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Your Personal Librarian: Connecting First-Year Students to the Library at Reed College

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Introduction

Think back to your first year of college. How did you feel? Eager? Excited? Maybe also fearful, anxious about fitting in, making friends, or being successful? First-year students have a lot on their minds. It can be challenging to help them forge a meaningful connection with the library. Amidst the internal cacophony generated by the transition to college and the slew of departments and services competing for their attention when they arrive on campus, they may not realize that the library is here to help, too.

The Reed College Library has had a Personal Librarian program for our first-year students since the 2011 academic year.¹ We started our program after realizing that we were having a difficult time connecting with first-year students, for many of the reasons listed above. We were also inspired to start our program after realizing that our liaison model, in which each academic department at Reed is assigned a specific librarian as their subject liaison, might not be reaching students who had yet to declare a major. Finally, like many academic libraries, we were often facing slow traffic at our reference desk and were curious to explore alternative service models.

Personal Librarians at Reed: How the Program Works

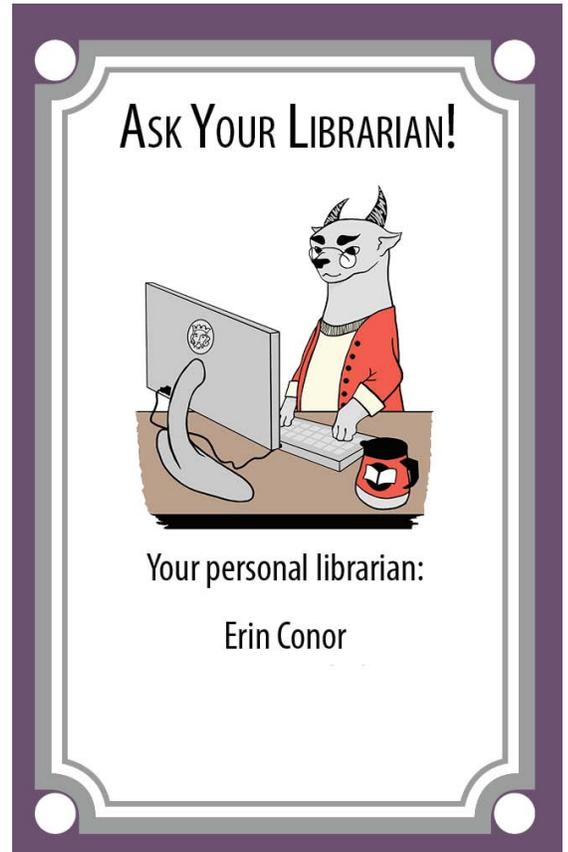
When planning our Personal Librarian program, we gathered ideas by investigating a number of similar programs existing at other colleges and universities at the time, such as those at Barnard College and Yale University. While we've made some tweaks to our program over the years, our overall goal has always been to keep our format simple and manageable. These basic elements have remained consistent:

- Every incoming first-year student is assigned a personal librarian. This librarian serves as a point of contact in the library and is available to answer any questions about using the library or doing research.

¹ Many Reed librarians, including myself, have provided leadership for our Personal Librarians program over the years. The wonderful Rachel Bridgewater, now at Portland Community College, deserves full credit for having initiated our program. Linda Maddux, our Science Librarian, is currently the coordinator of our Personal Librarian program.



- Prior to arriving on campus, each participating student receives a personalized mailing at his or her home address. The mailing introduces the student to his or her personal librarian and briefly explains what to expect from the program.
- Throughout the school year, personal librarians send their students a series of short emails highlighting library resources or services. These emails are timed to coincide with specific points in the curriculum or academic year, such as major paper due dates or semester breaks.
- During the school year, the library hosts at least one outreach event specifically for first-year students. These events are opportunities for students to connect with their personal librarian face-to-face, meet other first-years, and take a break from Reed's often intense academic environment. If they happen to learn something about the library while attending, all the better!
- Early in the fall of their sophomore year, participants receive a gentle farewell email from their personal librarian. This email includes information about the library's subject liaison program, which serves students who have selected a major.



Promotional artwork. Designed by Amy Stewart, Visual Resources Assistant.

Typically, all of the librarians who are involved in the activities of the library's Research Services department participate in the Personal Librarian program. This year, we have seven librarians acting as personal librarians; each works with around fifty first-year students.

Results

Since starting the Personal Librarians program, we have tried various methods of assessment, including short surveys for participating students and the use of Google Analytics. We consider this program a success. Overall reference traffic generated directly in response to the Personal Librarian program has been relatively low. However, the program has been very enthusiastically received by parents, faculty, and administrators, as well as by those



students who do opt to use the service. As we've worked to make our program as helpful as possible, it has also reinvigorated our partnerships with other departments on campus, such as Academic Support Services and International Student Services.

Designing and sending our annual summer mailings remains a fair amount of work, but with a schedule for the school year and regular calendar reminders for participating librarians in place, maintaining the program year-to-year is not difficult. From our point of view, the work of running the program is well worth the goodwill it generates towards the library. Our Personal Librarians program has become as much a marketing program as it is a reference service.

Conclusion

The idea of assigning busy liaison librarians responsibility for outreach to fifty (or more!) first-year students may initially seem daunting or impractical. We've found, however, that with advance planning and careful coordination, this alternative service model can be successful. Our program has resulted in meaningful and long-lasting connections with first-year students. It has raised the profile of the library on campus, and it has inspired us to more carefully consider how we can most effectively tailor our reference services to Reed students of all levels. 

