for the academic year, KSBN connects all first-year students at K-State. It provides incoming students with a shared academic experience that helps open the conversation with professors, staff, administrators, and other students.

History

In 2008, we piloted a first-year experience model by offering First-Year Seminars, small classes designed to help first-year students adjust to university life and expectations. In 2009, we introduced our mentoring program, GPS, by pairing incoming students with faculty and staff. We officially launched K-State First in 2010, introducing KSBN and CAT Communities as well.

In Fall 2011, over 780 students took K-State First classes. In addition, 3,500+ students were given a copy of the common reading selection, and more than 350 students participated in the GPS mentoring program.

Chapter 2: Purpose of CAT Communities

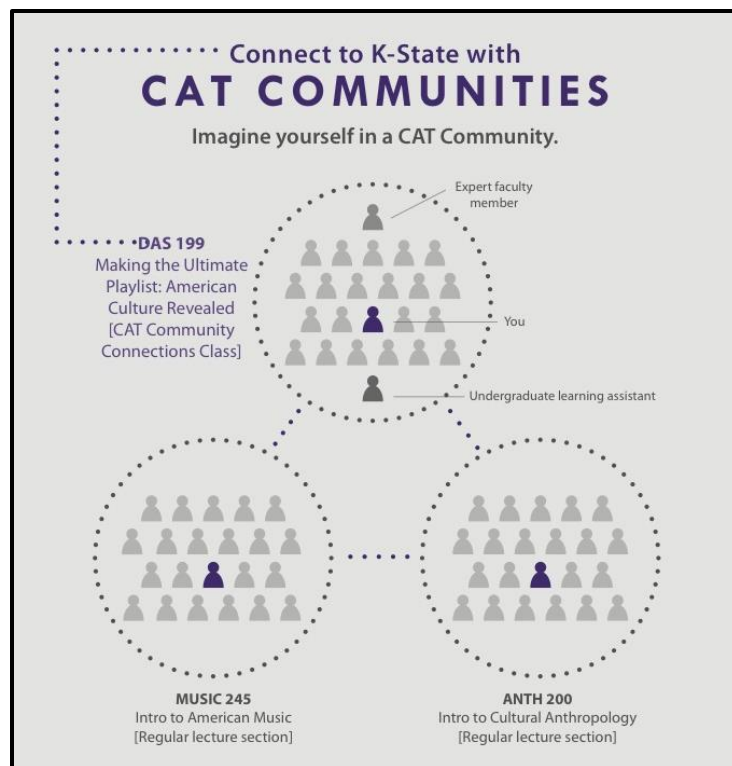
Who We Are

Connecting Across Topics (CAT) Communities are learning communities specifically designed for first-year students. We believe these communities are an excellent way for students to connect with other students and faculty from the beginning of their K-State experience.

CAT Communities are designed around student interests, and they offer mentoring from a professor and an advanced undergraduate Learning Assistant who shares the students' interests. Students may also enroll in residential or study abroad communities, which offer extended learning opportunities outside the classroom.

How They Work

A group of 22 students enroll in two general education courses and one connections course together during the fall semester. The two main courses count toward graduation in most programs, and the friendly faces in the CAT community make the larger, mostly lecture-based classes feel a lot smaller. Once a week, students meet in a connections course with this core group of classmates and a professor or professors with similar academic interests to help students apply what they have been learning. An undergraduate student, called a learning assistant (LA), who has been successful in the same courses will assist with the class and answer questions about college life, learning, and activities.



CAT Community Philosophy

CAT Communities enroll only students in their first-year at K-State. CAT Communities are based on the following six elements, which make up our core identity:

Interdisciplinary academic content

Each CAT Community is comprised of graded, academic classes. The content of the connections course is also distinctively interdisciplinary, as it is shaped by the other courses in the community. The most important goal of these courses is to provide fundamental support to K-State's academic mission and its focus on student learning. Included in this mission is an effort to support student learning beyond the first year, so we encourage faculty to also emphasize such college success strategies as study skills, test-taking strategies and time management as part of their academic curriculum.

Beyond the academic

As they support student learning inside the classroom, CAT Communities also create experiences for students outside of the classroom. Students and faculty are encouraged to attend K-State First events, such as the K-State Book Network program-wide event or other campus events. Faculty also embed within their course co-curricular experiences specifically for their CAT Community students. For example, you might go on a field trip or organize a study group.

Common elements

CAT Communities are part of the larger K-State First Program. All courses are designed to introduce students to the academic standards of college-level work and the University's undergraduate student learning outcomes. The courses emphasize critical thinking, communication, community building, and the application of learning. They also provide students with the opportunity to engage in co-curricular activities.

High-quality instruction

The CAT Communities Program has a strong, skilled, and dedicated faculty. These faculty members are part of a team of instructors who are coordinated at the university-level and work with each other to plan, design, teach, and assess the K-State First Program. These instructors, drawn from all over campus, are pedagogically excellent, experienced, and interested in undergraduate education at K-State. They are among the best instructors at the University.

Active learning

With their small size and community-focus, the CAT Communities invite and encourage an active learning environment. The courses devote significant portions of class time to hands-on learning, group discussions, problem solving, inquiry-based learning, and activities that provide students with opportunities to develop their critical thinking and communication skills. CAT Communities are also academic spaces that encourage students to collaborate, interact, and develop relationships with their peers and professors.

Peer mentoring

Each CAT Community benefits from the presence of an undergraduate peer mentor, or Learning Assistant (LA). As a fellow student who is acquainted with college life, the LA serves as both a social and academic support for students in the CAT Community. LAs attend the one-hour CAT Community course, help coordinate outside events, and facilitate students' transition to college life.

Student Learning Outcomes

All K-State First CAT Communities share four basic Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs): critical thinking, communication, community building, and application of learning.

Upon successful completion of a CAT Community, students will be able to:

Think critically

Identify interdisciplinary connections between two courses and explain their overlapping thematic questions or issues

Communicate effectively

Express their own understandings of course content in respectful dialogue with others and with engagement, imagination, and self-reflection

Build community

Interact effectively with faculty and peers both inside and outside of the classroom

Apply learning

Use the skills and knowledge learned in the class to solve new problems, answer questions, or identify areas for further investigation

Common Components for All CAT Communities

1. Syllabus including common SLOs
2. An attendance policy
3. Adherence to an active learning pedagogy
4. Participation in common reading program (KSBN)
5. Attendance at co-curricular events

Sample CAT Community Course Description

“The Psychology of Prejudice strives to engage students with similar academic interests in a smaller special topic class. The Psychology of Prejudice course will examine stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination broadly, including where bias comes from and how it may be reduced. In addition, we will discuss general strategies for maximizing your success in college.”



Types of CAT Communities

Although all CAT Communities share a similar identity and common elements, K-State First offers four different types of CAT Communities for first-year students.

Interest-driven CAT Communities

Interest-driven CAT Communities are themed around a variety of academic and social interests, including music, gender, diversity, self-discovery, and American culture. This year's interest-driven CAT Communities are:

- Gender, Diversity, and Morality
- Gender, Race, and Class in American Culture
- Chasing the American Dream
- Making the Ultimate Playlist: American Culture Revealed
- Who Will You Be?
- Understanding the Weather

Pre-professional CAT Communities

Pre-professional CAT Communities engage students with their intended profession early, in such fields as engineering, business, law, and pre-physical therapy. This year's pre-professional CAT Communities are:

- The Art of Engineering
- The Business of Hospitality
- The Law and Society
- Pre-Physical Therapy
- Profitability in Livestock Enterprise

Residential CAT Communities

Residential CAT communities provide an opportunity for first-year students to connect with students who share their academic interests by placing them in the same campus Residence Hall. Like our other CAT Communities, students take a group of classes together, but they live and socialize near each other, too.

This year's Residential CAT Communities are:

- The American Story
- The Psychology of Prejudice

Study Abroad CAT Communities

Study Abroad CAT Communities provide a dynamic, global learning experience for K-State students from the start of their college experience. Like our other CAT Communities, students take a group of academic classes together during the fall semester, but they also have the chance to travel abroad over Winter Break for an international service-learning opportunity. This year's Study Abroad Communities include:

- Spanish in Action (Costa Rica)



Chapter 3: The Role of the Learning Assistant

What is a Learning Assistant?

The Learning Assistant is a *peer mentor* for the first-year students in a CAT Community. As a fellow student who is acquainted with college life, the LA serves as both a social and academic support for students the connections course. Although the LA can and will at times serve in a teaching capacity, K-State First distinguishes the LA's role theoretically and practically from that of an instructor or graduate teaching assistant. We believe that the most effective LAs will fill two primary roles:

“Side-by-Side” Role (peer)

As a peer, the LA should come alongside the students in the classroom, providing them with a connection to K-State as well as a picture of a well-integrated college student. Practically, this means the LA should “jump in” to the CAT Community, involving themselves in class discussions, sharing about their own study habits, attending events, forming friendships with students, etc.

Leadership Role (mentor)

As a mentor, the LA acts as someone who has “gone before” and thus can act as a coach for students. In this role, LAs challenge students to grow both academically and socially and provide structured ways for them to do so. Practically, this may mean facilitating community-building activities, leading discussions, teaching mini-lessons on time management or study skills, hosting study sessions, or meeting with students one-on-one.

As a peer mentor, the LA will need to negotiate and balance both their side-by-side and leadership role, setting an example while being approachable and relatable.

Qualities of the LA

Each LA will bring a unique personality and set of skills to the position. However, there are some qualities we believe all LAs should possess, and we encourage you to develop these qualities throughout your time in the position:

- Enthusiasm for learning
- A strong background in the academic content of your CAT Community
- Creativity in designing social and academic opportunities for students
- Openness toward others and motivation to help others succeed
- Willingness to share your own experiences with college life
- Engagement with campus and community life
- Ability to be organized and prepared, both in and out of class
- Respect for student privacy
- Presenting yourself as professional while developing personal connections



Student Learning Outcomes: LA Program

Like our other K-State First programs, the LA training program has been designed to help participants grow both academically and personally. As such, we have developed specific Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) for our peer mentoring program. Our goal is that you will make progress over the semester in each of the following areas.

Upon successful completion of the Learning Assistant Program, LAs will be able to:

Think Critically

- Employ a variety of strategies to assist first-year students in their transition to college
- Understand effective leadership practices for peer mentoring

Communicate Effectively

- Communicate with a diverse group of people, including professors, first-year students, and peers
- Facilitate active learning in large and small group settings on relevant academic and social topics

Build Community

- Build and facilitate relationships among faculty, students, and peers, both inside and outside of the classroom

Apply Learning

- Use the leadership skills and knowledge developed in the program to influence others and enhance their own personal development



General Expectations for Learning Assistants

In general, the minimum expectations for the LA include:

- Spend approximately three to five hours per week assisting CAT Community professor with the Connections Course (planning and facilitating class activities, developing classroom community, connecting with students, etc.)
- Attend and actively participate in the Learning Assistant training and development program (approx. one hour per week).
- Facilitate social and educational activities outside of the classroom, including but not limited to study sessions, one-on-one meetings with individual students, field trips, lectures, etc.
- Serve as a peer mentor and positive role model for first-year students
- Meet regularly with the LA Coordinator

The Learning Assistant Training Program

All LAs are asked to participate in K-State First's LA training program, which includes weekly meetings with the LA Coordinator and other LAs across campus. These meetings are designed to communicate the importance of peer mentoring to our program, including its philosophical and pedagogical bases. Although we realize every LA will have a unique role based on the needs of his or her particular CAT Community, we want them to be equipped with general strategies for effective peer mentoring. These meetings also help foster community among all of the LAs working with first-year students across campus.

Sample topics covered in the LA Training Program:

- Developmental phases of first-year students
- Teaching and modeling student success strategies, such as time management, basic note taking, test taking, and study skills
- Planning for active learning, facilitating discussions, coordinating co-curricular events
- Assisting students who need academic or social support

At times, LAs will be asked to complete reading or prepare a short presentation prior to the LA Meeting. LAs should consider these assignments like they would other work responsibilities and come prepared to each meeting time.

Along with the requirement to assist in the one-hour connections course, LAs are also asked to plan a minimum of two, large-group supplemental sessions outside of class. These may include: organizing or hosting a study session, planning a field trip, coordinating attendance at a lecture, etc. The LA should take the primary responsibility for coordinating each supplemental session, although faculty members may advertise these to students in the class. LAs should submit a lesson plan for their session at least one week in advance of the date to the LA Coordinator.

The LA Program is described in more detail in your LA Program Syllabus and Schedule, which you will receive at the first LA meeting.

The LA Inside the Classroom

Although an LA's role is not confined to the classroom setting, their presence in the CAT Community Connections course is one of the most important aspects of the position. We encourage LAs to be involved creatively, actively, and energetically in the classroom setting.

Before Class:

- *Assist the professor in planning and preparing for the connections course.* Most professors and LAs find it useful to meet at the same time every week to discuss the upcoming class period. If you are leading any activities for the week, make sure to have a lesson plan written and all materials gathered.
- *Plan to attend every class session of the one-hour connections class.* If you are sick or need to be absent for any reason, you should contact your professor and make arrangements for covering your responsibilities. Attending the two general education classes connected to your CAT Community is not required, but may be useful at times (please arrange your attendance in these classes with the course professor ahead of time).

During Class:

- *Take an active role in getting to know students.* Learn every student's name as soon as possible, and spend time interacting with them before and after class. Try to have a personal, meaningful conversation with each student in the class no later than the third week of the semester and make a few notes so you'll remember important information later.
- *Be fully engaged in all classroom activities.* Pay attention to lectures, involve yourself in group activities, and participate in classroom discussions. When you are not leading an activity, sit in a desk along with the other students. Don't take over the discussion, but be visible and try to participate in ways that will support the professor and encourage students to join.
- *Observe how the students are interacting.* Make note of classroom dynamics, and look for ways to involve students not participating or connecting with classmates. If students seem overwhelmed or disengaged, ask if there's a way you can assist them or find an appropriate time to mention your observations to the professor.
- *Creatively design activities for student learning and connecting.* You and your professor will work together to decide what responsibilities you will complete in the classroom, but feel free to also take initiative and offer ideas. Some possible tasks you might complete in class include:
 - Advertising upcoming campus events
 - Leading a discussion over the KSBN book
 - Giving a presentation on time management
 - Facilitating community building activities
 - ... And much more!

“As an LA my first year, it was very easy for me to blend in with the students because I wasn't sure of my role. I learned from my first experience and took a more active role the second year, both in and out of the classroom”

~Karen Clifton, LA for Profitability in Livestock Enterprises '11, Math Applications in Agriculture '10

After Class:

- *Record your activities and thoughts for the week in your LA Journal.* Include approximate times spent on each activity, and spend time reflecting on what went well or could have been improved that day. Consider what types of activities you might organize to assist your students in coming weeks.

The LA Outside of the Classroom

The CAT Community model is unique in that it helps connect students both academically *and* socially. We envision that students will not only be learning in the classroom, but also outside of class. Likewise, we hope that they form friendships not just in their social time, but in the classroom setting as well. One of the best ways to connect academic and social experiences together is to plan learning experiences for students outside of the classroom.

Required

Co-curricular events: K-State First faculty are asked to attend events outside of class with their students, such as the program-wide KSBN event or other co-curricular opportunities specifically related to their CAT Community. As an LA, you should also plan to attend these events with the class. Minimal preparation should be required on your part, but your attendance, presence, and enthusiasm will speak volumes to your CAT Community students. Legitimate excuses from these events may be discussed and approved through your faculty member.

Supplemental sessions: Each LA is asked to plan a minimum of two, out-of-class academic experiences for students (although you are encouraged to plan as many as you find helpful and feasible). These differ somewhat from co-curricular events because although you should discuss them with your professor ahead of time, you will have full responsibility for these sessions. The primary requirement is that they somehow support the academic content of your CAT Community. In addition, you are asked to prepare a basic lesson plan for these sessions one week in advance and submit it for feedback from the LA Coordinator.

You will likely gather ideas for your sessions over the course of the semester, but here are some ideas LAs have implemented in the past:

- Hosting a test review, often incorporating games such as Jeopardy or trivia.
- Planning a workshop for an upcoming paper or project
- Viewing a related film, with a brief discussion afterwards
- Taking a field trip to a museum, with guided reflection and discussion questions
- Attending an on-campus lecture, with reflection and discussion times
- Coordinating service-learning activities (if interested, please contact LA Coordinator for help making arrangements)

Not Required, But Encouraged

Individual meetings with students: As you find it useful, you are encouraged to make space for meeting with students in one-on-one settings. Previous LAs have held office hours, set up student appointments to chat about college life or concerns, or arranged tutoring sessions for an assignment or project. Make sure to hold these sessions in semi-public environments, such as in the library or a coffee shop. Your professor may have a suggestion for hosting office hours in a regular place, such as a departmental conference room, should you wish to do so.

Other activities: Ask students to join you at a K-State sporting event, play a game at the Rec Center, visit a campus club meeting, or bowl at the K-State Student Union. If you're comfortable, use social media to connect with students and host live-chat Q&A sessions related to the first-year of college or a class assignment. Be creative! Connect with students in a variety of ways as you feel comfortable and it works with your schedule. For other ideas and resources related to connecting with students, see page 23.

A Word About Boundaries...

As an LA, we want you feel comfortable acting as a fellow student. If first-year students identify and trust you as a peer, your relationship with them can be very powerful. As such, we encourage you to develop casual and friendly relationships with the students in your CAT Community. At the same time, remember that you are also a professional and a leader. This means that you will need to set some boundaries with the students in your CAT Community that differ from those you set with close friends your own age. Because there is no way to predict all of the situations you might encounter, we encourage you to always use good general judgment when interacting with students. However, here are some boundaries you might consider before you begin your role as LA:

- **Boundaries related to time:** Be clear about how and when students may contact you. Will you give them your phone number? Are they allowed to text you after midnight? Can they contact you on facebook? Will you answer a question about the assignment on the day before it's due? These decisions are up to you, but we recommend that you establish some norms for student communication that will protect time for your own studies and personal time while also providing students with access to you when needed. Establishing office hours and pre-determined methods of communication near the beginning of the semester has worked well for previous LAs.
- **Boundaries related to student relationships:** Be wise when planning outside of class events or interactions with students. A good general guideline is to hang out with students most often in a group setting. For one-on-one interactions such as office hours or tutoring sessions, arrange to meet in public, open places (library, coffee shop, lobby of a residence hall, etc.). You should not host students alone in your home or drive them in your car. Dating a student in your CAT Community is strongly discouraged. Finally, all of your activities with CAT Community students should be legal, safe, and in good taste. If you are placed in an uncomfortable situation or have a question about appropriate boundaries, please contact the LA Coordinator.
- **Boundaries related to student privacy:** As you build trust with students, they may confide in you with personal information or concerns. You should feel free to listen, empathize, and provide advice to students as long as you feel comfortable. You should also protect the student's privacy by not sharing these personal concerns with the professor or other members of the CAT Community. The exception to this rule are cases where you are required to report an incident to a university professional, which include any reports of discrimination, harassment, or retaliation. Other situations may also require that you take action to help the student. For example, if the student shares information that may contribute to his or her academic performance in class, you may want to alert the professor. If you ever sense that the student may be in danger or place others in danger, you should immediately report this to the appropriate supervisor, such as the LA Coordinator, an RA or RLC, or your CAT Community professor. When in doubt, please make a quick written record of your interaction with the student and immediately contact the LA Coordinator.
- **Boundaries related to student academic performance:** Over the semester, you may become privy to information about how a student is performing in one of the CAT Community classes. By law, you are required to keep this information confidential. In addition, LAs should not grade student work, although you may provide feedback that is not evaluative or tied to a letter grade.

Working with Your CAT Community Professor

One of the strongest predictors of an LA's success is the quality of the relationship with their professor. Having a great working relationship with your professor will not only benefit you and the professor, but also the students in the CAT Community.

Five Ways to Maximize your Professor/LA Relationship

1. **Communicate often.** Research on peer mentoring and interviews with former LAs suggest that frequent communication between instructors and LAs leads to CAT Community success. Contact your professor before the fall semester begins and ask if you can meet to talk about the class. Come ready with pre-prepared questions and share your own strengths, weaknesses, and interests. (See page 17 for a list of questions you may want to ask at your first meeting.) Most professors and LAs also find it helpful to set a regular meeting time throughout the semester.
2. **Establish clearly defined roles & responsibilities.** The LA position is intended to be dynamic and flexible, and the position can be tailored to best suit the needs of your professor and CAT Community. Yet even with the flexibility of the position, establishing your role early and clearly will help to maximize your performance and prevent confusion. The following tips can help you establish your role:
 - Agree ahead of time which responsibilities belong to the professor and which belong to the LA. You may want to use the chart on page 18 to help.
 - Look at the examples in this chapter to generate ideas about what types of tasks and projects you might complete both inside and outside of class. Share your own creative ideas with the professor as appropriate.
 - Discuss how you will describe your role to the first-year students. See page 10 for assistance.
3. **Ask for feedback.** Don't be afraid to ask for constructive feedback from your professor on a regular basis. It's usually best to ask for specific feedback – i.e. “Would you watch me lead the icebreaker today and give me some suggestions for next time?” – rather than just a general, “How am I doing?” Asking for suggestions will help you build trust with your professor and improve your performance as an LA.

“The best thing my CAT Community professor and I did all year was communicate often. I was able to create some assignments before classes even started. Not only did this take stress off both of us, but it set up a dialogue for our working relationship.”

--Travis Shockley, LA for Design Matters CAT Community, '11

4. Share feedback. At times, you may become privy to information or feedback from students about the course that may be beneficial for the instructor to know. Although you will want to be tactful about how you share this feedback, don't be afraid to share suggestions with your professor. After all, you may have a helpful perspective on how the students are responding to the course.

5. Remember the faculty mentoring relationship is powerful. Although you have been selected for this position to help first-year students, the LA role is a learning opportunity for you as well. Your faculty member has expertise, life experiences, and professional connections in your academic area that can be extremely valuable. Ask questions, work hard, and be personable. This relationship may lead to references or other job opportunities down the road.

Topics for Discussion: CAT Community Faculty and Learning Assistants

Here are some ideas for discussions that you may want to have with your CAT Community faculty member.

LA/Faculty Background

1. What previous experience do you have working with students? What special interests or strengths do you have that may benefit the CAT Community as a whole?
2. Has the instructor taught this particular course and/or CAT Community before? What changes – if any – might be made? What new ideas could you help execute?

LA Involvement

3. What are the learning outcomes for the CAT Community? How can you help students meet these objectives?
4. What types of activities will you organize or lead? This could include teaching a lesson; planning an icebreaker; leading a small-group discussion, etc.
5. Each LA is responsible for planning two supplemental sessions – outside of class – during the semester. Brainstorm possible ideas for these sessions and tentative times during the semester when these might occur. Previous LAs have arranged field trips, study sessions, movie viewings, etc.

Details and Logistics

6. What time each week will the LA meet with the CAT Community Instructor?
7. What is the best way for each person to be reached?
8. What is the best way for you to communicate an absence (illness, school-related activity, etc.)?
9. How should we communicate if one of us feels that some aspect of the class is not going as planned?

Faculty and LA Responsibilities

The following grid can be a useful tool to determine your responsibilities within the Connections Course.

Role and/or Responsibility	Professor	Learning Assistant	Both
Preparing materials for class			
Taking attendance			
Corresponding with absent students			
Facilitating class discussions/activities/icebreakers			
Teaching academic habits (test taking strategies, note taking skills, study skills, etc.)			
Meeting one-on-one with students			
Integrating course resources into the class: <i>Immortal Life</i> , library resources, etc.			
Coordinating guest speakers			
Organizing and leading study sessions, trips to the library, and outside of class instruction			
Other:			

Ideas for Supplemental Sessions planned by LA (two required):

Session	Estimated Month/Date
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Chapter 4: Benefits of Peer Mentoring

A long history of research cites the benefit of peer mentoring within educational settings. As powerful sources of influence during the college years, peers can become positive or negative influences for other students socially, cognitively, and personally. Below are just a few areas research has highlighted as reasons for peer mentors' effectiveness with first-year students.

Accessibility

Peer mentors are often more available and approachable than adult professional staff. A recent literature review by Jaime L. Shook and Jennifer R. Keup reports that peer leaders exert influence on students "in a way that is less intimidating and more accessible to fellow undergraduates than would the actions of professional staff and faculty members" (6). In addition, peer leaders have close "proximity to the student experience" that makes them great sources of assistance for students (9). Because peer mentors are more accessible than others on campus, they can be important resources for students who need assistance navigating the demands of college life.



Social Connections

Creating a social network on campus is extremely important during a first-year student's transition to college. Studies have suggested that if students do not find friends at their own institution, their feelings of loyalty toward that institution decrease. In fact, Whitt et al. reports that "student involvement is the single most important determinant of what one derives from a college education" (72). Therefore, peer mentors can help students feel a sense of belonging on campus and thus contribute to their overall feeling of satisfaction with university life.

Academic Assistance

In addition to helping foster a social community, peer mentors can help students make academic gains. According to Whitt et al.'s findings, "the more that students were involved with their peers in both course-related and non-course-related interactions, the greater their cognitive growth" (72). However, the same study also suggests that some students do not receive help from their peers that is adequate for their learning needs. Thus, a peer mentor who is academically competent in the student's area of study can assist in ways that the student's own peer group may not.

Success for the Peer Mentor

Peer mentors also experience benefits themselves from serving in this position. The following is a selection from Shook and Keup's article outlining just a few of the many benefits of peer leading:

By fostering and applying skills and capabilities such as self-direction, leadership, oral communication, intercultural skills, civic engagement, teamwork, and critical thinking, peer leaders are honing abilities that have been identified as twenty-first century learning objectives for college and that are also highly desirable skills among employers (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2011). For example, peer mentors who serve first-year students report increased confidence in their ability to manage group dynamics, facilitate learning, and empathize with their students (Harmon, 2006).

Research from the 2011 LAs

Yearly exit interviews are conducted with our outgoing Learning Assistants at the end of each semester. Here are just a few of the themes that emerged from our most recent interviews, including some highlights, challenges, and suggestions.

Benefits of the LA Program:

- ✓ All of the LAs found the position rewarding and beneficial!
- ✓ Many LAs received satisfaction from watching the program connect first-year students to each other and to the University.
- ✓ LAs expressed personal growth in: relationship building, interpersonal skills, teaching/tutoring, public speaking, and their own ability to manage time.
- ✓ The highlight of LA meetings? Connecting with other LAs, particularly those from other disciplines across campus.

Philosophy of First-Year Student Success:

When asked what makes a first-year student successful, LAs most often cited:

- ✓ Ability to foster social connections and friendships
- ✓ Access to various resources on campus, both academic and personal

Some Challenges ... and Some Suggestions

LAs also noted a few challenges they encountered while serving in the position. Here are a few of those challenges and some suggestions for navigating them.

<i>The Challenge</i>	<i>Some Suggestions</i>
Some weeks, the job seemed busier than expected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The time requirements of the role can be difficult to predict, so knowing this from the start is helpful. Try to remain within the weekly guideline of four to five hours, but be flexible on busier weeks. • Use the LA Coordinator, your professor, and KSOL as resources for planning ideas and time management suggestions. • If the work becomes overwhelming, communicate immediately with the LA Coordinator.
Attendance at supplemental sessions was not as high as anticipated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan events that meet a need or desire for the students. (i.e. If they are anxious about an upcoming test, plan a review session.) • Prepare early and advertise <i>often!</i> Frequent reminders will pay off. • Communicate the relevance of the activity to students. Ask your professor to do the same.
It can sometimes be difficult to define the role and/or responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate often about your responsibilities with the professor and LA Coordinator. • Introduce your role to students on the very first day. Use the information in Chapter 3 as a guide. • Remember the role is intended to be flexible! When in doubt, ask for feedback from the professor, students, and the LA Coordinator.

Chapter 5: Community Building and Active Learning Resources

We believe that students will learn best in an environment where they feel connected with those around them and personally involved in the learning process. This chapter contains resources for building community and designing engaging, active learning experiences.

The LA’s Role in Creating Community

Building an atmosphere of safety and inclusiveness can greatly benefit the classroom environment. When students feel safe, they are more willing and eager to participate in classroom discussions and activities, and they will enjoy coming to class. Students are more apt to “contribute to a learning environment in which they feel a sense of belonging and where there is mutual respect among classmates and instructors” (“Building Community” 2).

There are countless ways you can help foster community among students, both inside and outside of the classroom. Most importantly, you can model inclusiveness and treat both the professor and students with respect and fairness. By simply acting as a consistently positive presence, you can contribute to the overall attitude and tone of the classroom environment.

The following section outlines some ideas for other ways to build relationships both inside and outside of class, through formal icebreakers or more informal gatherings.

Using the KSBN Book

The KSBN book is a great way to open up a conversation with students, since most of them read it over the summer. Consider asking their opinions about the book or the issues it addresses in both informal and formal settings.

The 2012-2013 KSBN selection is *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot.

For specific ideas about using the book, please check out the KSBN Faculty page at <http://www.k-state.edu/ksbn/faculty.html>

Past KSBN books include:

- *Zeitoun*, 2011
- *The Hunger Games*, 2010



Planning Community Building Activities

At times, your professor may ask you to lead a community building or ice-breaker activity with your CAT Community class. You can also implement these activities at other times, such as before a supplemental session or while waiting for an event. Below are just a few ideas to get you started when planning an icebreaker.

Map-Making: Tell students that the classroom is a map (of the state, country, or world), and have them stand where they believe their hometown would be on that map. Have students work together to adjust their map until it is close to scale. Then ask each student to share about their hometown and how they decided to come to K-State.

Speed-Dating (or Inside-Outside Circles): Have students line up across from each other in two even lines; or create two circles (one inside, one outside, with the same number of people in both). Give each student a card with a question on it. They have 1 minute to talk to the person in front of them and ask/answer each question. After one minute, have one line (or one circle) rotate to the right, to meet a new person and answer a new question.

Lollipop: Pass out dum-dum lollipops to the group. For every letter that appears in the flavor, the participant has to share something about him/her with the group. (Example: Lemon, L=Laughs, E=Energetic, etc.)

Two Truths and a Lie: Give the group some time to write down two things about themselves that are true and one thing that is a “lie.” Each group member will then share these facts about themselves and the rest of the group has to figure out which “fact” is actually a “lie.” (Note: If you don’t have time to play the entire game in one sitting, you can save students’ responses and play whenever there is time across multiple class periods.)

Four Corners: Ask students questions about their backgrounds, and provide four possible responses for each one. Designate each corner of the room as “A,B,C, or D.” Have students travel to the correct corner for each question.

On This Date in History: Ahead of time, find groups of pennies that were made in the same year, depending on the size of the group you would like students to form. Hand out a penny to each group member. Have them find the person with the same year on their pennies. They should then talk about where they were and what they were doing during that year.

Superlatives: Students are asked to study their classmates quietly and to decide on a superlative adjective that describes themselves in reference to the others (youngest, tallest, from farthest away, etc.). They then tell their adjectives, explain why they selected it, and test their accuracy.

Beach Ball: Get a large inflatable beach ball and use a permanent fine or medium point marker to write “get to know you” questions all over it. Throw the ball around in a large group. The person who catches it has to answer the question touching their left thumb. They then say their name, answer the question and throw it to someone else. You may also choose to use these questions as conversation starters in other types of games.

Developing Relationships with Students

Making personal connections with students early and often will reap benefits not only for your relationship with first-year students, but also for the overall tone of the CAT Community as a whole. One of the most important windows of opportunity to connect with students is during *the first three weeks* of the semester. Here are some concrete ways you might interact with students during the first three weeks of class and beyond:

- **Show up early to class.** Learn student names and make small talk before the professor arrives.
- **Send a personal welcome email** to each student, welcoming them to K-State and offering assistance with any questions or concerns during their transition.
- **Find out if you have class** near any of the CAT Community students directly before the CAT Class. Arrange to meet somewhere and walk over together each day.
- **Host a campus or residence hall tour** for any interested students. You could highlight important buildings important to their area of interest or plan a fun tour that highlights your own favorite study or recreation spots on campus. Consider scheduling the tour right after class, so students are already gathered.
- **Arrange an impromptu group event** immediately following class or on the same day as the CAT Community course. (Ex: “Hey Everyone, I’m going to walk over to the K-State Student Union for buy one, get one free Call Hall ice cream at 3:00. Who wants to meet me there?”)
- **Attend a Week of Welcome event** with students in your CAT Community. Find the schedule of Week of Welcome Activities here: wow.k-state.edu
- **Organize a game of sand volleyball** or ultimate Frisbee at the Rec. Set a time and place, and have interested students meet you there.
- **Going to a club meeting?** Invite students along with you. (“I’m heading to Parachute Club tonight – anyone interested in coming along?”) Or, attend the Activities Carnival with some of your CAT Community students. Help them get signed up for some organizations that interest them.
- **Host a study or review session** in a residence hall lobby near where your students live. You can contact the Residence Hall staff to arrange space, or ask a student who lives in the hall to reserve a spot.
- **Invite students to a lecture** or campus event that you’re already planning to attend. Save a few spaces for them so you can sit together, and try to chat about the event afterwards.
- **Contact students who habitually miss class.** Make sure they are okay and doing well, and let them know they are missed during class time.
- **Set up a weekly “office hour.”** This doesn’t need to be formal – you might simply hang out at the Union during the same hour every week. Tell students exactly where you’ll be and invite them to visit with questions or concerns. (Note: some LAs find that scheduling personal appointments with students once or twice during the semester is more successful. If you host regular office hours, choose a time when many students in your CAT class are available and advertise often!)

Tracking your Student Interactions

Since you only see your students in a formal setting once each week, it can be difficult to learn and remember names quickly, or to connect with every student in a personal way during the first few weeks of the semester. Here’s a helpful tool you can use to enhance your memory and keep track of your student interactions.

Student Name	Date	Method of Connection	Notes about Conversation
Ex: Jane Student	8/22	Walked to next class after CAT course together	Lives in Ford Hall; plays trumpet in marching band; attended a small high school

What is Active Learning?

Put simply, active learning happens when students are given the opportunity to interactively engage with classroom material and help produce academic knowledge. Rather than simply being passive vessels who receive information, students learn best when they play an integral role in the classroom environment.

“Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves” –From “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

The LA’s Role in Active Learning

Although the instructor will primarily structure classroom activities, every LA will at times be asked to help facilitate student learning, whether during a supplemental session, a tutoring session, a short classroom presentation, etc. Whenever you are given this opportunity, we ask that you design creative, active learning experiences for students! Although it can take some preparation on the front end, your role as a facilitator or teacher will be much more enjoyable when students are engaged participants, rather than passive listeners.

Ideas for Active Learning

- **Journal or reflective writing:** Give students a question or writing prompt related to the day’s topic, and ask them to write down their initial thoughts in one or two minutes. You can use this to kick off a class discussion, or as time for students to review something they have just learned.
- **Think-pair-share:** Present a question or discussion topic to students. Give them a few seconds to formulate their own answer, then have them turn to a partner and discuss their thoughts. You can then have students share out their ideas with the rest of the class.
- **Round robin:** You can use this activity to generate discussion and ideas among the class. Have each student write a response to a prompt on a blank sheet of paper. They do not need to include their names. Then, have them pass the sheet of paper several people to the left or right. That person should read the initial person’s thoughts and then generate a response. Keep passing papers around until everyone has had a chance to respond to at least 4-5 people. Then, you might host a large group discussion about what students learned.
- **Inside-outside circles:** Divide students into two even groups. Have one group stand in a circle facing the outside of the classroom, and then have the other group stand in a circle facing the inside of the classroom. Everyone should have one person standing directly in front of them. Provide students with note cards with a question or discussion topic on them. They should ask this question to the person across from them and discuss for 30-60 seconds. Then, ask the members of one circle to rotate one person to the left. Students can repeat the same activity, only their partner will have a different question or topic for them to answer.
- **Recalling a memorable experience:** Start a discussion by getting students to talk about a memorable experience in their lives that somehow connects to the topic of the lesson. Because students are experts on their own experiences, starting out with personal stories is often much less intimidating for them than launching straight into a discussion of the strengths and

weaknesses of a theory. This can work well with various discussion topics (media's influence on society, Hurricane Katrina and racism, First Amendment freedoms, etc.) or when thinking about success strategies (exam prep, time management, note taking, etc.).

- **Minute speeches:** This activity is great for reviewing information as a class. Place slips of paper in a basket or hat. Each slip should contain one topic, such as a concept from an article they have read or a term they should review for an exam. Give students five minutes to prepare a “one minute speech” on that topic. They can use their books or notes, or even work in partners if you choose. Then, go around the room and have students share their mini speeches. If they run out of things to say or miss important information, allow others from the class to chime in.
- **Find illustrative quotes:** Bring in copies of an article (or any text) you would like students to discuss. Have students spend the first 10 minutes or so reading through the article and highlighting/underlining quotes that they especially agree with, disagree with, find interesting, or find particularly difficult to understand. Whether you discuss in groups or the whole class, students now have something to contribute. They can discuss/question/affirm the points they've underlined.
- **Illustrate a term or concept:** Provide students with paper and colored pencils or markers. Ask them to draw a picture that represents a concept from the course. Provide time for students to share these with others in the class and explain why they made the artistic decisions they did.
- **Games:** Many games can be adapted for active learning in the classroom. LAs in the past have used Jeopardy, Hangman, or card games as means of helping students review material. You can also invent your own game or activity. For example, to lead into a discussion on time management, one LA gave her students balloons and told them they should hit the balloons around the room without letting them touch the ground. As the activity went on, she continued to add more balloons and students were laughing as they tried to keep balloons from falling. Then, the LA asked the class to consider how this activity related to balancing their schedules as college students, and they discussed strategies for keeping organized.

A note on lectures and presentations ...

Many professors use lectures and presentations as a means of conveying information to students, particularly in a large lecture setting. There is nothing inherently wrong with this method, but we want CAT Communities to create smaller learning environments where students can take a more interactive approach to learning. As such, we encourage you break presentations or lectures into shorter chunks. For example, if your professor asks you to give a presentation about your own first year of college, think of ways to make the presentation interactive, such as sharing your own experiences for 5-15 minutes, and then giving students time to write or share about their own. You might also include a brief video or movie clip, facilitate a study skills activity, or hold a Q&A time where students can ask you questions about your experiences. Be creative and watch students become more engaged in the information you're sharing!



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Some information and activities included in this section have been adapted from the University of South Carolina's University 101 handbook, from the chapter entitled "Teaching and Learning."

Lesson Planning 101

As an LA, you should not be responsible for extensive amounts of lesson planning, but you should be prepared to teach and facilitate group activities whenever called upon. Teaching and facilitating skills will also come in handy when leading your own supplemental sessions. Here are some things to know and remember when planning and teaching class.

- **Preparation is key!** You will feel much more confident when leading your activity if you have a good sense of where your lesson is headed and have written a solid plan. Try to have some back-up ideas if something goes amiss or the lesson ends earlier than expected.
- **Convey confidence.** You might only be a year or two older than the first-year students, but you have been placed in this position for a reason. Be yourself, but be confident and poised. Don't be afraid to encourage students to participate.
- **Explain clearly.** Be explicit about what you want students to know or do, and explain why it's important. Ex: "Today, we are going to discuss issues of class in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. This should help us better discuss and understand current American economic policy." Speak loudly, clearly, and slowly. Give directions clearly and consider writing them on the board so students can refer to them often.
- **Provide time for wrap up or review.** At the end of a lesson or activity, leave at least a few minutes for reflection or review. Students' recall will be stronger if you provide time for them to synthesize what they have learned. Ask them to answer a short writing prompt or share what they have learned during the activity with a partner.

Elements of a Lesson Plan

There are typically three parts to a strong lesson or activity: establishing clear objectives, planning meaningful activities, and leaving time for review or assessment. These terms are explained and illustrated below.

Term	Objectives	Activities	Review/Assessment
Primary Question	<i>What will the students do or learn during the lesson?</i>	<i>How will students learn the material?</i>	<i>How will you make sure students have understood the objectives?</i>
Examples	Students will be able to... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand important themes in <i>Moby Dick</i> • Define qualitative and quantitative research • Explain strategies for effective test-taking • Evaluate the decision-making of Henrietta Lacks' doctors 	Include active learning methods such as... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journal or reflective writing • Think-pair-share • Round Robin • Group discussions • ... etc. Other active learning ideas are on page 25.	As an LA, use informal review and assessment methods such as... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exit slips • Verbal review • Reflective writing • ... etc. *Formal methods like quizzes and tests are also possibilities, but these should only be used with instructor approval and assistance.

Lesson Plan Template

Name:

Class:

Lesson Title:

Date:

Materials/Resources Needed:

Objectives: (What do you want students to learn? What should they be able to know or do after the lesson?)

Students will be able to ...

Activities: (How will students learn the material? When possible, provide a “time stamp” for each activity.)

Review/Assessment: (How will you review what was learned? How will you know if students met the objectives?)

Chapter 5: Additional Resources

Campus Events & Activities

In order to help get your students involved in campus events, here are some places to find out about what's going on at K-State.

Week of Welcome: wow.k-state.edu

Landon Lecture Series: <http://www.k-state.edu/lectures/landon>

Lou Douglas Lectures: <http://www.k-state.edu/ufm/LouDouglas.htm>

Campus Support Offices

Here is a list of offices on campus where you can direct students if they require additional support.

One Stop Shop for Student Success, Division of Student Life: <http://www.k-state.edu/onestop/>

Disability Support Services: <http://www.k-state.edu/dss/>

K-State Healthy Decision: <http://www.k-state.edu/hd/>

Counseling Services: <http://www.k-state.edu/counseling/>

Office of Student Activities and Services: <http://www.k-state.edu/osas/>

Additional Reading

Kuh, George D., et al. *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

Pascarella, Ernest T. and Patrick T. Terenzini. *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

Newton, Fred B. *Students Helping Students: A Guide for Peer Educators on College Campuses*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.



General Timeline

<p>Spring</p>	<p>Complete hiring process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Submit application and attend interview <input type="checkbox"/> Complete hiring paperwork in New Student Services before August <p>Prepare for your role</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Attend Spring LA Meeting <input type="checkbox"/> Meet with LA Coordinator and CAT Community professor to prepare for the fall semester
<p>Summer</p>	<p>Complete any necessary reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Read KSBN Book <input type="checkbox"/> Look over LA Handbook <p>Communicate with professor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Establish your role inside & outside of the classroom <input type="checkbox"/> Outline fall meeting times and communication plan <input type="checkbox"/> Look over the course syllabus or policy statement <p>With professor's approval, contact students prior to the beginning of the semester</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Introduce yourself and your role in the CAT Community <input type="checkbox"/> Provide students with a way to reach you with questions
<p>Fall</p>	<p>Every Week:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Attend LA Meetings <input type="checkbox"/> Plan and prepare for CAT Connections Course <input type="checkbox"/> Connect with students and facilitate social and educational activities <input type="checkbox"/> Attend co-curricular events with professor and students <p>First Day of Class:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Introduce yourself to students <input type="checkbox"/> Begin learning names <p>First Week of Class:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Attend Week of Welcome or other events with students <input type="checkbox"/> Help students find their way around campus and connect with each other <p>By Week Three:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Make meaningful, personal contact with each student <input type="checkbox"/> Schedule a personal meeting with LA Coordinator <p>By Week Six:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Complete mid-term meeting with professor <p>By Thanksgiving Break:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Have two supplemental sessions planned and implemented. Submit plan to LA Coordinator in advance.

Winter	<p>Week 15:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Complete LA Exit Interview with LA Coordinator <p>Communicate with Professor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Write them a thank you note <input type="checkbox"/> Debrief the semester and gather or offer feedback <p><i>Enjoy your break!</i></p>
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University of South Carolina. “Building Community.” *University 101 Faculty Resource Manual*. 2010. 1-31.

University of South Carolina. “Teaching and Learning.” *University 101 Faculty Resource Manual*. 2010. 1-34.

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