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Peer Research Mentors at Gettysburg College

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Peer Research Mentors at Gettysburg College

Abstract

Musselman Library at Gettysburg College developed a Peer Research Mentor (PRM) program to expand the library's formal research and instruction program. Designed and coordinated by a group of research and instruction librarians, the PRM program is built around a cohort of eight undergraduate students from a variety of class years and disciplines. Each PRM has a librarian supervisor. The PRMs participate in intensive training, provide reference service alongside professional librarians at the Research Help Desk, and develop outreach projects to better connect student patrons with library collections and services. *[excerpt]*

Keywords

peer learning, academic libraries, peer consultants, high impact practices in libraries

Disciplines

Higher Education | Information Literacy | Library and Information Science

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Case Study 6

PEER RESEARCH MENTORS AT GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

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

OVERVIEW

Musselman Library at Gettysburg College developed a Peer Research Mentor (PRM) program to expand the library's formal research and instruction program. (See Appendix A. Job Description—Peer Research Mentors.) Designed and coordinated by a group of research and instruction librarians, the PRM program is built around a cohort of eight undergraduate students from a variety of class years and disciplines. Each PRM has a librarian supervisor. The PRMs participate in intensive training, provide reference service alongside professional librarians at the Research Help Desk, and develop outreach projects to better connect student patrons with library collections and services.

Training

Our intensive “boot camp” training workshop is scheduled over two days before the start of the fall semester. (See Appendix B. Peer Research Mentor Boot Camp Schedule.) The core curriculum addresses challenges that student researchers face: getting started, defining a topic, finding articles in library databases, and evaluating sources. Training modules



were collaboratively developed, taught, and assessed by pairs of librarians. Librarians build upon boot camp training during biweekly cohort meetings throughout the semester. (See Appendix C. Topics Covered at Biweekly Meetings.) In the fall, librarians select topics, design lessons, and facilitate the meetings. In the spring, PRMs take the lead, with support from librarian supervisors.

I am familiar with more databases than I ever knew existed! Tough research topics don't daunt me anymore because I know I have a variety of places to search and I know how to redefine my search terms if something isn't working.

Peer Research Mentor, Gettysburg College

Reference Services

PRMs co-staff the Research Help Desk with librarians. Working together allows the PRMs to practice and build their knowledge and skills with support from experienced colleagues.

Outreach

In consultation with their supervisors, PRMs design outreach projects that bring together specific student populations with library services. PRMs have promoted and taught library tools, created workshops for classes, and developed instructional videos.

ADMINISTRATION (PROMOTING THE PROGRAM) OR TRAINING (INVOLVING OTHER STAFF)

As our Peer Research Mentor program has grown, we have cultivated relationships with other campus groups and organizations. Some of our strongest connections are with the Office of Academic Advising, which includes the Honor Commission, and the Intercultural Resource Center, which is part of the Office of Multicultural Engagement. Working with these offices has simultaneously enhanced PRM training and promoted our program to the larger campus community.

For example, librarians and PRMs collaborated with the Intercultural Resource Center to create drop-in workshops for international students. When our next hiring cycle began,

their director promoted the program to international students and we received several PRM applications. We hired two international students and subsequently integrated PRMs into international student orientation. As a result, new international students receive much more than the traditional library tour at the start of the academic year.

Gettysburg's Dean of Academic Advising approached librarians about supporting efforts to promote academic integrity on campus and collaborating with the Honor Commission. We invited her to co-facilitate a biweekly meeting with a PRM. The lesson plan included a jigsaw reading from *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty* by James M. Lang and a discussion with the Dean and a student member of the Honor Commission. As a result of this training, one of the PRMs joined the Honor Commission and served as the library liaison to coordinate future events and programming.

I might do some teaching in some form in the future, and I think the aspect of mentoring other students as a PRM has been useful for working with students on a one-on-one basis, answering their questions, and explaining how to look for sources. Even if I don't teach in the future, that experience will be helpful in any job where I will need to work with other people.

Peer Research Mentor, Gettysburg College

Training (Boot Camp)

In order to prepare peer research mentors to participate in the program, librarians in the Research and Instruction Department developed an intensive, two-day “boot camp” training for new PRMs. Boot camp is designed around the research process and provides PRMs with a helpful framework to use when assisting students. The training focuses on areas in which undergraduate students often struggle—getting started with research, generating keywords, evaluating sources, and locating and accessing materials. PRMs participate in active learning exercises and formative assessments throughout the training (assessments help librarians identify areas where further training is needed). PRMs also spend time learning about relevant library services, collections, and staff; the reference interview; and best practices when working with peers.

Boot camp training materials are organized in a binder filled with daily schedules, outlines for each section, additional resources, employment forms, and contact information. The outlines include the main training topics, sample research questions that might apply to

the topic, and reflection questions. Short periods of time for reflection and writing are provided throughout the boot camp. Reflections are initially discussed during boot camp; librarian supervisors continue debriefing these with PRMs during their first week of work.

I am familiar with a host of database platforms and I understand when certain information might require a library subscription and how I might get around these obstacles. Open access resources may have some information when a paywall gets in the way of finding a given article. I can also use my knowledge of search engines to enhance searches I conduct for research material.

Peer Research Mentor, Gettysburg College

Training (Ongoing)

The training process for peer research mentors continues throughout the semester via biweekly cohort meetings, weekly research questions and resource exploration, and one-on-one meetings with a librarian supervisor.

The biweekly meetings are facilitated by librarians or PRMs and can be used to build upon concepts covered during boot camp or to introduce new content. Topics have included citations, discipline-specific resources, using special collections, and library technology (microfilm readers, digital scanners, and assistive technology). Additionally, the meetings enable the cohort to work together on shared questions and issues experienced either at the Research Help Desk or with their outreach projects.

PRMs continue to develop their own research skills and explore new library resources by engaging in exercises delivered via our course management system. PRMs work on practice questions while working at the Research Help Desk and are encouraged to discuss them with the librarian on duty. The questions are selected from our database of Research Help Desk questions and anonymized as needed. In alternating weeks, PRMs are asked to explore specific library resources chosen to expose them to a wide range of research tools. Answering the weekly research question or exploring the resource of the week helps ensure that PRMs are continually building their knowledge.

Regular meetings with supervisors provide an additional opportunity for PRMs to work through and discuss the questions and exercises. These meetings are designed to function as regular check-in points on their outreach projects and as a means to provide additional one-on-one training when needed.

HIRING

Research and instruction librarians developed a job description detailing the three core components of the peer research mentor position: training, reference service, and outreach. The description made clear that we were seeking students who were interested both in enhancing their own research skills and sharing these skills with fellow students.

We advertised the position in the campus newspaper, via email, and on library social media. We also contacted faculty we felt could recommend strong student applicants (we targeted instructors of first-year seminars and our teaching partners in the Education, English, and History departments). During our second hiring cycle, we reached out to campus offices that might help us diversify our applicant pool. They shared contact information for various student groups on campus and encouraged individuals to apply to the program.

Working with a multitude of people and personalities is another aspect I will use in my life. No two people are the same, and being able to treat them all with respect and according to their individual needs is something that will take me far.... Becoming more confident here by working with different patrons and understanding that people here care for me and are willing to help will allow me to be more of a team player.

Peer Research Mentor, Gettysburg College

Applicants were required to submit a letter that expressed their interest in the position, described their education and/or career goals, and listed relevant course experiences and references. Research and instruction librarians reviewed applications and identified candidates to interview. In later hiring rounds, we invited interested current PRMs to join the interviews. Interview questions focused on the applicants' research skills, relevant coursework, public service, and mentoring experience. We also shared important information (such as the time commitment, including the required boot camp training dates and biweekly meeting times) and left time for applicants to ask questions. Following interviews, references were contacted and all candidates were discussed within the department before making final hiring decisions.

APPENDIX A

JOB DESCRIPTION—PEER RESEARCH MENTORS

The Research & Instruction Department of Musselman Library invites Gettysburg College rising sophomore and rising junior students to submit applications to become a peer research mentor for the 2020-21 academic year. A peer research mentor is a student who works alongside librarians to support students engaged in research, while also improving one's own research skills. This position is open to rising sophomore and rising junior students in any major. The peer research mentor team intentionally includes students representing a range of class levels, academic backgrounds, and student experiences. If you love information and helping people find exactly what they need, this could be the position for you!

Peer research mentors will engage in three main areas:

1. **Training:** Mentors will participate in a concentrated series of training sessions in August before classes begin, as well as ongoing training throughout the year (one hour bi-weekly). Training topics include basic customer service principles, navigating our online and print library collection, understanding today's information environment, search strategies, evaluating information, the inner workings of the library (from cataloging to interlibrary loan), current library issues, and other topics of interest to the mentors.
2. **Reference service:** Mentors will work at the library's main research help desk two to four hours per week, partnered with a professional librarian. In addition, qualified mentors may meet with students during scheduled research appointments.
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 interest and skills. For example, a mentor might create a web research guide that supports a class assignment, meet with students completing a particular assignment, or promote reference services in other ways. This component is flexible and should support the mentor's academic interests.

Qualifications:

- Desire to learn, improve, and master research skills in more than one academic subject area
- Interest or background in education, mentoring, and/or tutoring
- Strong communication and organizational skills
- Ability to work effectively with diverse groups of students, faculty, staff, and community members

Preferred Qualifications:

- Interest or background in education, mentoring, and/or tutoring

Peer research mentors will be part of a learning community supported by each other as well as Fortenbaugh Interns, the Holley Intern, and librarians. Peer research mentors will mentor other students while becoming more successful researchers themselves.

Peer research mentors will work six to eight hours per week while classes are in session, in addition to about fifteen hours of paid training during the last week of summer break. The pay rate is \$8.50 per hour.

To apply, submit a letter indicating your interest in the position, your education and/or career goals, any relevant courses, and the names and contact information for two or three references (references should be faculty members who can tell us about you and your work in the classroom, and/or your supervisor in a campus job or other relevant job). Please be specific about why you would like to be one of our peer research mentors. Application materials must be received by Friday, April 17, 2020 to be considered.

Have questions? We'd love to chat with you! Drop by the office (room 102, main floor, Musselman Library) or contact one of the current peer research mentors.

APPENDIX B

PEER RESEARCH MENTOR BOOT CAMP SCHEDULE

Move-In Day

- 9:00 a.m.–4:30 p.m.: Pick up key from Residence Life
- 5:00–6:30 p.m.: Kick-Off Dinner (Library Dean's home)

Day 1 of Boot Camp

- 8:00–9:00 a.m.: Breakfast, Introductions, and Warm-up Discussion
Discuss: What is a library? What is our library? What has your library experience been like? How do you use libraries in general? Share your personal favorite library story.
- 9:00–10:15 a.m.: Give Us a Library Tour
Each PRM explores a floor of the library and prepares to present important features to the other PRMs and librarians. Librarians fill in as needed.
- 10:15–10:30 a.m.: Break
- 10:30 a.m.–Noon: Introduction to Research
Introduce the research process which outlines the Boot Camp training. Assign research topics for remainder of training, and start with reference sources (print and online).
- Noon–1:00 p.m.: Lunch
- 1:00–3:00 p.m.: Discovery & Access: Books!
Local catalog vs. WorldCat, searching strategies (keyword vs subject; advanced search tips), LC Call Numbers, Course Reserves, Textbooks, ILL, etc.
- 3:00–3:30 p.m.: Break
- 3:30–5:00 p.m.: Practice
Library Olympics: Book relay race, Where in the library is it?, and "Hot seat" (practice reference questions). Receive homework: Reflection—What confuses you? What do you hope to learn? What are you excited about?
- 5:30–7:00 p.m.: Dinner

Day 2 of Boot Camp

- 8:00–9:00 a.m.: Breakfast, Meet & Greet, and Warm-up Discussion
Introduce key library staff (Systems Librarian, ILL staff, Circulation, Building Manager). Discuss reflection questions.
- 9:00–10:15 a.m.: Discovery & Access: Finding Articles
Articles, Journals, Databases, and One Search—oh my! Includes what is a database, identifying the right resource; searching and advanced search tips, etc.

- 10:15–10:30 a.m.: Break
- 10:30 a.m.–Noon: Discovery & Access: Journal Locator & Evaluation
How to use the Journal Locator to identify, locate and access individual journals and articles in library collection, retrieving full-text, or utilizing Interlibrary Loan. Cover distinguishing among types of sources (books vs. articles, primary vs. secondary, etc.) and critically evaluating information sources (popular vs. scholarly, peer-review process).
- Noon–1:00 p.m.: Lunch
- 1:00–3:30 p.m.: Research Help Desk Basics
Reference interview with practice questions. Research Help Desk minutiae: LibAnswers, READ Scale, printing, and technology troubleshooting.
- 3:30–4:00 p.m.: Break
- 4:00–5:00 p.m.: Library Olympics & Closing Ceremonies
“Find that citation” and “Can you help me?” (Research Help Desk scenarios). Medals and closing ceremonies.
- 5:30–7:00 p.m.: Dinner & Final Reflections
Receive reflection homework for first one-on-one meeting with librarian mentor: “How can the library help students become better researchers?”

APPENDIX C

TOPICS COVERED AT BIWEEKLY MEETINGS

- Citation and bibliographic management tools
- Using Special Collections and Archives
- Open access and introduction to scholarly communications
- Designing outreach projects
- Historical resources for research on the American Civil War
- Dealing with end-of-semester reference questions
- Interlibrary Loan and off-site storage
- Ebooks
- Science resources (PRM-led)
- Academic integrity and the honor code (PRM-led)
- Funky technology in the library: microfilm readers, assistive technology, and more (PRM-led)
- Music resources (PRM-led)
- Image sources (PRM-led)