

# Learning Support Centers and International Tutor Training Program Certification: An Interview with Rick A. Sheets

By Luann Walker



*Rick A. Sheets has been working in learning assistance, faculty training, and technology support for over 30 years. He collaborated with Frank Christ as the co-founder and webmaster of the Learning Support Centers in Higher Education (LSCHE) website, a resource established in 1996 for learning*

*center directors, administrators, and faculty. In addition to being a past president of the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA), Sheets served as coordinator of the International Tutor Training Program Certification (ITTPC) from late 2008 until early 2015. Holding a B. A. and an M. A. of education from Arizona State University, Sheets continued his education through the National Center of Developmental Education's Kellogg Institute before returning to Arizona State to earn a Doctorate of Education. In 2010, he retired as director of the Learning Support Center at Paradise Valley Community College. Over his extensive career, Sheets has earned awards for training and employee innovations, CRLA recognition awards, and the National College Learning Center Association's (NCLCA) Innovation in Technology Award for his work on LSCHE. Lastly, in February 2015, he was inducted as a Council of Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations (CLADEA) Fellow, the field's highest honor.*

**Luann Walker (L.S.):** The idea of a resource like Learning Support Centers in Higher Education (LSCHE) began in approximately 1965 "as a collection of professional reading and conference notes relating to postsecondary learning assistance with a special emphasis on learning assistance centers" (LSCHE, 2015b). With Frank Christ, you developed LSCHE and continue to direct its operation today. In March 2014, you unveiled LSCHE's new layout. What caused its inception?

**Rick Sheets (R.S.):** LSCHE (P.K.A., the Winter Institute website) was developed and came online to support the annual Winter Institutes, a professional development workshop that Frank initiated. LSCHE initially provided information and resources that Frank Christ had collected for three decades and wanted to make available to learning assistance professionals. It also provided a resource for colleagues to learn about many resources provided at the week-long Winter Institutes. Overseeing the LSCHE website has been and continues to be an exciting, challenging, and interesting process. The website opened in 1996, written in HTML then Netscape Navigator then PageMill and then to DreamWeaver, a more comprehensive website management tool. In 2011, Frank Christ and I discussed the need to update the site, but the update was pushed into the future. As a legacy for Frank and our work together, LSCHE continues to support the needs of colleagues in the field; however, LSCHE needs to be continually updated. In 2013, with the help and support offered by the Tutor Matching Service (TMS) company, LSCHE's new look was developed, and all pages moved to the new format as a WordPress site.

**L.W.:** Sadly, Frank Christ passed away in 2012, and many of those new to the field only know him as a figure in articles and books. Could you describe what it was like to work with Frank?

**R.S.:** Frank was truly a Renaissance Man. His tireless energy, love, passion, excitement, and commitment to the field and to the LSC professionals were contagious to all who had the pleasure to work with him. He was always pushing to help learning assistance professionals realize the importance of being a catalyst for change and innovation in supporting learners. He focused on ways to better support learning for all students and for the staff and administrators too. He often spoke about workshops or sessions he would provide for administrators in time management and MBO (Management By Objectives). Working with Frank was never dull. He was always looking at ways to

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help professionals in the field and saw technology as a valuable tool to reach more learners.

**L.W.:** Frank Christ advocated for and helped build many cornerstones in this field; he was a founding member of the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) and the first author for the *Journal of Developmental Education's* (JDE) "TechTalk" column. How do you believe Frank would perceive the latest iteration of LSCHE? Would it exceed his expectations?

**R.S.:** I feel it was exactly what he would have wanted, but he would immediately be pushing for even more options and venues to use the revised website to reach even more learning professionals. Frank was always networking, discussing, sharing, listening, and making suggestions for colleagues through conferences, webinars, email, and list-serves (like LRNASST).

One area of LSCHE I think Frank would have been working to expand and develop is an additional focus on technologies available and used in the field, especially in teaching and learning online. Frank often focused on how important it was for learning centers to provide support for students taking online classes.

**L.W.:** LSCHE has really been updated to integrate even more outstanding resources specifically designed for Learning Support Professionals. For those of us who have been using LSCHE for years, in addition to the new appearance, how has LSCHE been transformed?

**R.S.:** Easier navigation is now available throughout the site. A breadcrumb trail provides easy navigation back through the site hierarchy, and main category pages have a side panel with parent and child links.

The original 35 resource categories in LSCHE were condensed and combined into 12 major categories on the home page, each as its own page. An expanded view of the resources creates a site map of the available resource links under each category heading. New technologies were incorporated to support LSCHE, including better access and viewing on mobile devices. The conference and event calendar items can be added to many online calendars with a single click.

Responding to a request early in Spring 2015 for job postings, job postings web pages (LSCHE, 2015a) were added under professional development, and the number of listings has averaged 25-30 posts at a time (posted for 3 months then moved to archive pages unless additional posting time is requested). Furthermore, all of the 500+ pages were moved and reorganized, and the process of updating information on all the pages began. Updating every page in LSCHE is a "work in progress" for

sure, but all of the 5,000+ links have already been updated. For example, the list of names for learning centers in the "about" page has now more than doubled to 260 from 120. The chronological history of learning assistance has been updated and expanded to be more comprehensive. In addition, new technologies and practices have been added to help keep resource links up-to-date (i.e., a broken link checker designed for WordPress sites).

**L.W.:** Rick, in the early years you were the main, if not the only, person developing and updating the resources and links. With the growth LSCHE what additional staff has been incorporated to support the maintenance of LSCHE?

**R.S.:** As cofounder and webmaster, I am overseeing the work and changes in LSCHE and currently maintain the website. Alan Craig is and has been co-editor in LSCHE for many years, and there are now other informal contributors (Hunter Boylan, David Caverly, Brad Hughes, Lucy MacDonald, David Arendale, Penny Turrentine, and Johanna Dvorak, to name a few). In 2014, a formal LSCHE advisory team was formed, consisting of Karen Agee, Alan Craig, and Russ Hodges. We continued to update the site with informal support from the

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interested practitioners, leaders, and experts in learning assistance and developmental education. We also have graduate students from Texas State University researching, expanding, and updating LSCHE resources.

**L.W.:** Unlike many of the websites we typically encounter, which bombard viewers with ads, LSCHE requires no membership fees or subscriptions nor does it request donations. How can such an expansive and growing website remain active without funding from its users?

**R.S.:** Funding was initially needed to provide a domain and webhost. Maricopa Colleges and specifically my campus, Paradise Valley Community College, agreed to provide web server support to LSCHE as a folder on my learning support center (LSC) website. In 2009, CRLA agreed to host LSCHE as an additional and independent domain add-on. Finally, in 2012, as CRLA moved to a management company for daily operation, LSCHE moved to its own domain to better support the Council of Learning Assistance and Developmental Education

Associations (CLADEA) and its member associations and centers. It has been a labor of love for me, and the costs for me hosting the website and maintaining the domain have been low. LSCHE has been created and based on volunteer support by its founders, advisory team, team leaders, interested leaders in the field, and organizations like the Tutor Matching Service, who volunteered time and resources to update the look and functionality of LSCHE.

**L.W.:** Historically, LSCHE began with hard copy documents from Frank Christ's files. Making those articles available online was the initial phase of what is now a growing collection of supportive resources for learning center professionals. Frank's legacy has paved the way for the new site; in addition to expanding the site's focus on technologies used in the field to support online education, what do you see as the future of LSCHE?

**R.S.:** I see a bright and exciting "work in progress" as LSCHE continues as an Open Education Resource (OER) web portal dedicated to learning support professionals, CLADEA, and its six nonprofit national and international member associations and centers. LSCHE is in the process of moving from a comprehensive list of links of individual resources available on the internet to now providing more annotated links of available resource lists maintained by colleagues throughout the Internet. These changes are already in process and will continue taking place over the next year or two.

One area just completed is an annotated list of links of more than 90 associations and organizations of interest to learning support center professionals and developmental educators, which includes links and descriptions to each of TRiO's eight federal programs. It begins with a listing of each of CLADEA's organizations and centers. We have also recently posted a new resource called "Publications for the LSC Professional," which includes a list of publications of each of CLADEA's organizations and centers and a list of suggested reading by CLADEA. Input and feedback is always welcomed on the site.

**L.W.:** In addition to your continual work with LSCHE, for over 6 years you were the Coordinator of The International Tutor Training Program Certification (ITTPC). The paramount purpose of the CRLA's tutor certification process was to set an internationally accepted standard of skills and training for tutors (CRLA, 2015). How were international best practices selected and incorporated into the selection of the current certification's content? Are there differences amongst the countries, and, if so, how does training vary across different countries/cultures?

**R.S.:** I was not part of the team at its inception, though I remember hearing about it. From 1986 until 1989, a team of interested CRLA members and some current/former CRLA Board of Directors officers discussed the need for tutor-training guidelines to provide consistent training procedures. The work paralleled the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) work. Thus, when created, ITTPC followed the CAS standards for tutor training in learning assistance programs. The group researched and applied best practices from presentations at national conferences throughout the development of the program. The content includes four aspects of tutor-training program certification: (a) tutor training, (b) tutoring experience, (c) tutor selection, and (d) tutor evaluation.

**L.W.:** Tutors and tutoring programs provide support for underprepared students in many educational settings across national borders (CRLA, 2015). How many countries are currently ITTPC certified?

**R.S.:** Currently, more than 1100 programs are certified, including programs in seven different countries outside the United States: Australia, Canada, Greece, Japan, Kuwait, Republic of Korea, with Morocco as the most recent addition. It's exciting to have so many ITTPC-certified programs and in so many places. Some countries specifically seek to certify their tutor-training programs through ITTPC to improve language skills within their institutions. The requirements follow the same guidelines, and everything is submitted in English, but we can still support work in other countries. The topics we offer and their requirements are flexible enough to accommodate cultural differences.

**L.W.:** During your tenure and preceding it, there has been some change in the name and the process for tutor certification programs. Can you explain the impetus behind some of the changes and your role during that process?

**R.S.:** The International Tutor Training Program Certification (ITTPC) is a work in progress, continually seeking research and best practices to help programs identify how their program meets a set of standards. The certification was initially created as the International Tutor Certification Program (ITCP) in 1989. The status of "international" allowed other countries' postsecondary programs to also participate. CRLA set certification standards to focus on tutor training programs so that other organizations' certification initiatives could endorse different aspects. The CRLA board clarified the name to International Tutor Program Certification (ITPC) to address concerns related to clarifying that CRLA certifies programs rather

than tutors (and authorizes those programs to certify their tutors). Sister organizations developed agreements to work together, maximize resources, and reduce redundancy via CLADEA.

Within the last few years, it became apparent that the name "ITPC" still required more clarification, and, as a result, the name was changed to "International Tutor Training Program Certification" (ITTPC) to include the word "training" in the title because it certifies tutor training programs. ITTPC is an extension of CRLA; therefore, the certification achieved by completing the ITTPC program is actually from CRLA. Recommendations for making the name change were sent to CLADEA for input and support before official action was taken, and ITTPC was chosen as the newest name for CRLA's Tutor Training Program Certification. A parallel program to certify peer mentors was created in 1998. It is smaller and has grown slower than ITTPC, but the CRLA Board feels strongly that the two

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certifications support and parallel each other as much as possible.

In January 2015, Roberta Schotka, a long time reviewer, accepted the role of ITTPC Coordinator and has been working diligently with Page Keller, Certifications Director; Lori Saxby, CRLA Past President; and CRLA's management company (TEI) to complete the development of a new online application process for certifications. The new process has been on the drawing board since 2009, and programming it actually began in 2012 by CRLA's management company. The new online application process was unveiled at the 2015 CRLA conference in Portland, OR.

**L.W.:** Your insights are invaluable, thank you so much for your years of service enriching student learning via your work in learning centers, your historic and long-term contributions to the field. LSCHE, supported in part by Texas State University doctoral students, and ITTPC, with their over 1,000 certified programs worldwide, undoubtedly make huge impacts across the field.

### References

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