

TasSTAR Peer Tutor Program

Preliminary Report to the Ian Potter Foundation

Introduction and background

TasSTAR is modeled on the highly successful STAR (Science/Technology Awareness Raising) peer tutoring program of Murdoch University, where university science students – as trained peer tutors – help in local schools on a regular and sustained basis. Since its inception in 1994, STAR has grown from just six volunteer university students in three local schools, to a program where around 80 students are now peer tutoring in 26 schools in metropolitan Perth and surrounding areas.

As the name implies, the aims of STAR are to foster an interest in science and technology and to encourage young people to seek careers in this area. STAR peer tutors are positive role models, helping to bridge the gap between school and university. At the same time, these volunteers gain valuable workplace skills and experience.

Following the example and the ideals of the STAR program, and with the support of the Ian Potter Foundation, the University of Tasmania's School of Agricultural Science (through its science education program) initiated TasSTAR in early 2004. The program is in place on all three UTas campuses, with currently ten students in pre-tertiary science classes at Hellyer College (Burnie), Newstead College (Launceston) and in Hobart College. Our peer tutors are students from the School of Agricultural Science, as well as from the Schools of Aquaculture and Computing.

The TasSTAR project team¹ consists of a part-time coordinator, responsible for day-to-day organisation, under the guidance of a project manager. These staff are both based at the Cradle Coast campus in Burnie. The project also receives additional casual support from a Hobart-based liaison officer.

This report gives an overview of the first phase of the TasSTAR program (first semester 2004). In particular it reports on the initial project development and recruitment and training process, as well as ongoing TasSTAR communication activities and project evaluation to date.

¹ See page 5 for contact details.

Project establishment, recruitment and training of peer tutors

The first phase of TasSTAR began in February 2004 with our activities focused on project planning and continued liaison with three potential colleges: Hellyer College (Burnie), Newstead College (Launceston) and Hobart College. These discussions grew from the existing strong links between the School of Agricultural Science and the Tasmanian secondary and college education sector generally.

At the same time we initiated recruitment of university peer tutors on all three UTas campuses (Burnie, Launceston and Hobart). We adopted a range of approaches for introducing TasSTAR to the student population, from email broadcasts and displays on notice boards, to visiting individual classes, making formal presentations and holding information sessions on-campus. While these proved successful (several students immediately registered) it was ultimately the subsequent persistence of several enthusiastic university staff that resulted in our attracting ten students to kick-start TasSTAR statewide (our initial goal was to begin the program with five students). This highlights the strength of a personal approach and the importance of building good relationships with key 'local' individuals (or 'champions') within the University.

The next step was the development of an appropriate training process, to clarify students' expectations and to help prepare them for their peer tutoring experience. The training sessions included college teaching staff, to allow our peer tutors and their respective teachers to begin to build some rapport. Training sessions were conducted on-site at the colleges² to introduce peer tutors to the physical layout of the schools and their potential classrooms. These factors were built into the process to help address any potential worries or nerves before the peer tutors' first day.

In designing this initial training program, we benefited greatly from the peer tutor manual provided by the STAR program of Murdoch University, and from the experience of Joy Walker from Student Services at the Cradle Coast campus. The training sessions were held during March/April 2004, with our trained peer tutors starting their placement in the week following training.

Developing a profile for TasSTAR

A range of information and promotional materials were developed to assist with our recruitment and training activities, including brochures, flyers, registration documents and handouts. Examples of these are provided as attachments to this report.

² Except in Burnie, where the peer tutors are ex-Hellyer College students

A web page <<http://www.utas.edu.au/nwc/tasstar>> has been developed to provide an outlet for some of this information and to further promote the program throughout the community. Links from the TasSTAR web page to the Murdoch University STAR program give web users further background on peer tutoring generally, while potential peer tutors can also access our registration documents on-line. We plan to expand the web page to include a photo gallery, peer tutor profiles and testimonials, and to provide regular updates on relevant activities.

The profile of TasSTAR will be further developed through attendance at the Murdoch University Peer Tutoring Symposium in Sept/Oct 2004. The symposium will bring together practitioners, advocates and those interested in peer tutoring with the aim of improving practice and developing strategies for a sustainable future.

Preliminary evaluation and future plans

As the first program of its kind for UTas, evaluation is an important and ongoing component of our TasSTAR activities. In addition to structured avenues for gathering feedback (e.g. visits, surveys) we encourage informal and regular feedback in all communication, for example by deliberately explaining TasSTAR as a 'pilot program' to foster the value of suggestions and ideas along the way.

The feedback to date has been extremely positive. For example, students and teachers were encouraged to submit their thoughts about their 'first day' with some indicative comments included below:

"I felt quite good actually. It was like going back to school. Felt a bit awkward walking in the class a little bit late. Wasn't really nervous or anything. I have given tuition in chemistry to grade 10 -12 students in the past ... and found myself enjoying that kind of thing. And getting a chance to do that again feels really good. I think it's the bit about getting to help the students in an area I am fairly good at that I like best." (peer tutor)

"I thought Friday went really well. She arrived a little after 2, which was good as it gave me the opportunity to explain her role to the students. She sat thro about 30 mins of me waffling. We then did some prac and she was part of a three person team. After that a member of her team had been away ill so she worked him thro the calculations. So we survived." (teacher)



Our peer tutors are continuing to enjoy their experience, as illustrated by the following comment from one of our students in Hobart, after several weeks as a peer tutor:

“No problems, all the students know my name and are happy to call it out in class, and some are starting to ask me about Uni life, courses etc. All good!” (peer tutor)

The focus on regular and open communication allows us to address issues if and when they emerge. The peer tutors have been comfortable in approaching us for help or advice throughout the period, as illustrated below:

“This girl came up to me after the class and talked to me about a lot of stuff.. .. [The teacher] had told me that she was suffering from the family breakdown thing... and I didn't know what to say when she asked me if I missed my mom and dad [who live overseas]. I said yeah... but didn't really want to talk much on that topic because I didn't know how she'd feel if I said anything more. Would be helpful if you could provide me with some tips on how to deal with situations like that... When I taught some students before, there were a couple of them who had family problems, and they'd be more interested in talking about their problems rather than studies... I've always failed to get them focused. How would you deal with that?” (peer tutor)

End of term/semester College and University visits have provided another opportunity to gauge progress to date. University staff have indicated their commitment to remain involved and indeed in some cases to help the peer tutors organise additional activities for their college classes (e.g. running a prac class on campus, organising a campus tour). In what is perhaps the clearest sign of the program's success to date, all of our peer tutors – and all participating teachers – wish to continue with the program through second semester 2004. The comment below, from a participating college teacher, captures the positive sentiment at this mid-year stage of the program:

“I have been working with ‘Nadine’. Her help with some of the less able students has been a great help. In addition, her presence during practical sessions, has been valuable, because she communicates with the students in small groups or individually. This has helped students better understand what they are doing, and the concepts involved. The feedback I have received from the other staff involved has been very positive. At this stage there are no changes I can identify as necessary and we would certainly be in favour of continuing the program next term.” (teacher)

In terms of numbers, we have already met or exceeded our end-of-year targets for peer tutors involved (ten; target five), UTas Schools involved (three; target one), and colleges involved (three; target three). We plan to soon offer TasSTAR to several other interested colleges, and will be offering more UTas students the opportunity to become involved as peer tutors during second semester, 2004.

Summary

In closing, there are several key points to note as we move forward from the first phase of TasSTAR. These can be summarised as follows:

- No need to reinvent the wheel – STAR provides an excellent model
- Flexibility is important – a pilot program fosters ongoing evaluation
- Use a personal approach for recruitment – enthusiastic staff are ‘champions’
- Demonstrate benefits clearly to potential peer tutors – students’ time is limited
- Keep everyone talking – good communication will resolve issues early

Based on the targets achieved, and from the feedback gathered to date, we are confident that the TasSTAR Peer Tutor Program is delivering on expected outcomes, for all our peer tutors and their respective teachers and colleges. We are demonstrating a successful extension of the original STAR model to one that meets the needs of our regional setting, as was our primary objective.

The success of TasSTAR to date highlights the value of the Ian Potter Foundation’s seed funding, in helping establish a unique program at UTas that encourages students to volunteer in local colleges. We can expect TasSTAR to continue to deliver positive outcomes for the duration of this pilot year, building a strong case for the continuation of the program through 2005. A successful application for additional funds from the Foundation (as suggested in the initial proposal) will help build this sustainability.

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