

Wendy Holliday and Cynthia Nordgren

# Extending the reach of librarians

## Library peer mentor program at Utah State University

In January 2004, Utah State University Libraries (USU) launched its Library Peer Mentor (LPM) Program. The program was designed to hire students to assist at the reference desk and in the classroom, extending the reach of librarians. Research suggests that students often ask fellow students for help when using the library.<sup>1</sup> We wanted to use peer teaching as a way to engage USU students and make them more comfortable using USU Libraries.

### Finding peer mentors

In 2004, we had funding through USU's Undergraduate Teaching Fellows (UTF) for five LPMs to work 15 to 20 hours per week. LPMs were recruited from USU's student population through advertising in the student newspaper and posting the job in computer labs, the Honors Program office, the Academic Resource Center, and other campus locations. A committee of three librarians and one library assistant reviewed applications and interviewed students who had experience with computers and customer service, and who had a high GPA (we required a minimum of 3.0). We further narrowed the field by focusing on candidates with past UTF, tutoring, and/or library experience. In the end, we hired LPMs with majors covering the sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

### Training and the weekly seminar

The committee had to develop the LPM training quickly because of short notice of funding. We borrowed an overall approach and several exercises from Chris Neuhaus' article, "Flexibility and feedback: A new approach

to ongoing training for reference student assistants."<sup>2</sup> We created a binder with handy tips, phone numbers, articles, and exercises and asked LPMs to complete the Ohio Reference Excellence tutorial created by the Ohio Library Council.<sup>3</sup> We also planned a series of weekly seminars on customer service, the reference interview, how information is organized and accessed, database selection, and searching.

As the semester progressed, additional seminars were planned, including an introduction to technical services, using legal resources, and tours of specialized collections across campus. Formats ranged from readings and discussions to collection tours with a self-paced assignment. Highlights included exploring the Beat collection in the Fine Arts library, Jack London's books in Special Collections and Archives, and a visit to see pressed plants in the herbarium library. These latter seminars helped build LPMs' awareness of our lesser used but highly inviting collections.

LPMs rated the following training modules most useful: the library tour, customer service, database and online catalog search strategies, overviews of other departments' location and function, and online FAQs to help answer questions about library services/policies.

### At the reference desk

LPMs were scheduled at the reference desk immediately, in order to provide on-the-job

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training. At USU, each librarian has an area of expertise. We chose not to assign LPMs to a single librarian but continued with our rotated desk assignments so LPMs could benefit from a variety of subject librarians' expertise. One LPM reflected, "Because we were allowed to interact with so many specialist librarians, I've become a sort of Renaissance reference assistant." As the semester progressed, exposure to different service styles and referral expertise grew. The LPMs caught on to the reference interview quickly, and, though we conducted no formal count, we did notice many students tended to gravitate toward their peers for assistance first.

In the beginning, librarians answered reference questions to give LPMs an example of patron service. After the reference interview, we recapped how we handled the exchange and gave the LPM any extra pointers they wanted (e.g., how to search a specific database more effectively). As their confidence grew, they occasionally misdirected patrons, and librarians had to step in to gently redirect. In other cases, LPMs recommended helpful strategies that had not occurred to the librarians. LPMs were also useful in taking patrons to locate materials in the stacks, something some librarians are reluctant to do because it leaves the desk unstaffed.

### **In the classroom**

Initially, we invited LPMs to observe any library instruction class that captured their interest. A few weeks into the semester, LPMs worked as part of the library instruction team, co-teaching and offering one-on-one searching assistance to students in a variety of classes. While a librarian observed, one LPM taught a full session of business students how to find and search free law resources on the Internet. She later expressed that this teaching opportunity was a highlight of her LPM experience.

Each LPM also conducted a mini-seminar for their LPM peers and the reference librarians. This was a culminating exercise that came at the end of the semester. The LPMs chose print and/or database resources and demonstrated how to use them to address a specific

service need. Topics included: Evans Early American Imprints (digital edition), reference resources to find key facts about Thurgood Marshall, and a JSTOR search on piracy,

### **Special projects**

Time spent at the reference desk was enhanced by exposure to aspects of librarianship that lay beyond the service desk. LPMs were invited to help with a variety of "behind the scenes" research that took them away from their desk routine and offered more variety in their work day. Some projects were brief assignments, while others are still in progress. LPMs assisted librarians with an information literacy project by tracking down general education syllabi for a campus-wide review. They also assisted with reference collection management, researching distance education information requests, and a title checking project comparing USU's holdings with those of BioOne and JSTOR. One LPM helped transcribe and proofread interviews for a qualitative research project.

### **What we learned from evaluations**

In their end-of-semester evaluations, our LPMs expressed a desire for more responsibility at the desk and, particularly, in the classroom. They enjoyed the mini-seminar and recommended we have them conduct the mini-seminars earlier in the semester and do this more than once a semester: "What better way to learn than to teach someone else." They also offered suggestions for future LPM seminars, including learning about business and law sources earlier and visiting government documents to learn more about our map collection. We now realize we should ask LPMs what they want to learn and review before the semester ends. They felt their own research skills improved through the LPM experience: "I've been able to produce higher quality work this semester than I ever have before." On their reference desk experience, one LPM observed that LPMs "can offer alternative solutions to patrons' questions, which the librarian may not have considered." Another LPM remarked, "The best way we can

help is to know not the answer, but where to go to find the answer.”

### **What we learned about ourselves**

Our first glitch was not having enough time to prepare for an entire semester of seminars when spring semester started. We had about four weeks worth of readings with supplemental exercises planned, but rarely came up to this level of calm preparedness once the semester was running at full speed. The training sessions did not always run as smoothly as planned. In their end-of-semester evaluations, the LPMs mentioned how we got off to an uneven start. Scheduling around students' classes meant we sometimes had all five LPMs to disperse to two reference desks, basically overstaffing and sometimes intimidating the patrons with their eagerness to help. This led to librarians scrambling to create “special projects” to relieve congestion at the desk. While some of the projects were menial or repetitive in nature (database entry or shelf reading), they fostered a sense of remaining helpful, even when no patron was in sight, and helped alleviate some of the tedium of down time during slower desk shifts.

There was also some resistance to letting the LPMs become more independent. It took some gentle intervention by members of the committee to re-emphasize to librarians that the LPM should have a chance to try before librarians step in to help with their expertise. It was a learning process for librarians, as well as LPMs, to figure out how best to serve a patron's needs in situations where the librarian might be quicker, but the student might feel more comfortable with a peer.

One of the most positive effects of the LPM program was outreach, both in the library and across campus. We enlisted librarians outside our committee to share aspects of their work with LPMs through mini-tours and hands-on demonstrations. A wonderful sense of mutual appreciation blossomed between LPMs and librarians from all departments. LPMs learned about the important behind-the-scenes work that make libraries possible, while library staff from all departments were energized

by the enthusiasm of the peer mentors and their commitment to service. The LPMs also attended two fundraising events, serving as ambassadors for the library. The library's director of development was enthusiastic about the positive impression the LPMs made with potential donors.

### **Future for LPMs**

We will hire two new LPMs to replace two who chose not to return for academic reasons. We have invited our veteran LPMs to help plan and lead the weekly training seminars. They will also help conduct a large freshman orientation program and assist with the implementation of a new library instruction curriculum for English composition courses. In the latter program, we hope to use LPMs as discussion facilitators and tour leaders to build upon their library knowledge and the advantages of peer teaching and learning. We also hope to extend our services outside of the library by having the LPMs staff some tutorial hours in the Honors Lounge, dormitory computer labs, and other academic service centers on campus.

### **Conclusion**

Our experiences with LPMs this first semester were positive. We anticipate requesting funding to maintain the LPM program beyond the 2004–05 academic year. By remaining open to new ideas from library literature, co-workers, LPMs, and our patrons, we hope to continually expand our knowledge of how best to provide quality training for LPMs and how to make LPMs an integral part of our library team.

### **Notes**

1. George D. Kuth, “The role of the academic library in promoting student engagement in learning,” *CE&RL News* 64, no. 4 (2003): 256–82.
2. Chris Neuhaus, “Flexibility and feedback: A new approach to ongoing training for reference student assistants,” *Reference Services Review* 29, no. 1 (2001): 53–64.
3. See Ohio Reference Excellence on the Web at [www.olc.org/Ore/](http://www.olc.org/Ore/). 