The UVI GIS Curriculum Project Impacts the Classroom

The U.S. Department of Labor has identified the geospatial technology (GST) sector as one of 14 high growth job sectors. GST experts attribute the rapid growth in GST education to the expansion of more powerful hardware with Web access being offered at a lower cost; the development of easier-to-use-software; and the expansion of GST accepted use by government, business, industry and the general public.

Over the past five years, the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) has been integrating GST into the curriculum to prepare its students to understand geospatial technology as well as the skills required for participation in the GST industry. In summer 2010, UVI cross-listed in its catalog its first Geographic Information System (GIS) course in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences and the College of Science and Mathematics.

Several students have participated in geospatial analysis research in various disciplines. Most noticeably, one student on the St. Croix campus produced a map for an Empower VI proposal for the siting of a floating offshore wind farm that would generate electricity at sub 10 cents per Kilowatt hour. The map shown in Figure 1 highlights the environmental resources in the proposed location. Another student applied spatial analysis in the development of a proposal for his family trucking business to generate a map for the job site and calculated the volume of material for removal. Impressed with his knowledge of geospatial analysis, a local planning firm, WM & Associates utilized his services for spatial data collected and analyzed for this project was used to support draft legislation proposed for the rehabilitation and improvement of the Charlotte Amalie, Christiansted and Frederiksted historic districts.

As part of the University’s GIS curriculum long-term effort, projects that would support addressing critical community issues are already planned and coordinated; those projects will be shared with the University community in the very near future. The project will continue to host public demonstrations and classroom presentations to build student and faculty awareness of geospatial thinking and how it can impact lives not only in the classroom but in the territory.

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Purchasing Food on Grant Funds

Principal Investigators and grant Activity Directors often ask the question, “Can I use grant funding to pay for food?” While the short answer is “no”, there are exceptions to the rule.

As a rule, the purchase of food is typically considered to be an entertainment expense and is strictly prohibited. There are, however, certain circumstances that would allow the purchase of food with grant dollars.

The most common example is the allowance for meals while travelling. This common occurrence is a generally accepted use of grant funds and is typically only questioned when meal costs appear excessive or include alcoholic beverages.

A second exception is the allowance for refreshments on breaks at workshops and other similar sessions, which facilitate participants remaining in the general vicinity of the event while having access to light food items and drink.

The boundary between allowable food expense and unallowable entertainment costs is less distinct when Principal Investigators and Activity Directors attempt to utilize food in certain other circumstances. There should be a clear and salient linkage between the use of food and the objectives of the grant program being pursued. For example, while refreshments during breaks in a training workshop allow for continuity of the educational effort, serving refreshments at the end of a presentation is considered an unallowable entertainment expense, since it does not further the grant’s objectives.

Some factors to consider when thinking about the purchase of food on a grant include:

1. How is the meeting integral to achieving the purposes of the grant?
2. Is the meeting intramural or extramural?
3. Why is it necessary to have food in order to have the meeting? (i.e. Is it in order to maintain continuity of the meeting?) Document the agenda, and begin/end times of the meeting. If scheduled at meal time, explain why.
4. Are the costs reasonable?
5. If the meeting is at a restaurant, or other non-university location, the venue needs to be explained; a restaurant venue could be read to imply that the meal (or entertainment) took precedence over the actual meeting.

Building the Bridge for Student Success

In 2011, the University of the Virgin Islands implemented its first annual Summer Bridge Program. Bridge programs exist in universities and colleges across the nation and commonly focus their attention on one, or all, of the following freshman groups: minorities; academically "at-risk"; adult (>25 years); or students who are the first to attend college within their families.

After assessing the needs of students here at UVI and in the territory, 77 high school graduates (37 on St. Croix and 42 on St. Thomas) were awarded a $3,000 scholarship to attend the UVI Summer Bridge Program. This program catered to prospective university freshmen, with low SAT scores, and offered them a chance to: strengthen basic math and English skills, specifically those skills needed to obtain satisfactory results on placement tests; create a network of support amongst themselves, as soon-to-be college freshmen with similar goals and similar academic struggles; to broaden their understanding of the workforce, careers and jobs and help link their college experience with a viable and satisfying career; to become independent, understand self-advocacy and practice what it really means to be a young adult with the responsibilities of a college student.

Before the summer of 2012, UVI extended bridge services to adults interested in obtaining an undergraduate degree, and to high school juniors in preparation for their senior year in high school. On June 24, 2012, UVI’s Summer Bridge Program attracted over 100 high school graduates for its second year of programming. When asked about the impact of the program on young adults, Dr. Haldane Davies, the Summer Bridge Program Director insisted that “the Summer Bridge Program is an exceptional program for the institution as it bridges the gap between the final year of high school and the first year of college. The results are quite impressive for students’ performance on the university’s placement test and are ready to register for freshman courses.”

By 2017, UVI’s Summer Bridge Program will have seamlessly transitioned over 700 high school graduates into college. While the program is still in its infancy, its goals and objectives will be continuously evaluated to ensure that UVI continues to strengthen the bridge for young adults for success in and out the classroom.
Title III Grant Supports Financial Sustainability

The use of available technology has become one of the required tools of the trade for development professionals at educational institutions. The Internet is affecting the way our donors research and select the causes they support, the amounts they give, and their interactions with organizations. Constituents receive and send e-mail, surf the web and participate in social networks, connecting with friends, family and co-workers around the world. By the end of 2006, 73% of respondents (about 147 million adults) surveyed by the Pew Interim & American Life Project were going online and 26 million had made a charitable gift online.

For FY 2009-10, the Office of Institutional Advancement solicited $10,100.00 in Title III grant funds to support its effort to host Blackbaud’s Sphere eMarking product on the University’s website. It was our belief that by implementing this software package, the university could expect to see an increase in its number of supporters, donors and web presence.

The University of the Virgin Islands’ Annual Fund received over $1.1million in support for the 2008-2009 fiscal year. While this represents a significant contribution to the Annual Fund, it was accomplished without the aid of Internet technology. With the introduction of this software package, the University will have the ability to generate more revenue for the Annual Fund.

The chart below depicts the impressive growth in online giving to the University’s Annual Fund over three years of project implementation.

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The Impact of Title III on UVI’s Retention Rates

Since its inception under Title III funding about five years ago, the Campus Advising and Tutorial Services (CATS) Center provided a co-curricular resource that promoted student retention and success. The original proposal, titled an Academic Approach to Retention, Progression and Graduation Rates supported enrollment and progression among entering cohorts of freshmen.

The methodology to increase retention rates hinged upon increasing the number of effective student contacts, follow-up with instructors of pre-college courses and adapting an intrusive advising/academic counseling model. The term intrusive is a positive word and connotes proactive outreach to those students who do not respond to phone calls or emails. In such situations, the staff member might visit a classroom or a dorm to find the student and deliver the counsel he/she needs.

The rationale underpinning this approach was the belief that when professional staff worked closely with faculty to identify those areas where students needed assistance, the staff would be better equipped to advise and help both faculty and students. Moreover, the more frequent the contacts with first-year students, the more likely that attempts to mitigate retention risk factors would be successful. The students entering UVI came with hopes and dreams about their success and achievement. The majority of them however brought deficits in their academic preparation that presented a serious retention challenge that could not be ignored.

The two-fold service focus that the Title III funds supported was advisement and tutoring. Tutoring emphasis was placed on the pre-college courses that the majority of entering freshmen had to take. Before progressing on the degree they were seeking, students had to pass the foundational courses in mathematics, English and reading. Repeated failure would inevitably lead to disillusionment and eventual dropout so the tutors doubled down on their efforts in these foundational courses.

It is difficult to attribute direct causation between the efforts of the Campus Advising and Tutorial Services Center and the retention rates that UVI reports over the period of its existence. There are so many variables that impact the decision of students to continue their education at UVI. However, the claim to some level of correlation would not be overreaching. The major impact of the Title III funded initiative was that UVI’s retention rates were consistently higher than the national average. For example the annual retention rates for first time, full time, baccalaureate degree seeking freshmen for the period 2008-2011 school year were 75.3%, 71.6%, 70.5% and 70.0%, respectively. Admittedly, the trend line has a negative slope but throughout the period the UVI retention rate was between 6 and 10 percentage points higher than the national average.
After a member of faculty or staff has been successful in receiving support from the Title III grant to initiate or enhance their program, there is almost always a singular question that will emerge: Can I charge (name a product or service) to my Title III grant?

Here are a few questions that Title III Activity Directors and Principal Investigators on other grants can ask themselves to determine the answer to that question.

*Was it a part of my project description and budget?*—If the proposed purchase was approved as a part of your project’s implementation and spending plans, then there is a likelihood that you may proceed with the purchase.

*Is the proposed product or service necessary for the project and is the cost incurred specifically for the approved project?*—If the answer is yes, the purchase would then be considered allocable to the grant.

*Is the cost reasonable?*—If the cost does not reflect what a prudent person would pay for a similar product or service, the cost may be questioned.

*Is the purchase consistent with other similar purchases?*—If the product or service is being purchased in a manner that is consistent with the institution’s policies and practices, it is probably allowable.

*Has the Activity Director or Principal Investigator (PI) properly documented the purchase?*—There should be official documentation of the price of the product or service, such as an invoice. A listing of prices prepared by the PI is not sufficient documentation.

*Is the product or service legal?*—The product or service may not be prohibited by US or VI laws.

*Does the purchase conform to the established federal guidelines?*—The federal government has established guidelines for the use of grant funds in 2 CFR 215 (Uniform Administrative Requirements) and 2 CFR 220 (Cost Principles). If it doesn’t comply, you cannot buy! Check with the Office of Sponsored Programs or the Title III Project Administration office if you have any questions.

*Is the purchase consistent with UVI’s policies, regulations, and procedures that apply to federal awards.* The institution’s financial policies (available at [click here](#)) should be consulted to ensure consistency.

If the answer to any of these questions is not “YES”, your proposed purchase may not be allowable. It is always important to remember that all federal grant funding is accompanied by multiple sets of laws, rules, policies and practices, and it is important to understand and comply with these to protect both the institution and the Principal Investigator.

*The contents of this newsletter were developed under a grant from the US Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily present the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.*