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## **Towards a More \*Personalized\* Personal Librarian Program: Pitfalls, Progress, and Potential**

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# TOWARDS A MORE \*PERSONALIZED\* PERSONAL LIBRARIAN PROGRAM: PITFALLS, PROGRESS, AND POTENTIAL

AUDREY B. WELBER

## BACKGROUND

Modeled after Yale's successful program ("About the Personal Librarian Program," 2016), Princeton launched a Personal Librarian pilot in 2017 with the goal of pairing every undergraduate with the same librarian for all four years. We initiated the pilot with first- and second-year students, utilizing a rolling plan so that by Fall 2019 all class years would be included as each class advances to the next level. We decided to launch this pilot for general outreach purposes, but also to fill a long-standing gap in library outreach to second-year students. In the first year, this pilot met with a low student response rate and increasingly fragile librarian buy-in; this paper will reveal both the issues that initially stunted the program's success and the changes that now promise to make it one of the library's strongest outreach initiatives yet.

## IMPLEMENTATION

### Staffing

Buy-in from the Library administration and Princeton's Dean of students was immediate and enthusiastic. In July of 2017 a call was put out to librarians and other library professionals to be part of the Personal Librarian (PL) pilot and was met with great interest. In our invitation to library staff we described our plan to "pair [each student] with a librarian who can serve as a friendly face and starting point for general information about the library," emphasizing that the initial undergraduate cohort would "be first- and second- year student[s]" and that we would be "restricting it to underclassmen for this first pilot year."

PITFALL #1—The language in the invitation was ambiguous; it would have been better to err on the side of over-explaining.

### Outward/inward Facing Web Presence

We designed a web page (<https://library.princeton.edu/personal-librarian>) where students logged in and identified their PL by an informal and engaging profile (e.g., "I'm a professional herder of cats"). We also created, using Word Press, an internal website (<http://personallibrarians.princeton.edu/>) for PLs which included links to help answer student questions, a statistics form, sample email templates, and other technical instructions. We also offered in person training opportunities for all PLs, aimed particularly at librarians new to public service and reference/research.

### Student/PL Pairing

The registrar supplied us with a spreadsheet including every undergraduate's name, email address, class year, residential college/dorm, and even their tentative subject interest. While we initially thought about various pairing models, such as by student's subject interest (STEM/non-STEM), residential college, and first year writing seminar assignments. These options were too

impractical or convoluted, so students were randomly paired with the librarians. Each PL had approximately 53 students with the exception of a core group of about four librarians who had between 250 and 450 students).

PITFALL #2: We didn't initially explain the rationale behind the pairing to the PLs

## **INITIAL (FIRST YEAR) RESULTS**

Though we anticipated at least Yale's typical 10% response rate (Kolowich, 2015) our numbers were much lower; staff complained that they received no, or very few responses; from both the beginning and increasingly as the year wore on, we learned that some staff never sent out their introductory emails. This was determined both by PL self-reporting and by informally asking first year students if they knew they had a PL or had received an email. And, even if students were aware of the program/had received emails, they reported feeling that these were bulk emails they didn't need to act on.

PITFALL #3: Each PL sent out bulk emails, in which students were BCCed.

PITFALL #4: Given that PLs were discouraged because there were few responses, it would have been better to have more students per PL to ensure sufficient student responses to maintain PL morale.

## **INITIAL COURSE CORRECTION (RESULTING IN FURTHER PITFALLS)**

By the end of the first academic year, a number of library staff opted out, due to retirement, "busy schedules," or low student response rate (with the implication that it wasn't a worthwhile use of their professional time). To further complicate matters, one librarian decided to embark on a separate in-person outreach program to the six residential colleges. Since this type of effort has had a poor track record at Princeton and could be potentially confusing to students (who would now have a writing seminar librarian, a residential librarian and a personal librarian), I convinced both the outreach librarian and the library administration that the two efforts should be merged, or at least lay the groundwork for doing so. So, in August 2018, we re-paired by residential college even before the in-person outreach program was launched, all while folding in a new cohort of first year students and thus including the rising junior class. Changing the pairings for existing first and second year students and their PLs affected few students as response numbers were so low. Similarly a lot of re-pairing was needed anyway due to librarian turnover and an unprecedented number of new hires.

However, this sudden re-pairing without a full explanation of our rationale, coupled with roll-in of new first years and also rising juniors, resulted in something of a staff mutiny from subject specialist librarians who felt that the inclusion of juniors would undermine their attempts to forge connections with their departments and would end up confusing the students. This mutiny unfortunately took the form of charged "reply all" email exchanges among PLs, including one that pronounced hatred for the PL program.

PITFALL #5: We didn't explain the thought process behind re-pairing PLs, or emphasize that the initial plan had always been to include all four undergraduate classes.

## **FURTHER COURSE CORRECTION**

In early September 2018, when it seemed that the pilot would fail due to staff dissatisfaction, we quickly moved to: ensure full public support from library administrators; emphasize the "pilot" nature of this program and our willingness to make adjustments; acknowledge the initial lack of clarity in the ultimate goal of the program to include all undergraduates; explicitly emphasize the importance of referring juniors to their subject specialists, while also clarifying that the PL program was intended as a "safety net" for juniors who might not know how to reach their subject specialists; and, extend the offer to "opt out" of the pilot to PLs who were unhappy and seeding discontent.

While the political issues among PLs were improved through clear communication and humility, by far the most successful fix for the program overall was a technical one: MAIL MERGE! In Fall 2018 we began encouraging all PLs to use Microsoft Word's mail merge feature for increased personalization, which avoided the impersonal BCC and replaced it with a personally addressed email. This immediately resulted in a marked increase in student response (see Appendix A) and, in an effort to address the subject liaisons' concerns, we described how mail merge could be used to parse class years in the mail merge process for further

personalization (i.e., first and second year students would receive one email and juniors another). This increased email personalization coupled with the serendipitous reduction of staff (reducing PL ranks to those most invested), resulted in a higher response rate per PL and a re-energized program.

## **CONCLUSION AND POTENTIAL ENHANCEMENTS**

Though there were many hurdles in Princeton's Personal Librarian pilot, they were overcome by clarity of communication, listening carefully to dissenting viewpoints, and aiming for the highest degree of student personalization possible. For the future, since PLs are now paired with students by residential college, we look forward to joining an "in residence" program with the Personal Librarian program, using the PL email channel to announce the presence of PLs at established study break events. Another intriguing idea would be to create a PL program aimed at new faculty.

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## REFERENCES

About the Personal Librarian Program | Yale University Library. (2016). Retrieved from <https://web.library.yale.edu/pl>

Kolowich, S., "Study: College students rarely use librarians' expertise," USATODAY. (2015, March 11). Retrieved from <https://stephenfrancoeur.wordpress.com/2015/03/11/steve-kolowich-study-college-students-rarely-use-librarians-expertise-usatoday/>

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## APPENDIX A

### **Academic Year 2018-19 Princeton Students:**

Total Undergraduates: 5353  
Total First year students:1357  
Total Second year students:1337  
Total Juniors:1319

**Number of PLs AY 2017-18:** 36

**Number of PLs AY 2018-19:** 24

Comparative student contacts for one Personal Librarian with 454 students:

**AY2017-8:** 12

**AY2018-9:** 98

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