

The Personal Librarian Program at the University of Richmond: An Interview with Lucretia McCulley

by Cy Dillon

In the fall of 2010, two well-known liberal arts institutions, Drexel University in Philadelphia (<http://www.library.drexel.edu/about/programs>) and Wesleyan University of Middletown, Connecticut (<http://classof2014.blogs.wesleyan.edu/page/30/>), began programs that provided “personal librarians” for incoming freshmen. This apparently new idea received some notice in higher education news feeds, and was even featured in Library Journal’s Newsletter (http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/communityacademic/libraries/886821419/drexel_university_drawing_on_yale.html.csp).

Academic librarians are always inquisitive, of course, and a national discussion about the history of such programs began quickly in a variety of listservs. Within a few days it was revealed that the concept was far from new, and that the first successful version was still flourishing at the University of Richmond, right here in Virginia. Lucretia McCulley, the Boatwright Library’s director of outreach services—and a former editor of this publication—was kind enough to answer questions about the history and value of the program that she began over a decade ago.

VL According to a September 2010 article by Steve Kolo-wich in *Inside Higher Education*, you developed the first program offering personal librarians to undergraduate students. When did

that happen, and what was your motivation?

LM Boatwright Library initiated the “Personal Librarian” program in the fall semester of 2000. This is our eleventh consecutive year of contacting each freshman with a personal librarian letter or postcard. The idea occurred to me

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because, at the time, I had a “personal banker” at my bank and I liked her very much. She was always available to answer questions that I might have. I thought this would be a great way to reach out to first-year students in order to make them aware of what librarians can do for them during their college years and to make a personal connection with them. One of the hallmarks of an education at the University of Richmond is a personal connection with students.

VL What were the logistics of that first version of your program, and which students were targeted?

LM We usually have around 780 new first-year students at the University of Richmond. With eleven liaison librarians, we divided all of those names among us, resulting in around eighty students per librarian. We created a letter welcoming the students to the university and explaining how a personal librarian could assist them. We then worked with our Printing Services Department to print the letters, addresses, etc. Once the letters were returned, we divided them equally among us. Then each librarian signed the letters and inserted business cards in the envelopes. Our reference associate gathered all envelopes and made sure they were in order by campus box number. We then delivered them to the campus post office for mailing, usually the second week of classes each fall semester.

VL Were you able to determine what percentage of University of Richmond students took advantage of the offer for personalized service?

LM This has been a frequent question about the program, but we were not able to assess use and response to the letter very specifically. Sometimes students would contact us and mention the letter, but many times they did not. Our main objective with the letter was to convey a sense of welcome

and to advertise the existence of research librarians. We didn't want to "bug" students with follow-up surveys, etc.

VL Was there anecdotal evidence that the letters made an impression on students?

LM Yes, I have had many seniors tell me over the years that they ran across the letter while cleaning out their rooms upon graduation, and it made them remember what a great idea it was! When I talk with the sophomore orientation advisors each year in August, they also mention the "personal librarian" letter and they want to make sure the new freshman class will receive it as well.

VL Was this early version a large part of your outreach efforts? What were some of the other outreach strategies?

LM Boatwright Library has always been devoted to reaching out to the campus community and thinking about creative ways to promote our services and draw users into the building or to our online resources. Other efforts over the years have included providing exam snacks or end-of-the-semester cookies, chair massages in the library during exams, "Ask a Librarian" posters that feature students with an ASK sign, mouse pads that encourage students to contact a librarian, digital flyers on large-screen computers around campus, collaborative programming with other events and departments on campus, and ongoing library workshops each semester.

VL Which strategy do you see as the most successful?

LM I think it is important to have a variety of outreach programs and campaigns, because

we serve such a variety of users. I think that offering food always elicits a good response!

VL Has your library enjoyed good faculty support in its outreach efforts?

LM Yes, faculty are always supportive of anything we do to encourage student use of the library and its resources. However, we have found that we need to approach faculty differently about their use of the library. We provide outreach to them through our liaison librarian program, by serving

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on university committees with faculty, and by organizing special workshops for faculty on their areas of interest.

VL Have you noticed research assignments changing in the past decade? If so, have the new approaches helped students become more information-literate?

LM From my own personal experience, I think students currently have very focused, specific research assignment questions when they meet with librarians. They have often already used the Internet for general, background information. As we all know, students have many choices when it comes to finding information. Libraries continue to compete with Google and other Internet search engines. One way that we can set ourselves apart is to promote the

trustworthy and reliable resources that we purchase for academic, scholarly research and to promote librarians as teachers and guides for finding and evaluating information. The "personal librarian" program assists with introducing the librarian as someone who can help with weeding through the mass of information that we are faced with each day.

VL How has the university's addition of a first-year seminar program changed the personal librarian effort?

LM This past year, we changed our approach for the personal librarian letter slightly. The university made a curriculum change in 2009, and now all freshmen are required to take two First Year Seminar (FYS) classes, one in the fall and one in the spring. Information literacy is a major goal for the seminars, and librarians and faculty are working together to attain this goal. Each seminar has a liaison librarian, and we meet with each class for a library lab session in the fall and spring semesters. This past fall, we decided that the liaison librarian for each FYS would also serve as the "personal librarian," making the connection even more personal! Now each student receives a large postcard directly from the FYS liaison librarian that explains the "personal librarian" concept, and the librarian's business card is attached to it.

VL Do you have plans to add features to your personal librarian program in the future?

LM Not at this time. We think it is working very well and we've noticed that many FYS students have contacted us this past semester with their "personal librarian" postcards! **VL**