

Interviewee: Thomas Pitzer

Interviewer: Roberto Pereira

Date: April 13, 2022

RP: Okay, so uh welcome, thank you very much for joining me. I have the privilege and pleasure of having Professor Thomas Pitzer here with me. Professor Pitzer, can you please introduce yourself.

TP: Thomas Pitzer I teach general biology in the department of biological sciences, at FIU in Miami Florida.

RP: Awesome Thank you so much. So, uh, tell us a little bit about yourself, where did you grow up?

TP: I grew up in Texas, well, I was born in Texas, and my family was military so we moved all over the southeastern South and southeastern United States and I spent the last 30 years here.

TP: I spent the first 30 years, up to the point of getting my master's degree, and then I spent the second half of my life here in Miami working for FIU in one capacity or another.

RP: So, you mentioned that you've been working at FIU in one capacity or another, for many years, when did you first arrive at FIU?

TP: In '92 right after the hurricane.

RP: Right after the hurricane that was hurricane Andrew I believe, yes?

TP: Andrew.

RP: Very interesting, what do you remember about that time when you first got into the university in 1992?

TP: It was very different you know, not everything wasn't controlled by technology. A lot of things were done by paper. The most of the... a lot of the basic courses are still the same. The classes were smaller, the amount of students, we had, of course, was smaller, the amount of buildings, everything was much, you know different, it was it was much less regimented and much smaller.

RP: And coming in, after hurricane, what are your first experiences or memories?

TP: Well, they didn't even have power. They didn't have power, to do registration, we did registration on paper, they put everybody out in the huge field in front of PC and you

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went by the first letter of your last name and everything was on index cards so they put..., there was no power, so we had to register for Class without power. So that was, that was what FIU you was like when I got here, because there was just, there just been the worst hurricane in recorded history, at that time and half the... everything basically south of FIU is destroyed. So that's what I stepped into. We didn't start school until power came back so it was late into the Semester before school started but yeah, yeah that was that was my introduction to FIU.

RP: Did they do any adjustments to that particular semester? Did they make it longer?

TP: It was a long time ago, I do not remember. I would imagine. Remember, back then, things are much more informal so they've probably just left it up to professor's discretion. I'm sure they probably didn't make some wholesale changes to the decisions and policies because back then it really, that really wasn't done that much. Really was very much open to departmental and Professor discretion making decisions like that.

RP: So you mentioned in 1992 picking up that you began your journey and FIU as a student correct?.

TP:Correct!

RP: When did, when did you get the transition more to become staff or faculty?

TP: '94

TP: '94 yeah.

RP: What was your first position at FIU?

TP: This. The first position was my faculty position, this, the position I have now. I mean before that I was a graduate student right, so I was doing, I was teaching, even then, but I was teaching as a graduate student and then I transferred, became faculty and basically, for my first 10 years here, the majority of my responsibility, lay with the labs.

RP: So um you mentioned the labs right, you mentioned how you've had, you know kind of different roles, so what are some of the various roles you've had at FIU or maybe a different...

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TP: I was hired as an instructor not a professor, so my work has always been sort of on the ground. So I was originally hired to coordinate the laboratory program so at first, I was in charge of all labs, all of the labs, what the curriculum was in the labs, what they taught, who taught it, all of that stuff. We were much smaller then, that could be done by one person, then. I also had a lot of curriculum to renovate so certain labs general biology, human biology. It was very, very needing of direction, so I took those labs over and changed them completely. Those labs went from night and day and that took me a good 10 years just to get that actualized. I started after I had set in motion some programs, which were very, very effective in lab like cooperative learning and active learning. After I established those programs and then things started to move forward in a very positive manner and everybody's happy with the way things are going on, the program got larger and larger and larger and larger. So it got to the point where there was no way I could do it all, so we started breaking it off into chunks head T.A.s (Teaching Assistants) would do the sort of daily work. And sort of weekly sort of training kind of things, so our big labs got head TAs so that I didn't have to run 800 meetings a week. And then also, i'm not sure exactly when this happened, but It was early on that I started teaching, I started co teaching with John Scott Quackenbush and Kelsey Downen, and that would be either for third, believe it or not, we used to teach thirds of courses, yes. That would either be for a third or a half of a General Bio, General Biology. Both (General Biology) one and two, I used to teach both back in the day and I also taught you human bio as well. So I started organically sort of like moving into lecturing classes when they needed it, it was not usually more than once a year. Am I going too fast?

RP: No you're going perfect. Good stuff. Lots of good information.

TP: I mean, i'm not, i'm leaving out stuff that happened along the way, we are sort of like on the, you know, the main quest. So and then, I started picking up more teaching as the labs became more self sufficient and I had more people to help me run the labs. I ventured out more, I love teaching more and more, so I started doing a lot more lecturing. So now I lecture every semester, it's not just once a year. Along the way I started a program called PLTL, so I guess you probably want to ask me about that i'm sure.

RP: Yes, absolutely so let's get into PLTL just to define some of these terms for anyone who may be experiencing this interview. What is PLTL?

TP: Peer lead team learning. It's a peer driven group learning paradigm, where students meet with a small group of fellow students from class. And a peer someone who is like them, it's usually an undergraduate like them who's had the class before, and then it's taking a certain kind of training. And they meet every week with the peer and they go over a

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worksheet that has problems on it that reflects the material in class that week. They meet once a week outside of class in small groups to discuss material that's being talked about in class that very same week. It's, it's, of course, to reinforce learning and to be able to extend that learning and transfer it to other situations and.. yeah so it's it's my pride and joy I started it I started in... wow... '95. I honestly forgot when I started it, I think it had to be around '95 and so started off with just in my section of my lecture and it was very popular. And it has grown now to encompass almost every undergraduate course in our department, with a few exceptions. So that it has, it is now in every section of every course we teach, almost everyone. It recruits a huge amount of leaders, these peers I was talking about, and so every semester we have hundreds of these peers now. So it's also a very strong mentoring organization, so not only are students benefited by having these weekly sessions, but the leaders that's what we call the peers, the leaders are also learning cultural lessons about academia, about about organizing, about teaching, and teaching reinforces material better than being a student anyway. So there's many, many advantages to becoming a leader within our program. You can grow...

[Editor's note: Technical difficulties occurred at this time causing a 4 minute and 27 second delay.]

RP: Sorry for the brief technical difficulties, we're back with Professor Pitzer, and we want to ask Professor Pitzer. What brought them to PLTL, to this peer led team learning program?

TP: So after I'd finished with the labs and doing cooperative learning, which was a big deal for me and I published in that, got that taken care of. And was looking now forward to doing something similar in lecture. So I had, I had, made some real in-roads in lab and I wanted to do, I wanted to see if there was something out there that could improve grades in lecture. And at that time we really basically you know pedagogy and talks about active learning that was really under the..., under, that was quiet that was very.... It wasn't it wasn't discussed like it is now, wasn't everywhere all up in your face, so I was really the only one in the department chasing this kind of thing but... So there happened to be a seminar at the University of Miami given about this program called PLTL. So I went over there it was a day long workshop and I said this is this looks pretty good, this is something I can do myself and it won't require me to spend any money, I can use the department's overhead and..., for things like copies, you know, you have to you have to make copies of the workshop and most programs pay their leaders, but we don't pay them anything they just get the benefit of working for us and getting a good letter of recommendation when they're done. So, so I adopted it, based on that workshop and it worked out really well, I mean I grew within the organization after that too not only did I

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do PLTL here at FIU but myself and the people..., very highly qualified graduates and undergraduates which helped me run the program, also became embedded in the national organization, the international organization of PLTL. So that was, that became quite a driving force for myself in my career and the people I mentored as well.

RP: Continuing on that idea, you mentioned that PLTL is an international organization. What countries are represented in PLTL?

TP: A lot, like there's no way i'm going to be able to detail that for you but, England, most of Europe, most of European countries um... wow, Greece. In addition to, in addition to like England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Spain, India, Greece. I'm sure many other countries there's other people who would know, be able to answer that question a lot better than myself.

RP: Is there a place if somebody is interested in PLTL where they can find this information?

TP: Just Google PLTL. It's everywhere, the first few things that pop up are going to be either, my university or the national organization. Either one of which is going to take you to wherever it is you want to go. So I would Google PLTL or the International Organization is called PLTLIS so it's just PLTL with the I-S on the end for international society. So Google that and you can find out everything you could possibly ever want to know about both the paradigm itself and the organization as well.

RP: Awesome, it's really good that we're talking about an international organization, right, when our university's name is Florida International University. Alright, so what we want to get through with these interviews is try to get at that idea of "what does international mean to FIU?". So for you Professor Pitzer, what does the "I" in Florida International University mean to you, and why?

TP: Well, the International, the obvious first answer is that we have a lot of international students, we have people from all over the world coming to the university, coming to Florida International University but... And, as I've grown in the university I realized that the international component is not just about what comes to us, but what we get back to them. So it's an international sculpt education, as well as just receiving people from all over the country, from all over the world, I should say, we also accommodate all these people from all over the world, and we have programs for people from different parts of the world. And we have programs available for people that come from different parts of the world, so we really are both an international accepting kind of organization, as well as training, an international group of students and presenting yourself on the international

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field. I mean we are an international university. We do, a lot of the things that we do, our outreach those across the world, not just, it's not just the United States. So it's like I said it's both who comes to us and our focus outward leaves us an international focus.

RP: So, giving me some examples, in your position, how have you dealt with these international students, what are some of your experiences that you've had?

TP: Well, I love having international students because it brings up wonderful experience, it increases the level of experience for everyone else around having a multicultural multiethnic, multiracial, multibackground group of students increases the liberal education for everyone, that's, everyone gets a boost by being exposed to cultures, and ideas, and people that are different from theirs. So I think that it gives people an opportunity that they wouldn't get at other universities to meet, and to work with, and to learn about, and to cooperate with people that are very different from themselves.

RP: So it seems like you have a very positive viewpoint of this international aspect of Florida International University. But there (are) people who feel otherwise, do you feel that this campus, FIU is an international campus?

TP: Well, Okay. It depends, it depends on what criteria you want to play. I think we are international in the sense that we do, we do have an open policy and accepting and we have these programs. But if you were to look at our student body, it is, it is a minority institution, there is no doubt about that, it's hugely minority Hispanic. And those Hispanics come from a lot of different Hispanic countries, not just Cuba, so we have representation from all over Central and South America. So, the vast majority of our international news does come from a lot of Latin and Hispanic Central and South American countries. And maybe not as much from like Eastern Bloc European countries, but we have that, we have that as well, we have that as well. So yes, I think it's an international campus, even though a lot of our student body may speak the same language, second language. Not all, of course not all, there's Portuguese up in there, too, but um... So that sort of gives a semblance of it not being international, but in fact it is. Just because Spanish is a language spoken by many of the students that come here, doesn't mean they all come from the same cultural *milieu* they come from very different places, so you know it's international yes.

RP: We've been speaking a lot about students, but how about your fellow co-workers or the TAs, graduate students you work with as well?

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TP: Graduate students tend to be the most undiverse group. The rest are fairly diverse, the faculty that are here. All it really is a pot that you stir, and got this group, it's very international and diverse, wonderful faculty. A lot of our graduate students come from typical channels in America, so we get a lot of what is typical and other in other graduate programs, now, mind you our graduate program, if you were to look over, we definitely a more diverse than your typical. But that's because we pull a lot also around from the surrounding areas and certain graduate certain professors will bring in international graduate students but, for the most part we still get a great deal of your typical, sort of you know, white males and females coming for Grad school, but it doesn't stay that way. After a ..., you know, the distribution of different types of people and heritage and whatnot is in our graduate Program.

RP: Doing my research, I discovered that you provide resources for those international graduate students and one of them is the graduate students survival guide, can you tell me a little bit about that?

TP: Probably one of the most utilized publications I ever wrote and I just threw it together. It was just, look when I first started here there wasn't much information for a new Grad student when they're coming in. Back when I came in, we all had to buy, for example, we had to buy stickers for our car and those stickers cost like \$750. We were graduate students! Anyway, the point is that there was a whole bunch of rules and regulations that moving to Florida, or moving to Dade County, or moving to the United States that a lot of people didn't know. Okay, and so I just made, I made this simple, I started out just a simple, like almost like a pamphlet with here's how you use the DMV, here's how you add classes, just all the stuff that you might need to just be able to maneuver around the area. Uh, housing, getting your ID, getting voter registration, how long will the deadlines for things, things like this. And I really didn't think that much of it and boy it exploded, and it is the one, it's a living document it lives on to this day, it continues to be edited every Semester and yeah. So yes, the survival guide, which you know is more popular than anything else I ever wrote, ever.

RP: That's awesome. So we talked about a lot of things, right but like what do you believe have been some of the most impactful events or moments during your time at FIU?

TP: The... I'm not quite sure what you mean, but the impactful things that I think i've contributed is cooperative learning in labs and PLTL in lecture. I think those are my lasting claims to fame. I think that when i'm gone, long gone I think those are two programs that will still be here and will live on. I think i'm very super proud of both of those things, I think that they improve student learning. I don't think, *I know*, I know, I have the data to back it up.

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Those two programs improve student learning and not only that, but they made my, especially PLTL made my own career, that much more... I love it, I love my career because of the fact that I instituted PLTL. So I'm not just a teacher, I'm not just a lab supervisor, but I run this program that is intimately involved with students on a day to day, hourly, hourly basis and I love that, that's what I love. So that, that's what, that's... Oh, I guess, I would have to throw in there, my... I also was something I didn't talk about, I'm also responsible for training graduate students to teach or just to be graduate students. So every graduate student who comes in goes through a workshop with me where they are taught the basics of how to teach because for a lot of, a lot of professors, they will they will have gone their whole lives and never learned a single thing about how to teach, so this is for some people, the one shot they'll ever get, to get to learn some pedagogy, so I do that too. And i'm very proud of that, I'm very proud of the mentoring and training, I give to new instructors within our department.

RP: That's amazing, that's awesome. Going, just going back to a previous point you made, you said that you have the data to prove that PLTL, cooperative learning, these are making real substantive impact. Can you just you know, give me a little bit more detail on that?

TP: Sure, sure, for PLTL there's almost every standard you could ever imagine. Well, overall grades, the biggest, the biggest one is that consistently over however many years now. Every semester, every course, every section students who do PLTL consistently make a letter grade higher than those who do not. It's about the most factual thing you can possibly imagine. It's in the data of every course ever taught with (PLTL). It also has been shown to improve, to maintain... I can't see the word now... Attrition! to cut, it cuts back on attrition so we lose... the people who do take PLTL are less likely to drop out before graduation. So, in that, in that sense, I think i've improved graduation rates. It has improved performance on standardized exams. Students who take PLTL do better on MCAT, FCAT, different standardized exams, than those who do not. There have been other, there have been other studies, but i'm not going to be able to review every single thing we've ever looked at. But... There's also, there's also a feeling of, we've shown that there's a feeling of... what's the word... camaraderie and like, a willingness to stay within the program because of the mentorship that leaders get so we've also done work that shows that the leader boost, it's called the leader boost. Being a leader gets you a certain step up, a boost up that other people don't have. And then, with cooperative learning the seminal paper, there was me showing that cooperative learning, which cooperative learning is basically just students working in groups rather than individuals. So cooperative learning showed that an improvement in student performance for those working in groups of four rather than working groups of two or one. So that was the demonstration that cooperative learning was having an effect.



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RP: That's, that's that's incredible. With these, with these boosts, and all these different gains its students are seeing. Going on the same lines, we talked about what are some things that are most impactful, but what's like maybe your favorite memory at FIU? First thing that comes to your mind?

TP: Ah my favorite memory? Like a one time thing?

RP: This could be a one time thing, continuous thing... give me both answers?

TP: That's hard... oh well, I guess, I well, one of my most proud moments was winning the university-wide teaching award. So I've also numerous times won the school's teaching award, but I won... about 10-15 years ago, I won the university's teaching award and that was, I was super proud of that. So though that may, that may represent, but every time I have... Every time there is a PLTL orientation and I see all the students, that I get to meet them and hang out with them, and be around them, I'm just about the happiest I am the whole semester. So I don't know if that answers your question, but those are two happy things I can think of when it comes to my job.

RP: Yeah, those are great responses that's awesome. So transitioning a little bit, um so you've been here since... you've been at FIU in some form or fashion, since 1992. We touched on this a little bit at the beginning, right, but what (are) some major changes or some broad strokes, you can tell me about FIU and the surrounding community in that time period?

TP: Size. It grew, you know, it's grown enormously. The campus it used to be called the "golf course" campus because it, it looked like a golf course. It doesn't look like a golf course anymore, it looks like a city. So the student body, I believe... I don't even know what number we're at now but it's huge, we have a huge student body it was much smaller when it came in. So we'd have smaller classrooms, and so the one of the challenges of course now it's been like 'where do we put all the students?', which we've met pretty well. The demographics have changed a little bit, but not much. Especially South campus, it was always very, very predominantly Hispanic, but it is more, it is even more Hispanic now than it was when I started but it was always by far predominantly Hispanic... And commuter, and it is still commuter, even though we have a much bigger proportion of on-campus life now than we did when I started, it's still very much a Community college, still very much Community college.

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RP: You bring up that word commuter. So, based on your experience, maybe at other institutions, how do you feel about, you know, teaching a set of students that are considered commuter students?

TP: It's harder, because they have a lot more responsibility, then at, or what you would call a traditional residential American academic institution. So a lot of these kids come with so much more baggage than your traditional students. Well they have to drive here every day, sometimes that seems like nothing but, sometimes that's an hour or more commute each direction for some people. Even if you don't live that far away, traffic now is so bad here. So that's part of your life. Many, many of our students work full time and they don't just support themselves, they're supporting their entire families, most of our students are at home, they don't live on campus, or alone. They live with their families, which is both cultural and an effect of the economy. The students are less prepared, of course, you know, that's the truth. Students are not, do not come with the study skills. And we thought 30 years ago we thought their study skills were horrible but they're even worse now. So what we get for cognitive abilities, it has decreased. But, but... But they are still very engaged, the students, for the most part, I think our student body is pretty engaged and, you know there's always exceptions, but, for the most part that hasn't changed very much. We've always had a pretty active and engaged student body, a good group of students, we have here at this university, for the most part. And I would take these kids over any university anywhere. So yes, it's not your traditional academic institution at all. And like I said, these kids have a lot of, a lot of baggage that others don't have, they, a lot of them are... come from economically depressed family situations, and they're commuter, and they are not necessarily... they do not fit the mold of the traditional college student. And so, you know, you have to take that into consideration, you think about student learning, and what's going on in your classroom, and there's so much other there's so much else.

RP: Continuing on the same lines, about changes right, you mentioned that when you first got to FIU, everything was very much pen and paper. How has technology changed in your teaching or just around FIU?

TP: Well, a lot! So, there was no Internet when I started teaching. There was no email when I started teaching. We got mail in boxes in the office that's how we communicated with each other. Some technology isn't... the technology has improved the situation, of course, I mean being able to use a lot of the things that technology affords us in the classroom is a step up from just standing there. Like that the biggest technology, I had at the start, was a overhead machine. So that was that was the technology, I had as a teacher. Now, you know, I've got the desktop located to the projector with a computer and I can show

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videos, and I can run simulations, and we can use these technologies in the lab as well, we can run simulations, and see things that we could never be able to see without the technology of like being able to visualize things on the projector, on the screen, or on the computer monitor. So, and then, and then just, of course, the maintenance of the curriculum is taken care of by all this technology. So, of course it's had a huge, a huge impact. Mostly for the best, but now you have, you know, situations where the technology can be used against us for cheating or... or what have you, but students always found ways to cheat so that's not that's not a big deal for me. But we do see, you know, we do, we are seeing more and more we're like technology now becomes like a distraction, so a lot of students paying attention to things technology wise rather than study, like all the social media and whatnot. So there's good and bad, but for the most part, I think, technology has improved our ability to help students learn.

RP: Awesome! Well, we talked about a lot of things. Just to wrap up everything nicely, based on your experiences with FIU, what are your hopes and dreams for the future of FIU?

TP: Wow... Well, well, well... i'm very, i'm very passionate about diversity and about inclusion and I want to see us be a safe space. I would like to see FIU be just one huge safe space for people of different races, and sexualities, and genders, and every possible thing like that you can imagine. So I want, I, I'm very much passionate about that. I think that we are already a great institution with regard to that one compared to others, but, you know, more and more of that cannot possibly hurt. I hope that FIU maintains its dedication to student learning and to supporting students and it doesn't become like this entity that cares more about money than anything else, and student needs, and interest fall away, or are less supported. So my hope for you is that it continues... that it, that it remains a humane organization, as well as an academic one and... And thinks about the students, and thinks about their needs, and thinks about the needs of their staff, and their faculty, and they care about people, they care! That they care about what goes on, and how they're how their students are, and how their faculty are and they are that now. They've been given awards for the, for how good it is to work at FIU. So there's a certain atmosphere here that's already great. I would like to see that continuing to be maintained. I think that's our forte and I think that that is, I think that's, that's what we should bank on. Yeah, yeah, that's pretty much where i'm at as for what I hope for FIU. I hope it doesn't lose its vision, of concern, and support, and care for people. That's what I think.

RP: Well, thank you very much, Professor Pitzer, I think that will conclude our interview. Any final parting thoughts?

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TP: No, my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it. Thank you so much.

RP: This was an enjoyable interview. Thank you so much for participating and see you around!

[End of interview]

Transcribed by: Roberto Pereira and Ashley Floyd Kuntz, PhD