TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION OF LIBRARY SERVICES AND OUTREACH FOR INTERNATIONAL AND DIVERSE STUDENTS: A MULTIPLE CAMPUS PERSONAL LIBRARIAN PILOT CASE STUDY

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ORIGIN OF THE PERSONAL LIBRARIAN PROGRAM

During Spring 2020, Penn State University transitioned to remote learning due to COVID-19 to prioritize world health and safety. This resulted in quick innovation and deployment of a multitude of resources to support learning, instruction, and research. Since libraries are a key resource for university communities, it became necessary to evolve and expand the variety and delivery of services.

Globally, Fall 2020 planning included a reduction in the number of students and researchers present on campuses and incorporation of a higher number of online classes. As part of this planning, the concept of a personal librarian initiative was developed by the library to collaborate with students, in order to attempt to mitigate any potential remote learning barriers and be reflective of the intersectional and unique needs of students in the completion of academic coursework, research, and loss of connection to their institution.

The primary goals of the initiative were to: 1) ensure students are aware of library resources, services and programs to support student academic success; 2) decrease student anxiety in remote use of library resources and services; 3) establish a personal point of contact with students for engagement, support and connection in the new virtual learning environment.

PILOT

The personal librarian program pilot was intentionally developed as an innovative approach recognizing that the diversity of an individual student’s environment, experience, and needs can influence access and utilization of library resources. The pilot reflected the following two strategic goals of Penn State University Libraries, Library Learning Services: to cultivate informed scholars who are able to gather and evaluate information and use information resources meaningfully throughout their academic careers and beyond; to develop inclusive and welcoming Library environments with intention and authenticity in support of the whole student.

Penn State University Libraries ethos is that we are “one library geographically dispersed” across twenty-four campuses, spread out over 46,000 sq. miles, so this initiative sought to foster engagement by University Libraries to positively impact the academic success of distinctive populations of Penn State undergraduate students across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The targeted populations for the pilot were undergraduate students enrolled in Educational Equity Scholar Programs (access and development for minoritized students) and international undergraduate students.
Undergraduate enrollment at Penn State University for Fall 2020 included 74,446 students, of which 6.92% identified as traditionally marginalized or from international communities (The Pennsylvania State University Data Digest, 2021). This initiative recognized that these students may be impacted by a diverse spectrum of learning and accessibility barriers. These factors are reflective of a spectrum of student life experiences, historical and intersectional challenges that are influenced by race, ethnicity, language, culture, religion, etc., along with the stressful uncertainty of a global pandemic. The transition to remote learning in Spring 2020 quickly brought “digital inequality” to the forefront for undergraduate college students (Katz et al., 2021). A few examples: equipment or technical assistance necessary for remote learning; internet connectivity and/or resident country censorship concerns; and limited access to services due to national and international time differences.

As a pilot it was difficult to predict engagement and interest by the target populations. In a brief review of relevant literature, results of a 2015-2016 academic year study at Santa Clara University's Personal Librarian Program for transfer students, 36.4% of participants were “active” users (responded or met with Personal Librarian one time) and of those participants, 9.6% were "very active," defined as "interacted with their librarian at least twice" (LaFrance & Kealey, 2017). Based on scanning available literature, it was anticipated that each personal librarian should have capacity to participate, serving as an adjunct resource to the existing Ask-A-Librarian (AAL) reference service.

Proposal

The pilot was developed to provide strictly email/virtual support (with or without video) by appointment based on student and personal librarian availability during the 2020-2021 academic year. Implementation of the personal librarian pilot included recruitment of librarians, construction of the pilot site within the existing learning management system (LMS), marketing and recruitment of students, monthly personal librarian meetings, and assessment at conclusion of the pilot project.

Recruiting Librarians

Recruitment of librarians was limited to those already engaged in support of the identified target populations with a willingness to raise awareness about library resources and to support students and research. Many of these librarians were experienced in providing public reference services through the existing AAL reference service and this serves an opportunity to provide personalized guidance to a static cohort of self-identified students. Each librarian was able to self-define desired hours, the number of students and campus affiliation they desired to support. All personal librarians committed to attend monthly virtual meetings to review current enrollment, strategize marketing efforts and develop announcements for the personal librarian home page. Additionally, a Microsoft Team was established for librarians to communicate and share resources.

The Pilot Coordinator, Racine Amos, served as the personal librarian for Educational Equity Scholar Programs with a projected maximum of 100 participants. In the event that participant interest exceeded 75 participants, recruitment of additional personal librarians would be initiated. International students had six personal librarians with a projected maximum of 230 participants with all librarians expressing willingness to assume additional students if needed. The Pilot Coordinator arranged training for participating librarians on use of the LibCal scheduling feature in LibApps by Springshare and an overview including navigation of the Canvas LMS. LibCal also offered students the opportunity to complete an anonymous survey (see Appendix A) to provide feedback regarding their appointment with their personal librarian.

The geographic scope of the pilot spanned several campuses with one or more participating librarians. In addition to three University Park librarians, librarians participated from Abington, Altoona, Berks, and Harrisburg campuses. Twenty-five international students self-enrolled in the program, 18 of whom were based out of Harrisburg. Harrisburg is a larger, less rural commonwealth campus, with over 600 international students enrolled in 2020-2021 who currently make up about 12.5% of the student population. Emily Reed is a Penn State Harrisburg librarian who is tasked with coordinating library services, resources, and outreach specifically for international students on the campus who volunteered to participate as a personal librarian working directly with international students enrolled at Harrisburg.

Marketing

The initial marketing plan for the pilot was sensitive to the participating personal librarians’ capacity concerns and desires to support students who identified themselves as attending the librarian’s home campus; it did not include any university-wide marketing efforts. Outreach was provided to the Educational Equity Scholar and International Student Programs, with pilot information, templates for email and LMS announcements for promotion of the pilot with their respective student populations. The templates included information on the role and expectations for students engaging with a personal librarian as well as information on how to enroll in the pilot. Additionally, a short promotional video with similar information was created and placed on the home page of the pilot site. During Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, the Canvas Pride received 288 page views from 26 unique students.
At the campus level, Reed took a localized marketing approach. At Harrisburg, Reed reached out to campus partners such as the International Student Support Services (ISSS) unit, instructors of English Language Learners courses, and the Harrisburg Library’s Outreach Coordinator to promote the pilot. All international students at Harrisburg received an invitation to join via email from ISSS, the librarian was invited to speak about the program at the beginning of ISSS events, it was promoted during class time by their professors or Reed in English Language Learners courses, and it was promoted through Harrisburg Library’s and ISSS’s social media channels. More than half of students who joined Harrisburg’s personal librarian group joined after learning about the program from the librarian during class, with 6.5% of students reached deciding to join. A few also joined after learning about the program from an elevator pitch presented by the librarian during ISSS events, for a success rate of 10% reached. Having a librarian invite students over Zoom was by far the most effective method of successfully recruiting students to join.

Logistics

The personal librarian program architecture was designed within the university’s learning management system, Canvas. A course was created that was publicly viewable, Personal Librarian for International Students. The course structure acts as a centralized online location for students to learn about the personal librarian program and the participating personal librarians. If a student wished to join the program, they would first log in with their Penn State credentials, then self-enroll in the course. Additionally, Canvas courses offer the capability of offering individualized groups within the course. This allows students to review and select which group, differentiated by librarian and campus, best fits their needs and interests. After students self-enrolled in the overall course, they joined one of the campus groups. Students were able to schedule research appointments with their personal librarian by accessing LibCal from within Canvas. For each campus group, the personal librarian was able to post group announcements, message students in the group using the Inbox tool, publish group pages, add events to the group calendar, and create group discussion forums.

In the fall semester, Reed created pages that could serve as ready reference resources for students (see Figure 1). Individual pages included information about the program, links to campus and university resources, and information about each subject librarian at Harrisburg.

Figure 1: Group Page, “Welcome to the Personal Librarian Program”

Reed also attempted to engage students using the discussion forums during the fall semester, but these were much less successful, so she didn’t continue with discussion forums in the spring. Some of the forums included a Library Q&A, an introductions forum, and specialty topics such as banned books, library vocabulary, and international games. Only two students responded to the introductions forum, and none of the other forums received any participation.

Reed primarily used announcements to communicate with students. Announcements consisted of textual and image content created using a rich content editor (see Figure 2). Two or three announcements were posted per week. Announcements focused on current events happening at Harrisburg Library, University Libraries, or other campus-specific events; library resource or service spotlights, opportunities for scholarships or contests, etc. Students received notifications about group announcements according to their set Canvas preferences, such as receiving an email or a push notification on their phone whenever an announcement was posted. Announcements about events and programs would often reference events cross-posted to the group calendar.
Assessment Plan

Assessment objectives were to determine any increase in participant knowledge or use, and decrease in anxiety resulting from using university libraries resources; to identify themes related to participant information seeking and requests, to inform future outreach and/or program continuation; to assess the efficiency and efficacy of providing personal librarian services; to synthesize student and personal librarian assessment and feedback of program. It is intended to utilize quantitative and qualitative data that includes cohort enrollment, number of appointments scheduled/completed, and student and personal librarian feedback surveys at the conclusion of the pilot Spring 2021.

Additionally, Reed is keeping track of all interactions in Canvas with Harrisburg students, such as communications from individual students via the Canvas Inbox, participation in discussion forums (for Fall 2020), and consultation requests. So far, three unique students have reached out to the librarian via the Canvas Inbox with questions, and one reference consultation was scheduled. While these numbers aren’t high, they should be viewed in context paired with number of site views and survey responses.

SUCCESSES

While the pilot may not have produced the high numbers we initially hoped for, there have been quite a few benefits that have resulted. First, it brought together a team of librarians from several of Penn State’s campuses who have similar responsibilities working with international students. The librarians have connected, discussed ideas, and examined challenges that each faced at their campuses. Secondly, it strengthened university and campus partnerships. Most importantly, even though our numbers weren’t vast, the individual students who did participate were kept apprised of library updates, events, resources, services, and opportunities.

LESSONS LEARNED

It became evident that the personal librarian pilot had to adapt and be flexible to the need of students. At one campus, rather than participate in the designed pilot, the librarian became “embedded” in the class at the request of the instructor. Although students were familiar with the Canvas LMS, the workflow for enrollment was cumbersome for students to navigate. To enable easier access, a “landing page” with program information and librarian profiles will be developed with links for communication and scheduling. Due to multiple roles of librarians, the need for appointment scheduling by email in addition to LibCal eliminated some scheduling challenges for participating librarians. Finally, it was demonstrated that marketing strategies must go beyond program level and be universal to provide greater awareness of the program to desired populations. The plan is to centralize previous contacts and marketing efforts, to establish a toolkit of marketing resources for each librarian to utilize on individual campuses and to develop a press release with public relations and marketing for Fall 2021.

NEXT STEPS

The personal librarians are currently discussing a one-year extension of the pilot. One challenge is that visa requirements, the availability of consulates, and international travel will impact how many of our international students are able to return to campus in the Fall 2021. Fortunately, the learning management system is a platform that reaches all Penn State students regardless of location. Even if not all campuses continue to participate in the pilot, Harrisburg will continue to offer the personal librarian program in order
to offer the significant international student population an opportunity to better connect with the library. Finally, we plan to market the program more broadly throughout the institution.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Personal Librarian Appointment Feedback Survey

Thanks for using Personal Librarian Services! As a pilot, your feedback is important to this service continuing in the future. Please complete this anonymous survey to provide information on your recent appointment and interaction with a Personal Librarian.

Q1 Please indicate the primary purpose(s) of your recent appointment with a Personal Librarian:

1. Library/Lending Policies/My Account
2. Accessing Materials
3. Research Consultation
4. Identify and Locate Materials
5. Citation Assistance
6. Other

Q2 Overall, how satisfied are you with your most recent interaction with a Personal Librarian?

o Extremely satisfied  
o Somewhat satisfied  
o Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied  
o Somewhat dissatisfied  
o Extremely dissatisfied

Q3 Based on your most recent interaction with our company, how likely are you to use a Personal Librarian again?

o Extremely likely  
o Very likely  
o Moderately likely  
o Slightly likely  
o Not at all likely

Q4 Based on your most recent interaction with a Personal Librarian, would you recommend using a Personal Librarian to other students?

o Definitely would  
o Probably would  
o Not sure  
o Probably would not  
o Definitely would not

Q5 If you would like to share any additional comments about your most recent interaction with a Personal Librarian, please enter them below.

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