

Enhancing the Student Experience:
A Case Study of a Library Peer Mentor Program

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Abstract. In the fall semester of 2010 the University of Saskatchewan Library piloted a Library Peer Mentor initiative as part of a larger Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) program offered by the University Learning Centre. As partners in the Learning Commons located in the Murray Library, it made sense that the program should expand to include library peer mentors. After four years, personal interviews were conducted with current and former library peer mentors to consider their experience in the program and what impact it has had on them. The case study highlights how academic libraries can collaborate and broaden their scope to incorporate peer learning strategies and provide new opportunities to enhance the student experience.

Keywords. peer mentors; student experience; collaboration; peer learning; partnerships; informal learning;

Introduction

Student peer learning programs have been growing at academic institutions for some time. Often they reside with student success and student service areas or teaching and learning units. Programs typically focus on a variety of 'student help' activities including study skills, writing help, and first year/transition initiatives. In some cases the library's sole contribution is to host and provide program space. However, with the evolving academic library landscape, partnerships and collaborations with student-focused services are gaining momentum. Libraries are increasingly seeking opportunities and new approaches for incorporating student peer learning initiatives into library programs and services.

Peer Learning and Tutoring at Academic Libraries

Although not a service everywhere, peer learning and tutoring programs in academic libraries have been around for a while. Deese-Roberts and Keating (2000), strong advocates for libraries and learning centers working together, initially piloted a Library Strategies Peer Tutoring Program in 1996 – 1997 at

the University of New Mexico. The service was offered through an established academic support program run by the campus undergraduate learning center located in the library. The program included the development of a training curriculum for library tutors and it was integrated into the broader learning center tutoring service. Library peers provided one-on-one help but they also assisted with library instruction in course-integrated sessions. This successful initiative confirmed that training student peers for library instruction services was a viable and desired approach. Peer tutors can effectively supplement the instruction students get from librarians and in the process help to develop their own core library research skills.

In some libraries, peer tutors have been used to market library services and resources. Texas A & M University business librarians developed a Peer Support Service that utilized a 'street team' technique, a labor pool typically made up of volunteers in a target market who are responsible for handing out promotional material. In this program, business students were expected to: 1. market library services and resources to their peers with minimal funding required; 2. create a safe environment and reduce the barriers that may exist between students and librarians; 3. increase avenues for information and research help; 4. be available at the point of need (classrooms, computer labs, and food outlets); and 5. establish stronger communication channels between the library and students by conveying information to students about library workshops (Smith and Reynolds 2008). Similarly, Millett and Chamberlain (2008) found that by partnering with the peer tutoring program at Trinity University in San Antonio TX, they were able to market specific resources such as RefWorks by training peer tutors who would use word-of-mouth marketing to promote and encourage other students to use the bibliographic software tool.

Librarians at Eastern Washington University also used peers to teach fellow students how to use RefWorks as part of their Service Learning Partnership with the Teaching & Learning Center. Students in four technical communication classes were expected to teach fellow students how to use RefWorks

after learning on their own. The rationale behind this approach was to provide students with service-learning opportunities in order to get real-world experience while working on projects where they are expected to delve into the academic requirements of writing, critical thinking, and reflection (Meyer and Miller 2008). “We wanted the students to be themselves, approach the project from a student perspective, and tailor it to their peers, who represented the community we wanted them to serve” (411).

Using student peer mentors in library instruction and information literacy classes does present challenges for both the librarian(s) and peer mentors involved. In particular, developing this approach will not decrease a librarian’s workload in anyway, especially at the beginning while the program is being developed. It is simply more efficient for an experienced librarian with expertise to teach a class on their own without the added challenge of coordinating a peer mentor. The librarian leading such an initiative must be committed to the ongoing training and coaching that is required to develop students for these roles. Additionally, there can be a lack of confidence on part of both the peers mentors and librarians related to whether the peers have an appropriate level of library and research skills to assist other students in a class room setting. That being said, examples of this approach have proven to be successful, especially when developed collaboratively with librarians and faculty. At the University of Windsor, peer-led learning was the concept behind the development of a course designed to help with retention and transition issues. The vision for this peer program was to empower senior students in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences by improving their research skills so that those skills could be transferred to first year students in all foundational courses in which senior peer mentors had active roles (Bolton, Pugliese, and Singleton-Jackson 2009).

Although peer learning programs do not exist at all institutions, students have had roles as hired employees in academic libraries for many years. Typical responsibilities include a variety of circulation and shelving tasks as well as answering basic directional questions. In this context, however, student

workers are frequently discouraged from helping other students with their information and research needs even though literature indicates that students rely on peers and friends when learning about the library and conducting research (Murphy 2014).

As university libraries refocus their services and spaces, librarians have begun to realize that developing and investing in student employees to perform higher level tasks such as providing a basic level of reference service makes a great deal of sense. As Stanfield and Palmer (2011) suggest, training students to handle more than just directional queries not only frees up librarian time to focus on higher level responsibilities, but the model also ultimately meets a broader goal of helping all students to develop information literacy skills. "By guiding students who are assisting other students, librarians create an environment where an informal learning community can grow, encouraging students to realize that the library offers more than just a computer station for working on assignments and checking email" (636). Although there are some limitations with such a model, including fears of inaccurate information being disseminated and the time involved for training, mentoring, and supervision, Stanfield and Palmer claim that "if we cannot foster and build these skills in students we work with and see each day, how can we claim to be doing so in other instructional settings?" (638) By investing more deeply in student employees to perform at a higher level, libraries create a learning culture where "students engage with peers, librarians, faculty, and collections more completely" (638). Drawing on the large body of peer learning literature, Bodemer suggests that academic libraries simply cannot ignore the importance of peers in undergraduate students' lives. He contends that students themselves are a viable source for providing peer reference and instruction. Based on the success of the LibRAT (Library Research Assistance Technician) program at California Polytechnic State University, he argues that "the role of the librarian is not to lead every instruction session or answer every question but, rather, to provide the training and tools so that peer providers can serve as optimal vehicles for student learning" (2014, 176).

A successful Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) program at the University of Saskatchewan, conveniently located in the Murray Library, was the foundation for initiating a peer learning approach and offered a great opportunity to explore a new service model for the library. The case study presented here focuses on the experience of those students who volunteered as library peer mentors in the first four years of the program. It examines the value it has had for them as students and considers how the library can play a more active role in providing experiential learning opportunities that enhance the student experience.

Peer Assisted Learning at the University of Saskatchewan

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) offered by the University Learning Centre has existed since 2008. The program experienced significant success over the past several years running Structured Study Sessions, Writing Help, Learning Communities, and Tech Help. The mission of the PAL program is to:

“offer programs, resources and services to encourage and enhance student learning at the University of Saskatchewan; create opportunities for students, faculty, instructors, and staff to be involved in engaged learning within the university community and beyond; help develop exceptional students, scholars, leaders, and citizens within the university community; and give and receive feedback to evolve and improve the Peer Assisted Learning program, allowing it to grow and succeed within the University of Saskatchewan. PAL Peer Mentors are academically strong students who take a lead role in developing and delivering learning support programs for students at the U of S.” (<http://www.usask.ca/ulc/pal>)

Since the library is a partner in the Learning Commons it was a natural extension to see the PAL Program include support for library research. With an established structure and a culture of collaboration and partnership in place with the University Learning Centre, the library was able to pilot a similar program

very quickly. The intent was to work with the peer mentors themselves to shape the initiative and to allow the program to evolve through mutual learning and experience.

Two Year Pilot Project

Year One

The library peer mentor initiative kicked off in the spring of 2010. With an existing recruitment process in place through the University Learning Centre, two peer mentor spots were advertised. Given strong student interest a third peer mentor was accepted. To be consistent with the University Learning Centre's practice, each peer mentor was expected to provide five hours each week of PAL activities focused on peer-to-peer support through drop-in sessions, workshops, orientations, and tours.

Although peer mentorship is a volunteer role, a financial honorarium equivalent to a half-credit course per-semester was provided to each student. Prior to the fall semester a weekend-long training session for all PAL mentors was held. Along with general training led by University Learning Centre colleagues, library peer mentors were provided with an in-depth library orientation and a review of basic search techniques.

Three library employees were actively involved in developing the program the first year. The Branch Head led the initiative, with another librarian handling much of the hands-on training and coordination, a library assistant worked alongside both librarians and was responsible for some training and administrative tasks. In the first semester emphasis was placed on building relationships, brainstorming ideas, marketing, creating promotional material, and determining how to proceed. A 'learn as we go' approach allowed the peers to have an active role in developing the direction of the initiative. The goal was to have the peers help shape the structure of activities based on their own experience as students. Aside from individual drop-in hours that were held throughout the semester, peer mentors planned

three workshop/orientation sessions focused on navigating the library. Unfortunately no students attended these sessions.

During the second semester peers planned two drop-in library lab sessions. Although attendance at these labs was also very low, there had been an improvement in the design of promotional material advertising the sessions. Peers also explored other opportunities such as attending a 'new student' luncheon in early January. This activity resulted in peers connecting one-on-one with students and assisting them with finding their way around the library. Additionally, an opportunity for one of the peer mentors to participate in library instruction sessions with the Psychology Librarian resulted in some individual peer consultations. Unfortunately, this approach was not explored beyond the one instance. Overall, the focus for library peer mentors in the first year of the program was on planning and promoting the new peer learning initiative. In that regard, awareness about the program did improve in the second semester, including having a professor promote the service in his first year history class.

Challenges and Successes

Challenges:

Like any new initiative challenges can often outnumber successes. From a planning perspective, collaboration with the University Learning Centre was a key element in the development of the library peer mentor program but it also presented some difficulties. As partners in the Learning Commons, colleagues at the ULC recognized the importance of library peer support and were keen to collaborate. Unfortunately, with each unit reporting under separate administrative structures and with different work cultures, some aspects of the collaboration did not go as smoothly as desired. In particular, communication between the two units was a problem and did not flow as well as it could have. Additionally, the librarian coordinator experienced challenges trying to integrate library peer mentor activities into the broader program. With no organized or formal mechanism to include the library in

the day-to-day planning of ULC peer learning activities, the library component seemed peripheral to the main goals of the program. Library peer mentors also felt a bit excluded given the fact that other peer groups were well established and functioning on their own quite successfully. There was a sense of isolation because they were physical situated in a different location which made it difficult for them to make connections with the other peer mentors.

The library expected the first cohort of peer mentors to be actively involved in the development of the program, allowing for flexibility to discover and develop the program as they went along. Unfortunately, a 'Learn as you go' approach and lack of organization and structure can be problematic. The peer mentors felt a bit lost at times and although they wanted autonomy to be creative, they also desired more structure and guidance. For the first semester this process seemed fine but as the second semester approached the coordinator established more structure and guidance for the peer mentors. The desire to provide a balance of structured and planned activities while also allowing freedom for creativity was not always easily met.

Collaboration between other University Learning Centre peer mentors (writing help, study skills, learning communities) did not happen as desired. The established ULC peer groups had been working on their own for a few years and did not seem as eager to integrate library peer mentors into their activities. Also, because the library peer mentors were not situated in the same location as other peers natural relationships and connections did not develop as easily. There was no way to resolve the proximity issue but overtime library peer mentors did become more established and recognized by the other peer groups and the working relationships between the peer coordinators did improve. Successful partnerships and collaborations do not happen overnight, they take time to develop.

There was no dedicated workspace for peers to prepare materials therefore they often used shared space or public computer workstations. Although work space continues to be problematic with no

dedicated library peer mentor area, the situation has improved by ensuring that each year proper space is found for peer mentors to do their work so that they are not required to use the public computers.

Having three library employees working directly with the peer mentors caused confusion regarding communication and clarity of roles. Sometimes the peer mentors were not sure who to go to when they required assistance. Having that many library employees involved in the day-to-day planning for three peer mentors was excessive and not necessary.

The lack of a budget for creating marketing and promotional material limited creativity. The peer mentors felt they had some great ideas for marketing and promoting their workshops, which included prizes, snacks, and developing high end posters and related material, but were frustrated that they were restricted to resources currently available to them which were already in limited supply.

Working as a team presented some difficulties. Like many teams, there are challenges related to work style, ideas, and preferences. Sometimes there were minor conflicts regarding ideas and approaches. Part of the learning experience for the peer mentors was how to overcome these conflicts and to recognize when they needed to work together and when they could work on their own.

Successes:

In the second semester the peer mentors showed more confidence and were more comfortable in their roles. This was likely due to the fact that they had one semester behind them, processes and relationships had become more established, and they received more structure and guidance from the peer coordinator.

With a bit of experience behind them and clearer guidelines, including hands-on help from the peer coordinator, marketing and promotional materials improved. Initially there was an expectation that

peer mentors would create all of the material on their own but it was clear that this was an area that required more assistance from the librarian.

One of the peer mentors participated in a formal library instruction session with a liaison librarian who had been on a part-time leave and had limited availability for queries from students in the class. The expectation was that the peer mentor would be available to assist students in the class when the librarian was not available. Although there were only a few follow-up queries from students, this was a great experience for the peer mentor and it provided a glimpse into how this approach might work in future situations.

The peer mentors began to make connections outside of the library. As they became confident in their role, the peer mentors started to talk to their friends and classmates about upcoming workshops and drop-in sessions. Two of the peers informed their professors about the new program and were happy to acknowledge and promote the library peer mentors in class.

Overall, the second semester was more gratifying for both the peer mentors and the librarians. There were opportunities to have peers involved in more formal events and activities outside of the library. The peers attended a 'new' student luncheon where they interacted with incoming students and were able to arrange small group or one-on-one tours and orientations of the library. As a result of these external connections the peers also provided a few orientation tours for aboriginal student groups.

Peer Mentor Feedback

While initial momentum of the program was slow, improvements were made that resulted in increased student attendance at sessions. Although not assessed in anyway, we believe this was achieved primarily through improved promotion using printed posters, white boards, electronic information boards, and by utilizing online channels such as the University Learning Centre's *Upcoming Workshops*

link and through the University's student information portal (PAWS). It is also possible that 'word of mouth' among students may have factored into this as well.

Towards the end of the second semester group and individual feedback sessions were conducted with the library peer mentors. Although the PAL program has an intended outcome of helping students through peer-to-peer learning, the overarching goal for the library was for peer mentors themselves to benefit through this experiential learning and mentoring program. Comments from the peers indicated that this goal had been achieved. Although some expectations were not met, such as low student turnout at their sessions, the mentors valued the experience and understood the need to build the program. They were proud to have participated in the inaugural year and they expressed appreciation for being involved in something that would impact and expand their own experience beyond their day-to-day academic studies. As one of the peers stated, "It was a good opportunity to lead and to learn at the same time."

The peer mentors saw a need for this type of program and wanted to see it continue. Before any final decision could be made regarding the success of the program or continued support, the library needed to apply what had been learned from the first year. Feedback from the peers was both practical and reflective and it provided the library with helpful information to guide planning for the second year of the pilot.

Peer Mentors Suggestions for Improvements:

- More collaboration with other peer mentor groups, in particular the Learning Communities and Writing Help.
- More guidance from library coordinators without losing creativity and autonomy.
- Provide 'stuff' to draw students in (prizes or candy).
- Five hours a week is not enough time to plan, do prep-work, and conduct sessions.

- Have a more proactive approach (don't wait for students to come to us).
- Connect with groups outside of the library i.e. Aboriginal Student Centre.
- Participate in university programs such as the fall semester orientation day (Live Expo) and first year transition activities.
- Have peer mentors work at the reference desk.
- Work more closely with other librarians and in other areas of the library.
- Provide a budget for prizes and marketing material.
- Increase training to have a better understanding of library services and facilities.
- Provide greater clarity about individual roles versus working together on workshops etc. Assign peer leaders for each activity.

Peer Mentors Personal Reflection:

- Gained confidence.
- Enjoyed the opportunity to practice public speaking and presentation skills.
- Liked contributing to an organization that was making a difference.
- Did not like it when students did not show up.
- Enjoyed working as a facilitator or planner working to bring ideas together.
- Was able to use supervisory skills.
- Did not feel skills were being utilized fully.
- Did not feel a part of the larger ULC Peer Assisted Learning Program.
- Helped to determine a career path, networking, inside information.
- A good chance to build on established skills in marketing and promotion.
- Solidified and expanded library knowledge and research skills.
- Good opportunity to lead and learn at the same time.

Year Two

In the second year of the pilot only one of the students returned as a peer mentor, while a second student graduated and the third student chose not to continue with the program. Planning for the second year included four key goals:

- ✓ Improve the overall peer mentor experience based on the feedback provided.
- ✓ Increase student and faculty engagement in the program.
- ✓ Improve organization and planning to ensure that the program is easily managed in the future.
- ✓ Secure funding and commitment from library administration to support Peer Assisted Learning and Peer Mentorship as an ongoing program of the library.

One of the changes that occurred in the second year involved the reduction of a librarian from the day-to-day planning. When the program began, the Branch Head who initially proposed the idea to library administration wanted to have a more active role and be able to connect with the peer mentors on a regular basis. For the first year this process made sense in order to gain a better understanding of what worked well and what did not and where the library wanted to go with the program. In the end this was not sustainable and the most efficient use of the Branch Heads time. Also, peer mentor feedback suggested that too many library staff involved in the day-to-day activities caused more confusion for them. With this change, the librarian coordinator took over the lead role with full responsibility for planning the second year, including spring recruitment and the fall training weekend. She met regularly with the Branch Head to provide updates and share ideas and thoughts about the progress of activities. Peers continued to run drop-in sessions and workshops including participating in the First-Year Learning Communities initiative run by the University Learning Centre. This learning community is a small group of first year students guided by student peer mentors who meet on a weekly basis to connect with other students that have common interests and goals in order to develop skills to master the academic

environment; explore new ideas and interests and to learn from their peers in first year or in upper years. In these sessions, the library peer mentors presented to 18 Learning Community peer mentors and to 20 students divided into different learning community groups. While this approach did not yield more activity beyond the first few sessions, the library peer mentors felt less isolated and the student numbers alone surpassed all attendees at all sessions from the previous year. Other highlights in the second year of the pilot included participation in Welcome Week activities, along with assisting with orientation tours and information sessions.

A second workshop series that proved to be more successful involved collaborating with Writing Help peer mentors focused on using the online Research Paper Planner tool designed to help students plan, research, and write an essay. The library research portion of these sessions was an integral component and student participant feedback was very positive. Many of the students reported in their feedback forms that learning about the library's USearch discovery system and finding out how to use the citation management tool RefWorks was a highlight of the session. Other comments included students saying that the most important or useful thing they had learned from the session was how to find online articles using the library databases with a couple comments indicating that the most useful information was learning how to evaluate articles before using them. This positive experience marked a turning point for the library peer mentors. Facilitating a multi-faceted session in partnership with other peer groups was a gratifying learning experience for the library peers. After the first couple of workshops, library peer mentors were very excited and could see the benefit this collaborative approach had for students and for themselves. They were feeling ownership for the program and were insistent that it continue.

Sustaining the Library Peer Mentor Program

The second year of the pilot saw a number of improvements with most of the goals being achieved. In the end, library administration committed funding to sustain the initiative because the program met the core strategies within the University Library's Strategic plan

(<http://library.usask.ca/info/strategicplan.pdf>) and because the peer mentors were able to articulate what the experience meant to them and how it played a role in enhancing their student experience:

“Being a peer mentor is valuable to me because I have grown in my library knowledge, my public speaking ability and my sense of community involvement. I also value the positive feedback received from students who attended our sessions. Overall this has been a valuable experience and must continue into the future”.

“Being a Library Peer Mentor allows me the opportunity to learn more about the Library at our University than the average student. I have hands on experience with the new USearch tool and I am also able to run tours of the Murray library. These handy skills definitely make a student's life much easier and less stressful when it comes to research and finding materials within the library for classes. I enjoy being able to teach other students these skills. Another great aspect to being a Library Peer Mentor is getting to meet many new people within the Library system at the U of S. I have learned so many new things from [librarian] hopefully I will have the opportunity to pass on to others as well. Being a Library Peer Mentor opens up a door to let students help other students and is a valuable asset to the PAL program”.

Four Years Later

After almost four academic years had passed, a review of the library peer mentor program was undertaken focusing specifically on the experience of the peer mentors themselves. In total, the library

had ten students participate in the program over the four years, with two to four peer mentors each year. A few of the peers have since graduated while others are still attending university but have moved on to other things. The librarian coordinator and library assistant continue to provide structure, guidance, training, and mentoring. Although peer activities remain focused on providing workshops and drop-in sessions, each year is slightly different and the peers look for new and interesting approaches to connect with other students.

In order to assess the impact the program has had on the library peer mentors, individual interviews were arranged with all current and former peers. Interviews were conducted in January 2014 using the same series of questions (Appendix I) either in-person, by telephone, or via email. The intent of the interview was to explore why these students wanted to become library peer mentors, whether the program met their expectations, and what impact it had on their overall student experience. All student peers had been at least in the second year of university (PAL requirement) with two pursuing an additional degree at the time of their application. The students applied to be a library peer mentor for both personal and academic reasons and viewed it as a memorable experience. Although former peers were reflecting on their experience from previous years and recollection may not have been completely accurate regarding specific details, consistent themes among all of the peers did surface.

Volunteer Experience

Peer mentors considered their role to be a volunteer position. Comments were made that this kind of activity would enhance their academic experience and contribute to their success as a student. It was noted that since there are limited opportunities for volunteer work on campus, this was one of very few options for them. For some it was strategic, with the hope of applying into a program where volunteer experience was considered important or because they simply wanted to put this type of experience on their resume.

Presentation & Public Speaking

Developing public speaking, presentation, and communication skills came up repeatedly by all of the peers as a key reason for becoming a peer mentor. Of all the comments provided, the desire to develop these personal skills was considered the most important. Peer mentors seemed to recognize the value of developing these skills as part of their academic success.

Helping Others

A desire to help other students' was another significant reason for becoming a peer mentor. Each of the individuals interviewed felt that they had something to offer simply by connecting and talking with other students and helping them feel comfortable at the university and the library. A number of peer mentors reflected on how it felt for them as a new student and thought that this was a way to ease the transition for new students. In particular, one peer mentor remembered clearly the anxiety he felt as a first year student who was completely unfamiliar with conducting research and using library resources and services. He was passionate about applying what he had learned over the years to help other students who might be in the same situation. Most of the peers acknowledged that the library can be an intimidating place for undergraduate students and can feel overwhelming at times. They considered the peer learning program a way to help reduce the stress students feel when conducting library research. For those individuals who participated in the first year of the program, the realization that they would be assisting in the development of the pilot and lead the way for this initiative was very exciting. They were pleased to have been a part of establishing a program that would benefit students coming into the peer mentor role after them.

Community and Belonging

A sense of community and belonging was important to the peers as they completed their education. There was a desire to get involved on campus and contribute to the university community beyond just

attending classes. Being a library peer mentor was a way to be part of the 'bigger picture' and to enhance their own academic experience.

Library Skill Development

A few of the peer mentors felt that they had fairly good library skills that would be applicable to the program. One peer mentor with a Library Technician background and previous work experience at the library, saw this as a great way to utilize his skills while connecting with other students. Other peers had not used the library much at all, in fact, library peer mentorship was not their first choice and they would have preferred a different peer group, such as Study Skills, Writing Help, or Learning Communities. Two of the peers commented that they had been considering librarianship as a career path and thought that it might be a good way to gain a better understanding of the nature of the work involved.

A desire to develop library research skills was not identified as one of the reasons students signed up to be a peer mentor. Yet, all of the peers commented that they had enhanced their knowledge about the library. In many cases they were surprised at how much they had learned. Gaining a better understanding and familiarity of library services and functions, along with learning about database and catalogue searching, using keywords, Boolean strategies, and citing were all mentioned. While the peer mentors were generally comfortable with their own research skills prior to participating in the program, they were definitely pleased to have expanded on them and apply what they had learned to their own personal research and studies. The peer mentors talked about how they had been able to use the knowledge they gained outside of their formal peer roles. Working on research projects with classmates or helping friends or siblings use the library became a natural process and an activity in which they simply felt more confident doing.

Expectations

Peer mentors felt that their expectations coming into the program were met. In fact, all but one individual said that they had gained more out of the experience than what they had initially desired. This person was frustrated with the lack of direct work helping other students. She had really hoped to see more students attend her sessions. Her concern was with the amount of planning and organizing that happened among the peers themselves. She desired to have more connections with other students, although she understood that it was early in the program and much of the planning and organizing was necessary. As a fourth year student with previous peer mentor experience with other peer groups, she likely held higher overall expectations.

All of the peers were genuinely disheartened at the beginning when they realized that attendance at their sessions was low. This was an aspect they were not prepared for and initially considered it an indication that the program was not successful. Peers came to realize that even helping just one student was a very gratifying experience. Making a difference for an individual was quite satisfying. Although low attendance was frustrating for the peers, they did realize how valuable it was to them individually and as a member of a team tasked with preparing, planning and organizing a session. This was repeatedly identified as a key learning experience.

Librarian and Library Assistant

The informal learning and training that occurred between peer mentors and the library employees contributed greatly to the enriching experience students had as a peer mentor. The peers placed significant value on the relationships they built and the knowledge they gained from working collaboratively with these individuals. In particular, the interactive sessions they had with the librarian coordinator and library assistant enabled them to be more comfortable and engaged. They learned a great deal about the library and the research process through these informal discussions where they

received guidance and support, but were encouraged to be creative and develop workshops and activities on their own.

Although no formal interview was conducted with the library staff involved in the program, there were many opportunities over the four years to discuss and reflect on the role each individual played. The librarian coordinator had expressed at one time that her meetings with peer mentors allowed for rich mentorship opportunities with discussions ranging from organizational politics to different personality styles and ways to approach a variety of problems and challenges. Although this aspect of her role was very gratifying, as there was often a sense of rejuvenation and excitement working with the peers, the personal mentorship and coordination required was also the most time consuming.

Impact on Academic Experience

The overall impact on the peers' academic experience varied for each person, to some extent based on why they chose to participate. For the two peers interested in exploring librarianship as a career, one chose to pursue that path and has completed a Master's Degree in Archival and Information Studies. For others who have since graduated, it has been an experience they draw on when applying for jobs, "I can't speak highly enough about it. I really enjoyed it, I am really glad that I did it. It is always something I go back to when I am going through interviews...It had a lot of value and benefit that I didn't think that it necessarily would or that it would shape my future or professional experience, but it definitely did."

The individual hoping to improve his speech through public speaking is now working in a professional capacity. He was inspired by his time as peer mentor to further develop his public speaking and presentations skills by joining Toast Masters. For the peer mentors, the work involved in planning and leading a formal workshop session has been an invaluable learning experience that has provided confidence when speaking to a group of people. As one person stated,

“It definitely has had a positive impact, especially with the public speaking. I am in pharmacy and we do a lot of presentations and stuff, so I think, doing the workshops have helped to be more confident talking in front of a group. Being adaptable as well, because it is different every week that you do it depending on the group of students...and to feel comfortable answering questions on the spot or saying ‘you know I really am not sure of the answer why don’t we try looking it up together’ just being comfortable doing stuff like that”.

Peer mentors appreciated the connections they made with other students and enjoyed the sense of satisfaction of helping others. Some of the peers commented that friends are now coming to them for help knowing that they have been a library peer mentor. For those individuals who are still attending university, they feel more connected to the campus community. Skills gained, such as setting goals, planning, and public speaking, have been transferrable to other aspects of their academic life contributing to their success and enhancing their student experience.

Planning for the Future

Although the library peer mentorship program is small, the students who participated have strong opinions that it must continue. They recognize the impact it has had on them personally and what it has to offer other students. Peers commented on how the program might be expanded and identified opportunities for peer mentorship outside the physical library space. Ideas such as participating more closely with other peer groups, being involved in university orientations, first year transition classes, and working with faculty in courses all came up as possible approaches for the future. Because informal and peer learning seems to occur naturally in the library it is a perfect foundation for maximizing a peer mentorship model (Murphy 2014). The challenge from an operational perspective is the scalability of the program given financial constraints and librarian workloads. That being said, academic libraries should be considering their current pool of student employees as potential peer mentors and redirect

some of the activities of these students. Whether this is by providing peer reference and instruction (Bodemer 2014 and Faix et al. 2010), or by marketing services and resources as a library ambassador (Hasty 2000 and Betz et al. 2009), “It is apparent that university libraries benefit considerably from engaging with students in these enhanced ways. A sense of ownership of the library space/services is created with the student population. The students provide value for money and can also give an informed insight into how their fellow students perceive the library. It allows the university library to rejuvenate its brand to new students who may have had little prior experience of library use” (Walton 2010, 119) and in doing so it provides an enriching experiential learning opportunity for the student employee/peer mentor involved.

This case study focused specifically on the experience of the library peer mentors themselves and did not discuss the value the program has had for student participants in peer-led activities. That is not to say there was no value, as some collected feedback and anecdotal comments suggest that students did have a positive learning experience attending peer-led sessions. Although the number of students attending sessions have never been that high, each year saw a small increase in attendance with more sessions being offered. A future project for the library will be to conduct formal assessment based on student participant feedback. While it is important to provide an experiential learning opportunity for student peer mentors, the library must also consider the learning experience of those students attending peer-led sessions.

Conclusion

There are many possibilities to explore how student peer learning and mentorship can be incorporated into other branch libraries and elsewhere on campus, enabling library peer mentors to connect with students in ways that may not always be possible for librarians. Although librarians continue to teach course specific research and information literacy classes, they do not have the same capacity to be

embedded into the classroom as perhaps a library peer mentor might. Looking at opportunities to have peer mentors in some courses is a great way to bridge the information and content delivered by a librarian in a teaching session. Additionally, as the library continues to collaborate and partner with other units on campus, there are opportunities to consider how library peer mentors might interact with other student focused service units such as Disability Services for Students, the Aboriginal Student Centre, and the International Student Study Abroad Centre. These are areas where librarians are not typically present but certainly there is a need for library support to students who access these services. Library peer mentors could assist in some of the unique challenges these students face when using library resources and services.

Developing a library peer mentor program definitely has its challenges, but this case study highlights the value it provides to those students who volunteer to be a peer mentor. Through peer mentoring, students develop leadership, presentation, and communication skills, become active and engaged learners, and develop library and research skills while helping other students learn about the library. The benefit for library employees who work closely with the peer mentors is the opportunity to be more relevant and meaningful in the academic lives of students and to have an impact on their success by engaging with them in less traditional ways. This type of collaboration, rather than as teacher or employer, fosters a unique relationship, one that creates an opportunity for informal learning and mentoring between student and librarian.

Appendix I: Student Peer Mentorship in the Murray Library

Interview Questions:

Current and former peer mentors:

1. What made you decide to participate in the library peer mentorship program?
2. Did/Does the program and your time at the library meet your expectations?
3. Did/Does your time as a peer mentor have an impact on your overall academic experience or success? In what way?
4. Reflecting on your time as a peer mentor can you tell me about any learning or skill development that you have gained?
5. What did/do you like most about the program?
6. What did/do you like least about program?
7. Is there anything you would like to add or share about your experience as a library peer mentor?

Former peer mentors only:

8. What are you doing now?
9. Has your experience as a library peer mentor had an impact on or contributed to where you are currently in your work, education, or personal life?

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