

Personal librarian program for transfer students: an overview

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to address the emergence of personal librarian programs and to discuss the development and implementation of the Personal Librarian for Transfer Students Program at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH).

Design/methodology/approach – The literature is limited to research focused on personal librarians and programs. This paper examines the process by which the program was established at UNC-CH and includes a discussion about how campus and library buy-in was secured.

Findings – The response to the program has been positive. Survey responses and anecdotal feedback shows that the program resonates with a select group of transfer students.

Originality/value – This research provides an overview of an effective, sustainable way to forge personal connections with transfer students to support their academic development.

Keywords Academic libraries, Undergraduates, Information services, Outreach, Research services, Transfer students

Paper type Case study

Introduction

In December of 2012, an article was published in *The Daily Tar Heel*, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's (UNC-CH) student newspaper, which brought to light how little support there was for transfer students at UNC-CH. The article noted some startling numbers about UNC transfer students that could not be ignored, such as "1.69: average cumulative grade point average of transfers on probation in spring 2011" and "23.06: percentage of all students on probation during spring 2011 who were transfers" (Mcanarney, 2012). Aside from the numbers, the vice president of the Tarheel Transfer Student Organization acknowledged that the "administration likes to pretend they support us [[...] but [[...]] transfers are overshadowed by first-year students" (Mcanarney, 2012). This article served as a call to action for librarians in the R. B. House Undergraduate Library (UL) at UNC-CH.

Prior to the publication of Mcanarney's article in *The Daily Tar Heel*, the head of the UL had been hearing the buzz about personal librarian programs from a variety of institutions focusing on undergraduate education. Conceptually, she found the idea of students having their own personal librarian interesting because such a program would provide librarians a path to reach students proactively. Practically, she found the idea of assigning each of Carolina's approximately 3,500 incoming students a personal librarian daunting and unrealistic. She was considering how a personal librarian program would fit at the UL, but when she read Mcanarney's article, her immediate response was that transfer students could benefit significantly from personalized library support. After the publication of Mcanarney's article, UL staff began researching personal librarian programs and reaching out to other

campus units, such as the Office of Undergraduate Admissions and the Office of Undergraduate Retention, to learn more about UNC-CH transfer students, the type of support that was currently available to them and the type of support that the library might be able to provide. The goal of this article is to briefly describe the history of personal librarian programs, to describe the development and implementation of our Personal Librarian Program for Transfer Students during the 2013-14 academic year, to discuss feedback from the first three years of the program and to address future opportunities.

Background

UNC-CH is an institution dedicated to “innovative teaching, research, and public service” (UNC, 2016). The University enrolls approximately 18,000 undergraduate students and 10,000 graduate students. In addition, 700-800 transfer students are admitted annually, and transfer students make up approximately 11 per cent of the student population. While the racial and ethnic distribution of transfer students and native first-year students is similar, transfer students are more likely to be first-generation students and on need-based financial aid (Fisher *et al.*, 2013). The 2013 entering class enrolled 801 transfer students, 34 per cent of whom were juniors. Moreover, 27 per cent of the class was age 22 or older and 28 per cent were first-generation students. These statistics remain relatively steady across the years. The most recent entering class, 2016, saw 725 transfer students enrolled, 36 per cent of whom were juniors; 21 per cent were age 22 or older and 29 per cent were first-generation students. Feeder institutions are most frequently North Carolina community colleges and four-year sister institutions in the UNC System (UNC website 2016).

The UNC-CH library system is a rich and complex network of resources, services and staff. The campus landscape includes the Academic Affairs Library (the main library, the special collections library, the Undergraduate Library and the subject branch libraries), Health Sciences Library and Law Library, in addition to a number of unaffiliated libraries. The Academic Affairs and Health Sciences Libraries are administered jointly and boast 268 permanent, full-time employees. This distributed library system can be challenging for new students to navigate; for transfer students who have a range of time commitments it can be overwhelming. For example, many new students mistakenly believe they are limited to using the Undergraduate Library and that the main library is for graduate students only, when they are welcome and encouraged to use the entire library system. Native first-year students are oriented to the library system via the First Year Writing Program; however, transfer students may not take the class, missing crucial information.

Literature review

A personal librarian program generally has the goal to foster a one-on-one relationship between a librarian and a student, so if library or research questions arise, the student will have a go-to librarian to contact directly for help. Ideally, the student's librarian would introduce themselves at the start of the semester to explain the program and ways in which they can provide help and would make contact with the student at a few key times throughout the semester. The hope is that a personal librarian would, in fact, feel more “personal”. A personal librarian program could make complex library systems seem less intimidating and more accessible. Personal librarians are not offering special or extra services to students; instead, they are advertising existing services through a new, personal communication channel.

Exploring new ways to reach students, particularly at-risk students, makes sense. Acknowledging that librarians should “rethink [their] approach”, especially in relation to reference services, is important. (Neal, 2009, p. 468). A personal librarian program is simply one newer approach to reaching our patrons. Transfer students, like all of our patrons, “want

us to be achromatic and advocative - that is supportive of the diversity of needs but also a voice for their shared interests” (Neal, 2009, p. 468). The one-on-one relationships that personal librarian programs foster allow librarians to hear voices and be supportive of diverse needs.

For this literature review, we only included sources that discuss personal librarians and programs as defined and described in Kolowich (2010) and Dillon (2011). Literature does exist but was omitted because it uses the term personal librarian to describe subject liaison librarians, which we see as conceptually and functionally different at UNC-CH. Moniz (2014) addresses the historical role of liaisons:

[...] the connection and overlap with the personal librarian program should be obvious. Good relationships between the faculty and librarians almost inevitably lead to a better experience for students. It is, however, the students themselves who are targeted in a personal librarian program for the establishment of ongoing, long-term relationships (Moniz, 2014, p. 7).

Personal librarian programs were not new to the field when Mcanarney’s article was published in *The Daily Tar Heel*. In September of Kolowich (2010) published, “Libraries Make it Personal” in *Inside Higher Ed*, which outlines the development of personal librarian programs at Drexel University and Wesleyan University. Kolowich (2010) acknowledged that

[b]oth institutions drew on the example of *Yale University*, which in 2008 began reaching out to undeclared undergraduates after providing the service to medical and law students for years.

Ultimately, Kolowich credited Lucretia McCulley, director of outreach services at the University of Richmond’s Boatwright Library, with launching the first personal librarian program. McCulley was inspired by her “personal banker” because “[she] liked her very much. She was always available to answer questions I might have. I thought this would be a great way to reach our first-year students” (Dillon, 2011, p. 11).

By 2012, personal librarian programs appeared to commonly support first-year students (University of Rochester, Drexel University, Barnard College, Case Western Reserve University), first- and second-year students (Boston University School of Theology, University of Iowa) or particular graduate student cohorts (Yale School of Medicine). Spack and Glover (2007) described Yale’s program, which began in 1996. Their goals were simple:

- divide the incoming medical class students evenly among five reference librarians;
- send three to four messages in one year (so as not to inundate them with too much information); and
- report anecdotally at the end of the first year (Spack and Glover, 2007, p. 16).

Drexel University librarians decided not to use a welcome email like Yale librarians. Instead, “[a]n initial letter introducing their Personal Librarian was mailed to the students’ homes the month before they started school in the fall 2010 quarter” (Kilzer, 2011, p. 295). Using a slightly different approach, Henry *et al.* (2012), librarians at Texas Tech University, created YouTube videos as another way to introduce students to their personal librarian.

In the aforementioned literature and personal librarian programs cited, all were geared toward entire incoming classes rather than a specific subset of the student body. While Melancon and Goebel (2016) developed a personal librarian for Aboriginal students during the 2014-15 academic year, UNC-CH’s Personal Librarian Program was the only one we could find at the time that was developed specifically for transfer students or any subset of students.

From the literature, there are concrete reasons why a personal librarian program for UNC-CH, rather than another type of support, made sense. One reason is social, in that a personal librarian can help build relationships between participating students and their librarian. [Townsend and Wilson \(2006, p. 453\)](#) acknowledge the positive impact articulation agreements provide transfer students seamless credit transfer but recognize other problems arise once the students physically transfers. They recommend focusing on the “social integration of community college transfers once at the receiving institution” ([Townsend and Wilson, 2006, p. 452](#)). [Townley et al. \(2013, p. 288\)](#) also explore transfers sense of community and concludes that

[...] researchers, practitioners, and educators [must] work to make the transfer process smoother, it is important to prioritize students’ emotional engagement in their campus environments as a key indicator in their academic and social success.

Another reason is related to institutional size. UNC Libraries is a large, complex system unlike smaller library systems found at many of their previous institutions. [Townsend and Wilson \(2006, p. 450\)](#) acknowledge “students may have more difficulty integrating themselves academically and socially than would transfer students from larger community colleges”.

A final reason is related to student engagement because

[...] students who feel more emotionally engaged with the campus environment perceive a greater sense of support from faculty and students and are more motivated to succeed academically than students who do not feel emotionally engaged ([Townley et al., 2013, p. 285](#)).

A personal librarian program can address all three of these. Personal librarian programs truly are about forming community for students. Having a personal librarian to reach out to should help the student feel socially connected and maybe even more encouraged to access UNC-CH’s large library system and other key resources they may need on campus. However, the success of the program for the student hinges on their willingness to participate or engage.

Approach

The first step in developing the program was to create a proposal. The proposal was based on information gathered from campus partners, such as the Office of Undergraduate Admissions and the Office of Undergraduate Retention, and modeled on existing personal librarian programs. The proposal was distributed to and discussed with library administration, library staff and campus partners. The proposal included our definition of and purpose for establishing a personal librarian program. It included the program’s goals, justification, implementation plan and timeline. The proposal ensured that we consistently delivered the same introduction about the program to each group and it helped us to obtain buy-in from key constituents.

Next, we met with the Transfer Student Retention Coordinator from the Office of Undergraduate Retention to ensure our program’s goals would meet the needs that they saw in the transfer student population; specifically, helping to connect transfer students to campus resources efficiently and providing an avenue to make personal connections with library staff. We met with librarians across campus in a variety of positions to recruit participants. In particular, we met with staff from special collections, technical services and public services. It was extremely important to us to recruit personal librarians that reflect a diversity of academic and personal backgrounds to connect with our diverse group of transfer students.

We recruited 40 librarians for the pilot of the program. There were approximately 800 students, which meant each participating librarian was assigned 20 students. This was the same number of students each personal librarian received in [Spack and Glover's \(2007\)](#) article, which helped reassure us that it would not be an overwhelming commitment for our personal librarians. In an effort to minimize the administrative workload for participating staff, we developed support documentation for the librarians to use throughout the process:

- listservs for each personal librarian populated with their assigned transfer students names and emails;
- a timeline based on the academic calendar, identifying key points in the fall and spring semesters when they should reach out to their transfer students;
- email templates marketing key services, such as research and citing tutorials, technology centers in the library, workshops and study facilities, that transfer students should know about early in their time at Carolina; and
- a cheat sheet listing a variety of academic and library support that staff might need to recommend to the students.

We held a training session to introduce the librarians to the materials and to give them a chance to ask us questions or voice concerns. Each librarian could use as much or as little of the pre-created content that they wanted. We created the documentation to ease their workload but the intention was not to tell them how to connect with their students or what to say. In fact, staff were encouraged to customize their communications and express their personality. All documentation was optional to use, adapt or disregard as they saw fit.

Like [Kilzer \(2011\)](#), we wanted to keep the goals of our pilot of the program simple. We established two goals, which have remained the same for three years now. Our goals are:

- (1) to provide a friendly face to the University Library; and
- (2) to connect users to quality information sources efficiently.

We wanted to inform students about the program before they came to campus in the fall. The New Student and Carolina Parents Program provided us with space in their welcome packet to tease the program over the summer. Based on the recommendation in [Dillon \(2011\)](#), we sent out welcome letters to students before the start of the semester. These letters were mailed to students' homes with the hope that they would feel some connection/reassurance before the semester even started. The letter explained the program to the students and told them the name of their librarian. Additionally, we attended Transfer Student Orientation Sessions to meet transfer students and introduce the program and ourselves. Once the semester started, the librarians contacted their students during those key points in the semester via email. If students contacted their personal librarians, librarians were to record the interaction using DeskTracker so the interactions could be counted and tracked for assessment. UNC Libraries now collect service statistics via LibAnalytics.

Our assessment goals for the pilot of the program were to aim for 5 per cent participation rate from students. Additionally, we wanted to gather feedback from staff to gauge response rate, meaningfulness of interactions and relationships with transfer students. We did this by analyzing interactions in our statistics management system and soliciting stories from participating staff. We also wanted to survey students to gauge if the program had a meaningful impact on their academic work, connection to campus and likelihood of recommending library services to their peers. The survey was distributed to students via email at the end of the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 academic years. In our survey, we asked

students the following prompts in which they could answer on a three-point scale (agree, neutral, disagree):

- My personal librarian had a positive impact on my academic work.
- My personal librarian helped me to feel more connected to the UNC community.
- My personal librarian helped me to feel more comfortable using UNC's libraries.
- I am likely to recommend library services to my peers.
- I am likely to contact my personal librarian in the future if I have library-related questions.
- Your personal librarian emailed you four times during the 2013-2014 academic year. Did you feel this was: not enough; just right; too much?

Findings

Statistics show that transfer students do take advantage of the program. In the 2013-2014 academic year, personal librarians recorded 31 interactions from 25 unique students. Five librarians had inquiries from multiple students and 26 of the interactions (or 84 per cent) were research questions. In the 2014-2015 academic year, personal librarians recorded 35 interactions from 29 unique students. Seven librarians had inquiries from multiple students and 29 of the interactions (or 83 per cent) were research questions. Several of the questions were known item searches and citing questions, whereas the majority of research questions explicitly related to specific research assignments. When students asked for directional or logistical information, they seemed to be seeking information on library and campus resources (circulating equipment, workshop availability) rather than very simple access information (borrowing procedures, hours). These interactions were both email conversations and in-person consultations.

Over the course of two years, the response rate for student participation in the program itself was 3.9 per cent. While the program has not reached its goal of 5 per cent, this may be because of the number of transfers enrolling in the sciences. At approximately 35-40 per cent, the students may not be enrolling in classes with a strong research component.

The end-of-the-year student survey yielded a poor response rate with only 12 responses (22 per cent) over the course of two years. For the 2014-2015 academic year:

- 83 per cent of the responses agreed "my personal librarian had a positive impact on my academic work";
- 80 per cent agreed that "my personal librarian helped me to feel more connected to the UNC community";
- 100 per cent agreed that "my personal librarian helped me to feel more comfortable using UNC's libraries";
- 100 per cent agreed that "I am likely to recommend library services to my peers"; and
- 100 per cent agreed that "I am likely to contact my personal librarian in the future if I have library-related questions".

While feedback was positive, there simply was not enough data to make any significant conclusions about the effectiveness of the program. Informal feedback, such as a recommendation that student staff receive more training on citation management tools, continues to be our best source of constructive feedback. Below are examples of informal feedback via email that personal librarians shared with us in which their transfer students thanked them for their help:

Thank you email 1:

[...] thank you so much for the help you gave me with my research paper on the Doryphoros. I was able to find books that better related to what I needed and cut my research time in half. I am amazed at how wonderful the librarians are at UNC and I'm really touched that everyone is so helpful.

Thank you email 2:

I just wanted to say that you are in charge of some of the finest librarians on campus and this side of the Mississippi river. Each one of them helped me to know a lot more than what I knew before I came in.

Personal librarians also shared informal feedback regarding successes and acknowledgments about the program, such as:

An email from a personal librarian to the authors:

[...] one of the students I'd met for an in-person consultation near the end of last semester to talk about search strategies for an Asian Studies research paper recognized me at the desk just now, stopped by to tell me that he got an A on the paper and in the class and thanked me for all of his help.

Another email from a personal librarian to the authors:

The email thank you I sent you today is from a transfer student I helped last year, also. So, a year later, I'm still her personal librarian [...].

An in-person acknowledgment of the program that a librarian shared with the authors:

I have the best image in my brain of a guy about my age coming to the desk asking for Angela and saying proudly, when I asked if they had an appointment, "She's MY Personal Librarian."

Discussion

The success of the program and the decision to continue it have relied heavily on anecdotal evidence from the participating students, librarians and campus partners, rather than on systematic assessment data. Each year when we attend Transfer Student Orientations, the students we speak with largely express excitement regarding the program and a sense of relief that there is one less campus entity that they have to take the initiative to understand. Campus partners continue to offer the library positive feedback regarding the program.

After the initial set-up of the program, it was easy for librarians to participate. While the participation rate was below our goal of 5 per cent, UL staff and participating librarians were extremely encouraged that 83-84 per cent of the questions asked were research questions. Research questions, rather than directional/information provide a space for librarians to have meaningful interactions and teachable moments with these students. Additionally, the feedback the students gave the librarians after the interaction showed us that for the students who reach out, the program and the support they received did make a difference.

While a ratio of 20 students per staff member was in line with how other institutions divided students, the high number of participating staff does make the program more difficult to administer. Reducing the number of staff would allow the program manager to better monitor outreach activities and ensure that statistics are entered accurately and in a timely manner. The low response rate would not burden participating staff, even if they were assigned a larger student cohort.

Limitations

Because the survey was only sent to participating students, we do not have feedback from students who chose not to participate, which is approximately 96 per cent of transfer students. This high rate of students who chose not to participate is likely related to the fact

that the program requires transfer students to be proactive in contacting their librarian whereas, if we were to embed in a class or to teach an instruction session, then the point of contact with students would be guaranteed.

Conclusion

When the program was developed in 2013, the Personal Librarian Program at UNC was the only one we could find developed specifically for transfer students, although others have been launched since then. The UL is now several years into the program with room to grow outreach efforts to increase the response rate and to help students understand how the library could support their academic success.

Stemming from this program, UL staff will continue to consider how we can best serve transfer students and aid in their success. To do this, they plan to continue researching and presenting about this program. On the state level, the head of the UL will be making a presentation to the North Carolina Library Association STEM Librarianship group in November 2016. She has already spoken with one community college librarian about the program and hopes to speak with library staff from other feeder schools throughout the year. This will help librarians at feeder institutions better understand the resources and services that will be available to their students when they arrive at Carolina. Conversely, she will also learn more about the type of preparation and resources those students receive prior to transferring to UNC. At UNC, she will continue to talk with student groups to remain personally engaged with transfers and to continue directing the program, hearing their stories and meeting their needs.

While the anecdotal evidence is enough to continue the program for now, UL staff are taking the 2016-2017 academic year to find better ways to assess the program. Instead of distributing the survey to students at the end of the academic year, they are considering having the personal librarians distribute the link to their students more closely following the interaction with hopes the response rate will rise as the interaction is more fresh in the students' minds. UL staff will also explore ways to work more closely with the Office of Undergraduate Retention. They included several questions about library services on their new survey of incoming transfer students and are in the process of hiring a new Transfer Student Coordinator. This will be a good opportunity for the library to reinforce existing relationships and to gain fresh perspective on the program.

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