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Community Outreach and Engagement in a Time of Crisis: The Peer Research Consultants Program

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COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT IN A TIME OF CRISIS: THE PEER RESEARCH CONSULTANTS PROGRAM

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Abstract

The Peer Research Consultants (PRC) program at the University of Miami Libraries (UML), was formed in 2016 as part of the Learning Commons initiative to collocate and centralize academic services at Richter Library. Although the program had a virtual component in the form of chat and phone services when founded, it was primarily a physical setup where library student workers assisted researchers using a peer-to-peer system. In this paper, we highlight the historical trajectory of the peer research consultant (PRC) program in academic libraries using Richter Library as a case study. We argue that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 provided an opportunity to redefine the program when it shifted entirely to a virtual modality. The shift to online services gave PRC's the opportunity to collaborate in-depth with library faculty and staff to support new outreach programs and community initiatives. In this paper, we highlight several examples whereby PRC's collaborative efforts resulted in research guides that offered links to families during lockdown, provided resources on racial justice initiatives, and combatted misinformation. In so doing, we conclude that the PRC program has strengthened the Libraries' visibility and ties to the university community, incorporated emerging trends in diversity, equity and inclusion, and provided trustworthy information during a time of crisis. We then offer future directions where library programs such as the PRC, can be leveraged for campus and community engagement.

Keywords: academic libraries, peer learning, peer research consultant (PRC) program, student workers, COVID-19, outreach programs, campus collaboration, community engagement

Overview: The Peer-to-Peer Model in Academic Libraries

The Peer Research Consultant (PRC) program at the University of Miami Libraries (UML) was an initiative developed in 2016 to help students at the University of Miami learn from their peers as well as from experts in a variety of subjects. The drive to integrate peer-to-peer learning is a part of a larger trend in academic libraries that relies on student library workers to offer reference services via a peer-to-peer model. In this paper, Roscoe & Chi's (2007) definition of peer tutoring is used and defined as the "recruitment of one student to provide one-on-one instruction for another student, accompanied by explicit assignment of participants to "tutor" and "tutee" roles. Typically, the tutor is more expert or advanced than the tutee, but in some variations of tutoring this knowledge gap is minimal" (p.534).

This working definition now allows us to trace the historical trajectory of peer research programs in the United States. O'Kelly et al. (2015) dates the origins of peer learning in academic libraries to the 1970s when California State University-Fresno replaced professional librarians with student assistants at the reference desk to answer simple and directional questions. And, in the 1980s, the University of Michigan designed the Peer Information Counselor Program (PIC) to attract and retain minority students (p. 166). Since then, peer learning programs have been implemented in different academic libraries with titles like Peer Assisted Learning (PAL), Library Pal Consultants (LPC's), or Student Peer Research Consultants (SPRC). These iterations indicate that peer learning is an effective tool in higher education and academic libraries. Researchers have also highlighted the multitude of ways peer learning is beneficial for both tutors and tutees. We turn once again to O'Kelly et al. (2015) who offers the analogy of a "safe harbor" whereby students can "manage their own learning experiences by exploring, practicing, and questioning their understanding of issues and topics with a well-trained peer, untethered from the hierarchy inherent in formal instruction environments or in working with professional librarians and staff" (p.163). This social leveraging upsets existing power dynamics and is in line with the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy, which states that Authority is Constructed and Contextual.[1] Furthermore, Bodemer (2017) explains that the process of peer learning promotes

> problem solving addressed through questioning, listening, and clarifying, combined with affective components such as modeling and empathy, performed on a more nearly horizontal level, have the potential to transform the traditional reference interview into a "peer-compatible" model. This one-to-one interaction falls into. . . the 'teachable moment' so often vaunted in the literature of academic librarianship [that can be] transformed into a 'mini-mentoring' moment (p.164).

The advantage of critical thinking and problem solving proved to be especially salient in the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Learning Commons and PRC Program at UML

In 2017, UML built the Learning Commons (LC) located on the first floor of the Richter Library. The LC was designed to provide the university community with access to collections, information services, learning support, and digital expertise. The vision of the LC is to

> Help students become effective and independent learners with the ability to identify, critically analyze and apply relevant information and technologies as well as the skills necessary to communicate across disciplines and cultures.

> While its Mission Statement indicates that the Learning Commons

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[1] **"**Information resources reflect their creators' expertise and credibility and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required."

Offer opportunities to work individually and collaboratively, learn from peers and experts, discover and explore resources and ideas, and create and experiment. Provide an inviting, comfortable, and technology-rich environment.

The PRC program was always a key component in implementing the vision and fulfilling the mission of the Learning Commons and has succeeded in modernizing and replacing the traditional reference desk model with a peer learning one. In recent years, questions have shifted from complex research inquiries requiring a librarian's expertise, to either directional or simple reference questions, which student library workers could answer. Therefore, the PRC program became an initial point of contact for students, especially undergraduates, seeking research assistance. PRC's are also trained to assist with basic level research questions, such as utilizing the library catalog and creating search strategies for databases. Library student workers are also trained to make appropriate referrals to subject librarians for more complex questions and to direct patrons to other Learning Commons partners if there is a need for this. Since it is situated at the Service Point area on the first floor, the PRC program became highly visible and was quickly integrated into the larger LC ecosystem that included partners from the Writing Center, Academic Technologies, the Camner Center for Academic Tutoring, the Math Lab, and Modern Languages Labs. Although PRC's lack the depth of disciplinary knowledge a subject librarian provides, they serve as an initial layer of research assistance, trained and capable of aiding their peers in finding books and articles, navigating databases, and developing search strategies. The fact that they are students themselves often makes them approachable and relatable to other students. This also creates a sense of comfort and familiarity among the student population using the library. A librarian faculty member serves as the program manager and is responsible for the design and administration the program. They also supervise the Peer Research and Learning Coordinator who in turn supervises the PRC's. The coordinator is a staff position and serves as a liaison between the PRC's and the program manager.

At UML, the stated objectives of the Peer Research Consultant Program are to help students with:

1) Developing search strategies
2) Finding scholarly resources
3) Creating and managing citations
4) Facilitating meetings with other Learning Commons experts ("Peer Research Consultants," 2022)

In performing their job duties, it is worthy to note that community outreach and engagement are understood to be implicit rather than explicit objectives of the PRC program. However, all of this changed with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Crisis Time: The PRC Program during Lockdown

In March 2020, there was a massive shift from in-person classes to online learning at the University of Miami in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown necessitated rapid change in teaching, learning, and the provision of services. Scattered across Florida and the rest of the United States, PRC's provided virtual research support services from as far away as Texas and Ohio. It is important to note that this was a time when there was an enormous need for information, not only leading into final exams, but simply regarding the sweeping changes happening at the university, the United States, and the global landscape. As a result, regular hours were extended to meet additional demand, and the PRC's took on additional hours to provide coverage during this time of crisis. The closing of physical spaces at the library dramatically changed the context of reference work. The PRC's were previously situated at a focal point in the LC, which made it easy for patrons ask for assistance. With the library closed, the PRC program and its services were reduced to an Ask a Librarian link situated in the upper right corner of the UM Libraries website. The need for assistance at the beginning of the pandemic was acute and drove a surge in the reference statistics. However, there was a decline in questions during the summer and fall of 2020. The information ecosystem of the Learning Commons was disrupted, and the network of partners disjointed, making it harder for LC partners to refer patrons. It also made it difficult

for incoming students to learn about services located in the Learning Commons, including the Peer Research Consultants.

Responding to Crisis: New Initiatives and Opportunities

While the pandemic continued, calls for racial justice were spreading across the country in the wake of George Floyd's death in May 2020. To respond to these issues and to meet the information needs of our patrons we decided to involve our PRC's in pandemic-driven initiatives that UM was spearheading. In this paper, we highlight three of them to demonstrate the various ways the PRC's served the UM community including its students, staff, and faculty members.

The first of these projects was a *K-12 Resources Guide* which was developed in immediate response to the pandemic in March 2020 and designed specifically for UM constituents. PRC's, in collaboration with librarian faculty and staff, brought together resources on COVID-19, mental health, and family activities ranging from art, fitness classes, and watching animal cameras at zoos. PRC's involved in creating this guide collaborated with librarians on the inclusion of tabs and resources which feature themes including *Things to Do*, *Things to Hea*r, *and Things to See* ("K-12 Reading Room Resources," 2022). Due to the success of the *K-12 Resources Guide*, the authors decided that PRC's should be involved in the development and expansion of other research guides. The PRC program, in staying true to the Vision and Mission of the LC, always aimed to provide students with crucial information literacy skills needed to succeed both personally and professionally. Given the socio-political milieu of 2020-2021, the need to impart information literacy skills became even more pressing. One of the UM Libraries' preexisting guides, *News and Newspaper Content*, was expanded to address this issue. While the initial guide gave patrons access to reliable newspaper resources, an additional tab was added that specifically addressed the growing problem of misinformation in the media. PRC's populated the new tab and included fact-checking websites on vetting media bias and sources ("News and Newspaper Content," 2022).

The third project developed as a response to the socio-political crisis looming during the summer of 2020. The development of the *Racial Justice Resources* guide was a collaborative effort that included input from the Director of the Learning Commons, the Head of the Learning and Research Services Department, subject specialists and Special Collections librarians working alongside the PRC's. When the call was put to the PRC's to aggregate links for the *Racial Justice Resources* guide, they were excited to participate in the project. Included in the guide are resources targeting both academic and non-academic audiences as well as fiction, nonfiction, and juvenile books all of which were highlighted along with toolkits and recommended reading lists relating to racial justice. Special Collections librarians also offered archival materials from the UML, many of which focused on the role of Miami in the fight for racial justice. One of our bilingual PRC's suggested adding a Spanish language resources tab in the *Racial Justice Resources* guide highlighting the importance of the city of Miami as the gateway to the Americas and the significant Spanish-speaking population in Miami. Just like its English counterpart, this tab includes fiction, nonfiction, audio-visual materials titles all in Spanish. Since its creation, the *Racial Justice Resources* guide has been viewed over 2,116 times, while the Spanish Resources tab in the guide has been viewed 148 times and the nonfiction tab has been viewed a total of 480 times. The later tab has the most views, which illustrates the interest and need for resources relating to racial justice. In addition, the guide has been featured in multiple campus sources, including the university's newsletter, News@theU. The creation of the guide was part of a wave of racial justice initiatives at the University of Miami in 2020-2021 including the creation of the Center for Global Black Studies ("Racial Justice Resources," 2022). The involvement of PRC's in these initiatives was rewarding at multiple levels. However, finding the time to provide PRC's with additional training on media bias, collating resources for UML faculty and staff in the form of a K-12 reading guide, as well as sources on racial justice was sometimes difficult to coordinate virtually.

Conclusion

In the last year, there has been a return to pre-pandemic research inquires and behavior patterns now that the Learning Commons has reopened without mask restrictions. PRC's have once again taken up residence at the Service Point in the Richter Library. Prior to the pandemic, PRC's at the University of Miami Libraries were not typically involved in the creation or development of research guides, however, their duties have now shifted beyond basic reference services. PRC involvement in community initiatives means that librarian faculty have additional input from student workers who are closer in age to the main constituents of Richter Library. Further qualitative and quantitative research is needed to trace the impact of the PRC program on student learning at UML. Despite the lack of data, it was an empowering experience during the 2020 public health and political crises.

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