Jennifer D. Culver: Henry Mitchell Scholarship Report

My initial interest in visiting Cape Town and the University of the Western Cape emerged from my Spring 2015 participation in the SisterScholars-in-Training Peer-Mentoring program, a joint collaborative effort between the University of Missouri – St. Louis, and the University of the Western Cape. The purpose of the peer-mentoring program was to provide female students with an opportunity to share their personal and academic stories with each other across international campuses and to enhance international awareness of the lives of other college women globally. Thus as a participant, I was paired with a UWC student and we connected via e-mail, Google chat, and Skype, for the duration of the 2015 spring semester and beyond. We encouraged one another regarding our academic journeys and shared stories about our upbringing, culture, academic experiences, career goals, and life aspirations. I remember thinking how awesome it would be to travel and visit my international SisterScholars peer, yet did not think it would happen due to limited personal resources. The following school year however, when the opportunity emerged to spend my summer in Cape Town, working with my advisor Dr. Angela Coker, evaluating the continuation of the peer mentor program, I was ecstatic. The opportunity was a chance to further the learning I had gained as a past peer mentor program participant as well as further enhance the breadth of my doctoral studies as a counseling education student.

I arrived in Cape Town, South Africa on May 27th and had the opportunity to begin my abroad journey by taking part in the celebration of the 30-year partnership between the University of Missouri and the University of the Western Cape (UWC) by attending the debut of Miriam Makeba: Mama Africa, the Musical. Attending this show the first day I arrived to Cape Town, set the tone for my two and a half months in South Africa. That is, experiencing the telling of the life and legacy of Miriam Makeba’s alongside a Cape Town audience, provided the first of many enriching opportunities to experience South African music, dance, history, language, food, art and more. Throughout my time in South Africa I continued to have opportunities to plunge into the culture working side by side with UWC faculty, staff, students, and members of the Cape Town community. Such experiential learning was of monumental value as the opportunity to immerse myself in a new culture and experience the various day to day activities of Cape Town has enhanced my cultural knowledge. The expanding of my cultural awareness is important as a counselor educator and better prepares me for work in today’s global society. This report cannot fully capture the richness of my learning but aims to provide a snapshot of the numerous experiences that facilitated my growth and scholastic development.

With one of the aims of my abroad experience at UWC being to evaluate the continuation of the SisterScholars peer mentor program, I worked with UWC staff Laetitia Permall and Tonia Overmeyer in the Center for Student Support Services (CSSS) as it was through their office that
the peer mentor program was coordinated. My introduction to these staff members was facilitated during the first weeks of my arrival in Cape Town through my advisor, Dr. Angela Coker. In working with the CSSS office, I met with CSSS staff and SisterScholar peer mentor participants to discuss their experience with the program, what worked well and ideas for improving the program. Additionally, I got to share with them my experience as a participant in the program and some of the narratives from interviews with UMSL participants. The information gained from these discussions was used to further strategize about the identification of a coordinator for the 2016/2017 cohort and to determine program size, structure, outcomes and research opportunities. Additionally, to further facilitate my understanding of the UWC student culture and the resources provided through CSSS, I served as an informal intern helping with various programs offered through CSSS. More specifically, I worked closely with the Department of Leadership and Social Responsibility (LSR) an office housed under CSSS. This role allowed me to gain greater insight into the UWC culture, as well as interact with students and staff.

In working with the Department of Leadership and Social Responsibility (LSR), I was able to both learn from and contribute to the programs offered through the office. I worked with the staff weekly, helping with various projects, workshops and publications. For example, I had the opportunity to facilitate various workshops for the Emerging Leaders and Advanced Leaders Programs covering topics such as inclusivity, motivation, embracing diversity and difficult dialogues. Being able to teach workshops in an international context helped me to develop as an educator and counselor educator specifically. Particularly, it cultivated in me the ability to present using examples, illustrations, and activities that were culturally and contextually relevant. This learning was significant as a Ph.D. student in counselor education where providing cultural competent instruction is essential. Further, through LSR programming I had opportunities to visit various museums, such as the Slave Lodge, the Robben Island Mayibuye Archives, and the District Six Museums engaging in facilitated discussions during the various museum visits. It was powerful to be able to reflect on the intersections of my own cultural identities as an African American female while learning alongside the students the history, struggles, resilience, and continued strivings of communities in South Africa. Additionally, being able to participate in Mandela Day activities through the LSR office, gave me an opportunity to give back to the community through serving members of an elderly community living in a residential facility in Cape, Town.

Picture: Teaching Emerging Leaders Program Class
The LSR office and staff became my campus home. The staff welcomed me with open arms and I easily became a member of the team. Some of my fondest memories and learning took place in this office over the sharing of meals, exchange of stories, and collaboration on projects. In working with Tonia, Monique, Arnold, Lorene, Caryn, and the LSR students, I learned a great deal about myself and the history and culture of Cape Town. Also, it is with this office that I first experienced eating Snoek, Nik Naks, Spookies and attending a tea tasting.

Picture: Tea Tasting with LSR Staff

In addition to working closely with the Center for Student Support Services and the Department of Leadership and Social Responsibility (LSR), I also had the opportunity to work with Dr. Venicia McGhie, in the department of Academic Development, within the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences. I met Dr. McGhie during her visit at UMSL as a Fulbright scholar. While at UMSL she participated in the SisterScholars meetings and she would share various insights about how she supported students through her position at UWC. While in Cape Town, Dr. McGhie not only connected me to the UWC community, but also facilitated various sightseeing opportunities and hosted dinners in her home. She was one of the first faces I saw when arriving to Cape Town as she picked me up from the airport. Dr. McGhie was instrumental in helping me navigate both campus and Cape Town in general. She would regularly pick me up and give me rides to campus during the week. Further she introduced me to numerous colleagues within her department, facilitated me attending UWC’s July graduation ceremony, and shared much insight and stories with me.

Additionally, in working with Dr. McGhie, I had the opportunity to guest lecture in one of her courses discussing with students the topic of positive self-esteem, self-concept, and academic self-efficacy. In working with Dr. McGhie, I gained insight into creating academic support in higher education for students in South Africa. I learned a great deal from witnessing first-hand the various ways Dr. McGhie and her department support students through initiatives aimed to address food insecurity, academic success, and community engagement.
Another collaboration that was a key part of my learning during my time abroad was in working with UWC Psychology Faculty Dr. Michelle Andipatin and Dr. Maria Florence. Working with the Psychology faculty allowed me an opportunity to better understand counseling and mental health from a South African context. In working with Dr. Florence, I was able to engage with psychology students as I attended her research team meetings. In my work with Dr. Andipatin, I was able to collaborate with her and graduate student Kyle Jackson to develop and present a gender sensitivity workshop to staff at UWC. This collaboration gave me an opportunity to learn about gender related issues in a South African context and further gain experience developing a presentation that was culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of an international community.

In addition, to on campus experiences, I also had opportunities to engage in learning opportunities alongside other UM programs visiting South Africa. For example, in June, I was able to go with, Dr. Rod Uphoff and his law school students on a safari in Kruger National Park in northeastern South Africa. Additionally, in July, I was able to join Dr. Lois Pierce and her social work students and visit Tygerberg Hospital in Cape Town to learn about Tyger Bear a program that serves to empower children who have been traumatized by abuse. Also, my visit in Cape Town brought to fruition, the hope of meeting my international peer face to face. I was able to spend time with my peer talking, laughing, enjoying meals together and meeting her friends and family.
My time in South Africa was enriching, as I had the opportunity to meet and build relationships with many wonderful people. The ability to witness the beauty of Cape Town, through its mountains, beaches, parks and landscape was breathtaking. Further the opportunity to connect and interact with others through conversations, shared meals and collaborations on various projects provided me with irreplaceable and enriching learning. I have gained a life enhancing experience that has contributed to both my personal and academic growth. I am grateful to all those who made this opportunity possible and who opened their homes, hearts, offices and resources to me. This experience would not have been possible without the support of the UM/UWC partnership and Henry Mitchel Scholarship. Special thanks to Leolyn Jackson, and the UWC International Relations Office, Joel Glassman and the International Studies Office, and my advisor Dr. Angela Coker. My life is forever enriched by the opportunity I had to study abroad in South Africa.