

# **Supporting Student Retention and Success: Personal Librarian Program at the University of Victoria**

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## **Abstract**

In September 2014, librarians at the University of Victoria launched a Personal Librarian Program for first-year students. The program aimed to establish a point of contact to assist students in their academic needs related to the library, and make them more aware of and comfortable asking for library help. This program at UVic Libraries directly addressed the University's top priorities, enhancing the first-year experience and promoting student retention and success. In this paper we will present a brief literature review of Personal Librarian Programs and how specialized programs like these contribute to student retention, describe how we set up the program (including automating emails) at the University of Victoria, promotion of the program and share the response we have received from students, which though lackluster did provide the program coordinators with useful lessons going forward.

## **Introduction**

In the Fall of 2013, the Learning & Research unit of the Mearns Centre for Learning - McPherson Library at the University of Victoria (UVic) was charged by the University Librarian and the Vice-President Academic with developing a Personal Librarian Program (PLP) as part of the focus on student success and retention at UVic. The PLP was to be implemented for new students arriving in September 2014. At the time, Personal Librarian programs already existed at other universities in Canada and the United States and these were examined during development of the UVic program.

The PLP is intended to be another tool to introduce library resources and services to incoming students at the beginning of their program of studies to aid them by "helping students attain the expertise, ability, and skill to search for, locate, and evaluate information necessary for academic success" (Pickard & Firouzeh, 2013, p. 412). Students have the opportunity to meet and engage with a specific librarian during their first year, to ask questions about study rooms, hours, computers and technology, and course related research assignments. This is important because new and incoming post-secondary students must develop effective, academically sound information seeking behaviors in order to be successful in their studies. These behaviors include: knowledge and skill in the research process, digital information fluencies, and understanding the principles of academic integrity. While developing these behaviors, new students tend to rely on peers and Google, as reported in numerous surveys of student information literacy including Project Information Literacy (<http://projectinfolit.org/publications>). The PLP program is a way to connect students with a professional librarian who can provide more comprehensive information.

The University of Victoria is a comprehensive Canadian university offering a wide range of undergraduate and graduate programs including doctoral degrees. 2015-2016 enrollment figures were: 21,593, including 3446 graduate students (<http://www.uvic.ca/home/about/facts-reports/index.php>). The University of Victoria Libraries has a complement of about thirty-one professional librarians. The committee established to implement the Personal Librarian program was chaired by the Coordinator of

Learning and Research. The composition of the committee has changed over time but reflects a core feature of the program, namely that all professional librarians are involved.

The initiative was included in UVic's Academic Priorities and Plan, 2013-14 and the goals of the PLP at UVic were to

- enhance the libraries current services for first year undergraduates
- ensure first year undergraduates are assigned a librarian as a first point of contact
- ensure first year undergraduates are more aware and comfortable asking for library help
- promote student success and retention

In this chapter we will describe how we set up the program at UVic, and share the response we received from students and librarians. We will also demonstrate our methods of administering the PLP, how we promoted it to first-year students, and discuss ways to improve the program for future iterations.

### **Literature Review**

A review of the literature shows how librarians are using personal librarian programs to market library services, provide research support, and contribute to student retention. Many of these articles informed the creation and execution of the personal librarian program at the University of Victoria Libraries. Gontshi & Owusu-Ansah (2015) trace the roots of the personal librarian concept to Smith (1933) who decries the lack of personal assistance in a library and argues "Its absence means that the success of library service depends mainly upon the accidental impact of the right reader and the right book." A common theme throughout the PLP literature is that setting up a program seems like a lot of work for small payoff. Providing a PLP, even if response is low, can have high impact for the students it does reach. Students surveyed who do take advantage of PLPs report increased use of the library, increased knowledge of library services, and a personal connection with their librarian (Dillon, 2011; Garofalo, 2014; Henry, Vardeman, & Syma, 2012; Spak & Glover, 2007). Tie-ins to other library services and promotions, such as instruction (Garofalo, 2014), help videos (Henry, Vardeman, & Syma, 2012), or librarian trading cards (Sullivan, Sclipa, & Riley, 2016), direct attention, create buzz, and aid library marketing efforts. Many guides and articles share best practices, mistakes, and technical details on how to set up a PLP (Moniz & Moats, 2014). We also found that by contacting librarians in charge of administering PLPs at other institutions led to a wealth of advice and ideas which helped direct the implementation of the program at the UVic.

### **Planning and Implementation**

The program was initially discussed with the Learning & Research librarians at UVic in October of 2013. We had a Skype session with Yale librarians (who had an established PLP program) to which all librarians were invited. By March 2014, a committee was established consisting of four librarians, including two from Library Systems and two from Learning & Research. The committee developed the project proposal which was presented to all librarians in March 2014. Part of this proposal was that all professional librarians and archivists unless on leave were assigned to the program. Still, even with 30 librarians participating, workload issues were a concern as each librarian would be assigned between 120 and 140 students. Composing and managing so many emails would be problematic; the Systems librarians were

invaluable. The solution about how to manage the emails was arrived at with a Personal Librarian email WebApp developed internally. The open source app randomly assigns students to librarians, sends out email messages to all participants with the librarian’s signature, and allows administrators to easily send out messages to librarians in the program. The students are randomly assigned to each librarian, irrespective of a librarian’s departmental liaisons or administrative functions. A search function is embedded into our PLP web page so that students can look up their Personal Librarian (<http://www.uvic.ca/library/research/plp/index.php>).

It was decided that a total of six emails (Table 1) would be sent to students, three in Fall term, and three in Spring. Each email would include a subject, content with many links to our library website, and a personal signature line. Prior to the sending of each email to students, drafts were sent via the app to all PLP librarians for their comments because librarians felt very strongly that they needed to know the content of the emails being sent by the app under their name and personal email. Librarians were also notified of the dates when the emails would be sent to students.

PLP messages subject lines	Date sent to students 2014/2015	Number of Emails sent 2014/2015	Responses received 2014/2015	Date sent to students 2015/2016	Number of Emails sent 2015/2016	Responses received 2015/2016	Date sent to students 2016/2017	Number of Emails sent 2016/2017	Responses received 2016/2017
Welcome to the Personal Librarian Program	Sep 16 - 18	4245	67	Sep-21	3953	53	21-Sep	3792	37
Hello from your Personal Librarian	Oct-31	4244	123	Nov-16	3938	54			
October update from your personal librarian							24-Oct	3810	64
December update from your Personal Librarian	Dec-08	4227	22	Dec-07	3934	14	05-Dec	3809	8
Welcome back to classes	Jan-26	4177	41	Jan 12 - 15	4481	42	20-Jan	4244	17
Meet your personal Librarian	Feb 6 and 16	4129	44						
February update from your personal librarian							10-Feb	4167	25
March update from your personal Librarian				Mar-07	4412	22			
Farewell from your personal librarian	Apr-09	3986	7	Apr-04	4268	17	03-Apr	4073	10
Response totals			304			202			161
Survey				May-10	4220	87	18-Apr	4034	

Table 1. PLP email messages sent at UVic in 2014 – 2017.

We added all 4000 first time, first year undergraduate students in our initial launch in 2014. Initial emails to students were sent during the third week of the fall term. In the second year of implementation, 400 upper year undergraduate transfer students were added to the program in January.

### Promotion

We undertook several promotional approaches to reach our students with our messaging. In addition to the regular emails, which amounted to the bulk of the program’s informational content, we created specific opportunities for students to learn about the program.

First to be created was the public website (<http://www.uvic.ca/library/research/plp/index.php>). This website gives a sense of what the intent is of the program and how it works. The website also provides some examples of how the librarian can assist the student with their studies. Lastly, the website provides a link where students can look up their Personal Librarian’s name and contact information should they wish to seek it out.

Information about the PLP was included in the new students handbook compiled by the university's Orientation unit and in order to give out a PLP-specific handout at general library orientation events and tours, we created a business card for the program. We also had a standup banner made to promote the program and to draw visual attention to us at various information fairs and other orientation and information events on campus.

In the first year, the library held two meet-and-greet events to which all first year students were invited. All librarians were scheduled at these events, typically for an hour each. These open houses, as we called them, were adjacent to the library's entrance, under a large tent, which lent to the events a sense of occasion. Students were encouraged to talk with the librarians, raising any questions they may have. To further entice students to come by, we offered candy at the Fall meet and greet and hot chocolate in the Winter one. Both these enticements served to draw passersby in to the vicinity of the tent, enabling many librarian conversations with students, both specifically PLP ones as well as others who happened to be going to the library. Roughly 200 students came by during the Fall event, and about 150 in the Winter counterpart.

Through the combination of all these promotional and communications efforts, in addition to the emails sent directly to the students, we felt confident that the program's existence and scope would be well understood, or at least known, by the targeted students.

## **Survey**

We were interested in gaining data and insight on how students benefited from the program, as well as how we may adapt it going forward to better address student needs or preferences. We created an approved human research ethics survey which consisted of four questions (Appendix 1). The survey sought feedback on whether the program contributed to the students' overall first year learning experience; how the emails and open houses enhanced their use of the library's services and resources; what the most useful aspect of the program was for them; and any suggestions for making the program more relevant to the student.

Roughly 4200 students received the invitation to participate in the 2016 survey. In the end, only 53 complete and 34 incomplete surveys were filled out. While this response rate was certainly not ideal, the benefit of going through the entire process itself was a real benefit for 2017, as we now have a full set of expectations and knowledge of the procedures and timelines required to get the survey out. Thus we will be able to build up a growing set of data about the program and its benefits.

As for the results themselves they provided some useful feedback and insight for our planning going forward. Overall, to the question of whether they thought the PLP made their first year learning experience easier, 15 respondents said yes, while 38 said no. Similarly, when asked whether the emails and open houses enhanced their use of library services and resources, 15 students replied yes, while 36 replied no. The positive feedback of the program tended to revolve around the librarian helping the student find articles; having useful library links in the emails; and reducing library anxiety. For example, among the comments we received in the survey included "Having a personal librarian increased

assignment completion efficiency.” Another respondent said “The emails made me more aware of the services and resources,” while another indicated that the emails “were helpful and prompt.” These comments were representative of many of the positive comments we received; they mostly centered on useful links located in the emails.

However, there was negative feedback as well. While this can be seen as discouraging, this data is useful in shaping the program going forward to better meet the needs of the students. The main areas of specific written feedback on ways to improve the program centered around the respondents’ desire for the PLP contact to be subject specific; for the communications to have clearer indication of what the program entailed; for the emails to be less of an inconvenience; and that the program itself was not useful.

There were several responses concerning the email messages. These included concerns about the length (“Shorter emails”; “The emails were long and wordy and didn’t explain in clear detail”), as well as to the messages being unwanted (“I found the emails to be distracting”; “”) and the program being low priority (“Had no time”; “I didn’t really read them”; “I prioritized classes and homework over events and kiosks”; “weren’t very relevant to me”; “The emails were easy to lose in my inbox, and they added to the email clutter. I would have preferred that there was an option for students at the start of the year to say yes or no to participating in the program”).

The quick takeaways from the survey for us in planning going forward will likely focus on being clearer at the outset of the scope, purpose, and expectations for the students; offer an option to not participate; write shorter emails; and prioritize promotion of subject librarians in the communications.

### **Librarian feedback**

The observed impact on students as witnessed by the librarians in their interaction both in person and by email showed a minority of students reacting positively to the program which led to a perceived increase in the use and knowledge of library services. Strengthening the messaging and marketing was a common suggestion as a way to improve the program as well as connecting the PLP in some way with library orientations and in-class instruction sessions. Overall, the librarians reported beneficial interactions with the students both in person and on email although the effectiveness of the PLP was questioned in part because the value of the program is difficult to measure.

### **What we learned / Next Steps**

Now that the Personal Librarian Program has been in operation for three years we have learned that email is not a particularly good way to reach students. As confirmed by the UVic technical survey, many students use their phones to communicate and use social media to mediate this communication. This includes a variety of platforms from texting to Twitter, but email is not a part of this array. So for many younger people, email is something they rarely check and this made it difficult for us to know how quickly students read our messages, if at all. A better way to reach students might be through text messaging, but at this point the technical difficulties of sending out 4000+ text messages make this option challenging.

We learned how to and how not to run open house events in our experience with the PLP. The beginning of the school term is the best time to have open house events as the weather is still warm and students are open to Orientation activities.

Getting buy-in from librarians to participate is important. The program was mandated from administration and all librarians were required to participate. For the reference and instruction librarians this was generally not an issue once it was explained that no one would be required to send out individual emails to each student. For librarians who did not do regular reference shifts or have limited interactions with students there was more concern about participating in this program. In fact several librarians expressed a strong desire to be exempt due to their lack of knowledge in the area of reference. In the future, we will be creating a PLP page with FAQ's for librarians for the more common questions and with general information on the program. We will continue to offer training/refresher sessions for librarians and continue to emphasize that referring a question is perfectly acceptable.

After three years the statistics show that response rates to the emails are quite low. So we will be working on promoting the program more widely. Some of this will involve creating a better web presence and also expanding our presence on library social media sites (Facebook and Twitter) and through library display screens. For the open house events and for general promotion at the Research Help desk, we will be creating more dynamic marketing materials containing information about the program and also tips on where to find help for research. This could be in the form of a paper brochure or a PDF online.

## **Conclusion**

The PLP has been running at UVic for three years. In the past three years, based on the number of replies from students, the response rate has been low, under 10%. This may lead us to the conclusion that, overall the program has not been a success. However, the program cannot be judged solely on the number of students that reply. Indeed a number of survey respondents indicated that they found the information in the emails helpful. There is no completely accurate method to find out how many students read the email but chose not to respond. The PLP is another way to reach students along with our other services such as Chat Reference, instruction, and in person research help. The program was developed in response to a charge from the University Librarian and the Vice-President Academic, to use this new program to reach out to students. 4000+ emails six times a year accomplishes the charge.

The interactions with students who took advantage of the PLP demonstrate that the program is effective in helping first year students navigate library resources, make personal connections with librarians, and stay engaged in their studies at university. The challenges we faced with the PLP at UVic are not unique to our institution and it is our hope that others can learn from our mistakes and replicate our successes. Offering a PLP to students as part of a larger initiative to promote library services and resources, enhance student success, and increase student retention is bound to make an impact with those who take advantage of the program.

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## **Appendix 1**

### PLP survey questions

1. Do you think the Personal Librarian Program (PLP) make your 1st year learning experience easier than it would have been otherwise?
2. Did the PLP enhance your knowledge of the library's services and resources?
3. Did the PLP emails and open houses enhance your use of the library's services and resources?
4. What could the program have offered you that would have made it more relevant to you?
5. What was the most useful aspect of the program to you?
6. Do you have any suggestions for making the PLP more relevant to your studies (or student success)?