

Cara Evanson

“We aren’t just the kids that sit at the front”

Rethinking student employee training

Student library employees embody a dual role. The students we supervise are often the same ones we teach in information literacy sessions. Traditionally, training programs for student library employees have primarily addressed students in their “employee” role by providing them with advanced responsibilities and projects,¹ ensuring accuracy in library tasks,² and encouraging professional workplace behavior.³ While these are essential aspects of student employment, our experience at Davidson College Library suggests students can benefit from a training program that more fully integrates the “student” role of student employees.

Rethinking student employee training

Davidson College is a liberal arts institution of 1,850 undergraduates. At E. H. Little Library, only students staff the library’s information desk. In 2009, the Peer Research Advisor (PRA) program was created, and students began providing front-line reference for information literacy librarians.

Each week PRAs provide 74 hours of desk coverage. There is no librarian on reference duty for 27 of these hours, so keeping our student employees motivated is critical. We consider these students to be colleagues in our department, and we strive to create a meaningful and fulfilling work environment for them.

Collectively, PRAs answer more than 1,000 questions a semester. These questions include

known item searching, citation formatting, and technology troubleshooting. PRAs engage patrons in a basic reference interview to determine which questions are of a research nature and should be referred, and which they can answer independently. During a normal desk shift, a PRA will analyze information needs, ascertain patrons’ skill levels, and effectively triage requests.

Due to the advanced role PRAs perform at the desk, training is ongoing throughout the semester. Since the initiation of the program, these students have attended hour-long weekly training sessions. For the first few years, responsibility for PRA training was swapped among several information literacy librarians and training methods varied. During the summer of 2013, staffing changes in the department provided us with an opportunity to rethink the program structure and develop a consistent training method. Our observation of lower engagement levels among some PRAs provided us with additional motivation to change our approach.

Learning outcomes and training activities

To better motivate the PRAs, we decided to focus on students as learners, not just employees. This involved designing training sessions

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designed around long-term objectives. Of the 11 PRAs, all had at least one semester of PRA experience and the majority were upperclassmen. We began our new approach in the fall and refined it for the spring semester. In spring 2014 we created two learning outcomes for the training program and tied them to ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education.⁴

1. Peer Research Advisors will identify and discuss how their role fits into the overall mission and structure of the library in order to see themselves as integral and valuable members of the library staff. [ACRL standards 1.4.b. and 4.2.b]

2. Peer Research Advisors will actively participate in promoting the goals of the library in order to increase awareness of library resources and services on campus. [ACRL standards 4.1.b. and 4.3.d]

We created these outcomes with the goal of helping PRAs understand how their work contributes to the library and campus community. They were written with a focus on the students and what they should be able to do as a result of these outcomes. Also, the long-term nature of these outcomes meant the resulting knowledge could be applied to many different scenarios, not just one particular task or project. For the current academic year we plan to tie the learning outcomes to threshold concepts⁵ and are looking forward to how they will shape our training structure.

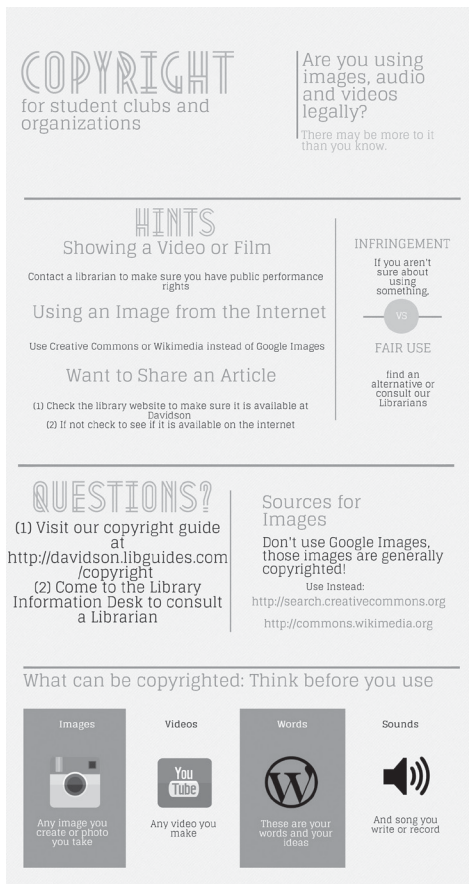
Our training sessions were constructed around the learning outcomes we created and included policy review, guest speakers, and individual projects. These activities also provided a means of assessment for how well PRAs were meeting our learning outcomes.

Policy review

In the first weekly training of the semester, information literacy librarians and PRAs formally reviewed and revised the PRA policies together. While informal feedback from students had helped to shape policies in the past, this policy review was a formal opportunity for librarians and PRAs to critically consider the policies, discuss them, and understand differing viewpoints.

The librarians began the meeting by presenting the Davidson Library's mission statement and our information literacy team values and norms (approachability, communication, culture of learning, honesty, respect, transparency, and trust). This prepared both PRAs and

librarians to base their discussion on the values and mission of the library, and was helpful in navigating issues in which student opinions contrasted with those of librarians. The resulting discussion enabled PRAs to understand the importance of their own voice at the library and learn how the information literacy librarians at Davidson negotiate decisions with each other.



Piktochart
make information beautiful

Copyright infographic created by PRAs. View this article online for detailed image.

Staff guest speakers

Throughout the semester, several library staff members were invited to come to training sessions and discuss their roles at the library. The PRAs learned more about what full-time library staff members do and how their work relates to it. They also learned how their role at the desk contributes to the overall effectiveness of the work done at the library.

One guest speaker was our library collections assistant for government information. She discussed the ways she works with the government document collection and described how PRAs' attention to shelving and finding government documents is instrumental in connecting her work to the needs of patrons.

Individual projects

The PRAs each identified a library resource or service they felt could benefit from promotion and wrote a proposal outlining their goals and timeline.

This encouraged the students to actively consider the needs of patrons and how to meet those needs. The finished products included an infographic about copyright and image use, advertisements for a language learning database, and flyers about the role of the PRAs themselves.

If a project idea intersected with a library staff member's area of expertise, the PRA met with him or her to learn more about how to best implement their project. Every other week of training was dedicated to these projects, and students were able

to work on them during downtime on their desk shifts.

"Employee-type" skills

"Employee-type" skills were still an essential part of training for the PRAs. Some skill-based practice was integrated with the staff guest speaker series, such as SuDoc numbers and customer

service role-playing. Other skills were practiced by PRAs as needed, mainly during downtime on their desk shifts. PRAs self-evaluated their own skill levels and completed training exercises in the areas they felt less confident. Many of these training exercises were created by PRAs who self-rated as more confident in those same areas.

Benefits and challenges

The greatest benefit of our new PRA training model is the level of engagement it has sparked in our students and the opportunities

it has created for transferrable learning. The development of training activities designed around our learning outcomes has enabled us to focus on the "student" as well as the "employee" role of our PRAs.

In a survey at the end of spring 2014, we asked the PRAs, "What have you learned this semester about how your role fits into the overall mission and structure of the library?" Several PRAs mentioned their critical role as the "first face" patrons see. One PRA said, "I am hugely important in welcoming people and helping them know what services they

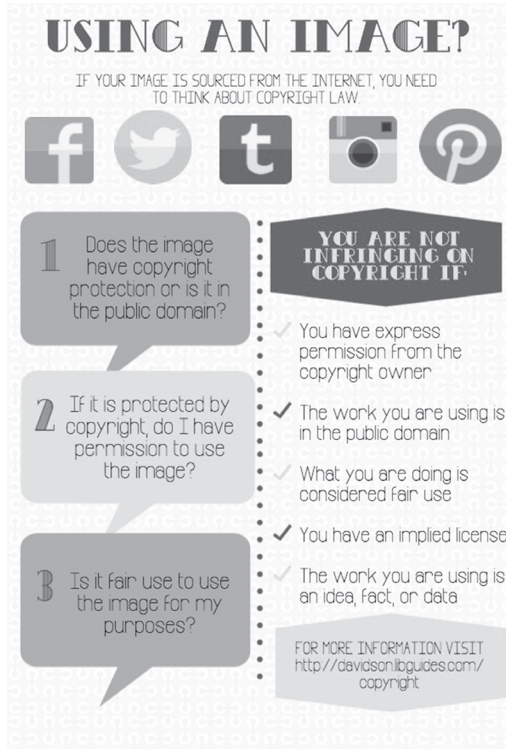


Image use infographic created by PRAs.

can utilize in the library...[and] making sure the library is reaching the students it needs to for all of its programs.” Another cited the opportunity for involvement in decision-making processes: “This helped me understand that we aren’t just the kids that sit at the front, but we can actually have a part in making decisions.” Due to the PRAs’ increased level of engagement, we are convinced the new training approach also benefits our other students, the library patrons.

As the focus for our student training program has shifted, so has our role as supervisors. Our learning outcomes have not just changed the students’ perspective on how they view themselves as library employees, but it has changed ours. It has influenced the way we interact with the PRAs and assess their potential. A challenge of the new training structure is that it is more time-intensive for librarians than our previous one. Specifically, the new arrangement requires more one-on-one follow-up by librarians to monitor skill progression, and coordinating our schedules with PRA desk shift schedules can be difficult.

A question we need to explore further is how much of student employee training should be spent on our long-term student learning objectives, and how much on the skills they need as employees. On the survey, one PRA stated, “I think over the entire course of my time as a PRA I have learned a lot, but I do think that if I had joined the program this year that my skill set would be weaker.”

To address this, one option is to have new employees undergo intense skills-based training for a semester prior to participating in the new training structure. Another possibility is a blended program in which employee skills training is more integrated into student learning-focused training sessions.

The threshold concepts outlined in the draft ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education also present an exciting new challenge. As we decide how

to best integrate them into our PRA training program, we hope to better define what kind of learning is essential and meaningful for our student employees long-term. We anticipate that threshold concepts will help us refine our current training structure and inspire us to think more creatively about student employee learning.

Conclusion

We believe our new approach to training is more valuable to our PRAs than a program that only focuses on “employee-type” skills. As is evident in their survey responses, they have a greater awareness of their importance as library employees and their role as it relates to the mission of the library. While we have focused on evaluating the current advantages, we expect this training program to yield future benefits for our students in their life beyond the library.

Notes

1. Firouzeh Logan, “Student Workers: Essential Partners in the Twenty-First Century Academic Library,” *Public Services Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (2012), doi: 10.1080/15228959.2012.731838.
2. Laura Manley and Robert P. Holley, “Hiring and Training Work-Study Students: A Case Study,” *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 21, no. 1 (2014), doi: 10.1080/10691316.2014.877739.
3. Jessica M. Drewitz, “Training Student Workers: A Win-Win,” *AALL Spectrum* 18, no. 2 (2013): 22-24, www.aallnet.org/main-menu/Publications/spectrum/Archives/Vol-18/No-2/student-workers.pdf.
4. Association of College & Research Libraries, “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,” www.ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency (accessed August 6, 2014).
5. Association of College & Research Libraries, “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” (June 17, 2014), <http://acrl.ala.org/ilstandards/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Framework-for-IL-for-HE-Draft-2.pdf> (accessed August 6, 2014). *ZZ*