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"I want my PRC": Engagement of undergraduates with and assessment of the Peer Research Consultant program

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Introduction

The Peer Research Consultant (PRC) program at the University of North Dakota (UND) is a peer-to-peer program that utilizes the skills of diverse student employees to manage daily library operations with staff supervision. PRCs are trained for a full semester by librarians, to assist their peers in introductory research appointments, as well as serving as library ambassadors by speaking about the program across campus and by providing high level assistance within the building.

Early years of the Peer Research Consultant (PRC) program's development were framed by constant change. Due to a building renovation that at one point had frontline staff working from a table at an entryway, to sharing a space at a Consult Room, to removing the Consult Room with the implementation of a Knowledge Commons (a one-stop service point with an Information Desk, PRC Desk, and a Consult room for librarians), the PRCs have rallied behind Clark's ongoing observation that "We've never trained a PRC the same way." In 2019, the first PRC hired was stationed in the busy lobby area while assisting in developing the foundations of the training process, using trial and error. The training curriculum was created with a great deal of feedback from PRC team leaders on what felt "clunky" and what was beneficial for them to know. The pandemic found the PRC team leaders trying to train entirely remotely, focusing on

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chat and email services. This continued to evolve once back in the building post-COVID as a building renovation was being completed.

Chester Fritz Library's (CFL) has moved away from a service model consisting of both an Access Services desk and a Reference Desk. Three desks can seem like an overload of help, but all three areas have a distinct purpose to make the library run smoothly. The Information Desk focuses on patron support for non-research related purposes. When patrons have research or reference related questions, Information Desk student employees are easily able to transfer the patron to the desk area named PRC/Ask Us just off to the left. If the PRC is unable to assist, or if it is a graduate student needing assistance, the PRC can easily walk to the Consult Room just behind the PRC and Information Desks.

One of the original goals of the CFL's PRC program was to "contribute to student learning by leveraging the social advantages of peer learning" (Clark et al., 2020, p. 583). While a study has not been done yet on the campus' view of the Peer Research Consultant (PRC) program, the PRCs themselves often hear many positive comments about their availability. When that PRC is off duty, and the patron is offered the option to meet with a librarian on duty, Clark has often heard the undergraduate say, "No, I want my PRC." Oftentimes this is due to the connection made by the different PRCs assisting the instructional librarians in the Introduction to English Composition classes. Library research is first presented in this class for their course assignments, with PRCs moving around the room to assist students in the research process.

Clark has been able to witness these changes and benefits over the last few years by having a direct supervisory role over the PRC program which currently has six PRCs. Co-author Breiland has been a PRC for about two years and inputs first-hand experience from the student perspective in this paper. This paper is a follow-up to Clark, Gabriel and Borysewicz's 2020 article "Development, Implementation and Importance of an Undergraduate Peer Research

Consultant Program at the University of North Dakota's Chester Fritz Library," also published by *Reference Services Review*, which explained how the program began and how it was built. Here, the authors look at changes to the program since its inception and the benefits seen by both patrons and the PRCs.

Literature Review

While this paper is conceptual in nature, literature was reviewed to ensure the soft skills and leadership training being utilized is in line with other academic institutions, the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), and the transferable skills employers are looking for in new graduates. Professionalism, alignment with high impact practices (HIPs), and the impact of peer learning on patrons and student workers, were common foci in the literature reviewed.

The United States Department of Labor codifies professionalism as a "means of conducting oneself with responsibility, integrity, accountability and excellence" (2022, p. 114). Relevant academic library literature concentrates on high impact practices such as critical thinking, communication, and leadership through community-based learning and collaboration (Chase et al., 2020; Mitola et al., 2018). Transferable in this case is in direct relation to academics, their personal life and assisting in preparing for future professions (Cady et al., 2022; Mitola et al., 2018; Sanford, 2021). Preparing for professions involves more than the hard skills learned in the classroom. HIPs such as those listed above are soft skills current employers are seeking in college graduates (Mitola et al., 2018; NACE, 2021). However, "students do not seem to recognize the benefits of working in the libraries as they pertain to skill development that can be transferred to future careers" beyond a mention on resumes (Charles et al., 2017, 13). Clark has made certain to include debriefings to address this in her own library and to each student working there, regularly bringing up learning outcomes and how they tie together with their work. A key component to developing these skills is providing opportunities for peer learning, aiding in

forming connections with other student consultants and with classmates (Cady et al., 2022).

Training in this manner “requires critical thinking and practice beyond the typical service encounter so the experience can create bonds between student workers that help to encourage future collaboration” (Cady et al., 2022, 3). This manner of student employment has been shown to have a direct correlation on leadership skills being developed (Pierard, 2022) and in facilitating employability development (Reid et al., 2021).

Skills such as those mentioned above are beneficial to student employees and later employers. Campus employment has also been noted to increase college retention beyond the first year as well as providing higher grades (Charles et al., 2017; Chase et al., 2020; Mitola et al., 2018). Because of these factors, it behooves supervisors to invest in their student employees and ensure that the mission of the library is entrenched in what is taught as well as being transparent to the students (Mitola et al., 2018; Charles et al., 2017). With libraries among the top hiring areas at academic institutions (Pierard et al., 2022), librarians are often charged with a responsibility to hire college students (Charles et al., 2017) and to develop training methods to encourage creative and critical thinking. Clark spends “extensive time on orientation, including mandatory training... that gives students basic information on policies, expectations, customer service standards, timesheets, what an academic library is, and how to do basic online searches” (Clark and Walker, 2017). This helps build the foundation for students to see their jobs as transferable experiences rather than simply transactional circumstances (Mitola et al., 2018). While library careers may not be the intention of most undergraduates, the development of their soft skills “will be valued in future resumes and job interviews (Cady et al., 2022, 11). Clark aids in this by meeting with students to ensure learning outcome language is included with a strong emphasis on being able to articulate how the skills apply to what they did.

Meeting with PRCs is essential to ensuring the growth of learning outcomes skills to benefit the student worker. It also benefits librarians and patrons when there is a strong line of

communication. Benefits of undergraduates serving as peer research consultants include aiding librarians in providing services to other students, and librarians gain feedback from the PRCs to “better understand the needs of their audience” (Charles et al., 2017, 6). Peers also “gain professionally and personally by developing relationships and learning from their peers and library professionals” (Mitola et al., 2018, 362). In relation to Bloom’s Taxonomy, the PRC program helps them learn how to interpret, summarize, and infer (Sanford, 2021) best resources and how to share this with the patron, which encourages integrative thinking to “bolster students’ learning and personal development” (Halper et al., 2020). This knowledge also helps peer mentors to communicate the benefits of the program more adeptly to the patrons (Mendoza et al., 2020; Venner and Washburn, 2021). That engagement creates excitement, which is then shared with others (Mendoza and King, 2020). It also lends to enjoyment in “planning and teaching, creating exercises and activities, and performing” once they overcame their early lack of confidence in the “importance of their own performance” (Oliviero and Zhok, 2018, 91).

The added benefit to the patrons is that while “it has been acknowledged that students prefer to learn from one another rather than librarians” (Rinto et al., 2017) PRCs are also passing on the excitement of utilizing the library’s resources. Many studies state that higher grades, higher retention and higher GPAs were a consistent outcome (Halper et al., 2020; Im et al., 2019; Sanford 2021). This is in part due to the peer mentor’s ability to “ensure that every student, regardless of background, has the support to succeed” (Sanford, 2021, 117). The peer-to-peer learning model enhances the learning experience by providing dedicated time in showing how the process works, which lends to improving study skills (Im et al., 2019). Having a peer assist them is also essential in developing student engagement (Mendoza et al., 2020) as it creates excitement for the learning process. As students are “more likely to use informal language when describing services” (Venner and Washburn, 2021, p. 164), there is less worry about not

understanding what a librarian may be trying to explain as well. This kind of peer support is a manner of social support which reduces library anxiety (Venner and Washburn, 2021). When patrons feel that their peers care for and value them and their academic pursuits, they are more likely to utilize the service beyond a single session (Mendoza et al., 2020). It has also been shown to increase their confidence, lower stress, and have a more positive attitude about coursework when they are given the skills to enhance autonomy (Rinto et al., 2017). Since “student workers are the first faces that patrons see when they enter a library building” (Venner and Washburn, 2021, p. 156), and with the above information factored in, providing opportunities for undergraduates to engage with their peers can be noted as an overall positive experience. For all these factors to be implemented, there had to be expectations communicated to the PRCs on what they were to learn and what they should be taking away from the program.

Expectations

When the program was first created, Clark and the Public Services librarians serving as team leaders wanted to set high standards from hiring through training. The original goals of the program included enhancing the PRCs’ collegiate experience and contributing to UND’s Strategic Plan (One UND, 2017) through High Impact Practices (HIPs), as well as developing their career readiness. This meant improving the PRC’s ability to problem solve, communicate effectively, model excellent customer service, and utilize reference interview techniques (Clark et al., 2020; Chase et al., 2020). A new Strategic Plan is in the draft stages, and Clark will be sure to review and adjust any changes to stay aligned with UND goals.

All students review a Research Guide (CFL, 2021) during their first week which includes the Policy Manual, and privacy training. “To further reinforce learning, Clark implemented an apprenticeship model” (Clark and Walker, 2017) with peer-to-peer training which encourages

leadership in students - something they are later able to put on resumes. PRCs then start on their own research guide that can take most of a semester to complete as they work through assignments and projects that teach them how to do reference interviews, use the library's databases, and assist in teaching the library sessions for the English composition classes (CFL, 2022). Beyond training, they are expected to assist librarians with the Introduction to English Composition classes, work to further streamline the training process for future PRCs and find simpler ways to solve problems.

A weekly "staff" meeting for updates by a librarian and to share best practices with each other was established within the first month of the PRC program going live. In the last two years, the meetings have evolved from just updates and a roundtable format, which PRCs have found this time beneficial, to now having each of them taking a turn at a five-to-ten-minute training session. These trainings might focus on ways of better utilizing a database or service, how to use a citation manager, along with tips the PRC learns while working with a patron that contribute to best practices. The PRCs have also moved from having a librarian lead the meetings to each of them taking turns at managing meeting minutes or leading the discussion. The added expectations of leading and teaching within their own group, not just in classrooms or at the desk, has added to their soft skill repertoire.

In the last two years Clark and her colleagues have also added the expectation that PRCs take their critical thinking skills beyond just working with the patrons to find best databases or sources. Librarians help develop these skills by involving PRCs in many of their projects such as creating research guides, preparing book order requests, and creating resources for patron use.

Adjustments to Hiring and Onboarding Processes

As tasks and expectations changed for the PRCs, the librarians working with Clark looked at how to adjust the hiring process as well. Clark already had high standards for the Access Services students, with an expectation to attain at least a 32 out of 40 on their annual evaluations to show they had met all Learning Outcomes (LOs) (CFL, 2021) and were capable of showing or teaching others before they were allowed to become shift leads, known as Senior Students. The expectation for PRCs was to have at least a 35. This meant the PRC supervisors were only hiring from within the Access Services students. The benefit was that the students already came with a strong base of understanding in the culture of "yes," which means never saying unfortunately, no, can't, won't, don't, or "it's policy." PRCs were expected to embody that cultural norm, as well as good customer service practices, and a basic understanding of the library and its services.

Adjustments began in the spring of 2021, when the librarians assisting Clark with the PRC training agreed they were ready to open PRC hiring up to all campus students; not just those from within Access Services, which shifted the name to be called Public Services. The three-semester requirement was dropped. This expansion meant guidelines had to be revised to become applicable for both students who currently worked at the library as well as those who had no previous library experience. A 3.0 GPA was required at the start of the program but has since been removed from the job listing. Grades are not entirely indicative of a student's ability to impart knowledge or teach others how to navigate. Additionally, PRCs within the program prior to this point had all commented that their grades had gone up since learning how to effectively narrow down topics and to use the library resources more effectively. This has been seen in PRCs hired after the change as well.

Other high expectations originally included the potential PRC to have taken the Introductory English Composition class as a requirement for applying. This ensured they have at least been exposed to a lesson by a librarian on how to do basic library searches. However, many students

have transferred from other universities and did not have an equivalent class. This expectation has now moved from a required on the job listing to becoming a preferred.

Beyond these requirements, to obtain a starting pay that remains \$2.00 higher than the Public Service students, meant that the PRCs had to have been working in Access Services an average of three semesters of student employment before they would qualify to apply for the PRC program. While all students start with daytime hours only, this was especially important for the PRCs to provide opportunities for job shadowing with librarians as well as best times to meet with subject librarians regarding their training. As they completed their training, librarians noticed added benefits from having PRC's working with them due to extra projects the librarians can get accomplished, as well as adjusting to provide extended hours into the evening.

The extension into evening shifts for the PRCs was another adjustment, providing better availability for patrons than previously available. This was a new option in 2022, due to the year being the first one with a full complement of PRCs as opposed to only one or two in a given time period. With PRC class schedules, night shifts also fit better for some of the PRCs, and offered more flexibility than being confined to business hours. The extra PRCs and extra hours allowed more projects to be completed for the reference team, opening librarians' schedules to have more in-person advanced research appointments with graduate students. As an example of this, over the summer of 2022, there were 3 PRCs working with 9 librarians. 64.7% of in person undergraduate visits and 33.6% of chats were handled by PRCs. The authors are looking forward to seeing how the statistics change, as this was the first semester trackable data could be gathered due to previous construction and the pandemic.

Onboarding in the beginning of the program was a challenge as the PRC librarian team was unsure what the PRCs would need to know. The first few peer mentors helped develop the onboarding portion of their training guide, with multiple iterations happening over the first three

semesters. In 2022, more experienced peer mentors began having discussions with newer PRCs about expectations, as well as clarifying information they are learning about how the job will work. This portion is still a work in progress, but continues to improve with each semester.

Adjustment to Training Procedures

The RUSA guidelines noted earlier speak to the provision of non-judgmental service and understanding nonverbal behaviors. Applying this to daily life and checking themselves makes a difference for the PRCs not only in research assistance but in awareness of diversity and equity measures. PRCs start by addressing their own implicit biases, long held prejudices, and committed to changing all micro-aggressive behaviors. Discussions on how to navigate charged language and how to model appropriate reference interviews while aiding in finding better search terms, was added post pandemic. Listening and verbal communication, along with a respect for where the patron is starting their process, aid the PRCs in developing soft skills that will be carried forward into their future careers.

These soft skills are needed throughout the library and were worked into the training procedures, starting when the student began their student employment time with the Public Services side of things. After COVID, the hiring procedures changed to no longer limit candidates to students strictly coming from the Public Services Information Desk. Adjustments through trial and error to figure out how to incorporate both Public Services training and PRC training were required. Clark has stated repeatedly that “we’ve never trained a PRC the same way twice.” CFL continues to streamline the training process, relying on the PRCs to assist in identifying what works and what does not. Some examples of this include assisting in building the program by trying new activities and giving feedback, being trained at a secondary station behind the Consult Room, assisting in finding resources to make the training guide more robust, using a back work room while more construction happened throughout the building, and

learning to rely on each other for answering most questions that came up. During all of that, the pandemic saw the PRC team leaders rushing to adjust some of the training to a work-from-home reality. If not for the innovativeness of the PRCs themselves, the program would not be as far along as it is now! The PRCs have helped immensely by bringing advancements and ideas to the librarian team leaders on a regular basis.

Post-pandemic, a dedicated Reference Desk was removed in favor of a Consult Room that was incorporated after a three-year building renovation. The PRC / Ask Us Desk is the public facing area between the Consult Room and the Information Desk. The Reference Desk had allowed PRCs in training to sit at a desk with a librarian. With the new desk, librarians were only called out to use the room as needed. After visiting with the Head of Public Services, a shift to the use of the Consult Room put a librarian in the space, which has no door. Both PRCs and students working at the Information Desk have commented on appreciating the librarians being within hearing distance. The arrangement allows the PRCs the autonomy to face any challenging undergraduate question while knowing they have “backup” just out of sight. It also provides assurance to the librarian team leaders to know the PRCs are handling the reference encounters accurately, allowing the librarian on duty to step in as needed. Clark and the PRC team leaders have found the in-the-moment feedback happening during or immediately after an interaction to be a strong reinforcer of the skills the PRCs are supposed to be learning in their training. The feedback aids in correctly using resources, how to interact with the patrons, and provides opportunities for the PRC to reflect on what they can do better with the next appointment they have. Reflection is a skill benefiting them beyond the library, assisting in educational and professional competencies.

Training these skills during the 2020 COVID pandemic and lockdown had to wait. Student employees that started online during the pandemic and in the two semesters of reopening found they faced different experiences in navigating the development of these professional

competencies. “The pivot to remote and hybrid services changed how library supervisors worked with student employees” (Cady, 2022, 2). The PRCs were instrumental in moving most training instruction to an online format. They were heavily involved in planning how to keep both patrons and frontline student employees safe (Clark et al., 2020) before the pandemic, and as CFL reopened post-COVID lockdown in the fall of 2020. All Public Services students had to work with the uncertainty of whether the building would re-open and if there would be projects for them to work on. This uncertainty continued throughout that academic calendar year as COVID cases rose and fell.

Co-author Breiland, a PRC set to graduate in May 2023, was hired and began work in February of 2021, only one semester after the building re-opened post-COVID. Despite her training taking longer than her coworkers, who were hired when COVID restrictions became less heavy, she quickly learned the basics of the library including the Dewey Decimal and Library of Congress Systems, as well as general care of the library. As with many student-facing positions, she learned soft skills on how to interact with patrons and give them the best experience possible through reference interview assignments. Breiland created mock interview templates, as well as did virtual roleplay appointments with Clark and other PRCs based on RUSA guidelines. These included being approachable through both verbal and non-verbal cues, demonstrating interest in the question being asked, listening without interruption and clarifying with open-ended questions, showing appropriate resources, and providing follow up at the end of the patron’s visit (RUSA, 2022).

One of the biggest challenges faced in the PRC training during the pandemic were online-only meetings which slowed, sometimes completely halting, progress in training. Librarian schedules included more Zoom meetings, which limited the time available to meet with PRCs.

Considerable coordination went into every progress check and Zoom call to answer questions because the PRC librarian team may or may not be in the building or available from their home

office. This led to Breiland and other PRCs having downtime when waiting for feedback and discussion on training assignments. Breiland used this time to complete projects for librarians and other staff members, such as updating research guides and creating tutorial handouts. She became more familiar with different departments and further familiarized herself with the different databases the library has in its catalog. This extra time spent allowed her to learn more about the quirks and features that make each database special, which Breiland now shares both with her coworkers and patrons. She continues to encourage the other PRCs to explore in the same way now that the building has reopened.

Educational and Professional Benefits

At the beginning of the program the PRC librarian team was solely focused on how to implement a program and ensure undergraduate employees were uniquely qualified to assist their peers. As the program reached the two year mark, the team leaders began to spend more time focusing on how the job could better provide educational and professional benefits to the PRCs. “While assisting their peers, the peer consultants explore new ideas, gain new knowledge about a variety of disciplines, and improve their research skills” (Clark et al., 2020, p. 583) through critical thinking by evaluating evidence and resources, as well as talking about ways to overcome bias (Sanford, 2021). After reviewing what other libraries are doing, it was decided to help PRCs verbalize benefits including self-confidence and conflict management, in addition to teamwork and communication (Beer et al., 2019, p. 5). PRCs also find improvement in research and comprehension skills, along with leadership skills promoted through autonomy and supervisor support (Chase et al., 2020), they learn how to use different technologies, how to manage internal communications, and they learn how to organize tasks or data (Venner and Washburn, 2021). These benefits align with UND’s Strategic Plan (One UND, 2017) and the original goals of the PRC program by providing opportunities for autonomy and troubleshooting.

Student perceptions of working in the library has guided Clark in how she trains and motivates her student employees. Breiland and her coworkers all report to Clark how they have increased skills and opportunities because of the PRC program, aligning with career readiness. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) (2021) defines this readiness as “a foundation from which to demonstrate requisite core competencies that broadly prepare the college educated for success in the workplace and lifelong career management.” Commonly noted by both research and Clark’s observations, soft skills they are learning include customer service, communication, and social skills (Charles et al., 2017).

Self-Confidence and Conflict Management

Clark has been told by multiple PRCs since the program’s implementation that self-confidence in research skills and higher academic performance are two of the greatest outcomes that both the patron and the PRC take away from the experience. Many universities have also “recognized that peer mentoring also leads to a better rate of retention and graduation for all students” (Beer et al., 2019, p. 4; Charles et al., 2017). PRCs also report enjoying not only doing the research but sharing what they know with others. As noted by Chase et al. (2020), CFL’s students also found that reflecting on their experience as a leader, many participants felt as though they gained the ability to collaborate with other peer leaders to accomplish tasks. A former PRC, a marketing major, who was a very outgoing student loved talking about their job. They were also a member of the Greek community on campus and shared the benefits of the program with not only their own Greek house, but many others. They encouraged people to come in while they were at the desk with “I’m still in training, so bring me a challenge to try!” Several students took them up on it, and the PRC was able to have real world training with a librarian looking over their shoulder. Knowing they could help others, even while in training, empowered a sense of leadership, which was seen across many of the PRCs. All are more

confident in speaking up, sharing tips and tricks they have learned with each other, and excited to bring people into the library.

Post-pandemic, the PRCs found themselves using this confidence to assist in a different level of communication, respect, and conflict resolution. As with many campuses, there were strict masking policies while in the building. Breiland and her fellow PRCs developed skills on conflict management and how to properly communicate with non-compliant patrons. This included maintaining a calm demeanor, verbalizing that she understood hesitancy or anger at the situation, and explaining why campus had put safety measures in place. Public Services student employees and PRCs hired in 2022 faced fewer discordant situations than were faced by those in the library the first year after lockdown.

Due to less frequent incidents than there were during that stressful re-opening period, coworkers had less experience than Breiland and her fellow PRCs did. She and her teammates feel that the opportunity to step in and develop mediation skills will be a benefit post-graduation, no matter the field they are going into.

Teamwork

Outside of working as a PRC, Breiland observed the skills she cultivated with her training being helpful in other aspects of her life. When working on group projects in classes, she noticed having more patience when working with group members. She has also used her knowledge in research and the resources available at the library to better complete projects while assisting her group members. Knowledge of information literacy was used to become better informed with both schoolwork and other topics such as politics and news. Knowing what constituted credible and reliable sources has promoted confidence and assurance in sharing information not just at the desk, but in life.

Communication

Students found the necessity of practicing strong communication skills with peers to be important and necessary because it “would position them to be more competitive for future opportunities” (Pierard et al., 2022, 644). This skill is demonstrated while teaching using both written and oral methods (Oliviero and Zhok, 2018) and in knowing how to sell the program and how to teach and work with patrons. One of the last things they do in their training is to create both a 30-second “elevator pitch” they can share with anyone that asks what a PRC is, and a one-minute introduction when assisting the librarians in the English Composition classes. The 30-second pitch is also used at New Student Orientations, which are now held within the library in late summer. Using PRC handouts and the enticement of candy, PRCs draw parents into a table at the entry point or while parents and their student wait in line to talk to their advisors. This allows them to start conversations about the services in the library beyond research assistance. Breiland often heard parents tell their children that they wished the PRC program was offered when they were going to school. The reinforcement of parents supports the program by reiterating how useful PRC research assistance is and how first time in college students need to be coming to the library. Since parents are often the ones collecting or holding all the materials their children receive during the day, they are also the ones to read the information and remind their child to “tack this on your board so you don’t forget it.” While a benefit to the student and parent, Breiland also noted that her newfound confidence in communication skills (Sanford, 2021) took her from a lack of comfort in public speaking, to becoming a lead promoter of the PRC program at the orientation event and when talking about assignments in class with others facing similar research challenges. It has carried over from “just a job” to positively affecting both her educational and personal life.

It was also noted by Breiland that librarians staffing the Consult Room create a faster and less stressful environment for the PRC’s, providing quick help and direct supervision when needed,

especially during training. There is no longer the problem of trying to juggle messaging librarians to receive help while still attending to the patron. Breiland, along with her coworkers, have commented they are no longer as nervous about taking on difficult topics or questions that usually get referred to librarians right away because help is so easily accessible. Likewise, assisting in the English Composition classes has added value to the students attending the classes. Librarians spend two to three sessions with each faculty member teaching students about databases, how to research effectively, and other introductory information. Many PRC's have already taken the English Composition class themselves, therefore can use their firsthand experience. When helping in the classroom, they can refer to "cool" resources they have used, or wish they had known about as freshman, as well as how they went about projects they have completed for that same class. Because the PRCs can utilize language that shows they understand the importance of what they do (Reid, 2021), it has helped both the patrons and the peer researchers.

Research and Comprehension

All Breiland's coworkers have talked about the increased research skills they acquired. Over the years, Breiland has heard from many professors that research skills are in great demand in the hiring sphere. With this position, PRCs develop a stronger understanding of all soft skills, compared to their peers outside the library, due to the intensive training by professionals and strong mentorship with the librarian team. A former PRC that went into psychology had stated that due to the amount of research needed to keep abreast of information, their training at CFL was contributory in finding and assessing sources. Another went into cybersecurity after assisting in the creation of training checklists and finding resources to enhance the PRC training process.

Peer mentors are diversified student learners with unique understandings of the perspectives on the undergraduate experience, with specialized, focused training (O'Kelly et al., 2015; Veneer and Washburn, 2021). PRCs often do not have the full story of what a patron wants and need to know how to guide using leading questions (Chase et al., 2020). They enjoy the increased responsibility given to them, as well as knowing they are influential in both how future PRCs will be trained and in the development of curriculum pieces. They see and adopt the enthusiasm of the librarians that teach them. Knowing that they are seen and valued as staff instead of "just a student employee" is important. Breiland has shared with librarians that the role of a PRC is an honor. On behalf of all the PRCs, she said "we get to learn more skills and they can have more time to complete other things." Another PRC noted the confidence in their research abilities because of the trust librarians give to PRC opinions and the value placed on their ideas. They feel they are making an impact, helping to make things easier for both staff and patrons. The PRC summed this up as "Since I've started working with students here, and especially the [English Composition] classes, I've really enjoyed the moment of realization many of them experience when they see everything we have to offer them. I think when they hear it from someone like me, just another student, they understand more than if a professor explained it in front of 50 other people." They stated that learning how to organize both tasks and the process of seeking information were instrumental in being able to explain the applicability and how those skills were transferable to their new job.

Breiland has experienced numerous benefits to her classwork since becoming involved in the PRC program. She reports feeling more confident when working on stressful or difficult academic tasks outside of work responsibilities since learning about resources in her training. Part of the critical inquiry Clark fosters in the learning outcome of knowledge is to know when to ask for help, and the PRCs embody this in knowing when to go to a librarian with their academic questions. It is also widely agreed upon that PRCs wish they had known about a lot of

the resources the library offers in their freshman year of college. It would have saved time, made classes easier, and less daunting. All the databases and physical books that could have made Breiland's classes easier and her papers better are now her favorite topic to advocate for with peers, along with sharing who the designated subject area librarians are.

Leadership

Leadership and peer supervision is another core skill the PRCs engage in. This is done through assisting each other in their training, taking turns leading PRC team meetings each week, and taking notes. The ability to work with a multitude of different people, personalities, and skill levels while coping with challenges (Chase et al., 2020) and taking responsibility to resolve problems through collaborative teamwork (Chase et al., 2020; Sanford, 2021; Pierard et al., 2022) has assisted them in developing their critical thinking skills as they navigate the needs of each patron and their co-workers. They also embody this by showing excellence and a positive attitude. "The fact that they are peers sharing the 'same social standing' outweighs their individual differences in discipline and knowledge acquisition" (O'Kelly et al., 2015, p. 164). PRCs have reported that the need to clarify and understand what the patron needs has aided them in becoming better listeners and problem solvers outside of work as well; a finding also noted by Sanford (2021). This skill, post college, provides a level of self-confidence that "encourages individuals to apply for leadership positions" (Chase et al., 2020).

Over Clark's time at CFL, she has seen eighteen of her Public Services students go on to gain an MLIS. Breiland is the first PRC to have added this next step to her plans. After stepping into the role of a PRC, Breiland found a joy in working with the librarians, the amount of mentoring she received, along with the real-world experience. Now that Breiland is fully trained and has had experience both at the desk and in the classroom with assisting undergraduates, her passion has evolved to now looking at MLIS programs to attend after completing her

undergraduate political science degree. Librarians and staff throughout the library are providing mentorship for more experience with the different librarian tracks available.

Giving student employees increased responsibility can increase pride in their work. The energy and enthusiasm of student employees can be contagious for all library staff and increase staff morale (Clark et al., 2020, p. 583). Breiland's coworkers are all in different areas of study, but all of them find reasons as to how this job is helping them in their future career goals. One of her coworkers is a marketing and English major who finds that the communication skills she is learning at work can boost her resume.

Assessment

Assessments are a crucial part of the PRC program, with equal importance on the quality and frequency they receive feedback (Pierard et al., 2022; Rinto et al., 2017). Mitola, Rinto and Pattni noted that to contribute to high impact practices, multiple methods of feedback should be provided, "including self-reflection, peer-to-peer discussions, and one-on-one conversations with the supervisor" (2018, p. 363) which allows students to contextualize their experiences. There are a variety of assessment methods and modes in place to help PRC's be successful. CFL utilizes a Libstat program to record all questions asked at the Public Services stations. All staff and students record any question they are asked, which allows for tracking of what types of questions as well as how well answers are provided. PRCs receive feedback within 48 hours if it was done well or needs clarification. This feedback offers them the opportunity to reflect on how they had handled the question and if there is anything they would have done differently.

All students also record daily tasks in spreadsheets housed within a Microsoft Team. A column is provided for feedback from co-workers and staff, which Clark also utilizes in evaluations to determine if tasks were done to expectation or if they had been asked to go back and improve on something. The immediate feedback from the one assigning the project provides the PRC

with a sense of excellence in tasks or clarification as needed. By recording projects, it also demonstrates accountability, which is one of the soft skills they are evaluated on.

The end of the semester evaluations are standard practice to many jobs. After the first semester, evaluations take place every year. The assessment encompasses a variety of areas to help the student understand where they are excelling and what skills need to be improved upon. The evaluation is the same one used to evaluate the students working in Public Services. However, the evaluation is currently being modified to better fit the PRC program. Rather than a score possibility of 40/40, PRCs only have 30 points now. This is because the “novice” or beginner section was removed, with the intent being that if a student was chosen to be a PRC, it was because they already have the basic understandings of how Learning Outcomes and customer service work. If hired from outside of the library, they spend the first several shifts going through the onboarding training that all students from Public Services do. This ensures by evaluation time, they have practiced and internalized the standards of customer service, along with the RUSA guidelines, because “students need to understand why their work is significant and how they are contributing to the broader mission of the library” (Mitola et al., 2018, 362). This supports their understanding of their value to the library while recognizing that their contributions are meaningful and transparent (Charles et al., 2017).

Another form of assessment in use are surveys. The first 15 chats online that are done by a PRC are monitored closely by the reference librarian assigned to the Consult Room at that moment. Once a visit is concluded, the PRC sends out links to two surveys. One will go to the librarian who supervised the chat or the face-to-face interaction and is designed to assess the PRC’s RUSA abilities. The second is a link provided to each patron the PRC works with. It is a simple Likert scale that allows the patron to rank their confidence in the PRC, their own ability pre- and post-visit in being able to find their own resources and provides space for feedback.

These surveys give Clark a comprehensive understanding of how well the PRC is doing, aids in evaluations, and helps the PRC become even better at their jobs.

Another survey was implemented in the last few years that the PRC is expected to give to the patron they assist. This is either done as a link if in chat, or a QR code if visiting in person.

Currently, it consists of five questions, in which the patron has one of four choices from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” We ask to know if the patron felt comfortable and respected by the PRC, if the consultation was useful for the patron’s research, if they are more confident in their ability to complete their research tasks, and if they are more aware of library resources. The last question is a fill in the blank space for the patron to add anything else they would like to share or elaborate on. PRCs are then spoken to about the results as part of a recurring check-in.

These recurring check-ins with the students are an integral part of the learning process. During COVID, these meetings took place over Zoom. The Fall 2022 semester saw the first in-person meetings conducted in over a year. During the weekly half hour meetings, as mentioned above, PRCs and staff go over a variety of topics, with each PRC taking a turn at leading the meetings, thereby practicing leadership and teamwork. Clark reviews the minutes in regard to what Breiland and her coworkers feel they could be doing better and how improvements could be made. This aids Clark in assessing needs to the workflow, as well as assisting in evaluations.

Assessment of workspace was also recently considered through a lens of disability, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and trauma-informed care for patrons and our PRCs. Originally the peer mentors were faced more out of the way from the Information Desk where public service students would triage directional versus reference questions. The PRCs were closer to the librarian Consult Room in this set-up, yet patrons had some difficulty finding them. The PRCs also mentioned a sense of not feeling safe, as their backs were to the public and they could not be entirely aware of their surroundings. A former PRC who advocated on behalf of neuro-divergency

recommended a standing screen be placed behind them for a sense of protection, and a mirror on the edge of the desk to help monitor their surroundings. While not perfect, it has proven somewhat helpful. A small lamp was also added to help brighten the space.

Quite recently a bigger change was implemented in response to PRC concerns about not looking as friendly to their patrons in this setup as they would like. With the assistance of administration and the librarians, the PRCs were given permission to shift desk spaces around to face forward. Signage is being developed to help distinguish the PRC Desk better from the Information Desk. Both desks will be recording all questions the next while to determine if there is any confusion or if patrons are approaching the correct desk. The hope is that patrons will find less discouragement in seeking help because the space will now be more inviting.

Conclusion

Fully trained PRCs have expressed their gratitude for all the skills they have learned as well as how transferable it is for them. Having a clear understanding of how it relates to their future careers has been a priority for the supervisors. To see it internalized and taken to the next level by the PRCs within their current duties shows how well the program is working. Those who have completed their training have taken it upon themselves to demonstrate a conscientious awareness of needs our patrons may have outside of ones the librarians had considered. These PRCs are starting to schedule themselves into evening hours, despite the job description only stating hours expected during a regular work week. They have indicated an understanding of their college peers that struggle finding time around full-time jobs or children that must be cared for, and have willingly adjusted their hours. This empathy for “the feelings, ideas, and point of view” (Sanford, 2021) of others strengthens post training, usually within the second semester of PRC work. This is the point when they begin to “perceive a sense of community” in which

relationships with their coworkers and the patrons are tighter and “much more fun and constructive” (Oliviero and Zhok, 2018, p. 91).

If the goal of supervisors is to have their PRCs “achieve enriched personal efficacy and improved interpersonal skills, embark on successful career development, and pursue commitments to helping others” (Beer et al., 2019, p. 11), Clark feels there are a number of factors that embody the worth of the program. The professionalism shown by undergraduate students who feel this job is an honor to hold, along with their empathy to the patrons and their commitment to upholding RUSA guidelines are at the top of that list. As the library begins to return to post-pandemic levels of usage, the patron surveys will hopefully corroborate what has been observed by the staff. Furthermore, “librarians who work with student employees should engage in research that explicitly discusses the benefits students themselves experience as a result of their employment” (Mitola et al., 2018, 363). This will aid in developing other methods of evaluation and training. Monitoring current practices in literature is something Clark will continue doing in order to further improve evaluation, supervisor training, and educational materials for the PRCs. She will also continue having conversations with the PRCs about expectations and providing performance feedback on a regular basis, which helps promote effort and improvement (Pierard et al., 2022; Veneer and Washburn, 2021).

While CFL has no survey data on how the patrons are benefitting beyond college from working with a peer, several PRCs that have graduated have communicated back to Clark on what has assisted them after graduation. They have noted how the high impact practices (HIPs) have helped them either gain a job, or how they have become an integral part of their new work teams thanks to the skills they have taken away from their time in the library. Transferable skills such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork have all added to a buildup in confidence and interpersonal skills mentioned by all current and past students.

That same confidence is encouraging CFL's patrons to utilize the program more often. Clark feels this is in direct relation to the alignment to high impact practices through learning outcomes for the PRCs which provide "opportunities for building customer service, communication and project management" (Cady et al., 2022, 11). As facilitators of soft skill learning, the PRCs are the model looked to by other Public Services students. The next step will be moving away from most of the training being done by the librarian team leaders and encouraging the PRCs to be more active in peer training with new PRCs joining the team. Breiland has been assisting in setting the model for this, which has only added to administration feeling that the growth of the program has been a success at the Chester Fritz Library.

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