## Peer Information Counseling: An Academic Library Program for Minority Students

## by Barbara MacAdam and Darlene P. Nichols

Increasing concern on university campuses over declining enrollment and graduation rates of Black and Hispanic students has prompted renewed efforts to address the academic problems of minority students. Academic libraries have a fundamental role to play in contributing to the successful adjustment of disadvantaged students. This paper describes and evaluates a library-based peer counseling program staffed by minority undergraduates and designed to bridge the gap between minority students on campus and library resources.

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The alarming number of racial incidents on campuses throughout the country have dramatized concerns about the failure of colleges and universities to create learning and social environments conducive to the successful academic careers of minority students. Events at the University of Michigan such as the distribution of racist flyers, the airing of offensive ethnic "jokes" over a campus radio station, and the vandalism of minority student social facilities reflect problems that the academic community has been wrestling with for years. Even with good-faith efforts, some of the problems minority students face (veiled or open racism, for example) are not easily addressed through programs.

#### The Campus Environment

The University of Michigan has had a 20-year commitment to increasing the enrollment and retention of minority students. Yet, as at other institutions, enrollment and retention rates, particularly for Black and Hispanic students, are discouraging reminders of slow progress. Of all Black students who entered the University of Michigan as first-year students in 1975, only 29.4 percent graduated after four years, as compared to 51.4 percent of white students in that entering class. Six years later, the gap between Black and white students had actually widened: of all first-year students starting in 1981, 26.6 percent of the Black students and 57.3 percent of the white students graduated by 1985. While the statistics for the

intervening years have fluctuated, the graduation rates for Black students have consistently remained 15 to 25 percent below those for white students.<sup>1</sup>

Despite concerted efforts, universities and colleges have had similar difficulties recruiting minority faculty. One of the underlying obstacles to progress in this area has been the limited number of minority Ph.D. graduates, the pool logically expected to supply current and upcoming generations of academics.<sup>2</sup> This should not come as any surprise in light of poor undergraduate retention rates and the fact that students who do graduate are electing nonacademic careers. Clearly, the higher education community has not yet found the key to making campuses the hospitable environments which minority students might embrace for lifelong commitments.3

Many factors contribute to the academic difficulties experienced by minority students at predominantly white, middle-class colleges and universities.4 For example, prior scholastic preparation may place many Black and Hispanic students at a severe academic disadvantage to most white students. College usually means separation from familiar surroundings and a period of social adjustment for all students. The social adjustment for minority students is particularly difficult when the new environment lacks many of the touchstones necessary to create a sense of belonging. For example, at the University of Michigan many Black students come from predominantly Black neighborhoods in Detroit and have never lived in an environment such as Ann Arbor where the majority of the University staff and students, and the general community, is white, middleclass, and affluent. The problems are compounded by the inadequate number of minority role models. Finally, the very nature of academia may present an alien, even hostile landscape to many minority students.

## **Existing Programs**

A variety of campus programs presently target minority and at-risk students at Michigan. These programs run the gamut from academic support programs for students whose high school preparation may have left them inadequately prepared for college, to peer advisors who live in the dormitory housing to assist first-year students in adjusting to every aspect of campus life. For example, the Comprehensive Studies Program (CSP) provides extensive support through academic counseling, skills workshops, introductory courses offered in several departments such as English and Mathematics, and a summer academic program to introduce students to college life.

Nonacademic services are offered by the Office of Minority Student Services (MSS). The responsibilities of this office range from sponsorship of cultural activities to personal counseling. The office serves as an important resource referral point for students. The professional staff, which is made up of representatives from each of four ethnic groups (Asian American, Black, Hispanic, and Native American), also functions as a liaison to many University committees and offices.

The Housing Division offers several programs to support minority students in the residence halls. The Minority Peer Advisors (MPAs) are upper-class students who work with their fellow minority dormitory residents, informing them of events and services available on campus, counseling them, and planning in-house programs. The MPAs reach first-year students at a critical point in the development of their sense of security about the college experience.

Many other offices also offer minority student support. These include Financial Aid, Career Planning and Placement, and Rackham School of Graduate Studies. In 1987, the University also created the position of Vice-Provost for Minority Affairs. In speaking about the goals and objectives of his new position, Charles Moody said, "The most immediate challenge is to get people to buy into the con-

cept that everyone has a responsibility in this effort [to increase the enrollment and graduation rate of minority students]. The University, through the faculty, staff, and students, can be the kind of place that truly values and sees diversity as a strength and as a manifestation of excellence."5

# The Peer Information Counseling Program

As educators, our challenge is to create an atmosphere that contributes to a successful living/learning environment for all college students. Staff at Michigan's Undergraduate Library (UGL) have tried to balance the needs of the student as a scholar with the needs of the student as an individual. Like most departments on campus, the UGL provides many basic services for all students. Beyond this, librarians have also recognized that there are often groups of students with needs so pressing and so particular that services must be targeted specifically for them, or they may not benefit from available resources.6

In the fall of 1985, motivated by concern for the specific needs of minority students, the UGL began the Peer Information Counseling Program (PIC) in support of the University's commitment to improve minority undergraduate retention. The program was to be a mechanism for students to learn skills in information handling and microcomputer use from other students. Three assumptions supported the program's design: (1) that library research and information-handling skills, like writing and analytical thinking, are part of the foundation for a successful academic experience, (2) that a large research library, which is often an intimidating and confusing world to the student population at large, may be especially troublesome to minority students, and (3) that one of the best resources for helping minority students succeed is the influence of successful minority students themselves.

Academic and social peer support programs have been used at colleges and universities in a number of ways. For example, a study of peer tutoring in reading at a Maryland state college revealed a marked improvement in exam scores for those students who were tutored. Although a review of the literature suggests that college and university libraries rarely incorporate programs designed specifically as peer support programs into their reference or bibliographic instruction services, successful efforts at Wabash

College's Lilly Library in the early 1970s,<sup>8</sup> the minority student-staffed Reference Assistant Project at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside which began in 1980,<sup>9</sup> and successful peer programs in other fields offer encouragement that peer counseling is a viable model within an academic library.

## **Program Goals**

A recent study at the University of Maryland indicated that use of the library is an important predictor of student retention. Other studies of minority retention suggest that a significant factor in the high dropout rate of minority students is the relatively small number of minority faculty and staff, and academically successful minority students. Peer support programs have been one approach to this problem.

The University of Michigan's PIC program employs minority undergraduate students to teach information-handling and microcomputer skills, and to serve as role models for minority students who might initially feel more comfortable asking for assistance from another minority student than from a librarian. Specific objectives for the program included:

- furthering the use of the library and of microcomputers by minority students;
- improving the information-handling skills and computer skills of minority students;
- developing the information-handling, computer, and counseling skills of the students hired as counselors; and
- contributing to a campus atmosphere which promotes retention of minority undergraduates.

## **Program Description**

The Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs provided funding for the first three years of the project. Support included an assistant librarian's salary, \$10,000 per year in PIC student salaries, \$2,000 for supplies, and the initial outlay for two microcomputers: an IBM-compatible Zenith and a Macintosh. PIC program personnel initially consisted of five minority undergraduates supervised by a minority librarian as program coordinator. During the 1985/86 academic year, seven minority students worked as Peer Information Counselors. All were highly motivated juniors or seniors active in the University minority communities and interested in the success of the program. They included economics, biology, and English majors, and

most had plans to go on to graduate or professional school.

Activities of Peer Information Counselors. Activities of the PIC students fell into five general areas:

- assisting patrons at the UGL reference desk,
- tutoring students in word processing,
- providing in-depth term paper assistance
- producing instructional materials, and
- publicizing the PIC program.

Figure 1 shows a list of activities, drafted by UGL librarians and agreed to by PIC students, that counselors were expected to be able to perform by the end of their first semester.

Training was provided in formal sessions conducted by the coordinator and on an on-going basis at the reference desk. Counselors received training in both basic reference skills and effective public service. Because each of the major areas of work assignment required training for complex tasks, duties were phased in over the course of the first semester—counselors began by learning how to locate periodicals and took on other duties as they gained confidence.

The PIC students spent most of their work time at the reference desk, the primary contact point with students needing assistance in the use of the library. They also participated in the term paper assistance service, which helped students who have set up appointments for research assistance on a particular topic. The emphasis in these appointments is on research strategies. Thus, counselors worked out an approach to the topics they were assigned, checked their strategies with a librarian, and then met with the students to counsel them.

The counselors were also trained in word processing on the two types of microcomputers available in the UGL Microcomputer Center: they learned MacWrite on the Macintosh and Microsoft Word on the IBM-compatible. They were then available by appointment to tutor students in basic word processing. In the second year of the program, PIC students began staffing the Academic Resource Center, a small microcomputer learning center. There novices and more advanced students could drop by or make appointments for assistance in developing their word-processing skills.

In addition to their library activities, the counselors met with outside groups and individuals to talk about the PIC pro-

## Figure 1 Expected Competencies of PIC Counselors

#### Reference

- Answer directional questions
- Assist in the use of the various machines in the reference area: microform readers and reader/printer, Infotrac, Geac terminal, IAC indexes
- Select proper periodical index for a topic and assist student in using it
- · Assist students in finding periodicals
- Conduct a reference interview
- Select appropriate approaches, e.g., card catalog, periodical index
- Assist in finding books through the card catalog, Geac, RLIN
- Determine subject headings for the card catalog
- Know location of standard kinds of sources in the reference collection
- Recongize when a question should be referred to a librarian

#### Term Paper Assistance

- Prepare search strategies for straightforward research topics approached through standard sources in UGL: identify appropriate subject headings for card catalog, appropriate indexes, and basic reference sources
- Work with students, showing them how to do research according to an appropriate search strategy

#### Microcomputer Skills

- Know how to use Microsoft Word and MacWrite to do word processing
- Tutor students in word processing in the above programs: starting up program, creating
  documents, manipulating text, saving, retrieving, and printing documents
- Present basics of word processing to small groups

#### **Production of Instructional Materials**

- Determine relevant information to be presented
- Write instructional materials in a form understandable to intended audience

gram and about library use. These groups included dormitory Minority Peer Advisors, the Black Business Students Association, and the NAACP campus chapter. The counselors also talked individually with friends, encouraging them to come to the library for term paper assistance or microcomputer training.

## Liaison with other minority programs.

Librarians recognized from the beginning that the PIC program needed to be integrated into other minority programs on campus in order to participate in referral networks between service units. During this first year, a good deal of effort was expended on building these liaisons through personal contacts with faculty and staff who had extensive contact with minority students. In particular, two academic programs with high minority enrollment, the Comprehensive Studies Program and Physical Education, integrated library and microcomputer ses-

sions into their course work using the PIC program. The coordinator taught library and microcomputer sessions for special courses within each of these departments and PIC staff members were available to tutor students outside of the class sessions.

### **Publicity and Program Building**

The greatest challenge facing the program was gaining the visibility and recognition among faculty and students necessary to maximize use of the services by targeted groups. Some of Michigan's characteristics as an institution created impediments to program growth: its size, pluralism, diversity, and tradition of decentralization and autonomy among its component schools/departments all conspired to make it difficult to implement a direct and immediate line of contact among students, faculty members, and instructional support programs. Minority student support programs also reflect this diversity and decentralization. There

was no niche into which PIC could easily

PIC's lack of visibility was also due in part to the program's focus. The arguments behind the establishment of PIC and the importance of libraries as an integral and fundamental part of undergraduate instruction make immediate sense to librarians, but not necessarily to faculty, administrators, or students. Faculty wanted to know why they should refer a student having academic difficulty to the PIC program instead of "regular library services." And one faculty member asked: "Why should I send students to PIC where they'll be helped by other students, instead of a librarian? How can students possibly provide better help than a professional?" When surveyed in PIC's second year, some minority students themselves challenged the implicit assumptions behind PIC and behind so many of the other progams targeted for minority students: that minority students are in need of more help or academically less able than other students.

Program publicity via letters, flyers, and meetings relied heavily in the first year on individual contact with staff and administrators involved in other programs related to minority students on campus. In addition to service units such as MSS, PIC students and the coordinator contacted large academic departments, such as Communication, Sociology, English, and Psychology, and spoke at a wide range of campus group meetings. Ads highlighting PIC services also appeared regularly in the student newspaper.

### **Program Assessment**

From the beginning it was agreed that evaluation of the PIC program would not be made on a strictly quantifiable basis. Since data on library use by minority students in previous years were not available for comparison, a tabulation of the amount of post-program use would hardly prove the effects of PIC. Furthermore, librarians felt that service would be inhibited by having to categorize and count patrons at the reference desk. Nevertheless, some assessment of the program and its impact was possible.

The counselors. At the end of the program's first year, each of the Peer Information Counselors was asked to write a brief evaluation of the program in terms of its accomplishments and its impact on them personally. All of the counselors expressed great enthusiasm for the program and the hope that it would continue. 11 Further, they felt that it contrib-

uted to their own skills and knowledge, and they expressed particular appreciation for the microcomputer experience. Two counselors acknowledged that the microcomputer component was the factor that attracted them to the job, and one indicated: "With the world changing over to computers and the University along with it, this part of the PIC program is a must for minority students and all students on campus." Several went on to mention that the library experience had been helpful in their own academic work. One noted, "I was able to help myself when it came to my personal research, because now I know some of the fastest ways to find out information. I wish that the knowledge I have now could have been with me as an underclassman."

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The counselors also assessed the value of their work in helping students. Two of them mentioned that students found the counselors more approachable than librarians, and that they were therefore more willing to ask for help. "A student may be more apt to ask what he considers a stupid question of another student than to ask the 'almighty, all-knowing librarian." Several counselors mentioned how much they enjoyed helping others. One said, "There's nothing like the look on someone's face when I have helped them find a book, poem, or author that they couldn't find on their own." Another commented, "It was really good to be able to help someone that was really lost." And a third remarked, "To me what is best is not only the fact that I learned the information, but that I have the knowledge to help other people retrieve vast amounts of information just waiting for them to use."

The overall response from the PIC students was an affirmation of the value of the program both for the community at large and for themselves. As one com-

mented, "Next year I envision the program taking off even better than this year. It kind of made me want to be an undergraduate again."

The librarians. UGL librarians were asked to discuss their impressions of three general issues:

- the performance of the PIC students,
- the perceived effects of the program on the minority population, and
- the perceived effects of the program on the library and its staff and users more generally.

Staff were very favorably impressed by the performance of the counselors, finding them more adept at process questions—e.g., how to find magazine articles—than questions requiring knowledge of particular reference sources, or knowledge that is acquired in library school or by long use of the collection. The librarians were especially impressed with the strong public service attitude of the counselors and with their eagerness to learn.

Librarians found it difficult to determine whether more minority students were coming to the desk than had in previous years. Those who had prior experience at the reference desk expressed a heightened awareness of minority students due to the PIC program that may have skewed impressions. All agreed that having the counselors at the desk did attract at least one category of minority students: the friends of the counselors. All of the counselors had a wide network among minority students, so that for many students who stopped at the desk there was a personal rather than merely a peer relationship.

Staff felt that having the counselors at the reference desk made it more approachable not just for minority students but for students in general. Several of the librarians mentioned that by working with the counselors they felt they gained a kind of credibility among students. As one librarian put it, "I've asked PIC students for help on a question. Patrons see an equal relationship. They can say to themselves, 'This is someone who talks to my peers.'" Librarians felt they had gained a great deal from the program in working with undergraduates as colleagues: "It seems to me that the model for reference here has been transformed. From now on, even if the PIC program doesn't continue, we'll want to have students working with us."

The librarians talked frankly about having the PIC students at the desk to

demonstrate the commitment of the library to working with minority students. They were strongly opposed to a presence merely for show, and concurred that the real effects of the program would be long-term, measured in growth over three to five years as program links formed and as PIC students began to function as the intended bridge to the student body.

Survey of users and staff. At the end of the first year, a brief survey was sent out to 33 students who had had consultation appointments wih PIC students. In general, the responses from students suggested a very positive reaction to the PIC program; respondents who had participated in word processing training gave the service a very high rating and those who had received research assistance rated the service only slightly lower. All of the respondents commented that they found their contact with the program useful, mentioning that it had made writing their papers easier and had helped them do library research for a subsequent project. One student wrote: "Continue this program—I think it is extremely important for freshmen to have individual aid in using the library." Instructional staff, academic counselors, and other University staff contacted, described PIC as a program that provided a service students needed and often requested. They, too, hoped to see the program continue.

## **Program Impact**

A service program like PIC has certain numeric measures attached to it. One could, for instance, accumulate statistics on the quantity of

- outstanding students who participate in the program as counselors,
- students taught in PIC program-related classes,
- term paper assistance consultations handled by PIC students,
- computer tutorial sessions provided by PIC students in the Academic Resource Center, or
- hours the public can expect to find PIC students assisting in reference desk service.

Harder to measure, but possibly more important, are those less quantifiable accomplishments:

 changes in the library staff's awareness of the presence and needs of at-risk and minority students,

- changes in the library's public service image,
- the program's ties to other minority and at-risk student programs and to staff on campus,
- the altered perceptions of minority students, and
- the development of PIC students themselves within the University community.

Even more difficult to evaluate is the ultimate role a program like PIC may have in the recruitment and retention of minority students. Clearly, the factors influencing minority student adjustment and academic success on campus are complex; they have persisted in spite of the efforts of a host of well-intentioned and broadly supported programs at Michigan. The scope of its vision in linking computer literacy, information-gathering skills, and positive role models allows the PIC program the opportunity to contribute to minority student adjustment on a variety of fronts.

In 1986/87, PIC program staff met with a total of 570 students in all program-related informational and instructional sessions. These meetings included minority student orientation sessions as well as classroom instruction, but not reference desk assistance which, because of its high visibility and use, remained the cornerstone of the program.

Currently, the reference desk receives nearly 3,000 inquiries a month, and PIC students are available 37 hours a week at the reference desk. As participants in reference service and as computing assistants in the Academic Resource Center, PIC students assist all patrons, and no effort is made to limit their activities to minorities or, indeed, even to students. Since the beginning of the program, 20 students have worked on the PIC staff, and PIC students are campus leaders who have gone on to graduate school and responsible positions on campus, planning careers in medicine, law, and business.

## **User Surveys**

During specified hours of one week in April 1986, all those asking questions at the UGL reference desk were asked to fill out a survey form and deposit it when completed in a box away from the desk. Survey forms were coded to indicate the status of the staff member giving service (librarian, library science student, PIC student). A total of 240 forms were returned. The survey was seen from the

outset as an indicator rather than as a statistically valid instrument. The sample size for minority students was small: 21 Blacks, 14 Asian Americans, 5 Hispanics, and 2 Native Americans, and the satisfaction ratings for library services were so generally high that comparisons between them meant little. Minority students appeared to use the reference desk to a slightly greater extent than their proportion in the student population of the College of Literature, Science and the Arts. Blacks constituted 7.8 percent of the respondents as opposed to 5.3 percent of the LS&A population, for example. All those receiving help from PIC counselors indicated high levels of satisfaction with the service provided: 60 percent said they were "very satisfied" with the service, 35 percent said "satisfied," and 5 percent were "fairly satisfied." Comments made on forms from respondents who had received service from PIC students were uniformly favorable.

In January 1987 a library use and attitude survey was sent to the 1,795 identified minority undergraduates enrolled in the College of Literature, Science and the Arts. Preliminary data analysis of the 625 completed surveys produced some surprising statistics. Responses to two questions regarding PIC were particularly telling. Of 625 respondents, only 83 (13.5) percent) indicated that they had ever heard of PIC. Worse still, only 19 (3 percent) indicated they had actually used PIC services. These responses were clearly in conflict with the number of students PIC services had, in fact, reached in the second year alone.

The PIC program obviously needed greater name and program recognition, and, for this reason, future activity and resource allocation will be focused on public relations and information designed to create this kind of recognition. Clearly, minority students who are helped by PIC students at the reference desk, who drop in for Academic Resource Center computing instruction, or who sign up for a research assistance appointment are unaware that the services they are receiving are from PIC. To build program recognition and use, the PIC program concentrated efforts on designing a program logo, preparing a printed brochure describing PIC program services directed toward students, and obtaining professional marketing assistance in designing newspaper ads and support materials.

Improved name recognition and increased student use of PIC are the program's highest priorities. In the fall

semester of 1987, each counselor wrote a letter to an assigned group of minority freshmen describing the program, introducing him/herself by name, and inviting the student to call for assistance or more information. The letter also included the first issue of the PIC program newsletter. This one-to-one contact was an attempt to break down the sense of impersonality and anonymity endemic to large-scale programs and was seen as particularly crucial in reaching students reluctant to seek out a support service on their own. Fall of 1987 saw the beginning of an outreach program to the residence hall library system at Michigan, and PIC students were considered an important part of this effort. Finally, in an attempt to create closer curricular ties to the program, efforts are now underway to offer as part of the Comprehensive Studies Program a course on information gathering and analysis specifically targeted to the needs of at-risk and minority students.

## Looking to the Future

The third year of the program saw a tough reassessment, including a sharper definition of the role of the PIC students as a bridge between the library's resources and minority students. Realism has tempered expectations of how much a counselor can learn in a semester about providing information-handling assistance to other students. Although staff will concentrate on new ways to make student staff members more proficient contributors to reference service, they recognize that good intentions are not enough to keep the program viable—it must demonstrate tangible accomplishments to justify the cost in dollars and staff time. Nevertheless, the library continues to perceive this as an opportunity, not just a responsibility. By focusing on the role of the counselors and their unique assets, emphasis is on the minority student as an enriching contributor within the university community, not on, in one writer's words, "the deficit model approach" that sees minority students as a negative element that must be made more "acceptable" to the academic mainstream.<sup>12</sup>

The overall assessment of the program by staff associated with PIC program planning is that the Office of Academic Affairs and the library have taken an extraordinary and challenging step with the creation of the PIC program. PIC represents a commitment to the importance of library-related services, computer literacy, and information-handling skills as part of the repertoire of academic competencies for minority students.

As the library moves toward greater use of high technology, as the card catalog is supplanted by an online catalog, and as more student work is managed through the use of information storage, retrieval, and handling equipment, the gap between the academic skills of many minority and white students will widen unless the needs of minority students are specifically addressed. Equally important, the library, as Ernest Boyer puts it, is in a unique position and has a profound responsibility to "sustain the culture of the book," so that future generations of college students can benefit from a lifelong commitment to reading, thinking, and learning for the pure joy of it.<sup>13</sup> The library must join other campus services to help create an environment which makes all students a part of this process.

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