

“Once a Library Ambassador, Always a Library Ambassador!” Using Peer Mentoring to Integrate the Library into the First-Year Academic Experience and Beyond

Katharin Peter

Introduction

In contrast to the librarian-as-expert pedagogical model, peer-mentoring provides for a collaborative learning environment where students can be both experts and learners. For libraries, such initiatives while relatively inexpensive and straightforward to implement, can have far-reaching outcomes: by empowering student representatives with leadership opportunities, libraries can encourage a sense of pride and ownership in the students so that they will represent the library to their peers and be peer mentors not only for the term of their appointment but on an ongoing basis. This paper will present the results of one-year pilot peer-mentoring program at the University of Southern California (USC) in which a cohort of incoming freshmen were appointed to serve as Library Ambassadors to the Residence Halls and tasked with promoting library resources and services to their peers, serving as first-responders for library-related questions in their residence halls, and independently developing capstone projects designed to promote the library to other students.

Review of Literature

Academic libraries have long relied on student workers to perform a variety of operational duties, such as shelving books and staffing circulation desks. In ad-

dition, several libraries have embraced students' potential to act as peer mentors and library advocates in a variety of roles within the library and across campus. Most common in the current literature, students have been trained to staff library reference desks as peer information counselors—in some cases, as part of diversity initiatives¹ or in response to budget cuts.² At Utah State University, for example, Library Peer Mentors were hired to “extend the reach of librarians” and assisted with reference and instruction activities.³ At the University of Lincoln Library, Peer-Assisted Learners were hired to answer “first-line enquiries” and promoted library services and resources to their peers through a variety of additional activities including developing promotional materials and conducting presentations.⁴ In other libraries, individual students have been tasked to serve as library liaisons or representatives undertaking various duties including planning library events,⁵ developing online tutorials and research guides,⁶ and, in the case of Elsevier's Scopus™ Student Ambassador Program, marketing a specific library database to other students.⁷ A few libraries have employed student-led marketing projects with various peer-mentoring components—from student “Street Team” volunteers using guerilla marketing techniques to promote the library,⁸ to more

Katharin Peter is the Social Sciences Data Librarian at the University of Southern California and was the Program Coordinator for the USC Libraries Library Ambassadors to the Residence Halls Pilot Program, email: kpeter@usc.edu

formalized collaborations with undergraduate marketing classes⁹ and a student chapter of the American Advertising Federation¹⁰ in which participating students developed and implemented library marketing campaigns.

Library student organizations¹¹ and advisory groups¹² have also employed peer mentoring to varying degrees. Taking advantage of existing infrastructures, a few libraries reported forming partnerships with campus writing centers and peer tutoring programs in order to offer library research strategies alongside subject-specific tutoring services¹³ or to train class-linked peer writing tutors to provide library research assistance.¹⁴ While there are many instances in the literature of librarians outreaching to or embedding in residence halls by, for example, offering research workshops,¹⁵ working with freshmen learning communities,¹⁶ and living in the residence halls as Faculty-in-Residence,¹⁷ little could be found in the current literature on the deliberate use of students as library peer mentors within the residence halls. Of note, at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, an undergraduate student was trained to serve as a "library first responder" to her Living Learning Community in order to assist residents with research when the In-House Librarian was not available.¹⁸

Program Design

The USC Libraries Library Ambassadors to the Residence Halls Pilot Program aimed to achieve greater library integration with the campus community by establishing a direct and robust connection with freshmen in the residence halls. While many peer-mentoring programs rely on continuing or advanced students to mentor newer students, this program recruited incoming freshmen to serve as peer mentors to other incoming freshmen.

The pilot program included elements found in many of the programs described in the literature but sought to differentiate the Ambassadors from student reference assistants and peer tutors by emphasizing leadership aspects including student-initiated library outreach and promotional activities. To that end, Ambassadors were provided an introduction to the library and trained in research basics but were not expected to staff the reference desk or provide in-depth research support. Instead, Ambassadors served as first responders for library-related questions

in their residence halls—primarily assisting students with Quick Search (USC Libraries' discovery interface) and directing students to other library resources and services such as course reserves, Ask-a-Librarian, web-based research guides, and group study spaces. Unique to this pilot, Ambassadors were required to complete individually-developed capstone projects designed to promote the library to other freshmen. Further differentiating the Ambassadors from hourly student workers, Ambassadors were appointed for the academic year and received a \$300 stipend each semester with disbursements tied to specific capstone project deliverables.

Beyond representing the library to their peers, Ambassadors were informally tasked with bringing first-year student perspectives and feedback to the library. Other duties included attending freshmen-level information literacy workshops to talk about the library and the Ambassador Program, staffing library orientation events, and helping spread the word about upcoming library programs—especially those geared toward undergraduates. Ambassadors were required to log all Ambassador-related activities and efforts as well as any research or library-related questions they received from students. Activity logs were shared with the Program Coordinator via a Google spreadsheet. The short-term success and impact of the pilot program was broadly assessed through analysis of the activity logs, evaluation of the capstone projects, and Ambassador exit interviews.

Implementation

A \$5,000 USC Libraries Dean's Challenge Grant was awarded in January 2011 to fund five Library Ambassadors to the Residence Halls for the 2011-12 academic year.¹⁹ Program planning took place during the spring and summer and included focus groups and interviews with current students. Recruiting of applicants was conducted primarily during the university's summer orientations for incoming freshmen. Applications were due prior to the end of summer so that interviews could be scheduled and conducted during the first week of the fall semester. Ambassador training was completed during the first five weeks of classes. So that capstone project work would not compete with the Ambassadors' final exams, project proposals were due prior to the Thanksgiving holiday. For this reason and also to allow other students to benefit from the capstone project outcomes prior to the end

of the school year, projects were to be completed by the midpoint of the spring semester.

Partway through the planning process, Felicia Palsson, then Distance Learning and Outreach Librarian and second author on the original grant proposal, left USC. Sara Tompson, Head of Instruction and Orientation Services, and Chris Hines, Leavey Information Commons Manager and a former USC student, agreed to join the project at the start of the fall semester. Grant funds were used for Ambassadors' stipends, to create branding and promotional materials, and to purchase food for training sessions and other significant group meetings. Remaining funds were made available to Ambassadors by proposal for capstone project supplies.

Recruiting

As a pilot project, initial recruiting efforts were modest and included: employing social media via the USC Libraries' Twitter and Facebook pages, placing promotional fliers within the USC Libraries and at university orientation events, and providing a brief overview of the program to all incoming freshmen who attended the optional library orientation workshops during the university's summer orientations. Promotional efforts emphasized leadership opportunities, capstone projects as resume-worthy accomplishments, getting an edge in academic studies by improving research skills, and, of course, the stipend. Applicants were directed to review the program website detailing specific program expectations and Ambassador commitments prior to submitting a letter of interest and resume. Fifteen applications were received. Finalists were selected based on leadership experiences and qualities, commitment to the position, interest in mentoring peers, and communication skills. Ultimately, five students were appointed to serve as Ambassadors to three residential colleges and one residence hall.²⁰

Training and Team Building

Two training sessions were conducted and included team-building activities, library orientations and tours, and hands-on information literacy and library research workshops. While the first training session focused on clarifying the role of the Ambassadors in the residence halls, developing research competencies, and identifying strategies for responding to peers' questions, the second training session aimed to develop student goals for the direction of the pro-

gram. Specifically, based on the tours and trainings they received, Ambassadors were asked to identify a cohesive message about the USC Libraries highlighting the resources and services they thought would be most relevant to their fellow freshmen. Ambassadors identified four areas as priorities in their outreach:

1. Quick Search,
2. Ask-a-Librarian services,
3. Subject-specific resources (including subject librarians, research databases, and research guides), and
4. Library spaces and equipment.

As a group, Ambassadors brainstormed strategies for promoting themselves and the USC Libraries within their residence halls such as, networking with the residence hall advisors and faculty masters, creating fliers and handouts, and creating a Facebook page for the program. To encourage the development of a team identity, Ambassadors were given Friends of the USC Libraries t-shirts as well as placards identifying them as Library Ambassadors to place on their dorm room doors. At the completion of training, the Ambassadors were announced via Libwire, the USC Libraries' blog.²¹

Capstone Projects

Once initial training was completed, the program focus shifted, for the most part, to the development of the Ambassadors' capstone projects. The capstone prompt challenged the Ambassadors to each design a project to promote library resources and services in a way that would appeal to other freshmen. While Ambassadors were given free rein to propose any type of project, each Ambassador chose to organize an event. A rubric for evaluating the capstone projects was developed addressing uniqueness and creativity in design, accuracy in representing the USC Libraries, and evidence of interest from other students. Ambassadors were expected to spend at least 30 hours planning, promoting, and implementing their projects.

To guide them in developing cohesive and achievable proposals, Ambassadors were given a one-page template to complete prior to receiving the first stipend disbursement. Complete proposals included a project summary and detailed: how the project would positively promote the library; the specific resources, collections, spaces, and/or services the project would promote; the proposed course of action including a list of steps to be completed; planned promotional

efforts for encouraging peer participation; potential obstacles and permissions needed; and requests for funding. Individual proposals were developed over the course of six weeks via one-on-one meetings with the Program Coordinator as well as group meetings in which the Ambassadors were expected to present their project proposals and provide feedback on the proposals developed by their peer ambassadors.

Outcomes and Assessment

While long-term program impact could not be assessed at the time of publication, student activity logs, completed capstone projects, and Ambassador exit interviews allow for evaluation of the short-term success and potential of the program.

Capstone Projects

For their capstone projects, each Ambassador chose to plan an event that would highlight key areas of the library collections, services, and/or spaces. Events included: a film-making seminar, two scavenger-hunt style competitions, a dinner program featuring stories and presentations by librarians and archivists, and a tea-party built around a viewing of the USC Libraries' Cassady Lewis Carroll Collection. Attendance at the events varied with between 3 and 37 students participating. A summary of the projects, including the student-created movie, was posted on the USC Libraries' blog.²²

While the events ranged in scope and quality, the most successful event, an Amazing Race inspired scavenger hunt, suggests the strong potential of student-created events and promotions to instill excitement among other students as well as enthusiasm among the library staff involved. In this case, teams of students raced across campus looking for clues in five library branches and completing tasks highlighting a range of services, collections, and spaces in a fun, quick, and competitive atmosphere. In this case, the effective use of social media helped promote attendance: each team registered to compete in advance via a Facebook event page that required they tag their teammate in a post and, thus, extended the reach of the event promotion.

Activity Logs

The Ambassadors' activity logs provide some evidence in support of the peer-mentoring components of the program. Ambassadors reported fielding research and

other library-related questions as well as proactively outreaching to students in their residence halls. For example, one Ambassador wrote, "Informed a student that Leavey was open 24 hours. She was studying in the hallway late at night for a midterm and looked uncomfortable." Another example, "Informed students in my Bob Dylan freshman seminar that they can get Dylan CDs at the music library and listen to them for free." Further, anecdotal evidence from the activity logs indicates that other students felt comfortable approaching the Ambassadors in a variety of settings to ask about the library. For example, one Ambassador wrote, "At lunch, a student noticed my Friends of the Library t-shirt and asked me what the shirt is for. We ended up having a conversation about the Library Ambassadors and the resources available at Leavey Library. He wrote down my phone number in case he ever needed to contact me with questions." Similarly, another Ambassador wrote, "I was spotted at the dining hall by one of the students from the Writing 140 class I talked to earlier that day, and we talked a little more about the role of a library ambassador and a few things about Doheny library."

Exit Interviews

At the end of the appointment, exit interviews were conducted in order to solicit feedback for improving the program while, at the same time, encourage the Ambassadors to end their appointments with positive feelings about the library. Thus, Ambassadors were asked to recount a positive experience they were taking away from the program as well as aspects that had caused them anxiety. Much of the exit interviews were spent discussing the challenges, successes, and takeaways of the capstone project planning and implementation. General findings indicated a desire for more team building activities and more formalized support from the library such as, additional promotion of the Ambassadors on the library webpage, in printed library materials, and in library spaces. The Ambassadors especially enjoyed (and excelled at) the activities where they represented the library publicly, such as at orientation events, and sought more of these opportunities. While, for the most part, the Ambassadors indicated the capstone projects as their top takeaway, several Ambassadors agreed that they would have felt more confident in planning their capstone projects if they had first had a trial run—perhaps by planning a smaller project as a group. Two

Ambassadors noted that their dorm outreach efforts waned as the capstone project planning began to take up more of their time. All of the Ambassadors indicated that they believed the position would benefit them in their future studies and/or by providing relevant experience for building their resumes.

To gauge the potential long-term impact of the program, as part of the exit interviews, the Ambassadors were asked how they thought they might use the library over the next three years. While not specifically asked, almost all of the Ambassadors indicated that they were open to continuing their involvement with the program and/or they would still informally assist friends and other students who came to them with questions about library research. As one Ambassador stated, "Once a Library Ambassador, Always a Library Ambassador."

Reflections and Future Directions

A successful library peer mentoring program must be tailored to the culture of the institution, needs of the students, and mission of the library. In the case of this pilot program, creating a mission statement that clearly defined the role of the Ambassadors within the libraries and in the residence halls was invaluable in helping set program priorities, guiding decision making, getting buy-in from library staff, and, generally, championing for the program. Recommendations for continuing such a program at USC include:

- Providing more structure to the program especially, setting regular meetings, identifying ongoing Ambassador responsibilities, and creating additional team-building activities;
- Increasing Ambassador involvement with existing library events and programming;
- Increasing efforts to develop program partnerships within the USC Libraries, in the residence halls, and across campus;
- Increasing the number of student-led initiatives in the residence hall spaces; and
- Expanding the program to include more Ambassadors in additional residence halls.

Of note, while relatively inexpensive to implement, the program required a significant time commitment from the Program Coordinator and other library staff. To assist with program continuity and management duties, an Ambassador from the current cohort could be hired to help with future cohorts. Long-term impact of the pilot program might be eval-

uated through follow-up surveys or interviews with the Ambassadors as they progress in their studies.

Overall, the USC Libraries Library Ambassadors to the Residence Halls Pilot Program was a fun, instructive, and rewarding experience for the Program Coordinator and other library staff involved. While the program clearly sparked interest and enthusiasm among staff within the USC Libraries, preliminary and anecdotal evidence indicate that the pilot program also sparked interest and enthusiasm from students in the residence halls and suggests the potential of such a program to contribute meaningfully to broader efforts to integrate the library into the first-year academic experience and beyond.

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Notes

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