

# UTILIZING STUDENT EMPLOYEES AS AN ALTERNATIVE MEANS OF PROVIDING LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

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In these budget-conscious times, library administrators want to keep expenditures down while continuing to offer outstanding services and maintain good public relations. Central Michigan University (CMU) is no exception. When the university's Park Library reopened in early 2002, after a two-and-a-half-year, \$50 million renovation, it received a great deal of press coverage. Because the library was now a friendlier, more attractive facility, non-CMU students and other members of the public began visiting in far higher numbers. Visits from these patrons led to frequent requests for tours and library instruction from area high school teachers and community college instructors. As a result, the Reference Department began utilizing Reference Public Support Student Assistants to provide these services to non-CMU student groups.

A review of the library literature shows there has been little published about using library student employees to provide instruction to unaffiliated visitors. The relevant literature falls mainly into one of three camps. The first group consists of articles about library student employees who work at reference desks at various institutions. Zamostny (2008) wrote on this subject highlighting her experiences in training and working with student employees at her library's reference desk. Her institution, however, does not capitalize on using student employees to provide anything other than one-on-one assistance at the reference desk.

The second group of writers has contributed articles on creating formal peer tutoring programs in academic libraries. Such programs have been established at Binghamton University (Stelling, 1996), the University of New Mexico (Deese-Roberts & Keating, 2000), Utah State University (Holliday & Nordgren, 2005), and the University of Florida (Ronan & Pappas, 2001). At Binghamton University, peer advisors in the library provide library instruction sessions to fellow students, while at the University of Florida, peer teachers receive course credit for teaching an anthropology library resources class. Whether these programs continue to this day is unknown, but they focus upon college students who work in libraries or receive special training on library sources teaching their peers rather than non-university students.

The last group of articles written about library student employees and teaching focuses on library school students who work as research mentors. Two representative articles on this topic are about programs at the University of Michigan Engineering Library (Holland & Powell, 1996) and the University of Iowa Libraries (Forys, 2004). In the Michigan program, library and information science (LIS) students receive course credit for their work with engineering undergraduates. At Iowa, LIS students receive quarter-time salaries for their work. Again, whether such programs continue today is unknown, but such training opportunities for future librarians are different than the work advanced student assistants do at CMU.

The tours and instruction sessions for non-university students at CMU are conducted by the most veteran student employees who, in addition to having worked for the Reference Department for a minimum of one year, have also received additional training in conducting tours, operating the computers and projectors in the library classrooms, and providing instruction using the resources available to all patrons visiting

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the library. The instructional sessions are conducted using basic scripts prepared in advance by the Instruction Librarian. This gives the student employees a sense of confidence in their demonstration, and inhibits improvisation, so it helps ensure a consistent level of quality in the student presentations.

Providing instruction to a group of non-CMU students rather than providing the same instruction on a one-on-one basis at the Reference Desk is cost-effective because student employees are paid far less than librarians and professional staff (student assistants are paid Michigan minimum wage, which is \$7.40 per hour). With some additional training, the student employees can utilize their skills to provide services to the public that the library would otherwise be unable to provide at an equitable level. It also takes some of the burden off the librarians and enables them to concentrate their time and effort on teaching CMU students, which is their primary audience. This paper will provide an overview of the CMU Library instruction program for non-university groups, and the benefits enjoyed by all those involved.

### **WHY USE LIBRARY STUDENT EMPLOYEES?**

In utilizing reference student assistants to conduct tours and library instruction sessions for non-CMU groups, the triaged assistance these students provide on an individual basis at the Reference Desk is extended. "Triage" refers to the practice of having student assistants provide different levels of service at the Reference Desk, depending upon whether or not librarians are present. When librarians are at the desk, student employees sit at a printing station where they answer directional questions, assist patrons with printing and copying documents, help locate materials on the shelves, and fix stuck shelves in the compressed storage. However, when librarians are not on duty during late weekday evenings and Saturdays, student employees assist patrons in using the library's catalog and finding articles in general databases (e.g., Academic OneFile and Wilson Select).

Moving student employees from behind the desk to the head of the classroom for tours and instruction sessions increases the value of the extensive training they have received, which includes a one-credit library research skills course (LIB 197) and additional resource training when hired. Allowing student assistants to provide instruction to a group of students rather than helping each one individually is also cost-effective. In addition, using lower-paid student assistants instead of librarians and paraprofessional staff for routine, scripted sessions is a responsible use of university funds. It allows the CMU Library to offer services to the public that might not otherwise be possible. In the most recently completed academic year (2007-08), advanced Public Support Reference Student Assistants conducted 40 tours and instruction sessions for approximately 1,000 students. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for the Library to serve these visitors were it not for these veteran student employees.

### **BENEFITS TO THE LIBRARY**

Providing bibliographic instruction to groups such

as area high school and community college students is an excellent public relations tool. Many of the instruction requests come from teachers who graduated from Central Michigan University. Being able to provide this service is good publicity for the university as a whole and may also enhance alumni relations. By contrast, negative responses to their requests could engender a less-than-positive feeling about the university when they are next asked for a contribution! Also, many of the visiting groups are composed of high school and community college students who are very likely thinking about the next step in their academic careers. The positive experience they have at CMU's library could very possibly influence their decision when it comes to deciding whether to attend college and which college or university they choose to attend.

Though student assistants work almost exclusively with non-CMU students, there is one exception. Having student employees available to conduct tours is a huge relief to librarians inundated with requests for tours for instructors of introductory college classes. At the beginning of each semester, for example, instructors of Business (BUS) 100 classes request tours for their students. These are large lecture classes with 100 or more students in a single section. It would be physically impossible for one Business Librarian to meet this demand. In this one instance, the library student employees are asked to give tours to their fellow CMU students. During the last complete academic year, advanced student staff members conducted a total of 15 tours, comprising approximately 350 BUS 100 students. While this number does not sound overwhelming, bear in mind that these tours are compressed into a short timeframe at the beginning of each semester. The Business Librarian leads a similar number of tours and also conducts instruction sessions for BUS 100 sections. In addition, she also teaches numerous library sessions for upper-level business courses during this time period.

### **BENEFITS TO THE REFERENCE STUDENT EMPLOYEES**

Students who conduct these tours and training sessions gain skills and experience they would not otherwise acquire in the library. Public speaking experience is a valuable asset in any field they plan to enter. The groups they lead usually consist of students close to their own ages, so the student employees become accustomed to speaking in front of their peers. They also acquire teaching skills and experience working with diverse groups, which will prove useful in a variety of future circumstances. This is doubly true for library student assistants in the teacher education program. They not only gain a sense of self-confidence in the classroom, they also add impressive work experiences to their resumes.

On a more mundane level, the extra hours involved in conducting the tours and instructional sessions is a welcome addition to students' paychecks and has been a motivational factor for a few student employees. However, they gain much more than extra money in the form of improved confidence and poise that comes from public speaking. The advanced Reference Public Support Student Assistants find satisfaction in helping others find needed resources, and sometimes this work leads them to a career in librarianship.

In the past few years, a number of former CMU Library student employees have gone to library school, while many others have strongly considered library and information science as a possible future profession. One former reference student assistant attended library school at the University of Illinois and recently received tenure at the Michigan State University Libraries. Two former student employees are currently attending library school at Wayne State University. This spring, two of the Reference Department's most recent graduates have been accepted into the LIS programs at Simmons College, Rutgers University, Catholic University, and the Pratt Institute.

## **BENEFITS TO THE VISITING STUDENTS**

With a million volumes and scores of special collections, the CMU Park Library has a far greater number of resources than most high school or community college students have access to in their local school or public libraries. Most groups spend time after their training sessions utilizing our collections for their research projects. Without a proper orientation, most of the students would be overwhelmed by the size and complexity of the library's resources and would inundate librarians at the Reference Desk with requests for basic assistance. The hour that library student employees spend with them opens up this world of information to them, making their additional research time productive rather than frustrating.

Because visiting students can check out CMU library books and print or copy journal articles to take with them, students' papers and projects are improved. One high school teacher, commenting on her students' experience, said "'Confused' small town kids with 'Big' knowledge. A good thing!"

Visiting students seem to enjoy seeing someone close to their ages leading their group and the high school students, especially, can learn a good deal from the library assistants. The student employees serve as positive role models because they tend to be high achievers academically, and they portray a positive image of the college experience. They have campus jobs they enjoy and from which they gain practical skills. With less formal tours, time permitting, the last ten to fifteen minutes of classroom time often involve a question and answer session about college life in general. The tours and instruction sessions the student employees give also provide the library administration terrific opportunities to show off the library building, staff, and services and help recruit future CMU Chippewas.

## **THE PUBLIC SUPPORT SPECIALIST'S AND INSTRUCTION LIBRARIAN'S ROLES**

The Public Support Specialist schedules the tours and bibliographic instruction sessions, talking with the instructor about her needs and the size of the group (see Appendix A for a copy of the form the student employees receive). Although the sessions are general in nature, any particular focus the instructor may have is taken into consideration in planning the group's visit. As necessary, the Instruction Librarian will assemble a brief lesson plan for the student employees to follow in highlighting particular resources. Such planning requires a

minimal amount of the librarian's time (see Appendix B for a sample lesson plan).

The Public Support Specialist works with the student guide to ensure that the instruction room is properly set up with appropriate handouts and computer connections. She also tries to raise the guide's comfort level for the upcoming session, especially the first few times she conducts training sessions. When the group arrives, the Public Support Specialist greets the instructor and the group, introducing the student guide for the session.

## **EVALUATIONS**

An essential part of the student assistant instruction program is evaluation. Both the visiting teacher and the student assistant conducting the session evaluate several aspects of the tour and classroom time. The evaluation forms (see Appendices C & D) asks each to reflect upon the session, provide information on what was covered, and rate the session from poor to excellent.

As the student looks back at the session and critiques his performance, the self-evaluation gives him a chance to assess what he did well and where he needs improvement. After her second tour and instruction session, one student said: "Had a good time. Feel like I did way better on this one than the last, so it was a good experience." It also gives the student the opportunity to address questions he may not have been able to answer fully and determine where he needs additional training. A former student leader, who is now attending library school, noted after a presentation to advanced placement high school psychology students, "I covered everything, but...I wasn't as familiar with PsycINFO as I should have been." Reflections like this prompt the supervisors to better advise and prepare students for the next time they meet with a group.

The teacher's evaluation gives the supervisors a chance to assess the student's strengths and weaknesses and provides feedback to share with the student, both positive and negative, to help reinforce good behavior or strengthen weaknesses. In general, the visiting teachers greatly appreciate the job the student assistants do—especially if the student must adapt and change instruction on the fly: "We were short of time, but Ken tailored the session to fit our constraints while still covering all I expected and more." Teachers often use the evaluation forms simply to express their gratitude, "Thank you for letting us come. This is more than just research for high school students. It is an introduction to a university library." It is this evaluation protocol that helps the CMU Library maintain excellence in the service provided to area teachers and students.

## **CONCLUSION**

The University Library at CMU has been utilizing veteran Reference Public Support Student Assistants to conduct tours and instructional sessions for nearly a decade. During this time, thousands of area high school and community college students have been trained to use the library's resources by

very capable university students. Without these great student employees, administrators would either have had to turn down teachers' requests for formal visits or increase demands on the already heavily burdened librarians. With a small amount of time and effort on the part of one librarian and one support staff member, the library reaps a great advantage in serving its auxiliary audience, freeing the professional staff to focus on serving CMU faculty, students, and staff.

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**APPENDIX A: NON-CMU INSTRUCTIONAL SESSION FORM**

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Time \_\_\_\_\_

Group \_\_\_\_\_ Room # \_\_\_\_\_

Number in Class/Group \_\_\_\_\_ Course Topic \_\_\_\_\_

Instructor/Leader \_\_\_\_\_ Phone/email \_\_\_\_\_

Objective(s)/Purpose of Session: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Resources Covered:

- Centra \_\_\_\_\_
- Research Database(s) \_\_\_\_\_
- Virtual Reference Collection \_\_\_\_\_
- Wilson Select Database \_\_\_\_\_
- Michigan Electronic Library \_\_\_\_\_
- Print Index(es)/ Abstract(s) \_\_\_\_\_
- Other Reference Sources \_\_\_\_\_
- Government Documents \_\_\_\_\_
- Legal Resources \_\_\_\_\_
- Tour of Library \_\_\_\_\_
- Other areas and/or special interests: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Handouts needed:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Comments/Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Student Employee: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B: DOW HIGH SCHOOL AP PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS LESSON PLAN

1. Library's homepage – <http://www.lib.cmich.edu>
  - a. Starting point for everything
  - b. Default homepage for web browser on library computers
  
2. CENTRA
  - a. Library catalog
    - i. Demo keyword search
      1. Ask for example from students
    - ii. Bring up 1 item record
      1. Point out LOCATION, CALL NUMBER, and STATUS
      2. Quiz students on location of different call numbers (see handout)
      3. Demo SUBJECT heading searching
    - iii. Remind students they can get borrowers' cards at Book Checkout Desk
  
3. Find An Article - <http://www.lib.cmich.edu/databases/>
  - a. Looking for resources in a particular subject area? Select the most appropriate one from the list.
  - b. Go to Psychology
    - i. Select PsycINFO
      1. Demo search – ask for a volunteer's topic
      2. Do a regular keyword search; discuss categories of results (i.e. peer-review journals, dissertations, etc.)
      3. Demonstrate Find It!
      4. For full-text articles available as PDFs, suggest students SAVE file to desktop then email it as an attachment
        - a. Printing is available to for those who wish to set up accounts
  - c. Suggest students go to Reference Desk for additional help



