

Saskatoon Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Recap

By: Emerson Csorba, Vice President (Academic)

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From June 14-18, I ventured to beautiful Saskatoon to attend the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE), which has become an annual tradition for the Vice President (Academic). Although I came in with some healthy skepticism regarding the usefulness of the conference, it was an outstanding time for many reasons. *The registration fees and traveling costs were paid by the Centre for Teaching Learning*, which is run by the U of A Centre for Teaching and Learning Director Dr. Heather Kanuka. My time with Dr. Kanuka, former Vice-Provost Academic Programs Dr. Olive Yonge, Academic Director of the Undergraduate Research Initiative Dr. Connie Varnhagen, current Provostial Fellow Dr. Bob Luth and others was phenomenal. In addition to the time spent with these people, I also made a strong effort to meet new students, particularly from the University of Saskatchewan Students' Union.

In this summary report, I will briefly describe the five different concurrent sessions that I attended: Assessment Seminars by the Dean of Teaching and Learning of Mount Royal, Active Learning Classrooms by teaching and learning leaders from McGill, Assessment and Grading by Dr. Bob Luth of the University of Alberta, and Undergraduate Research by Mr. Brad Wuetherick of the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching Effectiveness at the University of Saskatchewan. The fifth session was one where I presented with Dr. Kanuka to administrators and faculty about graduate/student attributes. Lastly, I will discuss my meetings with the executive and student staff of the University of Saskatchewan SU. While in Saskatoon, I figured that I would make the most of my time by meeting twice with their Vice President Academic Affairs, and once with the entire executive and some of their student staff members.

Meetings with USSU

On my second day in Saskatoon, I arranged a meeting with Ms. Kelsey Tobola, the Vice President Academic Affairs of the USSU, who is in her second year of the job (they have one-year terms, but she ran twice). We talked for an hour or so about each of our portfolios and priorities for the year, and it turns out that our positions are fairly similar. For instance, the VPAA at the USSU sits on numerous university governance committees, which are fairly similar to the ones within University of Alberta governance (teaching and learning committee, academic standards committee, etc.).

During our meetings (we met on two separate occasions), we determined that some of our priorities for the year are similar. For instance, Kelsey is looking into some initiatives with textbooks on campus, which involve running a "Be Book Smart" campaign (the UASU initiated this campaign in Canada a handful of years ago). We agreed to keep in

touch about academic materials for the remainder of the year, to see whether we can collaborate on any issues.

Something that sparked my interest, catching my attention, is that University of Saskatchewan is looking into its advising services on campus. Following a review of academic advising services on campus, the university established a council that will investigate improvements that can be made to academic advising. The University of Alberta 2011-2015 Academic Plan lists mentoring and advising as one of its key academic priorities, which means that we have an opportunity here to substantially improve advising on campus. Advising is a touchy issue, but if we approach it in the right manner, then I think that 2011-2012 will lead to notable improvements to academic advising at the University of Alberta.

About midway through my time in Saskatchewan, I met up with members of the USSU executive to tour their building and take a look at their two bars/restaurants. Interestingly, the USSU just renovated their offices, which are now quite spiffy. They have an accessible office, in that the executive offices are fairly close to the entrance of their student centre. However, the welcoming environment and staff culture is not close to what we see at the UASU. One of their bars is similar to Dewey's, with what I would say is more of a relaxing atmosphere. The colours within that bar are mostly light, rather than the red that you see in Dewey's. Their restaurant/version of RATT is much larger than RATT, with a stage (albeit, quite the old stage) that allows for the bar to host small concerts. Their dance floor is next to the stage, but it is pretty small. I couldn't see it fitting in more than fifty people. But in sum, their two bars were high quality, in my opinion.

STLHE sessions

I attended five sessions during the conference, which were altogether rather interesting. With the two keynote speeches (which I do not consider to be sessions), I saw Dr. Jane Norden of Vanderbilt (a distinguished private university in Tennessee) speak about the need for a general/ethics-centered education for students, with a focus on students in Medicine. She stated that although they may be able to regurgitate facts by the end of a degree, students need to be able to handle complex person-to-person situations in a professional manner. She provided some scary examples to illustrate this point. In one situation, a family overheard two Medicine students in residence saying that a loved one had no chance of surviving. In another case, a doctor did not tell a family that one of its members had passed away; however hospital workers had already removed the body from the visiting room, so the family could not see their loved one for one last time. The second speech was from Buffy Sainte-Marie, who is a well-known singer and human rights activist. She spoke to the need to reform the History curriculum in different Canadian elementary and secondary schools, which currently downplays the role of Aboriginals in Canadian history. She noted that we know the pyramids in Egypt but cannot see the ones in our backyard. Her speech also addressed the need to reduce hierarchy within society, which I think applies to hierarchy within Canadian universities.

Overall, the two speeches were memorable and some of the highlights of the time in Saskatchewan.

On the second last day of STLHE, I had the opportunity to present to student advisors, faculty and university administrators about graduate attributes. Dr. Heather Kanuka and I only had thirty minutes to do so, but the presentation went well. We provided a fairly literature-based, “400-level” presentation about graduate attributes. Dr. Kanuka spoke more to the literature side of things, whereas I communicated the student perspective. We could have used more time for the presentation, but overall, I was pretty happy with the result. I certainly left the conference with more questions than answers about graduate attributes.

For the other sessions, I attended one called Assessment Seminars, which take place at Harvard and now, Mount Royal University in Calgary. With these seminars, a group of 60 or so students, faculty and administrators meet throughout the year to discuss projects that can be undertaken to improve the quality of the university (more specifically, these projects should increase student retention). Harvard has done this over the last twenty years, and now some other universities are catching on. I find this to be an innovative idea, but I do not know whether it is even necessary at the U of A. The Students’ Union has a healthy relationship with the university, and our transition is strong enough that major issues are advocated to the university over consecutive years (rather than being lost during transitions). Another session focused on research done by the Students’ Union and the University of Alberta regarding undergraduate research back in 2004-5, when Lisa McLaughlin was VPA. I was sent a copy of the research conducted during this year (which is now published) and I will attempt to condense it and make sense out of it.

The other two sessions were topics that I was quite familiar with. Dr. Luth, Provostial Fellow of the U of A, presented on assessment and grading. Dr. Luth’s presentation was quick (again, we only had thirty minutes to present) but engaging. Based on the reaction of representatives of other universities, assessment and grading seems to be a hot issue across Canada. Moreover, I sat in on an active learning classroom presentation by the McGill version of the Centre for Teaching and Learning. In 2010, I participated on a faculty-student-administrator panel on this subject, as part of an innovative project called “Pedagogical Provocations” (spearheaded by former SU VPA John Braga). When I establish the Academic Relations Group/AcaDream Team later this year (in October), I will invite the McGill presenters to a meeting (via Skype), so you can all see what I’m talking about. Simply put, the actual environment in a class (everything from the type of lights to the size and shape of a classroom) plays a role in student learning. I think you’ll find this subject quite interesting later in the year.

Conclusion

Attending STLHE was worthwhile, and I recommend that future VPAs take the time to venture to the conference (the next one is in Montreal!). The sessions opened my mind to different academic opportunities for the U of A, and I found the time spent with the USSU to be a lot of fun and informative. Perhaps the biggest thing that I got out of the

conference was the fact that the University of Saskatchewan is prioritizing advising as one of its biggest academic issues. The U of A has done so with the 2011-2015 Academic Plan, but we have not put this section into practice. My apologies for this report coming in late. For other conferences that I attend in the future, I will send reports to Council in a timely fashion.

Sincerely,

Emerson Csorba