

Achieving The Equitable Inclusion of Peer Research Assistants with Lived Experience in Substance Use: A Review of Existing Literature & Analysis of the Institutional Context of Peer Research Assistant Employment.

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Background: Substance use researchers are increasingly incorporating people with lived experience in substance use on study teams as Peer Research Assistants (PRAs). PRAs provide expertise on subgroup culture and emerging trends, intimate knowledge of study sites, and rapport with target populations. Job duties include recruitment and retention, survey design, and interpretation of findings. Benefits of PRAs include more relevant and impactful research questions; improved recruitment and retention rates; protection of participants; and enhanced credibility and authenticity of researchers.

Problem Statement: University hiring and personnel requirements (e.g., background checks, drug screenings, credentialing requirements, limited and inconsistent grant funding) present challenges to equitable PRA employment. This structure risks further harming individuals who have historically been subjected to maltreatment and neglect in research.

Study Objective: Support equitable inclusion of PRAs with lived experience in substance use by identifying existing barriers and emerging best practices.

METHODOLOGY

Method 1: A narrative literature review on PRA employment.

Inclusion Criteria: Peer reviewed or gray literature with a focus on PRAs with any criminalized identity.

Data Collection: Scholarly database and reverse citation searches for literature on inclusion of PRAs with histories of substance use and CJ system involvement. In total, 32 articles were included.

Analysis: Annotated bibliography summarizing key findings.

Method 2: Content analysis of university policies and descriptions at UMD Baltimore, UT Austin, and JHU.

Inclusion Criteria: For policies, procedures & position classifications there were no formal criteria. For job postings, any active research or administrative position posting.

Data Collection: All active job postings and publicly available hiring and employment policies and procedures. 7-12 documents and 3-5 job postings included per university.

Analysis: Thematic memos summarizing documents, differences between each university, and implications for PRA employment.

The institutional context of university settings creates barriers to the equitable inclusion of people with lived experience in substance use as peer research assistants.

- ❖ PRA roles not institutionally recognized as much as in treatment sector.
- ❖ PRA duties fall under entry-level position classifications. Promotional opportunities necessitate shift toward more traditional research roles.
- ❖ Persons in active use likely prohibited from formal employment.

STUDY FINDINGS

LITERATURE REVIEW: Reported Inequities & Structural Barriers

Inequitable Experiences

- Exploited & tokenized
- Career precarity
- Financial insecurity
- Role ambiguity
- Insufficient training

Barriers to Equitable PRA Inclusion

- Limited study duration & sporadic hours
- Restriction to entry-level roles
- Lack of promotional opportunities
- Payment mediums: one-time honorariums, gift cards; bus tokens

CONTENT ANALYSIS: The Institutional Context of PRA Employment

Position Classifications

Contractual/Ad-hoc

- Background checks and drug screenings typically not required
- Hour & duration limits
- Not eligible for benefits

Part- and Full-time Positions

- Necessitates background checks and often drug screenings
- Larger resource commitment due to guaranteed hours
- Benefits eligible

Pre-Employment Requirements

Background Checks

- Determinations based on:
 - Severity of the offense
 - Time since the offense
 - Relation to job duties

Drug Screenings/Prior Drug Use

- Pre-employment screenings typically required. Ongoing screening if sensitive employees or providing patient care.
- Individuals reporting active use who are not in approved treatment programs barred from employment at UMD

Relevant Position Descriptions & Promotional Opportunities

Entry Level

Example Job Titles:

- Research Assistant
- Administrative Assistant

Starting Salary: \$31k-46k

Duties: Study Implementation

Credentials:

- HS Diploma/GED
- No work experience

Mid- & Senior-level

Example Job Titles:

- Research Coordinator/Manager
- Data Analyst

Starting Salary: \$40k-70k

Duties: Oversee study implementation

Credentials:

- 1-5 Years relevant experience
- Bachelor's Degree; Master preferred

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

- ❖ Existing barriers pose substantial challenges for study management seeking to incorporate PRAs on research teams.
- ❖ Study management still have *some agency* and a duty to protect and support PRAs within existing institutional context.
 - Leverage institutional capital to advocate for internal policy changes to increase PRA equity & recognition.
 - Use emerging best practices for PRA inclusion.

Emerging Best Practices For Study Management

Prior to Hiring PRAs

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Review university employment policies & procedures related to hiring and ongoing personnel management.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Review job classes, credential requirements, wages.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Speak with HR/admin staff to ensure understanding of policies & procedures; identify potential workarounds.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Develop clearly defined roles and job duration of PRA role on planned study and long-term research agenda. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Is there a clear & defined PRA role on the study?</i> - <i>Are resources available to support them?</i> - <i>Will the position extend to future studies?</i>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Determine the best avenue for PRA inclusion. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Internal: Contractual/ad-hoc, part- or full-time</i> - <i>External: Hiring PRAs through outside organizations may allow PRAs to bypass onboarding requirements and maintain current positions in partner agencies</i>

Hiring & Ongoing Management of PRAs

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Be transparent about the position with PRA candidates. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Role, promotion opportunities, hiring requirements.</i>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Institute recurring check ins to discuss challenges, achievements, and career goals. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Outside mentor transition to academia.</i>

Limitations

Literature Review: The review was not systematic.

Content Analysis:

- Documents fail to capture actual *practices*.
- Reliance on non-PRA specific positions omit all possible ways PRAs are incorporated on research teams.

Future Research

- Studies sampling study management to better understand how they navigate existing barriers to incorporate PRAs.
- Key stakeholder suggestions for removing barriers.