



Let's Get personal

Implementing a personal librarian program

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Reaching the populations we serve to inform them about the library's great resources has always been a struggle for librarians. Nothing is more frustrating than talking to a library patron and having them tell you they wished they had known about a library service years ago. We wanted to find a way to reach out directly to students about our services rather than relying on faculty or students passively finding out about these things on their way to the library or by hearing it in a passing conversation with the librarians. Following all the upheaval of Covid and remote learning, we strove to find new ways to connect with our students directly. After several of us attended conferences and heard about Personal Librarian programs, we started learning more about how other libraries have implemented them in their own institutions. The Evans Library is an academic library serving a small private university focusing on STEM majors with over 9,000 students. Approximately half the student population attends in-person.

Our Personal Librarian program pairs first-year students with librarians who stay in touch throughout the year and provide help in various ways.

We introduce students to library resources, assist with finding information sources (books, articles, etc.), and connect students to campus resources for academic success. Reaching out to our students early on provides them with another person to ask when assistance is needed and should improve student retention.

Implementing our Program

When we embarked on this program, we set up weekly meetings to plan the implementation. We established smaller teams to develop marketing materials for students, provide training for the librarians involved, and set up essential resources such as a research guide. The first hurdle was finding software for sending e-mails to our students. We reviewed several customer relationship management systems (CRM), including what was used by our university. To send the types of messages we wanted, with the level of personalization, we decided to add LibConnect by Springshare as we use their products for other library needs. Changing our package instead of buying something new was familiar and cost-effective. We decided to send three e-mails per semester to new students: one welcome/introduction, one mid-semester, and one before finals week. Our marketing team created the e-mails; each librarian personalized them and sent them out at coordinated times. As we established this program, we started by alphabetizing students to a librarian by their last name. At the beginning of each semester, we use Slate, a CRM admission software, to generate a list of incoming students we can sort. Then, we create a customized list, assigning students to their appropriate librarians.

IMPLEMENTING A PERSONAL LIBRARIAN PROGRAM

Marketing our Program

We established a dedicated committee for the marketing efforts for our Personal Librarian program. We opted for a streamlined approach to promotional activities in our inaugural year, using a minimal marketing budget (less than \$50).

Leveraging our in-house resources, such as sticker printing and button making, we crafted eye-catching visuals to attract attention. Collaborating with Student Life, we actively tabled events within the library (300 interactions) and at the Student Org Fairs (234 interactions). We also discussed the program at our Freshman Orientation sessions (395 attendees). Furthermore, we proactively contacted first-year advisors, ensuring they were well-informed about our program to guide students to us effectively. We replaced traditional business cards with Personal Librarian Trading Cards featuring contact information for seamless connectivity. We created a fun, approachable, informal, and light-hearted tone throughout our marketing materials, e-mails, and in-person events. We hoped to convey a general sense that the library is a welcoming place and that the librarians are approachable and friendly even if students do not necessarily seek out their personal librarian. This concerted effort aims to enhance visibility and establish a personal connection between our patrons and their designated personal librarians.

Inaugural Year Results

Results for the program have been mixed but exciting. Our CRM reports that just under 70 percent of recipients opened our personal librarian e-mails, 43.8 percent above the number of e-mails opened in the average library e-mail marketing campaign, according to LibConnect. By contrast, only 2.3 percent of opened e-mails led to clicking on one of the included links. Another impediment to assessing impact is that students need to report when they are reaching out to someone as their personal librarian. To this end, we are looking into alternative metrics to analyze the program's success, such as advertised resource usage and future trends in overall library utilization. An early example of this is our new student guide, which saw several days of 300 plus percent utilization after being advertised in our Personal Librarian e-mails, despite the e-mail campaigns registering low clicks.

Looking to the Future

The personal librarian program at Evans Library is still a work in progress. We will be reworking the assignment of librarians for students and changing it to a major-based assignment, partly due to the loss of two participating librarians from our group. This will allow us to give more customized assistance based on each student's major as they advance through their education. By providing more targeted help, we hope the students will find information relevant to them as they progress towards their degree and then work in their field. Our results thus far show that the individual demand for the librarian's time could have been more significant, meaning the ratio of students to librarians is less crucial than we initially thought. While individual interactions were low with our students, we hope that as we narrow things down and target students more specifically by major, they will be informed about the resources most relevant to them. At the time of the writing of this article, one week into the Fall 2024 Personal Librarian program, the major-focused approach is showing success, with a respectable number of students making appointments with their personal librarian through our scheduling system (an average of 1.57/librarian in the first week).

As with all our work with students, our primary goal with this program is to help them be successful and informed community members. We want to find initiative-taking ways to reach more students in an ever-changing information landscape.

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