OPENING DOORS FOR LIBRARY ENGAGEMENT WITH STUDENT PEER RESEARCH CONSULTANTS

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INTRODUCTION

Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) models have become increasingly popular in classrooms and supplemental instruction services as high impact practices that benefit student learning.\(^1\) These models, in which students take a prominent role in service provision and outreach, have recently taken hold in libraries as a way to extend the reach of library services while centering and improving the student experience.\(^2\) However, administering such programs is not without its own challenges; they can be “time-consuming and staff-intensive, there are some questions about the efficacy of such programs, and PAL can sometimes give rise to librarian anxieties.”\(^3\) To ensure that programs are effective, sustainable, and appropriately supported, it is necessary to establish clear priorities and objectives. For Seattle University Library’s Student Peer Research Consultant (SPRC) program, this meant keeping the scope grounded in concepts of care both for peer leaders and peer learners. Our fledgling program was put to the test during the global COVID-19 crisis and political climate of 2020 when anxiety and trauma were heightened, and our services underwent rapid transformation. The initial focus we had on care served as a guiding principle throughout, allowing for a successful program implementation during an exceedingly challenging time and suggesting future possibilities for student-focused library services.

BACKGROUND

We began working on this program in 2018 under the direction of the Director, Library Student Success Initiatives, and officially launched in Fall of 2019. In its current iteration, the program consists of a small cohort of seven students working from the Library’s Research Services office to provide peer support and general help with library research through drop-in services, classroom support and targeted outreach.

The program grew out of a need to address multiple challenges. Primary among these was demand for increased student engagement at our institution. Seattle University is a

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private Jesuit University in the Capitol Hill district of Seattle, consisting of nine colleges and offering a combination of bachelor’s degree, graduate degree, and certificate programs. With a need to support many different student populations in these programs, recent strategic planning efforts in both the library and the University called for increased commitment to student success and the student experience, with emphasis on engagement and belonging. The Library’s most recent Strategic Plan, developed in 2018, included the strategic direction to “ensure student retention and success.”4 Goals following this direction included the further development of Learning Commons services, as well as the provision of “targeted, personalized outreach of services” to students. Similarly, Seattle University’s Strategic Directions, launched in 2020, included goals to enhance the student experience and strengthen professional formation.5

As we considered strategies for fulfilling these commitments, we found ourselves in the familiar position of trying to do so with limited resources. Our library typically employs 9-10 full time faculty who serve the campus as subject liaisons in addition to other functional roles, with a smaller subset housed in the Research Services department. While use of traditional reference desk services have declined over time, our public-facing services have grown to include increased demand for research consultations and instruction sessions as departmental programs and curricula continue to grow and evolve, while other campus and library priorities continue to compete for time and attention.

The concept of peer-assisted learning service models excited us for its potential to empower student leaders and improve students’ experiences with the library. Libraries have also reported benefits in terms of the flexibility these programs afford for librarians “to attend meetings, participate in committees and cater to projects that cannot be done at the research desk.”6 This seemed to provide an appealing solution to the challenge of improving student engagement experiences within a limited workload capacity, but we were concerned about hiring students to perform labor typically provided by experienced librarians, and the risks that presented both in terms of exploiting students and devaluing the expertise of librarians. In order to differentiate reference librarians from student research consultants in terms of work expectations, we followed the recommendation/model described

![Figure 1. READ Scale Data from 1/2020–3/2021](image)
by O’Kelly, Garrison and Torreano, in which “students...serve as consultants rather than reference assistants or teaching substitutes”. Practically speaking, this meant that we needed to set different expectations for consultations with students and librarians based on the difficulty and complexity of questions answered, as well as the tone of reference interactions.

Research Services had staffed students at our Information Desk, but their role had been strictly directional and very rarely included help with research beyond occasional known-item searching. Our reference services at the time were largely drop-in and appointment-based consultations provided by our Library faculty via face-to-face meetings, phone, email and virtual chat service. We reviewed a year’s worth of our recorded reference transaction data from these services using the READ scale to rank questions by difficulty and found a large proportion of general research questions that did not require sophisticated expertise to answer.

These typically reflected situations where students were just getting started with research or were encountering common roadblocks in the research process. We determined that those types of interactions would be a good fit for student research consultants, as they would not require advanced library training but would benefit from a friendly and supportive approach. With peers available to discuss research questions and draw from their own experiences with similar assignments, we hypothesized that students would be less likely to feel intimidated by the Library and we might see an increase in these types of questions.

EXISTING MODELS

As we began planning for this program, we started by looking internally at what the other partners in our Library’s Learning Commons were already doing successfully. The McGoldrick Learning Commons, brings together different student support services that have distinct identities, spaces and purposes, but share the use of classrooms and study spaces and collaborate with each other through membership in a Learning Commons Partners (LCP) Steering Committee. Partners include Library Research Services, a Writing Center, a Learning Assistance Program that facilitates individual tutoring and focused study groups, a Math Lab, and a Media Production Center. With the exception of Research Services, each of these areas already had student consultants, tutors, mentors, and study group leaders embedded in their regular operations. For the Writing Center, Learning Assistance Programs and the Math Lab, peer learning was already central to their operations. Conversations with our LCP colleagues early in the planning process helped to shape our expectations for recruitment, training and service delivery; and aim for consistency and cohesiveness among programs.

We additionally reached out to other University Libraries with similar programs, many of which were initially identified from Peer-assisted Learning in Academic Libraries. The models we looked at varied by scale and approach, with students taking on a number of different roles in different libraries. These conversations informed our decisions for how to integrate student research consultants into library services, with a primary focus on drop-in reference and secondary support for library instruction and research guides. Speaking to other institutions about their experiences also helped us to plan for stability and sustainability, and to think carefully about what level of staffing we would need to support the program in its early phases and maintain it over time.

CURA PERSONALIS

A concept that helped to ground us in planning for program sustainability and goals consistent with Learning Commons practices and our University’s Mission, Vision and Values was that of "cura personalis", or 'care for the whole person'. This is interpreted as a combination of honoring the unique worth of individuals; considering multiple dimensions of health (physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual) that must be attended to holistically; and taking into account the whole of one's experience including their community, history and culture.
connecting this concept to our goals of enhancing student engagement with research and fostering professional formation for peer leaders, we knew we would need to center care in our training, onboarding, mentoring, and evaluation processes. Since professional formation was a desired outcome of our program, we needed to identify the types of support our student consultants would need, and make sure to provide it actively and sustainably. We also needed to make sure that consultants were prepared to view peer learners through the same lens. It was important that care for students be a key component of both the services we were training students to provide, as well as for the experience of the students we were hiring.

DEVELOPMENT

To develop the program, we needed to establish some fundamentals. First of all, what to call it? We settled on Student Peer Research Consultants, which we frequently refer to as SPRCs, or “sparks” as a nod to the program’s goal of sparking engagement and community. We established program objectives to help us set goals and guide future program assessment, as well as learning outcomes for SPRCs on which to center our training and performance evaluations.

Our program objectives were threefold: we wanted to expand the impact and reach of Library Research and Instruction services, create early positive connections to the Library and Learning Commons for students, and connect our effort to broader University initiatives related to student learning and engagement. Our learning outcomes for students who were employed as SPRCs consisted of three main areas: we wanted them to be able to successfully navigate the administrative and professional expectations of the job, build expertise in library research and information literacy, and develop meta-awareness of how both professional and library-based skills could be transferable to other aspects of their lives and future careers.

From this early framework, we were careful to define program expectations so we could accurately budget for resources. We established a project timeline, with time allocated for planning, recruitment, phased training and implementation, as well as assessment. We also budgeted for expenses, calculating the cost of salaries for student employees per quarter and additional expenses needed for outreach and promotion. We established a SPRC leadership team of three librarians, with each taking on specific roles and allocating time to support the program, and designed an assessment plan to keep us on track. The active development period took from June to December 2019, and by the end of November, we had hired and began to train our first SPRC cohort.

Throughout this process, we solicited regular input from other Research Services librarians and other Learning Commons colleagues to the extent they were able to contribute. We asked questions connected to workflow and service gaps and invited team members to participate in “design sprints” over the Summer Quarter of 2019, to develop documentation and materials, such as those above. This helped ensure continuity of service, set expectations for workload and contribution, and generated new ideas and insight from key stakeholders. Certainly, setting clear expectations for service was of high importance, as it helped library faculty understand how they could interact and collaborate with our SPRCs once the program began. In a way, it was early relationship building as it helped generate buy-in and interest in the program pre-launch. Once services were deployed, we were able to more easily incorporate the Library faculty into activities like shadowing/mentoring during our training and creating a generally friendly and comfortable team atmosphere for our new student employees.

Collaboration with Learning Commons Partners turned out to be invaluable for the development of the program. Partners provided advice and examples from their own peer mentor programs, and assisted with recruitment by providing examples of job ads, rubrics and interview questions, and participating in the initial round of interviews. Similarly, Partners assisted us with training activities and welcomed collaboration, which enabled us to incorporate different Learning Commons services into training and also provide opportunities for SPRCs to train in partnership with Learning Commons student employees. Throughout, they helped us to develop services consistent with existing campus models, steeped in the value of the whole person.
TRAINING

Designing training and mentoring activities is a critical component of any student consultant program. We designated a librarian with experience and expertise in instructional design to take the lead in building a compelling and complex training program. Our previously established learning outcomes were central to the design vision of the program and anchored the training activities.

The training for our first cohort was ‘high-touch’ in that supervision, mentorship and guidance were all built into the training process. We used Canvas to design a course-like training experience with reflections, assignments, and lessons that were reinforced in weekly team meetings and periodic check-ins. At the end of their first year, we interviewed each of the SPRCs, and made revisions for subsequent cohorts based on their feedback. This feedback about training was overwhelmingly in favor of shadowing as the most beneficial way to gain confidence and learn skills required of an SPRC, such as database searching and reference interview skills, as well as quickly developing institutional knowledge. These interviews provided valuable insight into program strengths as well as where there was a need to grow or change aspects of our program to support our students’ success as peer mentors.

The second cohort began employment in the Fall of 2020, at which point we were all working remotely, necessitating more ‘face-time’ with SPRC trainees so that there would still be a group dynamic and a sense of belonging for the students. To facilitate the changes required by COVID-19 planning and recommended by SPRC feedback, we turned more fully to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) theory\(^\text{13}\) and employing multiple means of representation and access for concepts and training. We migrated materials to a newly developed SharePoint site, used Zoom-based discussions, readings, shadowing and synchronous workshops instead of Canvas, and sought to engage more directly with the team. The schedule was also made more flexible to accommodate for the difficulties of a remote orientation and training program.

SERVICE IMPLEMENTATION

Based on our original timeline, our first cohort was designed to begin delivering patron-facing services in Winter and Spring of 2020. By mid-March, in response to the growing COVID-19 pandemic, our campus and Library made the decision to pivot our services to entirely online delivery. Fortunately, our training program had included practice and shadowing using our LibraryH3lp chat service interface, and SPRCs had been reviewing chat transcripts as part of their training. It was straightforward transitioning SPRCs to staff our local virtual reference queue alongside the Library faculty during the day. To improve communication and collaboration, we created a dedicated Microsoft Teams channel to facilitate conversation during shifts. The students were enthusiastic about the change, as they had enjoyed the less-stressful virtual interactions in the training sequence and appreciated that backup would still be available via the Teams channel for actively chatting staff. In many ways, transitioning services meant resetting our students’ expectations of their work, and our focus became looking closely at chat as our primary point of contact, along with supplemental projects to keep them fully engaged. However, the transition also enabled us to sustain and even grow the outward-facing support services of our department during this critical time. By shifting our staffing to chat and adding SPRCs to the calendar, we could now double and triple-staff our busiest hours, which meant more requests for chat could be answered simultaneously. By the time our second cohort of SPRCs completed training, we were able to extend hours to include a Sunday shift, which expanded our services by an additional 6 hours and offered a level of availability we had not been able to provide in the past. The expansion of our chat services, while not a replacement for in-person services, were notable in that campus engagement with Research Services dramatically increased.

### TABLE 2

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<th>Limited Research Services Chat—Responses by Lemieux Librarians</th>
<th>SPRC Program Begins—Responses by SPRCs and Lemieux Librarians</th>
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NAVIGATING CHANGE

The sudden shift of services, and the social, political and health crises that defined 2020, meant that we had to carefully devote time to wellbeing and self-care, and by Spring of 2020 we had begun to informally incorporate trauma-informed practices into our approach. One of the first things we noted was the impact current events were having on students’ ability to focus and participate in team meetings. We responded by normalizing expectations of taking time ‘offline’ for self-care, allowing team members to turn off cameras during meetings, and creating open spaces for virtual discussion and community instead of heavily agenda-based meetings. We also relaxed our procedures for dropping and trading shifts, to make it as easy as possible for our students to take time away from the screen, or away from work, as needed. Since we were double-staffing chat shifts with Librarians as backup, students could request time off when needed without having to worry about service disruptions. They simply had to notify a supervisor, and we would communicate the change to any impacted staff.

The shift to primarily chat-based services changed our plans for assessment and evaluation. One of the unexpected benefits is that we were able to collect and review chat transcripts for our first formal evaluation process, which concluded in Winter of 2021. Supervisors met with each SPRC individually to review their performance and make suggestions for growth, based on their chat performance and feedback from Librarians who had collaborated with them on instruction and research guides. These conversations provided an opportunity to discuss SPRCs’ experiences and future goals, maintaining the focus on professional formation. The insights from these evaluations will be used to help match SPRCs with projects and activities that support their professional and personal interests, while also providing us with qualitative feedback we can use to make adjustments to service delivery and improvements to the program as a whole.

OUTCOMES

Our assessment of the program’s first year showed positive outcomes for the effectiveness of services and the experience of SPRCs. The dramatic increase in our virtual reference transactions gave SPRCs the opportunity to
assist with a high number of known-item searches and requests for help getting started with research, in addition to directional assistance. SPRCs also served as a key referral point, making initial contact with library patrons and directing them to appropriate librarians or offices when additional expertise was needed. As a result, we were able to maintain high levels of research service despite the many disruptions of 2020.

In addition to virtual reference, students were able to provide virtual, face-to-face peer service by visiting classes via Zoom. These classes were identified through an engagement initiative developed in partnership with the University Core with the intention of connecting new students to academic support resources. For six participating classes, SPCs met with small groups to promote Research Services, share tips and answer questions as students worked on introductory research assignments.

Outside of classes, SPCs helped to increase student engagement with library services through dedicated outreach efforts and promotion of services through our website and campus communication channels. SPCs additionally participated in several drop-in events co-hosted with Learning Commons Partners to support research and writing assignments at typically high-stress times during the quarter, and successful partnerships were forged with groups targeting specific student communities, including academic units such as the Social Work Department and campus offices such as the Indigenous Peoples Institute.

Based on our evaluation of chat transcripts, observations of classes and research consultations, and feedback from individual SPCs, we were particularly pleased with outcomes regarding the SPC experience and professional formation. SPCs' confidence in library use and ability to teach library skills to others increased throughout the year. We observed that the SPCs made good decisions about when to answer questions themselves and when to make transfers to Librarians or other Library service points, though many still expressed a desire for further training on referrals.

Through our team meetings, formal evaluations, and supplemental training, we made sure to emphasize transferable skills such as customer service, problem-solving, teaching and technology skills throughout the program. By maintaining regular communication, we were able to follow up with students who had questions or points of confusion, such as early struggles with defining and implementing referral procedures.

By virtue of our cohort model, we have witnessed the building of a supportive and enthusiastic community. SPCs provide peer support to fellow students, but they have also been excellent colleagues who have directly improved the Library's internal culture by providing the Research Services team with a valuable student perspective. As part of our evaluation process, we solicited comments from the Library faculty, and found that the faculty were impressed and appreciative of the SPCs' work on projects, willingness to step into instruction and other supporting roles, and in their ability to competently handle difficult interactions through our chat services. They have likewise been strong contributors to team projects and in departmental meetings. Further, there is a pattern of self-directed and proactive engagement with their roles and excitement about being involved in helping determine the direction the program takes moving forward. SPCs have excellent insight into what services will best benefit and engage their peers; creating space for them to contribute to things such as outreach, training, and special projects has only added value to level and quality of student and campus engagement.

**FUTURE GOALS**

The SPC program has been enthusiastically integrated into the Library and Learning Commons, with plans to continue in the upcoming 2021-22 school year. We are facing another round of difficult transitions, as our program will see five of our seven consultants graduate from their undergraduate and graduate programs at the end of Spring 2021. We plan to hire our third cohort of students in the Spring to provide adequate time to train, mentor and onboard the new team before the end of the school year. As peer mentorship is an important part of the program and onboarding process, this will ensure that new SPCs are able to join and engage with the full team and learn from experienced SPCs before they graduate. Inspired by colleagues from Washington State University, we plan to create a new Senior SPC role to provide growth opportunities for returning SPCs, further facilitate internal peer mentorship, and help with some of the administrative duties of the program.

Since the implementation of the program, we have lost one of the three faculty supporting roles for the program and are hoping to be able to bring in an additional faculty or staff member to support the continued
growth of the program. The work involved in managing the program is multifaceted and requires different areas of expertise and attention, including administrative responsibilities such as oversight of budget, planning and day-to-day operations, development and deployment of training, individual supervision and support, curriculum integration and campus outreach, among others. While we have explored different options for balancing these responsibilities, additional staffing is necessary to maintain the program at its current level.

In order to continue fulfilling the goals of the program, we plan to expand outreach and engagement activities between our student consultants and campus groups and departments, with specific attention to underrepresented or underserved groups on campus. The intention of the program has always been to broaden our engagement with students directly, and with a likely return to campus in Fall, there will be new opportunities for collaboration with programs and departments that focus on the entry experience for students. This includes students enrolled in the University Core programs, which serve first and second year students, as well as programs that target incoming transfer students.

We also intend to further our understanding and practice of trauma-informed care in our training and services as a natural expansion of the cura personalis philosophy. We’ve begun taking steps in this direction in a few ways. First, we turned to one of our consultants, a graduate student in the Social Work department who has done coursework and research in this area. They volunteered to present some of the core concepts and to help our team become more fluent in this area. We then, at their suggestion, invited a member of the Social Work Faculty to present their research to the Library Staff at large, with student employees from across the Library invited to attend as well. This session will be followed up by additional programming and educational materials for our student consultant teams across the Learning Commons. Our overarching goal is to continue to maintain our focus on ‘centering care’ for our SPRCs, and to mentor them to ‘center care’ in their work with their fellow students.

FUTURE CHALLENGES
As we plan future directions for the program, we are mindful of potential challenges facing us in the upcoming year. As with many college and university libraries, we face fiscal challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and its continuing impact on higher education. We will need to be mindful of a range of factors on budget and staffing, including increasing minimum wages, coverage needs, potential changes to our staffing models, and the cost of additional support staff. As our program has incorporated room for projects and professional development, it requires a balance of ‘set’ working hours, and ‘floating’ working hours. It is likely we will need to continue to carefully set limits, to make sure we maintain our budget estimates.

We are also examining the staffing changes we may need to implement in Fall of 2021 to meet student expectations for service as we anticipate a return to on-campus instruction. We expect that we will have a wide variance of expectations from our students that will require us to reevaluate how we deploy our services. Students who have experienced the Library prior to our moving services online may have specific expectations for those services to return, while new First Year students and returning Sophomores who have never physically been to the building may have entirely different expectations of Library support and services. Some students may continue to prefer entirely remote services while others may be eager to engage in-person. We will need to be intentional about the ways in which we integrate our SPRCs into the student experience both on and off campus in the coming years.

Finally, with the anticipated shift back to campus, we will need to again revisit our concepts of care. Students will likely be facing difficult transitions of their own, and as with many Library staff, we will need to negotiate our spaces and services to ensure that our teams feel safe and that our services are in compliance with CDC, State and Campus guidelines for safety and hygiene. We expect to be employing multiple service points and recognize that students who are comfortable delivering one level of service may be uncomfortable with another, so we will need to intentionally include them in our planning processes.

CONCLUSION
Establishing a Student Peer Research Consultant program resulted in increased student engagement with the Library, while also supporting the professional formation and information literacy competencies of our own
consultants. Investing in process and planning contributed to the overall stability and sustainability of the program, while a focus on care for students shaped its purpose and kept it grounded during a time of rapid change. By supporting the experience of student research consultants and mentoring them to be successful, both in the position and in their future professional career paths, libraries can provide targeted student support that ripples outward to the wider student community.

NOTES
9. For further details, see https://www.seattleu.edu/learningcommons/
11. See: https://www.seattleu.edu/about/mission/, these are also echoed in the Library and University’s recent strategic directions.
12. Paraphrased from https://www.seattleu.edu/jesuit-tradition/jesuitology/
13. See https://udlguidelines.cast.org/
14. Thanks to Jen Saulnier and Samantha Hage from Washington State University for sharing details from their program.