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

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In 2010, Michigan State University launched its residential/neighborhood books program, a system by which five student services hubs called Engagement Centers (EC) serve undergraduate students living in adjacent residence halls. Engagement centers serve all 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 services 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**

Biedemer (2014) presents the most comprehensive account of peer reference assistance in academic libraries from the 1970s to present. He lists early adopters institutions and describes the experience at his own institution, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo. At CPSU, peer reference assistants are called LARBAS (Library Reference Assistance Technicians) and preliminary results of the program point to the pedagogical efficacy of peer-led services (154). Biedemer recognizes that academic librarians are finally beginning to emphatically express that undergraduate students can provide high-quality reference assistance (148).

**STUDENT DATA**

Increasingly, libraries are training-to-use 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, 2011). A study conducted by the author (personal communication) found that there was a more accurate alignment witnessed by peer-assisted work in the library.

**Findings**

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

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**Data Sources**

Primary data sources:
- PRA interaction data (Desk Tracker)
- Student Information System data (demographics, enrollment, GPA)
- Interlibrary loan (ILL) data
- Library transactions
- Library association
- Other roles library association (course delivery, interlibrary loan)
- Other library data

**Re-enrollment**

Overall, a higher proportion of students who met with PRAs re-enrolled for Fall 2015 than those who used CTA’s, IL. However, among first-years, a lower proportion of those who met with PRAs re-enrolled.

**Recommendations**

While our findings are interesting and suggest different degrees of impact based on student level and human engagement with the library (people vs. book/space services), we do not have sufficient data to make generalizations. Our recommendations at this point are:

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

**INTERACTIONS**

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**GRADES**

Overall, all students who used any of CTA’s, IL, PRAs demonstrated higher average GPAs than students who did not. The greatest increase in GPA from Fall to Spring was observed among students who met with PRAs.