

## Ep. 021: Tutoring Options at the Julia N. Visor Center

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It's mid-semester, and some students may be having an "ah-ha" (or an "uh-oh") moment in regards to their grades. There's help for struggling students through the Julia N. Visor Center, part of Illinois State's University College. We talk with [Pamm Ambrose](#), an associate director with the College, who highlights their foundational approach to helping students achieve. We also talk about some common misconceptions about the services the Center offers (the Visor Center is not about "advisement"), and the importance of coaching students to cultivate learning skills and move beyond ineffective study habits. We also showcase how faculty members can help students take advantage of the Visor Center's many services.

### Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

PAMM: And I'm Pamm.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University. My name is Jim Gee, and joining me today is Pamm Ambrose. She is an Associate Director with University College. Pamm, welcome to the show.

PAMM: Hi, well, thank you very much.

JIM: We were talking before we got started about what is a University College. And so today, we want to kind of explore that. But specifically get into the services that are offered by the, the Julia N. Visor Center on campus, which is one of the many, many things that University College does. So, to get us started, what's the philosophy behind having a university college on campus because I know not every campus in the country has one.

PAMM: University College is a concept that's across the country. But it's not found in every university. Our job is to really work with those first-year students and students in transition. So, we also work with transfer students a lot. But we really are focusing on helping students make that jump into our university so that they can proceed in their academic journey.

JIM: What are the some of the particular challenges that these students face that the University College helps them with?

PAMM: So, we have four different Associate Directors one works with at First Year Advising one works with orientation and preview. One works with retention and probation. And my job is to work with learning services and instructional courses.

JIM: Okay, so the Julia N. Visor Center is a big part of what University College does for all students on campus.

PAMM: Right.

JIM: Not just first year students or transfer students. So, let's get this out of the way. When I first came back to teach here at ISU when I came back and they said, Yeah, then the Visor Center's available to help. I'm like, I was thinking it means advisement, but it doesn't, right.

PAMM: Correct. Okay, so the Julia N. Visor Center was opened in 2009. Okay, in the lower level of you at Manchester, we always say the lower level because people who, who know what he would Manchester used to look like before the renovation, yeah, don't like the basement, right. And it was, it's named for Julia N. Visor who was a faculty member in English.

JIM: Okay.

PAMM: And she was the person who really started academic support in 2009, they decided to renovate and make it more accessible to students. So, now it's downstairs in the residence hall, and students can literally come down in their bunny slippers and, you know, be comfortable. And so, it's easy access for most students on campus. That's great.

JIM: So, again, advisement is not part of it, though. So, what services are offered through the Visor Center.

PAMM: So, what we do is look at academic support. So, we offer tutoring for most of the general education classes, we really look at the classes that students seem to have a little bit of difficulty with. And our tutoring is different from what our students are expecting. This is not a sit down at the table with somebody and actually do your homework, we have weekly facilitated study sessions. So, students sign up and they meet with the same group of six or seven students, and it's facilitated by an undergraduate student who took the class did well in the class and has been recommended by a faculty member. The facilitators job isn't to give the answers. It's really to help students learn how to learn the concepts. So, we're looking at a bigger picture, we're not trying to get the right answers. We're trying to build those study habits, trying to help them be successful in learning what they need to know.

JIM: And is this for any course? Or is this for specifically like general education courses?

PAMM: We focus on the general education classes, because we're really University College's about those foundational building blocks. And so, we're trying to build those in the students as we help them develop study skills for things like biology, 101 and, and math 119. They can take those skills and move them forward as they go into their major classes. We recognize that the departments are the experts in their content area. So, that's not where we're focusing. We're focusing on the learning to learn.

JIM: So, I taught comm 110. And my I guess misperception and I think that there are some misperceptions to be fair among instructors on campus about all of the different things that students can get out of the Visor Center. And I do want to talk at some point. Before we're done today about how as an instructor, I can best prepare students to go

there or when I should recommend students should or should go there. I guess my misperception was always that the Visor Center was about writing. But there are services available for students who need help with writing is that is that right?

PAMM: Yeah, we also do one on one writing assistance. And so again, in that holistic manner, we're not editing or proofreading, where we tell the students you know, if you have a little squiggly line on your word, Doc, that means put an apostrophe in your edits. That's not what we're about. Our job is to help guide you through the process of is this at the level it needs to be at are my transitions appropriate is my verbiage. What I need to have it at, at a college level is this meeting the spirit of the requirement, we will help any student, any stage of the writing process for any course or any paper outside of a thesis or dissertation. Again, our student tutors are undergraduate. So, that's not or a publication, we're really not going to touch those. But I always tell students, I'm working on a degree on my on my Edie. And when I write a paper, I bring it to our tutors, because two heads are better than one and they can look at it and, and tell me if I'm making sense to them. And if it flows the way that I have tried to make it work.

JIM: So, what are some of the other misperceptions that you hear about when you talk to instructors about, you know, what they think about the Visor Center? What, what are some of the things that this is your chance to kind of set the record straight?

PAMM: We hear, we don't hear this so much anymore, but I want to make sure that it's out there, we don't do homework, right? We don't want to give any student a perceived unfair advantage. That's not what we're about, we're there to support the instructors in their endeavors to help the students learn. So, we are a support system. And it goes back again to that learning to learn. We only work in the classes that are foundational. So, we often get asked by, by departments, you know, our students struggling this major class, can you help us out, and we are happy to help them build a tutoring system, because our tutoring system, our tutoring program that we have is level two certified by the college reading Learning Association. So, that's kind of a big deal in the higher ed world. So, we're happy to help them develop that. But that's not our focus, we really want to help students build those foundational skills. The other thing that we do, we offer academic coaching. And that's where we have our grad assistants who have been very well trained, work one on one with students who may need some extra support to get or stay on track. And so, they're not tutoring students, and they're not their parents by any means. But they're helping them through the bumps in the road. And that's a great place for faculty to be able to say, you know, to a student who may be experiencing something, have you talked to a coach, have you talked, gone down to the Visor Center and seen if they can help you with this, our coaches know exactly how far they can go and at what point they need to send out for resources, you know, how to resource them to counseling or to, to health promotion, and wellness or something.

JIM: And I've so I'm very glad to hear that you're calling them coaches, because that's the word I've been looking for. When I have advised students to go to the Visor Center, when I when I said, you know, this resource is available, I always struggle with not making them feel like they're in trouble somehow, or that it's detention, or that they're dumb, and so they need remedial help phrasing it as coaching, I think is a great

way to be positive about it. Because it is a positive thing. This isn't where we send students who are problems, we're sending students who need extra help, to meet the expectations that we've set for them. And the expectations they should have for themselves. As far as their, their learning achievement.

PAMM: I'm really glad you brought up the word remedial, because that's not a word we have in our vocabulary. That's good. You don't believe in remediation or deficit model, we were foundational and developmental. And so that's what we focus on. So, we tell students all the time, if you're supposed to study two to three hours outside of class for every hour that you're in class, why not commit to an hour a week with a group of people who are just as committed as you are to studying. And we have students in our study groups, who are A students without going to tutoring, they just want to commit, we also have students who are struggling and everybody in between. But what they have in common is that they're all committed to learning how to learn,

JIM: Right. No, I think that's great. And I think it's even more important than ever, that we have a sort of renewed commitment to meeting the needs of all of our students, in terms of the diverse community of learners we have on campus. This is one way that that instructors by getting students to head that direction, towards the Visor Center and encouraging them to participate. That's one way that we can actually achieve that goal, I think, because they all come from different backgrounds, and they all have different levels of that foundational development and what you're talking about, I think that's great.

PAMM: The other thing that I'm thinking about that the instructors might want to know is that we're always looking for tutors. And so, as they have their classes, and they recognize that a student has a strength, that would be a great person to refer to the center and say, you know, you should apply to be a tutor, you should look at what openings are there and we're always looking for them.

JIM: And is there is there on the website or something like that. Is there a way for students to apply for?

PAMM: Yes.

JIM: For, for faculty to recommend? Okay, we'll link to that to the show. Ah for today's episode

PAMM: Oh, that's great,

JIM: So, that people can just find it. So, we were talking before we started recording. I was kind of hemming and hawing a little bit like, oh, I regret we didn't do this before the semester began. But you actually said that we're coming up on midterms. And this is kind of a busy time for you folks, why is that?

PAMM: That's sort of the aha moment. We have students who think that everything is going well, or they've gotten that first test back, and it's not great. But they think that they can bring it up, and then midterms happen, and they find themselves may be in a situation where they recognize they need some extra help. And so, we find that

around midterms, we have a population of students who come and say, Can you help me now? And the answer is yes. I mean, we can certainly help students at any point in the semester. We're not miracle workers, you know, the week before finals, we can't help you change that F, right. But we can certainly, because we work developmentally, we can help you at any point to build those those skills, those learning skills, so that even if it doesn't bring your grade up at this point, because there's not enough time, it gives you some foundational stuff to use for the following semesters and beyond.

JIM: So, I'm curious. I mean, this is, you've been here at ISU for a while, you've been teaching for a while, in your position through University College. What's changed over the last few years about students? What how are their attitudes different? What are they? How is their approach to learning changed? I'm curious to get your perspective on it.

PAMM: That's really interesting. I talk about this all the time, because every year students change, right. But what I'm seeing a lot now is all of our students are academically capable. We don't have probationary students, you know, we let students in who are academically capable. But I think what's happened is, they haven't had the opportunity. And I was a K 12 teacher. So, I'm not being dismissive to K 12. But they haven't had the opportunity to actually do that independent learning how to learn. So, in high school, they often get told this is what we're studying, this is what we're learning now go practice it. And in college, they're told this is what we're going to learn about now go learn it. And so, they really don't have the background in how do I go out and study? How do I manage my time? How do I prioritize and plan and those sorts of things? And so that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to give them those that skill set, so that they can I mean, they're academically capable. But if you can't show that, because you don't know how, then then you're going to struggle. So, we want to help them with that.

JIM: So, how does that anxiety or whatever you want to call that uncertainty? I guess, maybe anxiety is the answer. How does that uncertainty manifest itself?

PAMM: A lot of students do what I call the ostrich. So, they put their head in the sand. Ah, I got to do that I'm just go away. And then when it doesn't, they kind of our lost, you know, everybody at CTLT talks about mindset. And we have a lot of students who don't have the opportunity yet to build a growth mindset, they have that fixed mindset, I'm just no good in science. I'm just not a good writer. And we're trying to help them see that this may not be their preferred area of study, this may not be what they enjoy the most. But they are capable, they can do it because they just need to learn how to do it. So, yeah, those are those are the big things that we see, we see a lot of anxiety, we see a lot of students saying I just can't do it. And our job, especially our coach's job, is to help them work through and break down the task into manageable pieces. So, that they can approach it more easily. You know, we use the Mount Everest analogy, and you don't just climb to the top, you actually go a little bit and then you get on a plateau, and you take a break. And that's what we help students do is just a little piece at a time you'll get there.

JIM: I think that's great. And I like that I like the Mount Everest analogy, I'm going to I'm going to be using that. Including when I consult with faculty, one thing that I've encountered in recent years to a specific kind of anxiety where students are fixated on the grades and not the learning behind it. And I think how we communicate as teachers oftentimes actually inadvertently reinforces that idea, because we're tying so much of the learning to grades. That's a whole another show, as we like to say, Let's Talk Teaching. I would imagine you have a lot of students who are either come to you or are sent to you because they have a less than stellar grade and, and you have to probably do some talking them out of that, to get him to focus on what really needs to change, right.

PAMM: There's a lot of talking people off the ledge kind of thing.

JIM: Yeah.

PAMM: I had a student one sit in my office and had been a great student in high school and he said it was getting really not stellar grade in a class. And we talked about how he was studying. And I said, how's that working out for you? He said, not well, but it's how I study. Yeah. And I said, but it's not working. Yes, yeah, I know. But it's what I know how to do. But it's not working. And so, we had to break that down so that he was willing to try a new way that might help him to be more successful. So, they're kind of stuck in what worked in high school.

JIM: That's true. And and even if it wasn't working that way that well in high school, they're still stuck in it, right? To an extent. So, what else do we need to know about the Visor Center,

PAMM: we're happy to do tours, we're happy to have classes come and visit. That's a great way for students to feel comfortable walking in the door. We're not a scary place. But it's hard to take that first step on your own to walk in sometimes. The other thing is that we do academic skills workshops, and they're one in Dunn's. They're their 50-minute, interactive, facilitated presentation that any student can sign up for. But we also are willing to come into classrooms and do that. So, if an instructor is going to be at a conference or an instructor, just want some extra study skills, sort of support, we're happy to come in and do that. So, all they have to do is contact us at the center, and we'll get that ball rolling.

JIM: That's great that I'm I may take next time I teach comm 110. For sure. And even in my current class, now that I'm thinking about it, what specifically, okay, it's midterm that panic is going to sit in for some students, but what should faculty members be thinking of, perhaps over spring break when they may be turning an eye towards their summer? Or are you available in the summer, by the way as the Visor Center?

PAMM: We are, but we have writing assistance. Other than that, we haven't had the need to do academic tutoring, because most of the classes are online, right. But we still have all of our resources up on the website.

JIM: Okay cool. And we'll link to that too, of course. Anyway, what I was going to ask was, what, what should I as an instructor, put in my syllabus, or remember to discuss with

my class at the beginning of the semester, about the services that the Visor Center offers?

PAMM: Thank you for asking that. Jim. We have a syllabus blurb you do. Okay. And so, I am happy to send that out, we actually send it out on the ISU teach listserv, right? Every, every semester at the beginning of the semester. But we, we also have it on our website, I will make sure that you have access.

JIM: Yeah, wants to yeah, we'll get we'll make sure it will make sure that we, we highlight that as well on the Show page. And you know, we do I think it will become an annual or biannual event, or biannual, whichever it is, um, where we will kind of make available all of our getting your having a good first day of class and getting your syllabus ready sort of podcast and stuff like that. So, we'll definitely be sure to include that information. as well.

PAMM: We appreciate that. We also would encourage instructors to just talk it up, I think that our best marketing is word of mouth. When the instructors ensure to students that this is not, they're not recommending it, because I don't think you're going to make it here. Because it's extra support. It's an, and we tell students college is not an individual sport, it's a team sport. So, you need support, all of us need support at some time or another. So, just see what you need and see what we can do for you.

JIM: Well, thank you for coming on today and talking about this. This has been great. And, and I hope, you know, I would encourage our colleagues across campus to really take advantage of this and really look for those students who need that support. And this is a great way to have that happen. And then then they can achieve in your own class to the level that you expect them to. So, Pamm, thank you so much for joining us today.

PAMM: Thank you for the opportunity. I love talking about what we can do for students.

JIM: Well, we will have you back on again to do more of it. Okay.

PAMM: All right. Thank you. Okay.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about today's show, including the links that we talked about, by going to our website [CTLT.IllinoisState.edu](http://CTLT.IllinoisState.edu). Just click on the podcast link in the upper right of the page. You can also find out how to subscribe so you don't miss future episodes, for Pamm Ambrose, and for all of my colleagues here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology until we talk again, Happy Teaching!