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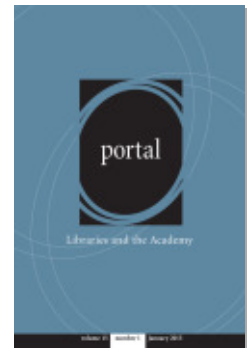
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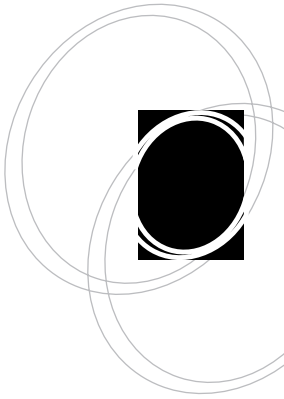
Building a Peer-Learning Service for Students in an Academic Library

Mary O'Kelly, Julie Garrison, Brian Merry, and Jennifer Torreano

abstract: Academic libraries are well lauded for offering supportive spaces for students' self-directed study, and significant resources are dedicated to librarian instruction in the classroom. What many academic libraries lack, however, is a middle ground, a routine way for students to help one another using best practices in peer-to-peer learning theory. A new, nonauthoritative, supplemental service by students and for students began at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, MI, in fall 2012 with a cohort of "peer research consultants." Students learn information literacy skills with a well-trained peer, untethered from the hierarchy inherent in formal instruction environments. This paper describes the program design, training, and conclusions after two academic years in operation and argues the value of peer tutoring in libraries.

Introduction

Academic libraries are widely known for offering spaces and resources where students advance their learning outside of the classroom. Rarely, however, are libraries recognized on their campuses as destinations for offering formalized peer-learning services. Peer-to-peer learning offers a "safe harbor" in which 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. Developing a library peer-tutor service, with students who serve as consultants rather than reference assistants or teaching substitutes, has great potential for broadening the reach of academic libraries and benefiting college students' academic success and experience.

Peer-to-peer student learning differs fundamentally from the authoritative and often distant learning interaction between student and faculty.[1] The tutor interaction typically is one-to-one, in person, with the tutor and student able to engage in conversation,[2] see body language,[3] and share knowledge.[4] Individual attention and exploration set apart the intellectually intimate conversation between peers from the one-to-many discourse in a classroom. Undergraduate peers interact outside of the faculty-student hierarchy. Students do vary in skill and experience, yet those differences do not override the inherent institutional similarity between them.[5] In other words, the fact that they are peers sharing the "same social standing" outweighs their individual differences in discipline and knowledge acquisition.[6]

The word "tutor" can imply a more directive, telling kind of instructional interaction, in which the tutors tell facts or impart knowledge. In some of the literature, "tutor" is used synonymously with "teacher," especially in monitor-type peer tutoring,[7] as opposed to collaborative peer tutoring. Kenneth Bruffee asserts, "Collaborative peer tutors are not surrogate teachers. Monitors are precisely that. A surrogate teacher is anyone who replaces the teacher in the social structure of institutional authority, whether inside the classroom or outside it."[8] Nancy Falchikov agrees: "Peer tutors are not teachers. They do not have professional qualification. They do not have the power to award final grades."[9] Therefore, peer tutors in academic libraries are not a substitute for the professionally credentialed librarians and qualified staff. Library peer tutors are student learners themselves, with unique and immediate perspectives on the undergraduate experience, and with specialized, focused training.

Tutors gain from the student interactions themselves in addition to the benefits from access to unique in-depth training. Alongside their peers, they explore new ideas, synthesize information from multiple sources, gain greater awareness of the breadth and depth of the information available in their disciplines, and, in general, experience a "form of liberal education" through the collaborative development of thought.[10] Although not all tutoring interactions are identical or indeed robust, and although tutors may occasionally resort to a more directive "knowledge-telling" rather than collaborative "knowledge-building" with the students,[11] they are regularly positioned to engage in an ever-changing series of exploratory conversations that are the foundation of participatory learning.

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Program Background

With the rise of Web-based information sources, reference traffic has declined and the types of inquiries requiring librarian assistance are, in many instances, shifting to a consultation model. In recognition of these changes, Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Libraries in Allendale, MI, rethought the traditional reference service model several years ago. The University Libraries moved away from librarians staffing a desk to offering a single frontline service point with well-trained, full-time staff and student

employees. The staff and undergraduate employees were prepared to address 85 to 90 percent of the questions received, with librarians offering consultations as needed for in-depth questions and deeper research needs.[12] Current library data demonstrate that student employees and full-time support staff answer 91 percent of service desk questions within five minutes, with close to 53 percent answered in less than one minute. Most desk transactions are requests for known items, followed by printer locations in the library and library hours. Librarians continue to offer office consultations, which are focused on addressing specific, in-depth research questions.

Building a new library offered us further opportunity to explore new ways to support students. We conceived of a space coined "The Knowledge Market" where students would be exposed to a range of advanced support services to help them achieve academically. As Ellen Schendel and her coauthors described it in the book chapter "Making Noise in the Library":

> The new library building as a whole, and the Knowledge Market in particular, was conceived out of a conviction that universities are not doing enough to prepare students for the kinds of skills that many professors and virtually all employers expect: to think critically; to find and then discern differences in the quality of information; to write coherently and persuasively; to speak with poise and effectiveness; to be conversant in basic and specialized technologies that are used in their particular discipline; and to be able to work with others in a team environment.[13]

This space was designed to bring library, writing, and presentation support from across campus together into one shared open area, offering students the opportunity to manage their own learning experience and keeping the threshold for entry into any of these services both low and obvious.

Early in the planning stages, we envisioned librarians staffing the Knowledge Market space alongside the Writing Center and Speech Lab staff. However, as we began talking with these other programs, we realized that we were imagining something quite different from a traditional reference or librarian consultation service, where students ask their questions and are guided toward specific resources and strategies to getting their answers. Instead, we wanted to develop a service where students are guided by their own inquiry, through in-depth conversations that help a student envision his or her own research plan, determine the success of that strategy, and develop critical thinking and analytical skills to determine the validity of the information found for his or her specific need. Asking librarians, who already had full workloads and professional-level expertise, to take on the role

We determined that a peer tutor model for delivering library research support was a better approach for fulfilling our vision for the Knowledge Market.

of tutor did not strike the right balance of skill and resource needed to address the need. We determined that a peer tutor model for delivering library research support was a better approach for fulfilling our vision for the Knowledge Market. The Writing Center and Speech Lab programs planned to use peer tutors for assisting students and were able to articulate the benefits of peer learning in other academic settings, and we were eager to explore how this model would translate to a library setting.

Use of Peer Tutors in Libraries

Libraries have witnessed the ability of student employees to step up and competently execute a variety of information encounters.[14] Several examples of developing under-graduate workers to support aspects of reference and instruction are provided in the literature; many of these still center on students taking over work that was once per-formed by librarians. Fewer examples exist of library programs designed to deliberately exploit peer-learning dynamics.

Early programs experimented with students as an extension of reference services or as part of established instruction services. In the 1970s, California State University, Fresno experimented with replacing the professional librarian with a student assistant at the reference desk to act as a "buffer between the library users and the librarian" and address directional and simple reference questions.[15] The University of Michigan in Ann Arbor developed its PIC (Peer Information Counseling) program in 1985 focused on minority student retention. PIC students were trained to assist at the reference desk and tutor students in word processing, as well as provide term paper assistance and serve as role models for other "minority students who might initially feel more comfortable asking for assistance from another minority student than from a librarian."[16] The University of Wisconsin–Parkside[17] and Binghamton University in New York[18] employed student peers as instructional support. A survey of the target students in the Wisconsin–Parkside program revealed that students were more likely to take advantage of student reference assistants than they were librarians to get their questions answered. Descriptions of training in these early instances emphasized knowledge of library resources, with little or no explanation of incorporating peer-learning principles.

In *Library Instruction: A Peer Tutoring Model*, Susan Deese-Roberts and Kathleen Keating echoed this observation in their review of the four early programs at the Uni-versity of Michigan; Binghamton University in Binghamton, NY; Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry, NY; and the University of Wisconsin–Parkside. It was clear to them that "library personnel tend to emphasize the acquisition of library information and skills in library-based training."[19] They explained, "Library personnel often lack experience with and knowledge of peer learning principles and programs"[20] when thinking about how to develop peer tutors in their settings. The authors went on to point out, "The infrastructure for providing tutoring services may not readily exist in many libraries."[21]

A decade later, Andrea Stanfield and Russell Palmer surveyed how libraries were training and developing student workers. They still noted that one of the biggest ben-efits of using undergraduate assistants was that it "frees up more time for librarians to work on higher order job activities."[22] Training considered beneficial to developing successful student workers included having students work through scenarios of real-life situations and instruction on the basic elements of customer service and managing a reference question. The importance of understanding principles of reflective learning also was noted, with an acknowledgement that peer learning provides an opportunity to "further solidify the information literacy skills of all students."[23]

Programs such as the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque Library Instruction Tutor project and the University of New Hampshire at Manchester's Research Mentors are designed to deliberately focus on taking advantage of the uniqueness of the peer-to-

peer relationship, not on replacing reference services.[24] In these two cases, the libraries capitalized on the training provided by campus tutoring or writing centers in developing their student research tutor pools. The New Hampshire at Manchester model developed writing tutors to also coach students in library research skills. The University of New Mexico Library partnered with its Center for Academic Program Support to develop library instruction tutors.

In 2014, Brett Bodemer reported on the evolution of the LibRAT program at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, encouraging libraries to leverage the power of peer learning.[25] Originally designed to supply peer reference to students in residence halls, the program has concluded that students can provide quality reference services, both in residence halls and at the library research help desk, and now trains students to provide single-shot lower-division information literacy instruction. Early faculty evaluations and student feedback indicate a favorable response to the program, with the author concluding, "Student endorsement of peer-led sessions provides clear evidence that participating attendees perceived them as useful and valuable."[26] While the article focuses on early assessment of the instruction program, not training, it is clear that the library has identified that harnessing the unique relationship among peers is an effective way to engage students in learning.[27]

> …harnessing the unique relationship among peers is an effective way to engage students in learning.

Design and Implementation of Peer Consultant Program

Design

The primary goal for GVSU Libraries' program is to develop highly trained peer consultants able to assist students in improving their information literacy skills. The consultants are expected to be academic leaders who can demonstrate four key competencies:

- Confidence in their own research abilities and academic knowledge
- Proficiency in secondary research using an array of resources and methods
- Ability to articulate the role of an academic library in higher education
- Ability to engage their peers in collaboratively meeting information needs.

The fourth competency is dependent on the previous three. Our program is designed around the theory that consultants who are confident, proficient, and aware of the library context will be well prepared to engage in meaningful learning conversations with their peers. Consultants consciously address three goals: reinforcing the students' comfort with the research process, identifying whether the consultation helped their specific information needs, and building the students' confidence in completing the work. These three elements—comfort, helpfulness, and confidence—are measured in our ongoing program evaluation.

To attract students with these competencies, recruiting language is written to cue potential student workers that comfort with library research will be required. The position announcement explains that employees will help other students refine research topics; find books, articles, and other sources of information; evaluate those sources; and

engage in conversation about the entire process of doing library research to complete an assignment. The posting also emphasizes opportunities for the consultants themselves to collaborate with peers and develop new skills in leadership.

The application requires two research-based writing samples, a faculty recommendation, and a completed application form that includes open-ended questions about three scenarios the applicants may encounter on the job.[28] Interview questions further explore their understanding of the role of the library in a college education and the differences between library and open Internet research. This intense process is designed to give the student applicants several opportunities to demonstrate critical thinking skills and comfort in exploring unfamiliar questions, both of which are key aspects of a peer consulting service that is open to all majors and disciplines.

Expectations are high for the students submitting the applications and for the staff who review them. As we move into our third year of the program, we have developed an annual timeline of recruiting, hiring, and assessment activities to help with time management and scheduling (see Table 1). We want the consultants to function as a collaborative team, so hiring and orientation are conducted only once a year.

Training

Content knowledge and ability to do a variety of searches the first day on the job are important. However, even more critical to us is increasing the capacity of the consultants to relate to a peer and deeply listen to the students' needs. Training is designed to instill confidence in the ability to help, even if specific information literacy skills still need development. Deep engagement with peers is the priority.

> **Training is designed to instill confidence in the ability to help, even if specific information literacy skills still need development. Deep engagement with peers is the priority.**

The peer research consultant training program is deliberately modeled after the Writing Center program and has three primary components: an initial two-day orientation, formal professional development sessions during the year, and mentoring meetings every other week facilitated by a lead consultant.

Lead consultants are a primary component in building the consulting team. Every spring, all consultants have the opportunity to apply for a lead consultant position. Lead consultants must have been a consultant for at least one year and must have demonstrated excellence in all the key competencies. They assist with hiring and orientation, are consulted about major program initiatives (such as creating a LibGuide "by students, for students"),[29] and lead the mentoring meetings. By participating in peer mentoring, the consultants are reinforcing and modeling peer-learning strategies—that is, they learn from one another to better facilitate learning in the consultations. In the meetings, they discuss a range of topics from innovative search strategies to methods for consoling distraught students. They also brainstorm ideas for development of the program, many of which have been implemented. Consultants are regularly encouraged to share their own feedback and provide suggestions for improving the program.

Table 1.

Annual schedule of recruiting, hiring, and assessment activities

Month	Activity	Responsibility
December	Identify which consultants are returning next year and calculate number of open positions	Supervisor, budget manager
January	Announce position openings using various campus channels	Supervisor, Web team
Early March	Deadline for applications	Application received by supervisor, faculty recommendation letter received by head librarian
March	Review applications using scoring rubric	Supervisor, lead consultants
Early April	Schedule interviews	Supervisor, lead consultants
April	Offer employment	Supervisor
May	Mail employment contract and orientation details	Supervisor
June–July	Plan orientation	Head librarian, supervisor
3rd week in August	Mandatory two-day orientation	Head librarian, supervisor, all consultants
First day of fall semester	Work schedule set	Supervisor, all consultants
Monthly	Program evaluation reports to library management	Head librarian

The two-day orientation for peer research consultants is held a week before fall classes begin. The schedule, which is reproduced in the Appendix, strategically builds from an overview of basic concepts to hands-on application of consulting strategies. Consultants are introduced to *why* the service is important, *what* skills they will acquire and share, and *how* they will do it. They also are introduced to the concept of the Knowledge Market and how their work fits into a multiservice academic support center. We want them to feel a part of a larger, long-term, campus-wide goal rather than a simple series of disconnected consultations.

We carefully design a three-tiered approach to learning how to conduct a consultation. First, the consultants observe. Professional librarians and staff demonstrate both ideal and awkward consultations. Second, the consultants practice consulting with each other while being closely observed. Consultants and their observers immediately discuss how the consultations went, and they are encouraged to explore alternative approaches so that the consultants start building a toolbox of flexible skills. In the culminating activity, the new consultants are presented with laptops, notebooks, and a line of volunteers (most are library faculty, staff, and student workers) with real assignments in hand, ready for drop-in consultations. They are instructed to introduce themselves and spend a half hour putting into practice all they have learned in the previous two days. All consultants and "student" volunteers regroup after the consultations for discussion. After orientation ended last year, the consultants shared that this surprise consultation was both the best and most challenging part of training, strongly recommending it be continued in all future orientations.

As part of learning how to conduct a consultation, consultants are instructed to pass the laptop to the student, letting the student fully engage in his or her own search for resources. Consultants do not demonstrate; they guide the students by means of conversation and empower the students to complete their own work.

> **Consultants do not demonstrate; they guide the students by means of conversation and empower the students to complete their own work.**

Consultants-in-training are given a copy of Muriel Harris's "Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors," which is openly discussed the second day of orientation so that each consultant will be familiar with the four ways peers can assist students that authority figures cannot: (1) encouraging independence through conversation, (2) helping identify how to proceed through modeling and suggesting (not mandating, as teachers may do), (3) offering strategies to cope with academic anxiety and lack of confidence, and (4) providing a translation of academic language into common student discourse.[30]

Throughout the academic year, consultants have had opportunities to participate in supplemental training sessions led by faculty and staff from within the library and across campus. Topics are set by need and request and have covered practical issues such as finding government documents, working with international students, advanced Google searching, locating primary documents, evaluating sources, and finding academic and social support services on campus.

Data Collection

Data are collected using ScheduleIt, a custom application designed to schedule, annotate, and evaluate consulting appointments. The application connects to Banner, the university's software that maintains student, alumni, financial, and human resources information. ScheduleIt allows students to make appointments with a specific consultant at various library locations. The system tracks the course for which the student seeks help (via Banner data) and saves the consultants' session notes. Students may choose to have the notes sent by e-mail to their professors. At the end of the session, students are prompted to complete a Web-based evaluation. ScheduleIt provides standard data reports to administrators on the number of consultations by location, by consultant, by student, and by class. It also provides time-based reports on length of consultations, number of consultations per hour, and number of appointments versus drop-ins.

The first academic year of service began on September 5, 2012. Since then, our 25 consultants have provided 1,386 consultations to 1,038 students in 607 classes.[31] In all, the service has reached students in 57 curricular programs, with the largest numbers of students coming from writing, communication, psychology, women and gender studies, history, advertising and public relations, biology, honors, and sociology.

At the beginning, we offered thirty-minute consultations only. Due to our monthly evaluation process, we quickly realized that the consultations were continuing well beyond the scheduled end-time, and in late November 2012 we added the ability to schedule students for fifty-minute appointments. The average consultation is now fifty-three minutes. The students and their consultants seem to need a significant block of time to thoroughly discuss their topics. These initial observations have reinforced our assumption that these are in-depth, collaborative interactions, requiring dedicated time and focus, not the types of conversations likely to take place at a service desk.

Data show that consultation numbers quickly increased during the early part of the semester and then followed a predictable pattern that coincides with the academic cycle (see Figure 1). As expected, we saw downturns during midterm and final exams and during holiday breaks. Students sought more consultations during fall semester than winter semester, which is similar to trends in other library usage data, such as circulation and gate counts.

Evening hours were selected based on observational studies in the library that indicated student activity is quieter and more self-directed during the day and is busier and more group-focused during the evening. Over the first year, we found that the demand for consultations was highest during the 4:00 hour and dropped after 7:00 p.m. We closely monitored use patterns to determine whether we needed to adjust our hours. The trend of higher demand in late afternoon has continued (see Figure 2). In consultation with our partners from the Writing Center and Speech Lab, we used these data in our decision to eliminate the 11:00 p.m. to midnight service beginning in winter semester 2014.

Data Analysis

All data collected from ScheduleIt between September 2012 and December 2013 (three academic semesters) were shared with the campus Office of Institutional Analysis. Be-
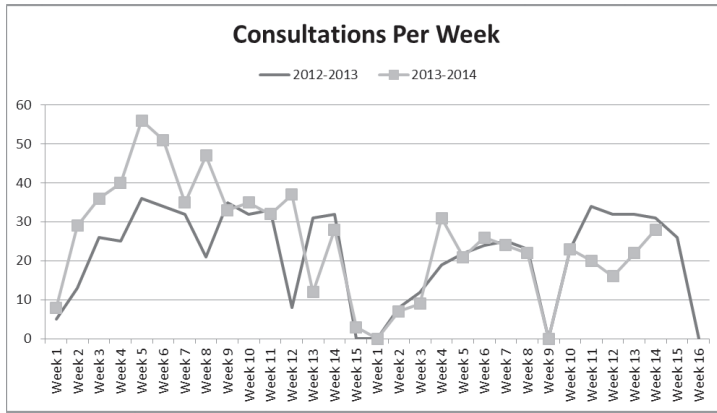
Consultations Per Week

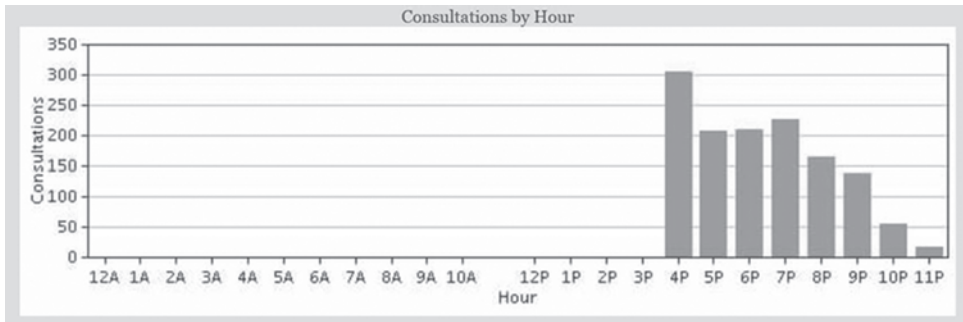Figure 1. Pattern of consultations by week over two academic years

Figure 2. Consultations by hour at the main campus location from 2012 to 2014

cause students are required to use their unique student identifier to make appointments with consultants, Institutional Analysis was able to determine the number of times a student worked with a consultant, the number of unique students per term, and student grade level. Those data will be used for future scheduling, budgeting, and marketing of the service to the campus.

Institutional Analysis discovered that most students use the service only once or twice a semester, and few students become frequent visitors (see Table 2). This finding corroborates the consultants' observations that students seek help for a particular need with a defined deadline. Rather than becoming a recurring tutoring service, the consultations are providing just-in-time assistance for a specific purpose.

Freshmen visit the consultants more than any other class (see Table 3). This will be an interesting trend to follow. Our institution is focused on retaining students from freshman to sophomore years, and the library closely tracks interactions with first-year students. The data collected now could, over time, be used to look for a correlation between freshman interaction with the library and persistence to graduation. (Institutional Analysis did look at retention by semester, but we do not yet have enough longitudinal

Table 2.

Number of visits to a consultant by semester

Number of visits	Fall 2012 Number	Winter 2013 Number	Fall 2013 Number
1	257	223	356
2	26	24	43
3	8	4	9
4	3		3
5		1	
6		2	
8	1		
11		1	

Table 3.

Number of students by class year, by semester

	Fall 2012 Number	Winter 2013 Number	Fall 2013 Number
Freshman	105	111	181
Sophomore	70	42	91
Junior	66	56	67
Senior	44	40	58
Graduate master's level	9	6	13

data to find significant results.) It also remains to be seen whether upperclassmen use the service less due to higher skills, less time, lack of awareness of the new service, or some other unidentified factor.

The grade point average (GPA) of students participating in consultations was analyzed, and no statistically significant difference was found between students who visited a consultant at least once and those who did not (see Table 4). The coordinators expected a higher GPA with some self-selection bias due to their own experience with higher-achieving students proactively seeking research guidance. The data did not support this assumption. Students seeking consultations have average GPAs.

Table 4.
Comparison of GPA

		Mean GPA
Fall 2012	No consultations	3.03
	At least 1 consultation	3.01
Winter 2013	No consultations	2.93
	At least 1 consultation	3.08
Fall 2013	No consultations	3.04
	At least 1 consultation	3.09

Student Perceptions

At the conclusion of each consultation, the consultant and the student write notes summarizing what they worked on and what the students' next steps are. The student also is given the opportunity to send those notes to his or her professor. The student then completes an online evaluation of the session. The evaluation asks three questions:

1. Were you comfortable working with this consultant? (Answers were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from very comfortable to very uncomfortable.)
2. Do you believe today's consultation was helpful to you and your research? (5-point Likert scale)
3. Are you more confident about your ability to complete your research assignment successfully after working with a consultant? (Yes/No)

We collected evaluation forms from 1,366 out of 1,386 consultations, or 98.5 percent. Results are highly representative.

The three questions are intended to measure how well the consultants are addressing the three elements of a peer consultation. We want to know if the students feel comfortable discussing the research process. The question may also indicate the consultants' skills in helping a student feel at ease during what could be a stressful, deadline-driven situation. We also want to know whether the process was helpful. The third question addresses the students' feelings of confidence and control over their own success.

> …approximately 97 percent of evaluations show a favorable perception of the service …

Preliminary analysis of the evaluations indicates that approximately 97 percent of evaluations show a favorable perception of the service, as measured by the number of students who selected positive answers, that is, "very comfortable," "somewhat comfortable," "very helpful," or "somewhat helpful" (see Figures 3 and 4). Of the students who completed the evaluation forms, 98 percent answered "yes" to the question about having increased confidence in completing the assignment after working with a consultant (see Figure 5).
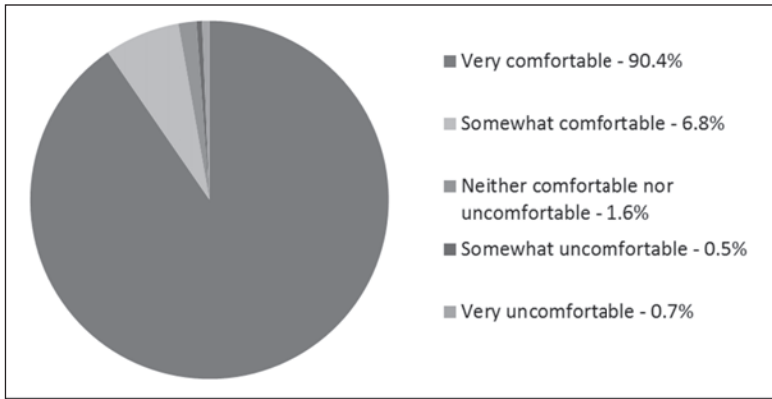
Figure 3. Were you comfortable working with this consultant?
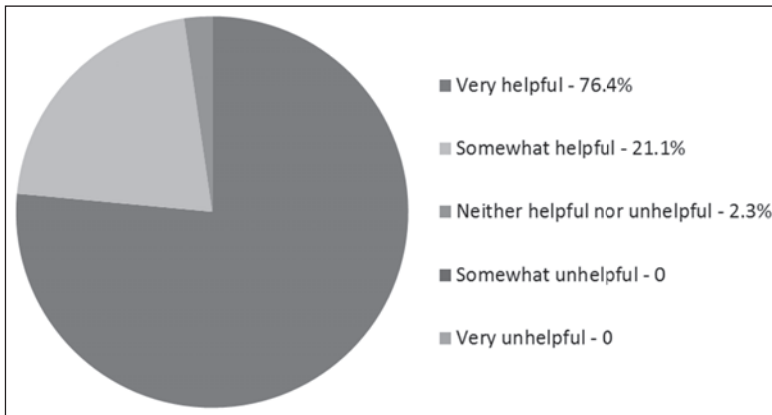
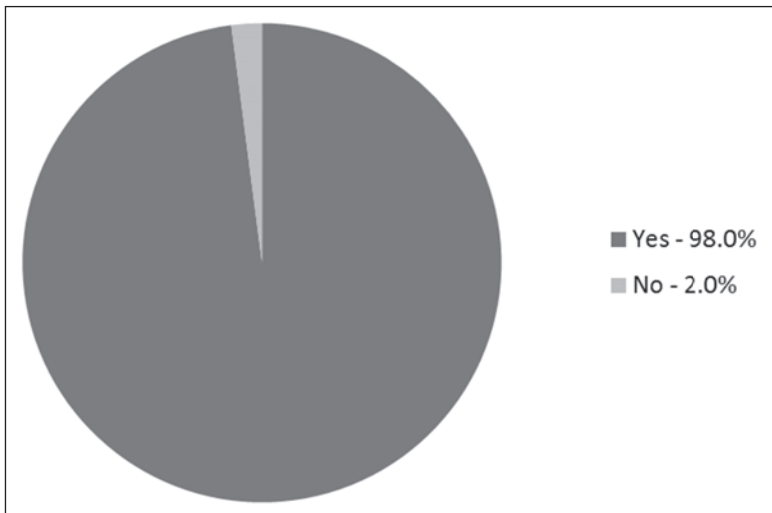Figure 4. Do you believe today's consultation was helpful to you and your research?

Figure 5. Are you more confident about your ability to complete your research assignment successfully after working with a consultant?

Consultant Perceptions

Given that the literature shows tutors can benefit from peer learning, we wanted to see if our consultants perceived any advantage. In March 2014, all 22 consultants were surveyed to see if working as a peer consultant had a perceived effect on various skills and characteristics. The return rate was 100 percent.

The consultants were asked to rank their own skills before they became a consultant and their skills now. Responses used a 5-point Likert scale; "very high" was scored 5 and "very low" was 1. The listed skills were taken from a combination of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) rubrics and a student-worker learning plan that is currently used by multiple departments on campus. There was significant increase in the consultants' perception of their own skills (see Figure 6).

Q2: BEFORE "Please rank your own skills from BEFORE you became a Peer Research Consultant"

	Very high (5)	Higher than average (4)	Average (3)	Lower than average (2)	Very low (1)	Total	Mean Score
Communication Skills	2	12	7	1	0	22	3.68
Teamwork	3	10	8	1	0	22	3.68
Problem Solving and Analyzing	2	12	8	0	0	22	3.73
Flexibility and Adaptability	3	12	6	1	0	22	3.77
Administrative Skills	0	8	12	2	0	22	3.27
Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness	4	9	6	3	0	22	3.64
Technology and Computer Literacy	0	7	13	2	0	22	3.23

Q3: AFTER "Please rank your own skills NOW."

	Very high (5)	Higher than average (4)	Average (3)	Lower than average (2)	Very low (1)	Total	Mean Score	Increase
Communication Skills	11	10	1	0	0	22	4.45	20.9%
Teamwork	10	12	0	0	0	22	4.45	20.9%
Problem Solving and Analyzing	14	8	0	0	0	22	4.64	24.4%
Flexibility and Adaptability	13	9	0	0	0	22	4.59	21.8%
Administrative Skills	9	11	2	0	0	22	4.32	32.1%
Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness	11	10	1	0	0	22	4.45	22.3%
Technology and Computer Literacy	4	14	3	0	0	21	4.05	25.4%

Figure 6. Tutors' perception of their skills before and after serving as peer consultants

A subsequent question asked, "What are the most important things you have learned since becoming a peer research consultant?" The answers strongly clustered around a small set of themes: desire to help others succeed; improved communication and listening skills; better information literacy skills; awareness of learning styles; and the role of self-confidence. One consultant answered, "I naturally am more inclined to be directive in my teaching style but being a PRC [peer research consultant] has taught me how to engage in the learning process as a peer and guide rather than as an instructor."

Another said, "Students will come in with a major or a research topic I know absolutely nothing about. And we only have 30 minutes together to understand the topic and find effective resources. My work as a PRC has greatly increased my appreciation for heuristics. As we research together, the student and I problem-solve and usually discover the direction they want to go with their research. We give them a foot in the door that allows them to understand the process and further their knowledge in their topic on their own." One consultant specifically addressed his or her own self-confidence: "I have learned that I am fully capable of completing any assignment no matter how daunting it feels in the beginning."

> **Students visiting the service report feeling comfortable with their consultants. They find the sessions helpful, and they feel more confident in their ability to complete their assignments after meeting with a consultant.**

And one answer included nearly all the themes: "How to effectively search for desired information, how to find the answers I am looking for, brainstorming techniques, how to get to the heart of the issue (in whatever context), and how to communicate with others with different levels of knowledge and understanding."

Discussion

The first year using peer research consultants in an academic library involved a small cohort of seven new consultants, limited space, and no established routines. The second year opened with twenty-two research consultants in a brand-new facility with space specifically designed for a tripartite student academic support service comprising library research, writing, and public speaking consultations, thereby introducing increased complexity to both the operation and assessment of the program.

Perception data—that is, data on what the participants think—so far are highly positive. Students visiting the service report feeling comfortable with their consultants. They find the sessions helpful, and they feel more confident in their ability to complete their assignments after meeting with a consultant. The consultants themselves are reporting an increase in their own performance skills and in their general awareness of communication and information skills. All of these general trends indicate that the service is well received and functioning as intended.

Data have been collected primarily to measure quantity and perception. Early formative evaluation has allowed the coordinators to make quick adjustments to the program in progress. Patterns have emerged that indicate need for more targeted training in specific disciplinary search strategies, especially in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields. An awareness campaign is also needed. The number of consultations was expected to be higher; however, the high perception scores indicate that the issue is awareness, not displeasure. Plans are afoot to significantly increase marketing the service to the campus community.

Throughout the academic year, we noted that some students declined to meet with a librarian when informed that a peer research consultant was not available for an immediate drop-in appointment. This observation indicated to us that students see a distinction

between meeting with a peer and with an authority figure. In student comments, we also observed that for some students this was the first time they recognized that they could get one-to-one research help from the library, suggesting that we likely are reaching a new segment of the undergraduate population with our peer research consultants.

Conclusion

Throughout the first two years of the program, the consultants demonstrated independence, reliability, and high expectations for themselves and the service. They quickly took ownership of, and responsibility for, the program's success and their own learning. They asked for tools and training that they required to meet student needs, and they actively monitored the program and shared feedback regarding ways to improve the consultations. The original intent of this service was to give ownership of library spaces to the students and offer them the opportunity to manage their own learning. The consultants modeled that ownership. Faculty also have validated the utility of

The peer research consultants are becoming established as an expected library service …

the service by asking for the consultants to visit their classes and by referring students directly to consultants. The peer research consultants are becoming established as an expected library service, separate from yet complementary to the range of services offered through service desk assistance, librarian consultations, and in-class instruction.

During our first academic year of the peer research consultant service, we worked to determine best practices. During the second academic year, we focused on integrating the library, the Writing Center, and the Speech Lab into the Knowledge Market space. Helping consultants from three separate areas work side-by-side and refer to one another's services has taken deliberate effort, including designing opportunities for shared training and building community. From this experience, we learned that peer consultants quickly recognized the power in having their colleagues in close proximity and found opportunities to refer to one another's services to further help the students with all aspects of their assignments. We anticipate that it will take three to five years for us to fully realize how students will use the Knowledge Market and how it might fundamentally change the student learning experience.

The benefits of collaborative tutoring have been well documented in the literature. However, most examinations of higher education tutoring have focused on writing and tutoring centers. There have been isolated examples of libraries using peer tutors to augment library services, yet this measure does not appear to have caught on as a wide or best practice. Within the academic library community, we still seem to be in the early stages of learning how to harness the full potential of peer tutoring for helping students learn new research habits and practice better ones. Based on preliminary observations of the first two years of our peer research consultant service, it is clear that collaborative tutoring has the potential to be successful in an academic library setting.

Appendix

Peer Research Consultant 2013–2014 Orientation

Mary Idema Pew Library Learning and Information Commons
August 21, 22, and 23, 2013

Wednesday, August 21

8:45 – 9:00	Coffee chat
9:00 – 10:00	Welcome!

9:00 – 9:15   Getting started
- *Introductions – All*
- *What to expect – Mary O'Kelly*
- *Housekeeping – Brian Merry*

9:15 – 9:30   Greetings and a background on the creation of the Knowledge Market
9:30 – 10:00   Icebreaker – Jen Torreano

10:00 – 11:30   All About the Libraries
10:00 – 10:15   How the library is organized: departments, services, roles – Brian
10:15 – 10:30   Interlibrary loan and document delivery – Alec
10:30 – 10:45   Great service at the library – Jen and Brian
10:45 – 11:30   Tour and scavenger hunt – Jen, Brian, and Mary

11:30 – 12:30   Lunch
12:30 – 1:45   Research Consultations, Part 1: What is a research consultation?
12:30 – 12:45   Introduction to peer consulting – Jen
12:45 – 1:30   Consultation demonstrations – Lead consultants, Mary, Jen
1:30 – 1:45   Q & A – Lead consultants

1:45 – 2:00   Break
2:00 – 3:00   Research Consultations, Part 2: Searching for information (Lab 001) – Mary
3:00 – 4:00   Role of a Receptionist

Thursday, August 22

8:45 – 9:00   Coffee chat
9:00 – 10:15   Research Consultations, Part 3: Role of a peer consultant – Jen, lead consultants
- Consultation demonstration revisited – a model consultation
- Why peers?
- Four areas of assistance
- Maintaining the peer relationship
- Keeping cool under pressure

10:15 – 10:30   Break

10:30 – 12:00	Research Consultations, Part 4: Nuts and bolts of a consultation
10:30 – 11:00	*ScheduleIt overview – Jen*
11:00 – 12:00	*Consulting each other – Jen, Mary, Brian*
12:00 – 1:00	Lunch
1:00 – 2:00	Research Consultations, Part 5: Advanced searching (Lab 001) – Mary
2:00 – 3:00	Research Consultations, Part 6: Putting training into practice – All
3:00 – 4:00	From reception to session notes: Putting it all together

- *Checking students in and out using ScheduleIt, with practice time*
- *Final logistics*
- *UltraTime, scheduling, and downtime[32]*
- *Key access*
- *Monthly training*
- *Mentor groups*

Friday, August 23

3:30 – 5:00	Knowledge Market orientation with library, Writing Center, and Speech Lab
5:00 – ?	Pizza party

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Notes

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6. Nancy Falchikov and Margo Blythman, *Learning Together: Peer Tutoring in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge/Farmer, 2001), 1.

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14. William F. Heinlen, "Using Student Assistants in Academic Reference," *RQ* 15, 4 (1976): 323–25; Wendy Holliday and Cynthia Nordgren, "Extending the Reach of Librarians," *College and Research Libraries News* 66, 4 (2005): 282; Suzanne Julian, "The Power of Peer Mentors in Library Instruction" (poster presentation, ACRL Conference, Philadelphia, March 30–April 2, 2011); Andrea Stanfield and Russell Palmer, "Peer-ing into the Information Commons," *Reference Services Review* 38, 4 (2011) 634–46; Allison I. Faix, Margaret H. Bates, Lisa A. Hartman, Jennifer H. Hughes, Casey N. Schacher, Brooke J. Elliot, and Alexander D. Woods, "Peer Reference Redefined: New Uses for Undergraduate Students," *Reference Services Review* 38, 1 (2010): 90–107; Brett Bodemer, "The LibRAT Program: The Power of Peer Reference and Instruction" (panel presentation, California Academic and Research Libraries Association, San Diego, April 5–7, 2012).

15. Heinlen, "Using Student Assistants in Academic Reference," 324.

16. Barbara MacAdam and Darlene P. Nichols, "Peer Information Counseling: An Academic Library Program for Minority Students," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 15, 4 (1989): 205.

17. Willie Mae Dawkins and Jeffrey Jackson, "Enhancing Reference Services: Students as Assistants," *Technicalities* 6, 8 (1986): 4–7.

18. Prue Stelling, "Student to Student: Training Peer Advisors to Provide BI [Bibliographic Instruction]," *Research Strategies* 14 (1996): 50–55.

19. Susan Deese-Roberts and Kathleen Keating, *Library Instruction: A Peer Tutoring Model* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2000), 30.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 31.

22. Stanfield and Palmer, "Peer-ing into the Information Commons," 636.

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24. Deese-Roberts and Keating, *Library Instruction*; Gail Fensom, Regina McCarthy, Kirsten Rundquist, Dorothy Sherman, and Carolyn B. White, "Navigating Research Waters: The Research Mentor Program at the University of New Hampshire at Manchester," *College and Undergraduate Libraries* 13, 2 (2006): 49–74.

25. Brett Bodemer, "They CAN and They SHOULD: Undergraduates Providing Peer Reference and Instruction," *College & Research Libraries* 75, 2 (2014): 162–78.

26. Ibid., 172.

27. Ibid., 176.

28. The following are the three scenarios used in the 2014 application:
(1) A criminal justice student was assigned to write a paper on personal protection for an upper division course. She needs to find ten sources. She's interested in writing about the recent laws passed in Michigan that a construction permit is no longer required to install a home security system and that a licensed electrician is no longer needed to install it. She believes that the change in the law has led to an increase in failed home security and an increase in break-ins, but she's having a hard time finding any information in the library's databases about either the law or its implications for homeowners. She has come to you for help. What steps do you take to complete the task?

(2) While helping a student with research for an upcoming paper, the student becomes very frustrated, says he doesn't even know where to start, and is ready to give up. How do you respond?

(3) A professor assigns an argument paper for a class. The assignment is to argue whether the following statement is true or false and why you hold that position: "Free speech means that no one may censor what another says in a public venue." Find three sources that support your position and list them below. Explain in detail how you found those sources.

29. http://libguides.gvsu.edu/prc.
30. Harris, "Talking in the Middle," 30–40.
31. Data as of April 13, 2014.
32. UltraTime is software that manages electronic timesheets.