Reference Assistance Project at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside

The Reference Assistance Project (RAP) is a program for minority students recently developed by the Library/Learning Center at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. Its immediate purpose is to improve the success rate of minority students in satisfying the library component of the university's Collegiate Skills Program. Its ultimate purpose is to increase the retention rate of minority students at the university.

Enrollment figures at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside in recent years had led the university administration to establish the goal of increasing the retention rates of minority students as a high university-wide priority. In the fall of 1980, the reference staff of the university's Library/Learning Center observed that minority students, in general, did not seem to make use of reference services to the extent that could be expected, even given their low enrollment figures. This observation led the L/LC staff to ask whether its basic library instruction program was meeting the needs of minority students. The instruction program requires all entering students to complete a self-paced workbook based on the Miriam Dudley UCLA model and to pass a library skills competency exam by the middle of the sophomore year. Research suggested that minority students, in general, were not completing the workbook and passing the competency test within the normal time frame.

Given the inhibitions that patrons typically feel in asking for help, the reference staff theorized that minority students might be particularly inhibited since the reference desk was staffed primarily by non-minority librarians. It was also suggested that, since relatively few minority students had completed the program, entering minority students lacked strong role models.

A plan was developed which called for the recruitment of minority students who had satisfied their collegiate skills library requirement and who could assist other students still completing their basic skills workbook. Librarians hoped that students would be less reluctant to approach their peers for assistance and that, furthermore, these peers would serve as positive role models. It was envisioned that the student assistants would work closely with reference librarians at the reference desk. A $500 grant was secured from a faculty development program on campus, the Center for Teaching Excellence, to implement a pilot project. This project was called the Reference Assistance Project, or RAP.

Minority students who had satisfied their collegiate skills competency requirement were identified, several were interviewed and two were hired to start in January, 1981. The grant allowed the Library/Learning Center to hire them for 12 hours/week for approximately eight weeks.

The first week was devoted to training. This consisted of reviewing the basic skills workbook, completing a short programmed instruction unit on a few ready reference sources, and participating in a role-playing session designed to prepare them for situations commonly encountered at the reference desk. In addition, the students were given instruction in handling directional questions and in taking messages for librarians. A special effort was made to teach the students to distinguish between reference questions requiring a librarian's knowledge of sources and interviewing skills, and workbook questions, for which the RAP students were primarily responsible.

The remaining seven weeks of the project were scheduled to coincide with the period when the basic skills workbook would be introduced in classes. To help integrate the RAP students into the reference process and make them feel a part of the "team," the students were given a desk close to the reference desk with a sign proclaiming, "Basic Skills Workbook Help Available Here." Name tags identified them as student reference assistants. They were urged to be aggressive in seeking out students who seemed to need assistance, rather than merely waiting to be approached.

The RAP students' close proximity to librarians on reference duty made it possible to refer patrons from one desk to the other and enabled librarians to monitor the RAP students' performance without being obvious. Any problems were discussed at the desk and suggestions for improvement were made on the spot. Meetings were held with the students each week to identify and resolve any further difficulties. Although the reference assistants' primary responsibility was to handle workbook questions, they were encouraged to observe when librarians were helping patrons with other questions which might be of interest to them.

At the end of the seventh week, the program was evaluated. The RAP students had kept statistics to show the number of contacts they had had with patrons; these figures indicated that patrons welcomed the program, since the total number of contacts at the reference desk with all those com-

pleting the workbook increased by more than 50% from the previous year. Subjective perceptions of the program were solicited from participants. The reference assistants had kept a diary to record their thoughts on the program, and entries made indicated both their increased confidence in using the Library/Learning Center and a growing interest in other facets of the library instruction program. They also reflected the seriousness with which the students approached the Reference Assistance Project.

Especially gratifying were indications that the RAP students believed the program had contributed to their personal growth. Reference librarians were uniformly impressed with the enthusiasm and business-like approach of the RAP students. They also felt that the program improved the L/LC's ability to reach students needing help in completing the workbook. Although RAP was intended to help minority students specifically, the reference assistants and librarians agreed that all students had probably benefited. Further study is planned to establish and use objective criteria to determine whether the Reference Assistance Project is actually an effective method of helping minority students to complete their library competency requirement.

A side benefit of using students as assistants was the fresh perspective they brought as they moved from receiving to providing instruction. The RAP assistants were able to point out several places in the workbook which confused students and which were changed when it was updated. They also suggested initiating tutoring sessions to help students prepare for the library skills competency exam, an idea which was implemented the following year.

Because the Library/Learning Center felt that the Reference Assistance Project had excellent potential, it was extended through the end of the school year with L/LC funds. As the semester progressed and workbook questions decreased, the RAP students handled more directional and informational questions, such as assisting patrons in using microform machines and finding periodicals on the shelves. They also worked on various projects utilizing their increased bibliographic skills, including assisting librarians in testing materials developed for advanced levels of library instruction.

The University, recognizing the potential of RAP to help realize the goal of improving minority students' effectiveness in the academic setting, provided funding the following year to continue the project indefinitely.—*Linda J. Piele and Brian Yamel.*

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Highlights of the Midwinter Meetings of the ACRL Board of Directors

The Board of Directors of the Association of College and Research Libraries met twice during the ALA Midwinter Meeting: on Sunday, January 24, 1982, and Tuesday, January 26, 1982.

Activity Model for 1990

David Kaser, chair of the Activity Model for 1990 Committee, reported to the board on the development of a statement outlining ACRL's mission, goals and objectives, and on a model describing the activities of ACRL in the 1990s. He noted that the purpose of the model was to provide a framework for the activities of ACRL as a whole, rather than limit the activities of individual ACRL units. The final draft of the activity model will appear in the May issue of *C&RL News* and will be presented to the board in Philadelphia for action.

Bibliographic Instruction

Carla Stoffle presented to the board a proposal for cosponsorship of a National Bibliographic Instruction Leadership Conference with the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. The board voted to lend advisory support to the conference and referred the proposal to the ACRL Executive Committee for final action, pending review of cosponsorship guidelines.

Chapters

The board approved the petition for the establishment of an Arizona Chapter.

Choice Editorship

The board delegated the approval of a new *Choice* editor to the ACRL Executive Committee, in view of the short time frame in which a selection must be made.

Discussion Groups

The board voted to approve the creation of three new ACRL discussion groups: an English and American Literature Discussion Group, an Extended Campus Library Services Discussion Group, and a Public Relations in Academic and Research Libraries Discussion Group.