Guest editorial:
The peer-led library

As academic librarians return to campuses from the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a greater emphasis on the importance of student success to the mission of colleges and universities. At the core of student success are the experiential designing services that are student-led and student-centric, creating opportunities for professional formation through student employment and supporting the whole student. Peer-led services are a model often found in the tutoring and writing centers with whom libraries often share space. However, we can struggle with the notion of putting students at the fore when it comes to the delivery of 'traditional' library services like reference or research support. This special issue of *Reference Services Review* highlights programs that are embracing higher education students as leaders, peer mentors, co-teachers and creative collaborators.

The ebb and flow of peer-led research services in practice

Peer-led research services are certainly not a new development in academic librarianship. As evidenced by our interview with ***Allison Faix***, colleges and universities like Coastal Carolina University have been working at the forefront with variations of this model of service for years. As she describes, however, the capacity to support these programs has ebbed and flowed. The benefits of these programs are evident though and perhaps even more relevant in this moment as campuses shift to conversations about engagement, retention, student success and professional formation.

Models can widely vary from program to program as well, demonstrated by the large number of case studies that were submitted to this issue from a range of campus sizes and from large research institutions to community colleges. Common themes point to both the logistical and strategic importance of these programs, while also underlining the challenges related to their scope and sustainability.

As ***Maxwell et al.*** explore in their case study, "Pursuing Student Success in the Library: A case study in Peer Mentor Program transition, training, and engagement," the scope and shape of these programs often shifts given the institutional needs. Having firm understandings of roles and clear expectations around service provision for these programs is critical.

In an autoethnographic-inspired approach to their Library Student Ambassador Program, ***Pham and Muralles*** explore in their case study "Reimagining Peer Support and Engagement," the growth and development of their program at California State University, East Bay and share recommendations and reflections from their ambassadors.

At UCLA, ***Johnson et al.*** demonstrate in their study, "Collaborative Research Services: A Peer-Led Cohort Approach," how their campus has shifted their Library Student Research Assistant role through the pandemic, and how they are recruiting for and reintroducing the program to in-person settings now that students are primarily back on campus.

Scripa and Spencer discuss the challenges and successes the team at the Pellissippi State Community College Libraries have had in launching their Pellissippi Ambassadors for Library Success program in "Introducing peer-to-peer reference services in a community college library."

This is all not to say that the generation and sustainability of these programs is an easy task. As many authors in this issue also note, there are considerable challenges in the creation

and maintenance of any peer-led program. Critical to the growth sustainability of these programs is ample staffing and the flexibility to shift priorities as needed to support individual student consultants who may be struggling with the balance between work and school. Finding the time to organize and deploy training and onboarding processes, as well as the ongoing commitment to sustaining training and professional development, are also items for careful consideration. Most importantly, this process also requires a shift in mindset. By placing peer consultants in front-line roles, it can mean an ideological shift into service provision. But the benefits of that shift can be foundationally important for their professional growth and formation.

Peer learning as a high impact practice

As I and the authors within this issue agree, peer-led programs demonstrate key connecting points to high impact teaching and learning practices, allow opportunities for student employees to engage in career and professional formation activity, enhance a library's ability to engage with and provide outreach to underserved or underrepresented communities and break down traditional power structures, or barriers, that can be created by our traditional service models.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities identifies collaborative assignments, learning communities and community-based learning as high impact practices (Kuh, 2008). In common here is the connection of a student to their peers and cohort and the value that teaching and learning has as a formational experience in their own education. When we hire, train and deploy peer-based research services at our service points, we are providing these students with not only an enhanced aspect to their education, but we are giving them the opportunity to engage with their community in a formative way.

The connecting points between these programs and peer-learning and career formation are clear. In "Better Together: Experiential Learning in Peer Led Research Services," *Graewingholt explores* peer-led learning as a high impact practice through their peer-assisted learning and peer-led reference programs. *Lowe et al*. note in "Peer teachers Taking the Lead in Classroom Instruction: Program Creation and Challenges Faced" how collaboration between peer teachers and teaching librarians helped develop their consultant's information literacy competencies, while also increasing student engagement in the classroom. *Clark et al*. in their article ""I want my PRC": Engagement of undergraduates with an assessment of the PRC program," discuss how peer research consultant program at the University of North Dakota have demonstrated both educational and professional benefits for their consultants, as well as increased empathy among their consultant team for the day-to-day struggles of their peers.

Diversity equity, inclusion and accessibility

An intentional focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) and anti-racism connects to all aspects of our roles in libraries. It is, in most places, at the core of our strategic initiatives, represented in our training and professional development and present in our day-to-day work with our patrons and with our colleagues. So too do the core values of this work translate into the day-to-day lives of our student employees. By incorporating these values into our training and onboarding, we help to prepare them not only for their roles with the public, but also provide an intrinsic part of their professional formation. For some, this work has become a focus for onboarding and training for their peer research consultant programs.

In *Ferer's* case study, "Putting DEIA into practice: Incorporating diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility into student employee training," they explore how enhanced DEIA training, and a focus on high impact practices within their student employees helps prepare them for solo work at busy service desks at Binghamton University.

In their article, "Shifting to a High Impact Practice-centered Student worker staffed Research Desk: a Hispanic Serving Institution Perspective," **Elizabeth DeZouche and Denise Santos** discuss how their changes to the traditional desk model not only provided student consultants with a meaningful role but also helped them bridge the gap to their campus's mostly Hispanic, first-generation population.

One of the most prominent benefits to engaging peer-led research services is the way in which it opens opportunities for the library to engage with our core audience. Students feel safe opening up to other students, and as noted by Gardner and Eng (2005), they will choose to engage with a peer as opposed to a Librarian or staff member at the desk. As explored by Ryder *et al.* (2017), peer to peer relationships also do not hold an inherent power structure in place, as a peer consultant or tutor does not hold any authority over the student seeking support. This allows for a different, and in some ways more open, form of relationship to be built between the consultant and student.

Student employees can also provide critical insights into how to market services, engage with student groups and improve outreach offerings to campus. Student employees who are well informed about the research services offerings of their department can help bridge the gaps that exist between Library faculty and our student populations. As **Bodemer** explores in his article, "Peer Reference and the Out-of-the-Building Experience," the insights of the LibRATS at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo were helpful as the campus ranged between in person and 'out of the building' modalities. His article employs a connectivist approach to explore the potential relationships between peer reference and library programming and instruction.

In this issue [...]

We hope you find the case studies and viewpoints in this issue to be inspiring and challenging. Academic libraries are returning from the disruptions of COVID-19 and in many cases finding that our traditional models for service no longer fit the needs of our students. Peer-led services provide a new way to engage our core audience, while enriching their educational experience. It is a brave space for librarians and students – with much to gain.

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References

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