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Peer Research Mentors at Gettysburg College: Transforming Student Library Jobs into High-Impact Learning Experiences

Clinton K. Baugess
Gettysburg College

Mallory R. Jallas
Gettysburg College

Meggan D. Smith
Gettysburg College

Janelle Wertzberger
Gettysburg College

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Peer Research Mentors at Gettysburg College: Transforming Student Library Jobs into High-Impact Learning Experiences

Abstract

Research and Instruction librarians at Gettysburg College developed a Peer Research Mentor (PRM) program for undergraduate students. The program is designed to empower a group of student employees to work in partnership with experienced librarians in order to increase a PRM's own research skills and support other student researchers more effectively. The program focuses on student training, reference service, and outreach to other students. The authors share the development of the program; describe their approach to training, supervision, and assessment; and offer insight about how to operate and sustain a similar program with limited resources.

Keywords

peer-assisted learning, research mentorship, student employment, college library, gettysburg college

Disciplines

Educational Leadership | Higher Education | Information Literacy | Library and Information Science

PEER-ASSISTED LEARNING IN
ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Erin Rinto, John Watts, and Rosan Mitola, Editors

Foreword by Patricia Iannuzzi



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*We dedicate this book to
Flora and Stuart Mason,
whose vision and generosity made this program possible,
and the past, present, and future Mason Undergraduate Peer Research Coaches.*

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10

Peer Research Mentors at Gettysburg College

Clinton Baugess, Mallory Jallas, Meggan Smith,
and Janelle Wertzberger

Research and instruction librarians at Gettysburg College developed a Peer Research Mentor (PRM) Program for undergraduate students. The program is designed to empower a group of student employees to work in partnership with experienced librarians in order to increase a PRM's own research skills and support other student researchers more effectively. The program focuses on student training, reference service, and outreach to other students. The authors share the development of the program; describe their approach to training, supervision, and assessment; and offer insight about how to operate and sustain a similar program with limited resources.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Student employees are central to the life and operation of academic libraries. Without student labor, many libraries would be hard-pressed to quickly shelve returned materials, staff late-night library hours, keep up with incoming and outgoing interlibrary loan requests, and complete the wide variety of small tasks that are essential to library operations. Gettysburg College's Musselman Library is no different. As a four-year, residential, liberal arts college in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, we have a full-time enrollment of 2,632 undergraduates (Office of Institutional Analysis, Gettysburg College, 2015). The library hires more student employees than any other campus office—on average, 60 student employees during the academic year.

While student employees work in all library departments, our office (Research and Instruction) has historically employed only a single student who typically worked less than six hours a week entering data or updating pages on the library website. The published literature is rich with examples of how other reference departments have hired students to work as reference assistants, training them to answer basic reference questions and referring to a professional librarian only when needed (Faix, 2014; Faix et al., 2010; Heinlen, 1976; Holliday & Nordgren, 2005; Stanfield & Palmer, 2010). For these institutions, training students to answer most reference questions has enabled librarians to spend their available work hours answering more advanced and complicated user questions through

the research consultation. This model also enables librarians to provide more information literacy instruction or be more active liaisons with academic departments. However, we were not interested in shifting librarians away from the desk. Instead, we wanted to use peer-assisted learning to transform both our student employees' work and the service provided at our Research Help Desk. Our primary goal in creating the PRM Program was to empower a group of student employees to work in partnership with experienced librarians in order to increase their own research skills and to support other student researchers more effectively.

In our residential liberal arts college context, librarians from all library departments value time spent working directly with students, faculty, staff, and campus visitors. Our reference work informs a range of other library activities, including website design, cataloging, collection development, and instruction. Indeed, it is a point of pride that all Gettysburg librarians (with the exception of the dean and college archivist) work at least two hours a week at the Research Help Desk. We wanted to invite student employees into this service point and engage them with our existing service philosophy.

At the institutional level, Gettysburg College's four "strategic directions"—engagement, distinction, access, and connection—also inform the philosophy of our PRM Program. At the library, we paid particular attention to the first direction, engagement, which for Gettysburg means that we will "offer the most compelling educational experience possible, emphasizing active engagement through a variety of learning experiences inside and outside the classroom that build leadership potential in our graduates" (Gettysburg College, 2015, p. 3). Gettysburg's president has also challenged the campus to "build a culture that values academic rigor that supports students as they cultivate their intellectual and civic passions" (Riggs, 2013, pp. 4–5). In response to these priorities, library staff began to reexamine how the library supports this strategic direction through our collections, events, internships, and programs. Around the same time, the high-impact educational practices identified by George Kuh (2008) became a particular focus for our Provost. Of the eight practices that Kuh identifies as being beneficial to increasing rates of student retention and student engagement, we gave particular attention to service learning/community-based learning. This practice emphasizes opportunities that enable students to apply their classroom learning to real-world settings. We felt we could contribute to institutional goals by changing the nature of how we work with students in the library. Specifically, through our PRM Program, we wanted to structure certain student employee positions less like student jobs and more like high-impact educational experiences.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROGRAM

As a team of research and instruction librarians, we have followed the Project Information Literacy (PIL) reports since their inception in 2009 and have used them to inform our teaching practice, outreach efforts, and learning materials. PIL studies show that students benefit from librarian help but are more likely to seek assistance from peers than librarians (Head & Eisenberg, 2010), so we considered how librarians could take advantage of student peer groups. We wanted to help our first-year students with difficult transition to college and connect with the significant number of upper-level students who were not seeking help from librarians. As reference providers and information literacy instructors, we knew where students struggled in the research process and where they were and were not getting help. We were familiar with the practice of placing students at

reference desks, but we wanted to go further in order to attract reluctant student researchers to our services.

After reading about a peer-assisted learning program at California Polytechnic State University in which student instructors for information literacy sessions received higher evaluation scores than librarian instructors (Bodemer, 2014), our excitement about working with student colleagues at the Research Help Desk grew. We strategized about how to capitalize on the peer-to-peer connection and knew that visibility of our student employees would be key. We wanted students in the library to see a PRM at the Research Help Desk who seemed similar to them, who knew what their assignments were like, and who could explain how to successfully conduct research in appropriate, student-friendly language.

Because peer-assisted learning is already an established part of our campus culture, we felt that students and faculty would respond positively to this model applied in the library setting. Many Gettysburg students already work as diversity peer educators, leadership mentors, orientation leaders, and course-embedded peer learning associates. We also felt that if we carefully selected PRMs from a range of disciplines and co-curricular activities, the program could capitalize on existing social relationships among students and connect the library with student researchers who may not otherwise seek help from a librarian at the desk. We intentionally chose the title “Peer Research Mentor” to associate our student employees with other peer educators in our existing campus culture.

We knew that other libraries were supporting peer-assisted learning by training students well and having them provide reference service, and we wanted these two activities to form the core of our program. However, we also knew that reference and instruction could take many other forms (such as creating online research guides, designing online tutorials, or delivering workshops), so we added a third central element to our program: an outreach project. These three pillars (training, reference, and outreach) helped us describe the PRM experience to potential applicants and drove the design of the program.

Next, we identified five major learning goals for PRMs. We wanted our PRMs to be able to:

- demonstrate a working knowledge of information resources and services available at a small, academic library;
- apply advanced search strategies and evaluative criteria in order to assist and mentor library users during the research process;
- conduct a reference interview in a variety of modes (in-person, telephone, and virtually);
- design and implement outreach programs for peers, including one-on-one research appointments, drop-in workshops, and instructional videos;
- contribute to a dynamic, supportive, PRM community. (Baugess and Mallory, 2015)

Based upon our planned goals, we drafted a job description that would be attractive to potential student applicants. The job advertisement describes a PRM as “a student who works alongside librarians to support students engaged in research, while also improving one’s own research skills” (Musselman Library, 2014). In order to ensure a broad representation across class levels, we specified that the position would be open to four rising sophomores and two rising juniors in any major. We explicitly identified three important qualifications for potential applicants:

- “[a] desire to learn, improve, and master research skills in more than one academic subject area;
- [an] interest or background in education, mentoring, and/or tutoring; and
- strong communication and organization skills.” (Musselman Library, 2014)

At this point in our planning process, we refined our PRM Program goals and placed them into language easily understood by students. The job advertisement articulates that PRMs will engage in the three main pillars of our program:

1. **Training.** The mentors will participate in a series of concentrated training sessions in August during the week before classes begin, as well as ongoing training throughout the year.
2. **Reference service.** Mentors will work at the library's main Research Help Desk two to four hours per week, partnered with another peer mentor and/or professional librarian.
3. **Outreach.** Mentors will design and implement an outreach program each semester. Each mentor will consult with a supervising librarian in order to customize a project that reflects the mentor's interests and skills (Musselman Library, 2014).

We used social media, campus e-mail, the student newspaper, and the library web page to advertise to students. We also asked faculty to recommend applicants. During hiring for the fall 2015 cohort, we made a special effort to attract a more diverse pool of applicants by appealing to campus offices like the Intercultural Resource Center and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Asexual (LGBTQA) Advocacy and Education office, as well as to various student organizations.

Based on our previous success with streamlined and accessible application requirements for library intern positions, we kept the PRM application process simple. To apply, we asked only for a letter describing their interest in the position, their education and career goals, any relevant coursework they have completed, and the names and contact information for two to three references. When reviewing applications and interviewing students, we looked for students who were eager and excited about the possibility to work with their peers in this way, who had coursework or previous jobs in which they have had to teach or mentor others, and who came from a variety of class levels, disciplines, and campus activities. After the initial round of hiring, we began including current PRMs in the interviews, too. We also routinely consider the unique qualities of the existing PRM pool and try to add fresh elements to round out the group's composition. Figure 10.1 describes PRM class levels and majors by semester.

During any given semester, the PRM cohort includes six to eight students. While the composition of the group fluctuates as students study off campus or graduate, our budget restricts us to eight students per semester. Since we began the program with no new source of funding, our library dean and department heads evaluated and consolidated existing student positions in order to reallocate funds to support this new strategic initiative. We should note that PRMs are paid a higher wage than other library student employees due to the high level of training and knowledge required. The starting wage for library student employees is \$7.25/hour; PRMs earn \$8.50/hour. The reallocation project made it possible for us to begin the program, but we are investigating potential donors to supplement the budget and sustain the program into the future. For now, we are able to support six to eight PRMs per semester for an average of six to eight hours per week.

TRAINING AND PREPARATION OF PRMS

We know that conducting research is challenging for students, so we predicted that our PRMs would feel even more anxious about the prospect of assisting their peers in doing research. In our initial cohort, only one of our students had worked in a library before, and

| | <i>Academic Years Represented</i> | <i>Majors Represented</i> |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| Semester 1 (Fall 2014) | Sophomores (4) Juniors (2) | English French/Globalization Studies Psychology (2) Sociology Studio Art/Environmental Studies |
| Semester 2 (Spring 2015) | First-years (2) Sophomores (4) Juniors (2) | English (2) French/Globalization Studies Health Sciences Psychology (2) Sociology Studio Art/Environmental Studies |
| Semester 3 (Fall 2015) | Sophomores (4) Juniors (2) Senior (1) | English Health Sciences History/International Affairs Music Education Psychology (2) Sociology |
| Semester 4 (Spring 2016) | Sophomores (5) Juniors (3) | Biology English English/Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies French/Globalization Studies Health Sciences Music Education Psychology (2) |

Figure 10.1 Composition of PRMs by academic year and major, fall 2014–spring 2016.

Note. The total size of the PRM cohort averages around eight students, depending on the number of graduating students and students studying abroad. Some PRMs have double majors.

a few had experience with tutoring or teaching. None had experience with a help desk or even felt confident about the full research process.

Knowing this, we carefully developed a training design that would help PRMs feel prepared and supported from the outset of their work—this evolved into an intensive initial training we dubbed “boot camp.” The boot camp curriculum provides information about our library building, how to conduct a reference interview, and best practices when working with peers. Training also includes opportunities to meet a range of library staff members such as the Library Dean, the Systems Librarian, the Director of Special Collections and Archives, and the Extended Operations Specialist who works until 11:00 p.m. These are colleagues who interact with the PRMs and to whom PRMs might refer other students. The curriculum is structured around common difficulties students face throughout the research process (Head, 2013). These challenges include starting research, defining a topic, finding articles in library databases, and evaluating sources (see Figure 10.2). By the end of the boot camp, we hope PRMs will be able to assist patrons at any point in the research process.

In order to make the training as effective as possible, we consolidate information in “chunks,” avoid lecture in favor of active learning exercises, gamify pieces of content, and integrate formative assessments throughout the training. For example, we introduce

| <i>Sequence</i> | <i>Content</i> | <i>Description</i> |
|-----------------|---|---|
| Day one | Library tour | PRM-guided tour of the library |
| Day one | Introduction to research | Training overview, introduction to the research process model, concept mapping, finding background information with reference sources |
| Day one | Research help desk basics | Conducting the reference interview, recording reference questions, printing, technology troubleshooting |
| Day one | Discovery and access: books | Local catalog vs. WorldCat, Library of Congress classification, course reserves, interlibrary loan |
| Day one | Practice—library olympics | Games to practice skills: book relay race, “Where in the Library is it?” location-based trivia, “The hot seat” to practice reference questions related to book searches |
| Day two | Discovery and access: finding articles | Understanding database structure, identifying the best research for a question, basic and advanced search techniques |
| Day two | Discovery and access: journal locator and evaluation | Checking library holdings for serials, retrieving full-text articles, interlibrary loan, evaluating information sources (peer review, scholarly vs. popular) |
| Day two | Practice: library olympics and closing ceremonies | Games to practice skills: “Find that citation” and “Can you help me?” to practice reference interview skills |
| Day two | Final reflections | Self-reflection on own skills and possible outreach projects to discuss with supervisor |

Figure 10.2 A model training curriculum for PRM boot camp.

the reference interview through a two-part role-playing activity. First, librarians model a “bad” reference interview with a PRM playing the patron role, followed by a debriefing that surfaces best practices for public service providers. Then, PRMs take turns answering questions designed to help them practice reference interview skills.

We often use games to review content, which encourages PRMs to move throughout the building and build comradery through friendly competition. This is especially effective at the end of a long training period. The book relay race, for example, requires PRMs to locate a book in our library catalog, retrieve it from the stacks, and find a clue that takes the next PRM into another area of the library. These types of games also serve as formative assessments and influence the ongoing training we deliver throughout the year.

In the fall semester, newly hired PRMs participate in a two-day version of the boot camp, which takes place the week before classes begin. The entire staff of the Research and Instruction Department is present throughout boot camp, but pairs of librarians develop and teach sections of content. Each pair keeps the program learning goals in mind when designing lessons. Now that we have delivered the boot camp several times, we rotate responsibility for different parts of the training content. As a result, our team of five research and instruction librarians shares ownership over the curriculum and update it together as needed.

The research boot camp is only one element of our training program. PRMs also receive continuous training throughout the semester through a series of biweekly meetings. These meetings help develop a sense of comradery, provide an opportunity to build upon content covered during boot camp, and introduce new concepts and skills. They also enable librarians to respond to issues and timely topics from the Research Help Desk and discuss

| <i>Librarian Led</i> | <i>PRM Led</i> |
|---|---|
| Historical resources for research on the American Civil War | Funky technology in the library: microfilm readers and more |
| Interlibrary loan and off-site storage | Resources for research in music |
| Designing outreach projects | Searching for art images |
| Reading and downloading library eBooks | Academic integrity and the honor code |
| Using special collections and archives | Citing primary sources in Turabian |

Figure 10.3 A sample of leaders and content for biweekly PRM meetings.

PRM-designed outreach projects. Initially, the meetings were librarian-led, but we now have veteran PRMs design and facilitate the meetings. In so doing, they further develop their teaching and mentoring skills. Meeting topics have included disciplinary resources, copyright issues for students using images or video, reading and downloading eBooks, open access publishing, and more (see Figure 10.3).

Other elements of our training approach are the “question of the week” and “resource of the week,” which alternate weekly. These activities give PRMs a chance to puzzle out tricky reference questions without the stress of a patron waiting for an answer and to explore databases they have not yet used. Practice questions include finding statistical data, locating sources from an incomplete citation, using a reference work to identify a poem based upon its first line, and more. We also use the weekly questions to introduce PRMs to a range of specialized disciplinary indexes, digital historical primary source collections, and other less-frequently used tools. In fall 2015, we transferred these questions to Moodle, our campus learning management system (previously, we shared them via e-mail). We use the “advanced forum” feature to post the questions, so that all PRMs can respond and review other responses. In this way, PRMs see the wide range of possible strategies a person may take to arrive at the same answer or how a person’s individual research experience can result in different perspectives on the same resource.

The final element of our approach to ongoing training is the “librarian buddy” system. PRMs co-staff the Research Help Desk with an experienced librarian, who may or may not be a member of the Research and Instruction Department. The PRM sits in the chair at our primary service point, and the librarian is close enough to see and hear any interactions and assist the PRM in a supportive, collaborative way. When users are not at the desk, PRMs and librarians debrief patron interactions and research questions. PRMs are encouraged to work on the weekly questions during their desk shifts so that they can discuss topics and resources with their librarian buddy. Librarians who have shifts scheduled with PRMs develop strong working relationships with them. Since any librarian working at the Research Help Desk may have a shift with a PRM, the Research and Instruction Department provides a best practices tip sheet for the librarians outside of the department.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAM

Our PRMs work an average of six to eight hours a week. A typical week includes two shifts at the Research Help Desk (four hours total), planning or carrying out outreach projects (about two hours), and a weekly check-in meeting with their direct librarian supervisor (30 minutes). Every other week, students attend an hour-long biweekly meeting with all PRMs and Research and Instruction Librarians.

While two Research and Instruction Librarians oversee the PRM Program, direct supervision of the PRMs is distributed across the five librarians in the Research and Instruction Department in order to balance the workload and sustain the program. This also enables PRMs to develop a close, mentoring relationship with their individual supervisor. One-on-one meetings are devoted to advising on outreach projects (which may be completed individually or in groups), debriefing reference questions, discussing areas in which PRMs would like more training, and other topics of concern to PRMs. The program thrives with support from a range of other library staff members. Staff from outside the Research and Instruction Department have been especially important to the success of the PRM outreach projects, as they have connected PRMs to key departmental faculty, assisted with technology, and provided insight about resources and issues relevant to their librarian liaison areas. Our established culture prioritizes supporting our student library interns, so working with PRMs was a natural evolution for many of our staff.

When we began the PRM Program, the least developed component was outreach, since we were unsure of the types of projects PRMs would decide to implement. We waited eagerly for the first cohort of PRMs to design, deliver, and assess their outreach projects. After three semesters, we can boast an impressive range of projects that have extended the reach of the library to new student populations on campus. Our PRMs have designed drop-in workshops on bibliographic management tools like RefWorks and Zotero. They have created a series of research workshops for first-semester international students. PRMs interested in our formal instruction program have updated and created new online research guides, designed and developed online instructional videos, and provided research consultations to students in selected courses. In many cases, PRMs have had great success working with faculty in courses they have already taken; typically, these PRMs are available during “office hours” to provide research consultations on assignments. Some PRMs have even taught brief research help lessons as part of a class or co-taught an information literacy session with a librarian. PRMs who decide to provide research consultations or instruction receive additional training from their librarian supervisor.

EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

From the very beginning, we planned a range of approaches to help us understand and assess the impact of our PRMs. First, we assess PRM activity at our Research Help Desk by tracking questions and answers in our Springshare LibAnswers system. We record the usual details about reference transactions (who answered it, question, answer, time, mode, and READ scale). In addition, we also track what we call a “PRM connection.” A PRM connection is a patron who approaches a PRM for research assistance (at the Research Help Desk or elsewhere) because they know or at least recognize the PRM. If the PRM knows the patron from a class, residence hall, student club, or some other context, we assume a PRM connection and instruct PRMs to check this custom box in LibAnswers. PRMs do not always have a PRM connection with patrons, but they often do.

Before implementing the program, we hypothesized that PRMs would draw student patrons to the Research Help Desk who might not have come otherwise. We certainly hoped for this outcome as our reference transactions had declined 20 percent between the 2010–2011 and 2013–2014 academic years. Figure 10.4 shows the decline in reference transactions recorded during the two academic years preceding the PRM Program, as well as the initial increase in transactions experienced after PRMs started working at the desk. Although we have seen a decline in the total number of transactions during the spring

| | <i>Total Reference Questions</i> | <i>Questions Answered by PRMs</i> | <i>"PRM Connection" Questions</i> |
|-------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Fall 2012 | 2,196 | | |
| Spring 2013 | 1,487 | | |
| Fall 2013 | 1,933 | | |
| Spring 2014 | 1,230 | | |
| Fall 2014 | 1,997 | 530 | 94 |
| Spring 2015 | 1,544 | 520 | 91 |
| Fall 2015 | 2,005 | 463 | 62 |
| Spring 2016 | 1,271 | 351 | 44 |

Figure 10.4 Reference transactions by semester: fall 2012–spring 2016.

Note. The PRM Program began in fall 2014.

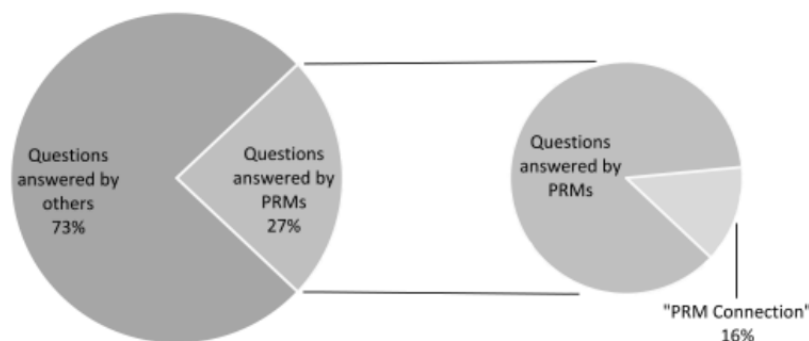


Figure 10.5 Percentage breakdown of reference transactions, 2014–2016.

2016 semester, we continue to be encouraged by the quality of the interactions between PRMs and patrons at the Research Help Desk.

Figure 10.5 shows the percentage of transactions that were handled by PRMs compared to other library staff. Over the first two years of the program, PRMs answered 27 percent of the total reference transactions, 16 percent of which were identified as a “PRM Connection.”

Assessing the PRMs’ research skills requires a qualitative approach. We use mid-semester and end-of-semester evaluations that ask students to reflect on their skills, their confidence in helping other students, the impact their skills have had on their own coursework, and other factors. One sophomore PRM shared the following feedback on boot camp training, which has clarified the importance of active learning exercises and games as a part of training.

I think that August boot camp prepared me very well for working at the reference desk. . . . I learned a lot of useful tools and resources that I did not previously know about. I also liked the games interspersed in the learning. The games made learning about the library more fun, and it helped me retain information better.

The evaluations ask the PRMs to identify goals for the next semester and if there are any areas in which they would like to improve. One sophomore PRM noted that:

My goals for next semester are to continue to familiarize myself with the library’s many resources. I think there are still many online search engines that I have not used or completely

understand. I tend to stick with a few favorite resources that I know, but it would be beneficial for me to expand my knowledge to continue to better aide [*sic*] patrons.

Another sophomore PRM noted that their involvement in the program has had the following impact:

I think working at the desk has definitely taught me how to be a better teacher and be better at explaining things to others. One of my definite weaknesses is working with a group, and this program has definitely strengthened my skills in that area. Plus of course my research skills have been sharpened!

One of our first-year PRMs made the following remark about the program's impact on their future career:

I think I will use the skill of finding and filtering articles and citation in my career in scientific research. Additionally, as I would like to teach, my experience at the desk has given me valuable mentoring experience and helped me learn how to teach people.

Collecting this qualitative assessment twice a semester has proved invaluable for ongoing program development.

In addition to evaluating the PRM experience through their self-reflection, we ask the PRMs to design their own assessments of their outreach projects and support them in developing ideas about how to do that. Participant feedback helps them improve design and content for future sessions. This feedback also helps PRMs develop confidence in their own skills. For example, a PRM who provided research consultations for a first-year seminar administered an end-of-the-semester survey to all 17 participants. Eighty-eight percent of respondents (15 of 17) reported that they found the consultation either very helpful or mostly helpful. Students also identified that they felt they were able to search more effectively as a result and were more likely to seek assistance at the Research Help Desk. Another PRM had presented drop-in workshops that focused on a citation management tool. The PRM created and administered a survey to participants after the session that inquired about the presentation style, level of instruction, other topics that might be of interest for a workshop, and how students found out about the workshop. The responses to these questions influenced how the PRM advertised similar sessions the following semester. While these are small assessments, they have increased the PRMs' confidence and helped to improve any issues with content or delivery.

Librarian supervisors also provide regular feedback to PRMs in their one-on-one weekly meetings. Outreach projects are debriefed throughout the project duration and at their conclusion. PRMs have a supportive and positive environment in which to discuss what worked well, what did not, and what they would change next time. Supervisors also engage PRMs in discussion about their individual learning goals for the semester.

IMPLICATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

PRMs have positively impacted their peers through their work at the Research Help Desk and their outreach projects, but they have also had a positive—and significant—impact on the Research and Instruction Department. PRM-developed videos, research guides, research consultations, and workshops have enabled us to expand our reference and

instruction services to a wider variety of students. PRM work has also helped us strengthen collaborations with campus partners like Academic Advising and International Student Services. As we do not often have the opportunity to sustain connections with students over a span of years, the mentoring relationships we have with PRMs are especially fulfilling to librarians. PRMs have also helped librarians gain a clearer view of the student perspective. They operate as an informal student advisory group and are often the first students with whom we share ideas about new programs or changes within the library. In turn, PRMs have invited librarians into student life; one librarian is now the campus advisor to a student dance group cofounded by a PRM.

Some elements of our young program work very well. For instance, we are quite pleased with the size of our PRM cohort—a group of eight students is manageable if we share the mentoring and supervision. We also know that our tiered training program works well—providing foundational training through “boot camp” and building on that with weekly questions, biweekly meetings, and individual supervisor meetings give students a steady stream of learning and support. Just as we had hoped, our senior PRMs are mentoring newer PRMs, and all PRMs are developing their ability to mentor their peers.

We are not yet satisfied with our efforts to achieve the final learning objective: “contribute to a dynamic, supportive, peer research mentor community.” The PRMs’ busy course schedules keep them from spending much time with one another, with the exception of the biweekly meeting (which is a logistical challenge to schedule each semester). We have started to address this by having additional fun, informal gatherings that are not related to formal training. Now that the program is well underway, we will devote more attention to achieving this goal. We are considering reducing our hiring/training cycle to once a year. Not adding new students mid-year would reduce the training load for librarians and might help the group to become a more cohesive cohort.

We have a few issues to work on, but the program is firmly established within our library. Upon reflection, we have identified two vital factors that were essential to our early success:

- Support from the library dean. We could not have worked with colleagues outside our department to reallocate student employee positions were it not for support and leadership from the dean.
- Recognize limits and start small. By starting with a small cohort, we were able to spend time developing a well-considered, intentional training model. We also had time to identify when and how administrative work for the program needs to take place. For example, we created most of our training materials during summer and winter breaks.

NEXT STEPS

As the program matures, we continue to follow campus conversations about student engagement and high-impact practices, as well as to seek opportunities to engage students in these practices. We are already using the PRM program as a model for another library-led learning experience involving academic research and peer mentoring: our new Digital Scholarship Summer Fellowship (launched in summer 2016). We also hope the PRM Program may serve as a useful model for other parts of our campus—and for other libraries, as well.

In order to sustain what we have established, we are working with our dean and campus development office to articulate the value and impact of the program to potential donors. Ideally, we will create an endowed fund that will provide ongoing support.

Of course, we will work to maintain a strong cohort of PRMs, which will help us attract and recruit future PRMs and retain them for two to three years. We have already noticed that our PRMs seem especially active around campus and draw upon their library experience when they serve on the Honor Commission, mentor international students, or join the Queer Peer Mentor group in our LGBTQA Advocacy and Education Office. We expect that their broad engagement will continue to strengthen our program.

Our advertising materials for PRM openings describe the experience as “a student job that makes you a better student.” Certainly, students benefit from the program—both the PRMs themselves and the undergraduate researchers whom they assist. The PRM Program also improves the effectiveness of the Research and Instruction Department as we are able to deepen and expand the reach and impact of our services to students. While the PRM Program continues to evolve with each new cohort, it has transformed what had previously been “just” a student job into a high-impact learning experience for students.

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