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The Library Concierge Project at Stanford University

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Abstract

To meet the challenge of ensuring that library staff and scholars/patrons are aware of the full range of resources and services offered through the library, the Stanford University Libraries initiated a Library Concierge Project in November of 2011. This article describes the program and provides an assessment of how well the Library Concierge Project has met its goals of promoting a service-focused culture and educating staff. A description of the concierge concept in action is also provided, along with anecdotal evidence of the impact of the project on supported scholars.

Introduction: The Challenge of Expanded Services

Like many of our peers in the large research library community, the Stanford University Libraries offer a nearly overwhelming range of services and resources in support of the teaching and research missions of our university. As libraries like Stanford expand their services into areas not traditionally associated with libraries and books—such as data management, digital humanities support of all kinds, and instructional technology consulting—we face a challenge in communicating to scholars the full range of resources we have to offer. While faculty and students who take advantage of our resources are generally quite satisfied, there are many more scholars who are not even aware that the kinds of support and collaboration they require are available to them through the libraries.

Libraries and librarians have always functioned as hubs of information connecting community members to resources, and this role becomes ever more important as the needs of scholars, and our support for such, expand into new and non-traditional offerings (Zickuhr, Rainie, & Purcell 2013). The diversity of resources now offered by libraries means that any given reference question, research project, or teaching initiative might benefit from the support and collaboration of expertise and resources located throughout the libraries, as well as from other units across a campus.

In short, modern academic libraries are more than traditional collections and reference services. Within the

Stanford University Libraries, our strengths span traditional library collections and services, emerging digital library resources and tools, publishing services, and academic technology support, and all these cross many disciplines. This presents a major challenge for us: Faculty and students don't always know the depth and breadth and range of our resources and services. Comments from a December 2012 survey of Stanford University faculty (Bourg, Buckley, Nakao, & Worthey, 2012) confirm this, for example:

"I did not know I could get such support from the libraries..."

"If there actually was support available that I knew about, it would be good."

Scholars often lack a full appreciation of the range of library services available to them, and library staff likewise struggle to keep up with the growing complexity of their own organization and the range of resources and services offered under the auspices of the Stanford University Libraries.

The Library Concierge Project was created to promote a new philosophy of library service, one that provides our patrons with reliable, knowledgeable points of contact from across the organization. It aims to provide library staff with a better understanding and awareness of the various resources and services provided in many different library units, so that we are better equipped to act as concierges, coaches, and ambassadors to our patrons. The Library Concierge Project began in November 2011 with planning and kick-off presentations. The first of our monthly Concierge training sessions (described below in How it Works) took place in February of 2012. The project is ongoing.

Library Concierge Project Goals and Expectations

The overarching philosophy behind the Library Concierge Project is that patrons should be able to learn about any service or resource they need for a research project, teaching initiative, or class paper through a single point of contact instead of having to discover each of those services and where it lives in our large, complex organization on their own. In this way, we are encouraging and equipping library staff to emulate the service model exhibited by a concierge at a 4-star hotel. Just as an exceptional hotel concierge [\[ii\]](#) has the right set of contacts and information to serve as a single point of contact for guests' needs, our library staff ought to be equipped and empowered to assemble the right set of resources and services on behalf of our scholars.

The goals of the Library Concierge Project are:

1. To promote an explicit focus on exceptional customer service and to promulgate a "Concierge-like" service attitude across the libraries and among library staff.
2. To train, equip, and empower all library staff to serve as single-point-of-contact "Concierges" in support of Stanford scholars.
3. Ultimately, to increase knowledge and use of the wide range of Stanford Library resources and services throughout the Stanford community.

In terms of specific expectations for staff, our goal is that all staff will improve their knowledge of our resources and their ability to assist patrons, regardless of their position in the organization or their degree of prior knowledge. Because all staff are encouraged to participate in the Library Concierge Project, even those whose jobs do not involve direct support of scholars, we emphasize a full range of ways staff can act as concierges. At one end of the range, we hope that a staff member who is approached by a patron in the hallway or on the campus shuttle

bus with a simple question about the library will be able to provide a better answer or referral because of what they have learned in the Library Concierge Project sessions. At the other end of the spectrum, we expect that some staff, especially our subject librarians, would be fully equipped to serve as a dedicated concierge for longer term research projects.

While the core of the Library Concierge Project (monthly staff training sessions) is not particularly creative, the commitment to systematically addressing the need for all staff to be more knowledgeable ambassadors for the library does represent a creative approach to an increasingly common challenge.

How it Works

The key to making the Library Concierge Project work is to provide library staff with the knowledge and skills needed to seamlessly connect patrons to the full range of resources they need. Monthly training sessions form the backbone of the Library Concierge Project. These sessions are open to all staff, and library management has been very active in supporting and encouraging staff attendance. In fact, department heads and senior leaders at the Assistant/Associate University Librarian (AUL) level actively participate and attend all sessions. We usually provide 3 identical sessions for each topic, with attendance capped at 50 people per session. We also record one session for each topic, making it available to staff who cannot attend the live sessions, or who wish to review the topic after a session. Each month, between 125 and 200 library staff members attend one of the live training sessions, and dozens more watch the session video.

The sessions are designed to familiarize staff with specific resources and services offered by the library and to provide examples of ways staff across the organization might refer patrons to that service or resource. Topics covered to date include:

- Copyright, licensing and e-resources
- Numeric and spatial data services
- Digital humanities support
- Humanities branch libraries
- Digital library initiatives
- Academic Computing Services support for faculty research and teaching
- Academic Computing Services support for students and learning
- Stanford University Press and HighWire Press (both enterprises of the Stanford University Libraries)
- Special Collections and University Archives

Future sessions will include topics covering our science and engineering branch libraries, the East Asia Library, preservation and conservation, circulation activities and policies, library development and donor relations, and developments in metadata and cataloging. We conceive of the Library Concierge Project as an ongoing initiative, as staff turnover will require repeat sessions and continual improvements and changes in our resources and services will mean that we will always have new topics to cover.

The Concierge Program Advisory Group is responsible for planning topics, scheduling sessions, handling the logistics and communication for training sessions, and recommending changes and improvements to the program based on formal and informal feedback. This advisory group consists of 5 staff members from across the organization, selected for membership in the group by their Director/AUL. The group meets monthly, and

members of the group spend approximately 4-8 hours per month (including the 1 hour monthly meeting) on tasks related to the Library Concierge Project.

A key task of the members of the Concierge Program Advisory Group is to coach all session presenters before their session, encouraging them to make sessions interesting and interactive and to provide the appropriate level and amount of information. The sessions have included skits, videos and music, group activities, as well as the opportunity for staff to view and handle special collections materials from our Art and Architecture Library and our Music Library.

The sessions also provide monthly opportunities for staff from across our 500+ person organization to get to know one another via an activity we call the Marguerite Moment. The Marguerite Moment is our version of an elevator pitch, named after Stanford's free campus shuttle bus. Our Marguerite Moment exercise goes like this:

“Imagine you are on the Marguerite shuttle and you sit down next to someone you recognize from the library, but have never talked to before. Introduce yourself to them, and tell them what you do for the libraries.”

Marguerite Moment exercises are also used to highlight key information about the session's topic. Staff are asked to imagine being approached by a Stanford community member on the Marguerite shuttle who asks a question about a library service or resource, for example:

“Hi, you work at the libraries, right? Where can I find music to borrow?”

“Hey, you're from the library. Do you know if there is anyone who can help me with a data management plan?”

“Are you a librarian? What's up with the Google book project?”

We use CourseWork, the course management system run by the Stanford University Libraries' Academic Computing Services division, as the online hub for the Library Concierge Project. Over 300 Stanford University Libraries staff members have joined the project site to access training session chat rooms, videos, and supplemental materials. Many have participated in the active discussion forum, to share their own concierge stories and real Marguerite Moment examples, suggest future topics, and follow up with questions about past topics.

Assessment of the Library Concierge Project

The ultimate goal of our Library Concierge Project is to provide Stanford scholars with more efficient access to the array of resources and services we have to offer. To accomplish that goal, we first have to equip and empower library staff to provide concierge-level service to our patrons. Although initial anecdotal evidence suggests that the project is meeting the needs of faculty (see Concierge in Action section below), we feel it is too early in the project to be able to systematically assess the impact on patrons. Our assessment to date has focused on the impact of the Library Concierge Project on our own staff's confidence, knowledge, and attitudes.

To evaluate the efficacy of the Library Concierge Project, we conducted a series of surveys to assess the staff's confidence in providing information about each topic covered as well as their feelings about the project itself. We

have deployed 4 surveys to date, with each survey covering both pre-test questions about topics yet to be covered, as well as post-test questions about topics covered in prior sessions.

For each topic, we asked respondents to rate their confidence in providing basic information about that topic on a 1-100 point slider scale: “How confident do you feel in providing basic information about the following topics?” We asked this question both before and after each topic session was held. The group average confidence ratings for respondents who answered both pre and post surveys are displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Pre and Post-test Basic Information Confidence Ratings on 100 point scale, by Topic

| Topic | Basic Knowledge | | |
|---|-----------------|-----------|----|
| | Pre-Test | Post-Test | N |
| Copyright & Licensing | 40 | 50 * | 51 |
| Numeric & Spatial Data | 23 | 47* | 51 |
| Digital Humanities Support | 37 | 40 | 23 |
| Art & Architecture Library | 34 | 48 * | 24 |
| Music Library | 35 | 52 * | 23 |
| Digitization Programs | 45 | 52 | 21 |
| Academic Computing: Support for Students & Learning | 37 | 56 * | 20 |
| Academic Computing: Support for Faculty research & teaching | 32 | 50 * | 19 |

* $p < .05$

As Table 1 shows, there was a statistically significant increase in staff members’ assessment of their own confidence in providing basic information on almost all topics after the Library Concierge Project session on that topic. The average increase in basic information confidence for all topics was 14 points (on a 100 point scale). The lack of a statistically significant effect for the Digitization Programs sessions may be due to the fact that this is a frequent topic at our quarterly all-staff meetings (note that pre-test confidence about Digitization Programs is quite high). Unfortunately, the lack of improved confidence about Digital Humanities Support may be due to a less effective presentation than the other topic sessions. With the exception of those two topics, these data indicate that the Library Concierge Project has been quite successful at meeting our goal of increasing staff members’ basic knowledge of various services and resources offered by the libraries.

We saw similar trends in ratings about confidence in providing advanced information about each topic (Table 2). For advanced confidence we asked, “How confident do you feel in providing advanced information about the following topics?” Because our goal was improved confidence and knowledge for all staff, regardless of their place in the organization or their initial level of confidence or knowledge about a given topic, we elected not to define either basic or advanced knowledge.

Table 2. Pre and Post-test Advanced Information Confidence Ratings on 100 point scale, by Topic

| Topic | Advanced Knowledge | | |
|---|--------------------|-----------|----|
| | Pre-Test | Post-Test | N |
| Copyright & Licensing | 23 | 34 * | 51 |
| Numeric & Spatial Data | 19 | 31* | 48 |
| Digital Humanities Support | 26 | 26 | 25 |
| Art & Architecture Library | 19 | 29 * | 24 |
| Music Library | 22 | 32 * | 24 |
| Digitization Programs | 35 | 43 | 21 |
| Academic Computing: Support for Students & Learning | 26 | 42 * | 20 |
| Academic Computing: Support for Faculty research & teaching | 25 | 39 * | 19 |

* $p < .05$

As expected, respondents’ ratings of their confidence in providing advanced information about all topics is lower than their ratings of their confidence in providing basic information, both before and after Library Concierge Project sessions. But like basic information confidence, we see increased confidence for most topics after the sessions were held, by an average of 8 points on a 100 point scale.

In addition to these quantitative measures, we also asked open-ended questions about how staff feel about the project. In general, survey respondents were very positive in their feedback about the project, as indicated in the following sample quotes:

*“No matter how much I *think* I know, I always learn something new at the Concierge sessions. The main lesson — about “prior knowledge” — is that there’s way, way more going on in Stanford Libraries than even us old-timers are aware of.”*

“I was able to confidently give a referral to an instructor this morning as a result of what I learned from the Academic Computing session.”

We also asked staff to describe any opportunities they have had to serve as a Library Concierge, engage in a Marguerite Moment, or to otherwise share information about Stanford University Libraries’ resources with a patron or potential patron. To better understand the Marguerite Moment stories shared by Concierge participants, we created a schema to explain their knowledge and experiences: a metanarrative (Stephens, 1998). To uncover common themes we performed a frequency analysis on the words in the stories (filtering out function words such as “is”, “am”, “for”, etc.), and used those words to code the Marguerite Moments into several groups, representing different ways that the concierge role is enacted. The most common version of the concierge role is one we labeled the “Informer”, where library staff provide information about library resources and/or services to patrons when asked directly. The next most common concierge types were the “Guides”, who direct patrons physically or conceptually to the resources needed; the “Socialites”, who share about the library in social situations; and the “Advertisers”, who go out of their way to promote library resources in work settings. Analyzing staff stories about their concierge interactions in this manner helps us to see ways in which the Library Concierge Project appears to be encouraging staff to more actively promote and describe our services to scholars in a variety of settings, taking on a variety of “concierge roles.”

Overall, the data from our Library Concierge Project surveys indicate that the project has resulted in increased staff confidence in talking with patrons about the specific services and resources we have covered thus far in the project, and increased staff awareness and attention to the importance of providing exceptional public service to our scholars. Moreover, analysis of the concierge stories staff shared in their survey responses confirm that there are a variety of ways in which library staff can and do provide concierge-like service to scholars.

Concierge in Action

The Library Concierge Project has encouraged all staff to incorporate a service philosophy into their regular interactions with patrons. We have also appointed official “Concierges” to certain long-term faculty projects. One such project is the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America project, an international, multidisciplinary research project aimed at “producing a body of scholarship that will be the most authoritative study on the Chinese railroad worker experience in America” (Goldman, 2012). The project is centered at Stanford University, and will be housed in Stanford’s East Asia Library. In recognition that this multi-year research project will make use of many different resources and services of the Stanford Libraries, we have formally appointed our Subject Specialist for British and American History to act as the concierge for the duration of this project. As the project concierge, he has directed the project team to the right resources on setting up an online archive that will eventually integrate with our library website, he connected the project team with our copyright expert for advice on intellectual property issues involving 19th-century photos, he consulted with several other subject specialists to obtain primary and secondary materials in both Chinese and English for the project, and he has provided training for undergraduate interns working on the project. In short, the concierge for this project has provided exactly the kind of well-informed, single point of contact we envisioned when we began the Library Concierge Project.

The project team agrees. Shelley Fisher Fishkin (the Joseph S. Atha Professor of Humanities, Professor of English, Director of American Studies Program, and co-director of the Chinese Railroad Workers project at Stanford University) responded with enthusiastic praise:

We were thrilled to hear that our project had its own “concierge” at the Library. It was an enormous relief given how many different ways our work involves different parts of the library. It has made a tremendous difference already—it has added to our sanity in crucial ways, and has ensured that we don’t make wrong decisions that would come back and bite us in the long run. During the months before we had our own “concierge,” I spent many hours connecting with perhaps a dozen different staff members in the library, ranging from digital humanities experts to maps librarians. It was hit or miss whether I found the right person... My peace of mind — and sense of order — has been greatly enhanced by having ... [a] “concierge” for our project ... It is great to know that [our concierge] is on the lookout for ways of making our lives easier, and making our research stronger. (Personal communication, February 10, 2013).

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

While we feel confident that the Library Concierge Project has been a successful initiative, we have certainly learned some lessons along the way. Some early staff feedback indicated that the wide range of expectations about how staff would use the information they learned in the sessions was confusing for many, and stressful for some. We addressed this by emphasizing in subsequent sessions that our goal is that every staff member, no matter where they work in the organization, would learn something at each session that would help them to do their job a little better and/or see how their work fits into the larger context and goals of the organization. For each session, we tell attendees that we hope that they will walk away with new knowledge of some sort that will have a positive impact on their work and on their formal and informal interactions with patrons.

Early on in the Library Concierge Project, we also realized that sustaining a program of this magnitude required considerable resources. We appointed a five-person Concierge Project Advisory Council to plan and handle the logistics of sessions, to direct assessment activities, and to shape future directions for the project. The work of this group has been indispensable to the continued success of the project. Sustained encouragement from senior leadership has likewise been instrumental in maintaining high levels of commitment and attendance from staff.

As stated earlier, our goals for the Stanford University Libraries’ Library Concierge Project are to promote a concierge-like service philosophy among all staff, to educate and equip all staff to provide concierge-like service when appropriate, and ultimately, to increase scholars’ awareness and use of the ever growing range of resources provided by the Stanford University Libraries. Just one year into the project, feedback from scholars and from library staff indicate that the project has been quite successful. An additional, less formal indicator of the success of the program is the adoption of the terms “concierge” and “Marguerite Moment” as part of our shared organizational vocabulary. Stanford University Libraries’ staff have even turned “concierge” into a verb, frequently deciding among themselves who should “concierge” a tricky reference question. Likewise, staff members explicitly share and celebrate examples of “Marguerite Moments” at regular meetings and in casual conversations. Although the label “concierge” initially met with some resistance from our staff (see Bourg 2012), tying our training sessions explicitly to a well-recognized model of exceptional public services was an important element of the program.

As libraries expand services to meet changing patron needs and expectations (Zickuhr, et. al. 2013), it is vitally important that all staff become knowledgeable ambassadors of our all of our services and expertise to the scholars we serve. At the Stanford University Libraries, we addressed the challenge of ensuring our staff are equipped and empowered to seamlessly connect scholars with the right set of resources and services through our ongoing Library Concierge Project. In its first year, the project has resulted in significant improvements in staff confidence

in providing information on a range of services and topics. More importantly, the project has created a culture within the library that emphasizes, encourages, and celebrates exceptional public service.

Notes

[i] I am grateful to Ellie Buckley, Kris Kasianovitz, Ron Nakao, and Glen Worthey for their valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this article. Ellie Buckley and Jacqueline Hettel also analyzed the assessment data, and were kind enough to make sure I represented the results accurately.

[ii] The label “conciierge”, and the comparison to a hotel conciierge, was not without controversy. Many staff objected to the term because they felt it implied a much more subservient relationship with scholars than the kind of collaborative and collegial interactions we foster. For more on alternate name suggestions, see “A conciierge by any other name” at <http://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2012/01/10/a-conciierge-by-any-other-name/>.

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