

— LEARNING TOGETHER: Investigating the impact of peer research assistants at Michigan State University —

MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

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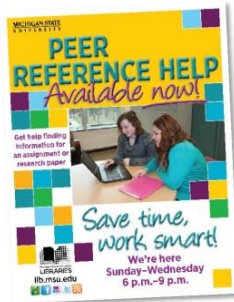
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In 2010, Michigan State University launched its residential Neighborhoods program, a system by which five student service hubs called **Engagement Centers (EC)** serve undergraduate students living in adjacent residence halls. Engagement Center services fall under the following categories:

- Academic Enrichment and Success
- Health and Wellness
- Intercultural Engagement

The MSU Libraries employs Peer Research Assistants (PRAs) who work in the ECs providing basic reference help on a drop-in basis. All other service points in the ECs collect student information by scanning an ID card or recording the student's Person Identification number (PID). PRAs began collecting PIDs in September 2014.



Does a residentially-embedded peer reference service positively impact students' academic success and retention?

Literature Review

PEER-ASSISTANCE

Bodemer (2014) presents the most comprehensive account of peer reference assistance in academic libraries from the 1970s to present. He lists early-adopter institutions and describes the experience at his own institution, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo. At CPSUSB, peer reference assistants are called LibRATS (Library Research Assistance Technicians) and preliminary results of the program point to the "pedagogical efficacy of peer-led [services]" (176). Bodemer recognizes that academic librarians are finally beginning to emphatically express that undergraduate students can provide high-quality reference assistance (165).

STUDENT DATA

Increasingly, libraries are turning to usage data and student performance indicators to determine if there is a correlation between student success and library use. Notable studies include those conducted by: Hong Kong Baptist University, University of Huddersfield, University of Wollongong, and University of Minnesota. In all instances, positive associations are observed between increased library usage and student success. Not surprisingly, some of the studies find that greater engagement with the library leads to a stronger correlation with student success (Wong & Webb, 2011a; <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/dss/>). All of the authors discuss the issue of privacy and their universities' response to harvesting confidential student data. Institutional philosophy on privacy and data usage significantly impacts the degree to which granular and identifying information can be collected and analyzed.

Data Sources

Collection period: 8/27/2014 to 5/1/2015

Primary data sources:

- PRA interaction data (Desk Tracker)
- Student Information System data (demographics, enrollment, GPA)

Secondary data sources:

- Collaborative Technology Lab (CTL) reservation data
- Interlibrary loan (ILL) data



Findings

The complexity of reference questions asked of PRAs is on par with those received at library reference desks...

Q: Where should I go to find a reputable definition for technological communication? Right now I'm using dictionary.com.

A: I directed him to Resources > Fast Facts > Encyclopedias/Dictionary. I pointed out that these will be more accurate definitions written by professionals working in the trade.

INTERACTIONS

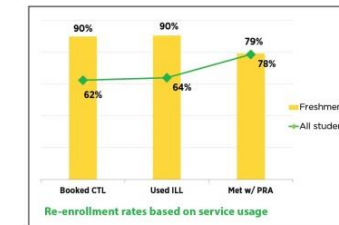
PRAs recorded **52 reference and 44 directional Qs in Desk Tracker**. However, they were only able to scan IDs for 51 unique students (62 total transactions).

Status	Students	Interactions
First-year	24	28
Sophomore	7	11
Junior	9	12
Senior	7	7
Graduate	3	3
Unknown	1	1
Total	51	62



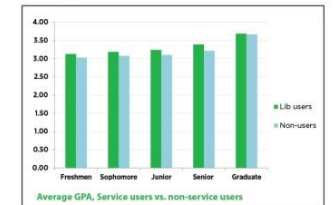
RE-ENROLLMENT

Overall, a **higher proportion of students who met with PRAs re-enrolled** for FS2015 than those who used CTLs, ILL. However, among first-years, a lower proportion of those who met with PRAs re-enrolled.



GRADE POINT AVERAGE

Overall, all students who used any of CTLs, ILL, PRAs demonstrated **higher average GPAs** than students who did not. The greatest increase in GPA from Fall to Spring terms was observed among students who met with PRAs.



Recommendations

While our findings are interesting and suggest different degrees of impact based on student level and human engagement with the library (people services vs.

book/space services), we do not have sufficient data to make generalizations. Our recommendations at this point are to:

- Further explore data
- Determine ways to increase reach of PRAs
- Consider incorporating additional data sources

ASSESSMENT in Action

This project is part of the program "Assessment in Action: Academic Libraries and Student Success" which is undertaken by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) in partnership with the Association for Institutional Research and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities. The program, a cornerstone of ACRL's Value of Academic Libraries initiative, is made possible by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.