



Personal Librarians

The answer to increasing patron contact
may be simpler than we think

By John B. Nann

In the mid-1990s, the librarians at the Cushing/Whitney Medical Library at Yale Medical School noticed that the traffic at their reference desk was declining. The increased complexity of the questions they were getting led them to believe that the decline was not because people no longer needed the help of the reference librarians—although the kind of help they needed might be changing—but rather had its source in a variety of other factors.



Does this situation sound familiar to you? It does to me. Many law libraries have seen a decline in the number of questions asked at the reference desk, while reporting that the questions that are being asked are far more complicated than in the past. Like the medical reference librarians, many law librarians also believe that the decline in the number of questions that we see is *not* because our patrons no longer need research assistance.

While some commentators have taken this decline as representing the death of the library, I am very positive about the future of the library and the future of many of our functions. There have been, and there will continue to be, many changes in our professional lives, but I believe that one of my former colleagues is correct in quipping that the internet is lifetime job security for reference librarians.

However bright the future of reference may be, we still must not only react and adapt to the new landscape. Rather, we should also be in the forefront leading others through the new information landscape to their destination. If it is true that there are patrons in need of assistance who are not coming to the reference desk, what actions can we take to reach them?

In this article, I will consider some of the actions that reference librarians have

been taking to reach patrons. I will also focus considerable attention on a program started at the Cushing/Whitney Medical Library that has now been adopted by several medical libraries in the United States, as well as by the Yale University Library and the Yale Divinity School Library: the personal librarians program.

Reaching Out

First, let's consider other methods of interacting with patrons that have been adopted at other libraries. The problem many of us are seeing is a decline in the number of reference questions asked, and we believe that this is due to reasons other than reference assistance no longer being needed. In casual conversations with Yale

Law School students and within focus groups of law students, this belief has been confirmed. In fact, according to a

recent survey, more than 90 percent of the Yale Law students had used reference services.

So why is the number of questions declining if a need still exists? Several hypotheses have been floated: basic questions are being answered elsewhere, and the students only seek help when they are

truly stuck; students lack experience in libraries; students are not physically in the library; students think that everything is online and don't see the reference librarians as being knowledgeable about online resources;

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or students are either afraid to ask for help or afraid they will look stupid if they ask for help. You can probably think of other possibilities.

My personal experience leads me to believe that one of the predominant reasons for the decline in reference questions is that basic questions are being handled by our websites and paraprofessionals. We are in fact answering the questions but are answering them so efficiently that they don't appear in our reference desk statistics.

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However, other less positive reasons for the decline, such as those listed above, do need to be addressed. For instance, one student in a focus group reported to me that he was a heavy user of the library and our services but almost never physically entered the library. Also, when we were examining whether to retain our reference desk, we asked the students how they liked to approach librarians, whether the desk was a help or a hindrance, and whether they would seek us out in our offices. I was surprised by the number of people for whom the desk was a hindrance; they were shy about being seen asking for help. There were not enough in this camp to have us close our desk, but more than enough to prompt us to explicitly encourage students to meet with us in our offices.

Librarians need to reach students who are not in the library, who may be hesitant to be seen asking for help, or who may be ignorant of what librarians can do for them. This news is not particularly earthshaking—many of you have thought about these problems, and many of you have tried what we have tried. While we have continued to maintain the reference desk (it has been reported to us that, for many students, there is a certain comfort found in the presence of a librarian at the reference desk), we have also taken other action. In particular, we have expanded our educational offerings (for-credit, brown-bag, etc.) and continue to provide classroom instruction through doctrinal classes. We also offer research guides in print, online, and dedicated to particular classes. We have advertised using a variety of methods and have “gone where they are” with instant messenger, e-mail, and roaming reference. We have marked out territory in Twitter, Facebook, and blogs.

Naturally, these efforts and tools are designed to go places outside the four

walls of the library and to educate about more than the specific curriculum of a session. But they also introduce students to librarians and our skills and are, often not through design, anonymous. All of these are worthy exercises, and I believe for most of us that they should continue. However, there is an idea that you may not have tried—personal librarians.

Personal Librarians

A personal librarian program is ridiculously simple. Each incoming student is assigned a librarian. The librarian contacts the student at the beginning of his or her time at the school and at regular intervals. Basically, that's it.

You might ask: how is this different from many other programs that we already have in place or relationships that develop naturally? The real difference is that the personal librarian program is explicitly individual. With personal librarians, we are saying more than “we're here when you need us” or “contact the reference desk.” We are providing the student with a name and a face—a particular person who really is there for him or her.

This individualism is more direct than most other programs and creates an explicit relationship that sets it apart. A personal librarian program directly addresses factors that we identified as affecting the number of questions, namely students' lack of experience in libraries and being afraid to ask for help. It may also create a more direct personal relationship that may help in dealing with the patrons not in the library.

A library implementing a personal librarian program need not even see it as a new program but rather as a tweak to existing efforts to reach students. However, there are some aspects to it that may make one want to treat it as a new endeavor.

At Yale, I already e-mail the students several times a year and let them know about our services, new databases, library-sponsored talks, and other news that might be interesting to them. Many of the reference librarians already teach legal research to 1Ls and often develop a relationship with many of them. Also, many of us develop relationships with

students that we encounter in other ways such as through a reference encounter, a class talk, a clinic research session, as a research assistant, etc.

But a personal librarian program reaches students who don't develop a relationship through those means. As implemented at Yale, the personal librarian program is open to all librarians. Librarians other than reference librarians are not required to participate, but many do. Not all librarians have the same number of students assigned to them. Also, there is no effort to assign librarians by topical expertise.

The Yale University Library, now completing its second year with the program, had been planning to have personal librarians “transfer” their students to the subject expert for their major. However, it turns out many personal librarians do not want to pass on “their” students. Likewise, many students want to continue the relationships with “their” librarians. How the transfer proposal will work is still to be determined.

This attachment between students and librarians can also be seen in one example from the medical library. A librarian received a contact from a patron via a response to an e-mail that she had sent out years earlier. The student had saved the e-mail knowing that it would be important someday and then used the librarian's assistance years later.

Challenges

As a department manager, my concerns run from one extreme to the other—from “Is this program worth the effort?” to “Will this program be overwhelming?” Reports from Yale libraries that have experience with this program indicate a

noticeable, but far from overwhelming, increase in contact: the university librarians report that they see between 10-15 percent of their students, while the medical librarians see more. One librarian at Yale has more than 700 students assigned to her, yet she doesn't feel that it is overwhelming.

One potential drawback is that there is not an effort to assign students to librarians based

on the students' areas of interest or the librarians' areas of expertise. However, in law school, a student will work in a variety of areas, and his or her focus may change over time. Most importantly, the personal librarian program does not expect that the personal librarian will be the person who actually provides

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assistance to the student in every instance. Rather, the personal librarian is the student's point of contact and can help the student identify the librarian who could best help him or her with the particular issue that he or she is facing at that time.

Similarly, there shouldn't be concern if a student develops a relationship with a librarian other than his or her personal librarian. "However we can reach the patrons" should be our motto. Some may be concerned that an e-mail from a personal librarian after a student has developed a relationship with another librarian might "bother" a student, that it might be seen as the library intruding on him or her. While each school is different, both our students and faculty have told us that they would like to get more e-mails from the library, not less.

I think that there are three truths that can be stated about the library and what a personal librarian program might do for it: first, patrons need librarians more than ever; second, the goal is to help patrons realize this; and third, a personal librarian program can help but will not solve the problem.

At the Yale libraries, the Personal Librarian Program is surprisingly simple. The incoming class is divided among the participating librarians. This division need not be random; for example, I would as much as possible assign students to the librarian who teaches them legal research. The program coordinator prepares a message for the students. This can be an e-mail or, if possible, it might be included in the welcome packet. Personal librarians then "tweak" the message created by the coordinator and send it out to their students.

Several times a year—monthly, each semester, every two months, or whenever makes sense at your location—the program coordinator creates a message and distributes it to the personal librarians to tweak and then distribute to their students.

That's about it. By explicitly creating a relationship between student and librarian, this simple idea can help students better take advantage of the library's resources.

“Wonderfully Positive”

Our patrons need us—even if they are not in the library, are shy about asking for help, or don't even realize that they need us. It is our responsibility as librarians to reach out to them in any and every way that makes sense, while giving due consideration to our resources, culture, and history. Many of us have undertaken many successful efforts.

I believe that starting a personal librarian program will make sense for a great many of us. First, we're probably already doing something very much like this, but by explicitly making it a program, we can have an even greater impact. Second, it's not that much more work than we are already doing. Third, it can help librarians other than the reference staff to develop a relationship with some of the students. Fourth, it is great marketing for the library. And fifth, it makes the patrons feel special.

In closing, let me leave you with the final word on the Yale Medical Library's personal librarian program from Jan Glover, education services librarian, and Judy Spak, curriculum support librarian: "The experience has only been wonderfully positive." ■

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