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Case Study: University of California, Los Angeles

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CASE STUDY

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*University of California, Los Angeles**by Annie Pho and Alicia Reiley*

Across the country, many academic libraries are pursuing avenues to support first-year student initiatives and are becoming involved in student retention efforts. At UCLA Library, we have taken a unique approach to supporting research and writing for first-year students who are enrolled in general education coursework as part of the Cluster Program. We created the Embedded Inquiry Specialist program, which is a unique and innovative initiative designed to support the Cluster Program. The UCLA Library is comprised of multiple library locations and serves a large student body of about 45,000 students, including around 31,000 undergraduates and about 15,000 graduate students. The Embedded Inquiry Specialist program is administered through Powell Library, whose mission is to offer “students opportunities to discover their intellectual passions, explore their creative talents, and engage in community with others” and Powell Library’s “services, spaces, collections, and programs promote student learning and success at UCLA and beyond.” Powell Library takes a very student-centered approach to teaching and learning, and in addition to the challenges of serving a large student population, every initiative must be designed to be sustainable and programmatic.

For the Embedded Inquiry Specialist Program, we hire and train undergraduate students who have successfully completed and excelled in their Cluster course by the faculty teaching team, to come back and be embedded in their respective courses. These students are hired to be Embedded Inquiry Specialists and they provide additional research and writing support using peer-to-peer learning for the upcoming academic year. The Embedded Inquiry Specialists also attend weekly Cluster lectures, special events to support the curriculum, weekly faculty teaching team meetings, weekly library staff meetings, and discussion sections. In addition to providing academic support, the first-year students see the Embedded Inquiry Specialists as a “peer mentors,” someone they can talk to about different classes and disciplines, jobs, time management, talking to professors, and life skills. This program has been hugely successful due to the partnerships that the library has made with the Cluster Program, the Undergraduate Writing Center, and the Office of Instructional Development.

The Cluster Program is an innovative, interdisciplinary, first-year experience program where students enroll in year-long courses in which approximately 18 percent of all incoming first-year students enroll. UCLA Library is positioned uniquely to support the UCLA Cluster Program, which is part of the UCLA Undergraduate Education Initiatives Office. The UCLA Library supports this program in many ways, including library instruction, library tours, providing research and writing consultations, and more. When the Cluster Program first began, librarians were assigned as liaisons and were embedded into the courses. They attended weekly lectures, met with faculty and students, and provided reference and library instruction. In 2015, the library experimented with hiring and embedding a former Cluster student into one of the courses in an attempt to scale

up the research and writing support for these large classes. From there, the program has grown, and now the library has an Embedded Inquiry Specialist in every Cluster course.

The Embedded Inquiry Specialists are nominated for the position by faculty and teaching assistants because they felt the student's coursework was of high caliber, which distinguished them from their classmates. The library receives a list of candidates from the faculty teaching teams and proceeds to interview and hire the students. When they are hired, they bring with them a high level of research and writing skills and personal experience with the assignments from the Cluster. This hiring process has worked well because the Inquiry Specialist often has a strong relationship with their faculty teaching team. They are very familiar with the content and rhythm of the course, the assignments, and the exams, which positions them to help students enrolled in the class with specific questions about the assignments. Additionally, their knowledge about the Cluster helps the library align its instructional content to the curriculum of the Cluster course. This nomination process has worked very well for the library.

This position requires a high level of engagement and knowledge of research and writing skills, which requires the library to provide a comprehensive and continuous training program. Before the academic school year begins, we host a three-day training where the Embedded Inquiry Specialists are trained by library staff, the UCLA Undergraduate Writing Center, and attend a kick-off orientation with the entire Cluster team, including the library. The training with the Writing Center provides them with best practices for university-level writing and how to teach those techniques to other students. The students watch a recording of a writing consultation and receive writing samples to review and edit. When they attend the in-person session, they discuss these techniques and learn about writing pedagogy. We are currently working with the Writing Center to expand the writing training and offer refreshers throughout the academic year.

The Embedded Inquiry Specialists hold their consultations and office hours in the library and are trained to provide in-depth research consultations as well. During the three-day training and throughout the course of the year, the Inquiry Specialists receive training on how to navigate the library's resources, develop research questions and keywords, and evaluate information in order to connect it to their respective Cluster course. Additionally, the Inquiry Specialists meet with their liaison librarians regularly to plan and strategize and work on approaches for library engagement for their course. Examples of these engagements may include a visit to the lectures and discussion sections to promote library services, attending faculty team meetings, providing library instruction, updating the research guides, creating online instructional content, and more.

Part of the Embedded Inquiry Specialists' job duties includes providing tours and orientations to the library, so they receive extensive training on the locations within the building and key student-oriented service points. The library orientation training speaks to the "soft" skills that have become a large role the Embedded Inquiry Specialists play in the life of first-year students. The initial library tour training starts during the three-day training in which they are walked through the building and participate in a "train-the-trainer" session, where they are shown key services, historical aspects of the building, and told how they would be explaining those points during the tour. The next iteration of the tour training involves peer-shadowing and co-leading tours with another Embedded Inquiry Specialist with at least one year of experience. The tours allow for the

Inquiry Specialists to work together early on in their career at the library, which helps to build community with each other and library staff. These tours occur within the first five weeks of the academic year and quickly prepare the Inquiry Specialists with public speaking skills and to reiterate their knowledge about key library services.

After the three-day training, additional training often happens in weekly meetings, where challenges and highlights of the week are also discussed. Library staff and students share ideas, brainstorm solutions, and suggest strategies previously adopted for comparable problems. These sessions foster community and trust within the group, help each other learn new skills, and bring forward issues and solutions to challenges. As they navigate the campus outside of their role with the library, because of their knowledge about key library services, they serve as unofficial library ambassadors and advocate for the library in other areas of campus life where they might be involved.

At UCLA Library, we use a variety of online tools to help the students stay organized, communicate, and for training purposes. Because of the independent nature of the Embedded Inquiry Specialist position, students need to be well-trained in how to use these online tools. We use Confluence—shared collaborative software—for documentation and training. Each student employee has a checklist that lists all the accounts and resources they need to be trained on as well as a work-plan for the year. The work-plan details what the Inquiry Specialist might be spending their time on week to week—for example, attending weekly lectures and meetings, providing research consultations, assisting librarians with instruction, providing library tours, and more. At the beginning of the academic year, liaison librarians and Embedded Inquiry Specialists sit down and establish goals for the year as well as go over their individual work-plans since each Cluster course is unique and may require attention in different activities. The concept of the work-plan is very important because it helps to set up expectations of the students in this position as well as give them a sense of what their time commitments will be per week and per quarter. The program has many facets, so documenting what kinds of activities the Inquiry Specialist might be involved in is very important.

Ensuring communication between student employees and full-time staff members is critical for any large-scale program. The library trains the students to use Slack, an online communication tool, to communicate with full-time library staff members and fellow student employees. Since the space where the Inquiry Specialists provide their research consultations is separated from where full-time staff work, Slack helps to keep lines of communication open when a staff member isn't necessarily in the same room as the Inquiry Specialist. Students also use Slack to check in and let the supervisors know they are present for their shifts. Using Slack has also facilitated communication among the Undergraduate Writing Center's student employees, which has strengthened the relationship among these various programs.

As the program has grown, we've continued to improve our training process for the Inquiry Specialists. Looking forward, we plan to focus more on soft skills in the initial three-day training for the Inquiry Specialists, focusing on the process of reference interviewing, setting up boundaries when working with students, and knowing when to refer students to another full-time staff member. Additionally, we have developed a ten-week online course site in UCLA's course management system to extend the training topics throughout the quarter, in addition to the weekly meetings in the library. The online

training course has more in-depth modules that will introduce students to more specialized resources within the UCLA Library system, such as navigating special collections and information sources in disciplines like the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. Our hope is that this online content will allow students to learn asynchronously, at their own pace, and reflect intentionally on how the content connects to their work as Inquiry Specialists.

Part of the success and growth of the Embedded Inquiry Specialist program has been in part due to our openness to receiving feedback from our student employees. Because the training process is so comprehensive, we have found that students hired into the Embedded Inquiry Specialist positions stay employed with the library for more than one year and often transition into similar research assistance positions in the library. We have had many students who have worked for the library for their entire academic career at UCLA. Many of the Embedded Inquiry Specialists have found their work experience very rewarding and helps them to build professional skills that make them highly employable graduates or as they apply for graduate programs.

The relationships that are built among the library, the Embedded Inquiry Specialists, the Cluster Program, and the Undergraduate Writing Center are crucial to the successful execution of this complex and important first-year experience library program. With every year, we continue to improve our program with the help of our partnerships to ensure that what we do is student-centered in every way.