

# SSSL @VU

## REPORT

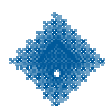
**VISIT TO HOUSTON FOR THE 17<sup>TH</sup> NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON  
STUDENTS IN TRANSITION**

**AND**

**VISIT TO UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS EL PASO (UTEP)**

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November 2010



**VICTORIA  
UNIVERSITY**

**A NEW  
SCHOOL OF  
THOUGHT<sup>SM</sup>**

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## OVERVIEW

This visit incorporated an invitation to speak about the seven models of Students Supporting Student Learning at the 17<sup>th</sup> National Conference on Students in Transition. Six of these models feature in a case study for the Monograph titled 'Organizing for Student Success: The University College Model' (2010) that was launched at the conference (I have a copy).

Following the conference I visited the University of Texas El Paso (UTEP) to learn about peer mentoring programs at that institution. To summarise I visited and learned about the structure and day to day organisation including training of the Peer Writing Centre, the Peer Leader Program, the Students Support Services program, the Peer mentoring program in Honours program.

I kept a daily log of my UTEP experiences which I emailed back to VU each night (see Appendix A). On my last night I also sent a summary reflection of my trip to all the staff involved in hosting my visit in the form of a short PowerPoint (see Appendix B).

## BENEFITS OF THE TRIP

### Conference

My presentation was well received and there was genuine interest in our SSSL area and many comments on the diversity and creativity of the programs. Attending the conference was useful to ascertain differences and similarities between the US ways of running first year programs and Australia's and VU's and in this sense reconfirmed that FYE programs are largely separated from academic staff in the US and strengthened my long held conviction and experience that collaborations between our area and staff in the faculties are vital for pedagogical health and for dealing with on the ground practicalities. This was particularly obvious in the area of final year students transferring to the workplace. VU's LIWC program was something they found difficult to fathom largely because they are unused to collaborations or to thinking system wide. There was much angst about students' abilities to do well in the workplace and clearly the Global Financial Crisis had impacted on a variety of staff and programs and was a major topic of conversation.

### UTEP

I presented about SSSL to a small but enthusiastic and interested audience. Each day was spent visiting a different peer mentoring program, namely the Peer Writing Centre, the Peer Leader program, the Students Support Services program and the Peer Mentoring Program in the Honours program. I also visited two classes to see peer Leaders in action. One of these was the Global Learning Community that has its strong connections with VU's Liberal Arts program. People shared their materials with me and were very generous with their time. Meeting many students from undergraduate to PhD was a major highlight. Other highlights included learning that we have piloted our own version of the Peer Leader program here at VU this year. Our SSSL term is Peer Assisted Tutorials (PATs). I think there are real possibilities for developing this further (money and staffing permitting). Another highlight was hearing about the interesting structure of the Honours Peer Mentoring Program, a structure I might be able to borrow if we ever implement a 1:1 peer mentoring program. I also discussed Student Rovers with Librarian Nancy Hill as there is interest at UTEP in developing the Peer Leader Program to incorporate a Student Rover type role.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

I described the trip to others as busy and intense but also like having a mini-sabbatical, an opportunity to focus completely on a general area of mutual interest and expertise. I wonder if it might be useful for other VUC staff to visit UTEP for the same reasons? I am aware that some staff from the VUC have visited UTEP but perhaps there is scope to widen the types of staff who participate in such visits?

Understandably my trip was very much focussed on finding out about UTEP's programs but I do think a mutual exchange would be very beneficial, for example organising one or two staff who I met in UTEP to conduct a similar visit to see/discover/learn from our 'on the ground' SSSL operations here at VU.

## APPENDIX A: EMAIL LOGS

*The following logs were written each night of my stay at UTEP and emailed back to VU.*

### UTEP DAY 1

Hi all

The writing centre is a large room, perhaps three times (or more) the size of where Monica and co are situated with about ten desks, specially selected to move on wheels and so are the chairs. There is a sign in book (I have a copy of the sign in sheet), and each tutor has a lap top into which the student puts their details (I have a copy). There is a printer for all to share. At the end of each tutoring session the student fills in an evaluation sheet. On the sheet, the student is anonymous but the peer tutor is not. As well as what's below, I observed a student, Crystal, run a tutoring session with Craig, a political science undergraduate. She was superb. The peer tutors are paid the standard across campus for students working on campus, the minimum wage of \$9 an hour. Peer Tutoring sessions last for a maximum of half an hour. Students wait inside the writing centre for a spot. When too busy the door is closed and students must wait outside. Appointments can be made ahead of time. Grammar is a major focus of the work the peer tutors do with students largely because the students tend to be writing students and that is a major focus of their work. I was told that non-native English speakers make great peer tutors. There is also a maths centre but I didn't get the chance to observe etc. Other information gleaned was:

#### Number of Peer Writing Tutors

This semester they have 24 postgraduate students, 14 undergrads and a number of Teaching assistants. They say the best tutors are the undergrads especially if they're in the job for more than a semester...so same story as our mentors...the more they do it the better they get.

#### Selection

Tutors have to get 2 recommendations from lecturers, submit a resume and attend an interview. Applicants are then given a piece of student's work and are given up to two hours to say how they would respond to it and to prioritise what they would do in a tutor session.

#### Training

UTEP's current writing centre is young, only a couple of years old and has had a new lease of life since they focussed on training the peer tutors about writing not just about 'how to tutor' as had happened in the past. I have attached the PowerPoint used to start training to give you an idea of what that means. Peer tutors are also supported throughout their tutorship including a weekly Friday afternoon debriefing session.

#### Online tutoring

I have attached the instructions given to peer tutors for how to deal with online tutoring.

#### Miscellaneous

Most students using the centre are writing students but some come from nursing and political science. They want to have 'satellite writing centres in other areas of the campus to try to capture students from other disciplines. A move of the nursing section to be next door to the building in which the writing centre is located is expected to increase the number of nurses to the writing centre from English majors. Evaluations are sent to the lecturers which help to increase the writing centre's acceptance and use.

Best wishes,

Gill

## **UTEP DAY 2**

After yesterday's focus on the writing centre, today I spent time learning about the Peer Leader program in the Entering Students' program.

It turns out that the Peer Leader Program is a developed version of our Peer Assisted Tutorials that we trialled in the Trident program in Knowing and Knowledge and Physics Engineering this year.

I was given a detailed overview of the Peer Leader program by Shawna the Peer Leader coordinator and lunched with her and two Peer Leaders. I then attended two separate meetings of some staff who have peer leaders in their classes and their peer leaders were also present. One group was from Engineering and I spent a little time describing Trident which they were interested in. As usual, listening to the students talk about what they do and how they benefit themselves and others through this sort of work is just wonderful and exactly the same as at VU.

I have some good materials to bring back with me and today has confirmed my thinking of what to do with the PAT element of Trident in terms of mentor training and support. It also makes me think we should try to develop PATs more broadly across the university.

End of today's Log :-)

Hope you're all well...

## **UTEP DAY 3**

Hi all

My last day here today and an interesting one again.

First I met some staff and students involved in the Student Support Services Program, a federally funded program for a maximum of 200 'at risk' students. These students do a not for credit course in academic skills and a staff member and a peer leader attend the subject's class to take notes so they can feed it into their classes. Peer mentors tutor the students individually.

Then I went to meet staff and students in the Honors (not honours as in 4th year of a degree but second year to first year honours) Peer mentoring Program, a 1:1 mentoring program. This program had only been going since October but they had an interesting way of structuring the program...i.e each of the 14 mentors has to structure ten activities in a semester that focus on either professional skills, social networking and two others I can't remember without looking at my notes which are in my suitcase! Each activity is submitted to the coordinator for approval. Inbetween time incidental meetings, texts, emails take place depending on the needs of the individuals involved. We had a great discussion with some student mentors and mentees, getting them to reflect on what they're learning/getting from the program. It was useful to see that both discipline and generic mentor/mentee matching can work.

Finally I visited Irma's Global Community Class (the one she teaches with Effie George at FNicholson). Here I saw a peer leader of two and a half years in action in the classroom and we all had a fun, lively and useful discussion about career paths, Australia, UTEP, VU, visas, and more. They reminded me so much of VU students...

I have packed my suitcase and in the morning Dorothy is taking me to new Mexico to Mesilla to buy presents! In the afternoon I fly home and get home Sunday night.

See you all soon!

## APPENDIX B: SUMMARY REFLECTION

### Gill's Visit to UTEP

#### A Reflection...

#### Writing Centre...

- We are going to pilot a Peer Writing Centre in 2011 so this visit was very timely!
- It was useful to see the infrastructure such as lap tops and to discuss Esther's role and the students' role.
- Recruitment, selection and training were each of real interest to me, particularly the focus on training students about the basics of writing.
- Observing a session was very useful. Crystal was impressive!

Many thanks to Kate, Esther, Helen and to Peer Tutor Crystal who let me observe her session.....

#### Peer Leader Program

- I discovered that the VU equivalent is Peer Assisted Tutorials (PATs)
- Maybe we could roll out a Peer Leader program at VU?

Many thanks to Shawna for giving me a great overview, the Peer Leaders for talking about their experiences and to Helen for allowing me in her classroom...

## SSSP

An interesting insight into this federally funded program for 'at risk' students. Interesting to see the similarities and differences between here and Australia for how these students are supported.

Many thanks to Jorge and his students for the in depth discussion.

## Honors Peer Mentoring Program

- Useful to see that both discipline and generic mentor/mentee matching can work.
- Staffing permitting (!) it makes me more confident about implementing a 1:1 mentoring program at VU.

Many thanks to Terri and Vanessa and the student mentors and mentees for a great discussion about the benefits of the program.

## GLC Class

- Great to see a peer leader of two and a half years in action!
- We had a fun, lively and useful discussion about career paths, Australia, UTEP, visas, and more.

Many thanks to Irma, Leandros (forgive spelling) and the students for a vibrant discussion.

## Thank you everyone...

- for your preparation for my trip
- for sharing materials and ideas
- for the walk in the indigenous garden
- for the drive up the mountain
- for your kindness, attention to detail, thoughtfulness and hospitality
- for sharing your students
- for a great professional experience

My very best wishes,

**Gill**