

## **Librarians Connect to Self-Reflect: Collaboration Among Personal Librarian Coordinators at Different Institutions**

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**Abstract:** The coordinators of the Personal Librarian Program at two institutions, Sarah Lawrence College (SLC) and Fairfield University (Fairfield), started a dialogue about their respective programs. Through these discussions, they learned from one another, developed new initiatives, shared feedback, and expanded and modified their programs based on their combined knowledge and skill sets. This article provides background information on the growth of each institution's Personal Librarian Program (PLP). Specific projects discussed include: transitioning to a new automated email campaign program - MailChimp, improving the design of email templates, developing staff training documentation, and improving outreach and marketing endeavors. It also demonstrates how, through continuous conversations and the sharing of resources, the PLP coordinators became each other's peer-mentors. The article also discusses the lessons learned about sharing knowledge and networking with other librarians. In addition, possibilities for potential future collaborations among other Personal Librarian coordinators are proposed.

**Keywords:** personal librarian, first-year students, transfer students, graduate students, peer-mentors

### **Introduction**

In many cases when one librarian leaves and another succeeds them, the torch is passed and the relationship between institution and former employee is discontinued. Over the 2017-2018 academic year, a group of librarians questioned whether this was the best path forward. Brooke Duffy and Kelleen Maluski, respectively the Research Services Librarian and Research Services & Outreach Librarian at the Esther Raushenbush Library at Sarah Lawrence College (SLC), and Lisa Thornell, Student Engagement & Outreach Librarian at Fairfield University's DiMenna-Nyselius Library, decided their institutions could benefit from creating a continuing

professional relationship of collaboration and knowledge sharing regarding their Personal Librarian (PL) initiatives. An essential part of the peer-mentorship across these two institutions was ongoing dialogue about outreach and marketing campaigns centered around each institution's Personal Librarian Program (PLP) in order to share ideas, knowledge, and feedback and to reflect on the efficacy of these promotional practices.

In 2015, Duffy had assumed the duties of running the Fairfield PLP, which was started in 2012. When she left at the end of the Spring 2016 semester, Thornell took over managing the PLP. The goal of the program was to introduce first-year undergraduate students to the library and to be a point of support. Typically, one email is sent per month during the academic year to the students, directly from their PL, promoting library news, resources, services, research tips, events, and more. Eight reference librarians participate in the program to provide outreach to roughly 1,000 first-year students and transfer students, with the students being assigned to their librarian by their Cornerstone class. PLs are expected to also reach out to faculty members so that they are aware of library services being promoted and can in turn encourage their students to seek them out.

A similar PLP was started at SLC in 2012 with the purpose of targeting students with information that would encourage them to be more knowledgeable and active library users as well as connect them to important resources and services. The SLC program consists of a monthly email sent out to all first-years, transfer students, and, starting in the spring semester of 2017, graduate students by a team of approximately seven to nine PLs. Each year, the program reaches approximately 440 first-year and transfer students as well as 150 graduate students.

The PLPs had existed at each school for some time without significant changes. When Duffy assumed the duties of running the PLP at SLC, she brought her previous experience from Fairfield by crafting PLP emails with library branding and visual elements, updating SLC's former text-only template. Duffy, after surveying the PLs to gather feedback about the program, then introduced the use of MailChimp, an email marketing automation platform, which she had also helped implement at Fairfield. When Thornell moved into her position at Fairfield in the summer of 2016, she took over the MailChimp transition and successfully implemented its usage. Her testament of this experience offered SLC concrete evidence that learning about MailChimp and then transitioning to this service would be a good investment of staff time and meet the PL's needs of improving student engagement with the program. This decision also opened the channels of communication between Duffy, Thornell, and Maluski to share ideas, successes, and failures within their programs and to brainstorm together.

## **MailChimp Implementation**

The implementation of MailChimp at Fairfield was necessitated by a new college policy limiting the number of students that could be emailed simultaneously, which would have required PLs to email their students in several batches, thus increasing their workload. The benefits of using MailChimp were many: better design functionality, a quick, integrated Mail Merge capability, the ability to store lists of student emails by PL, and the ability to create email templates, which each PL could use to build upon to send out their own campaigns, and more. MailChimp's template design feature also improved the design appeal and functionality of the

emails and made it extremely easy for PLs to share templates and tailor messages for different audiences, such as for transfer or graduate students. For instance, Maluski duplicates the template that Duffy creates for monthly emails and uses it to create separate, customized email templates relating to the specific needs of the nine departments at SLC. Each template should be capable of being customized with the PL's photo and contact information as well as links to social media channels, the library website and blog, and a brief one- to two-line description of why the student is receiving the email.

Prior to MailChimp, it had been unclear at both SLC and Fairfield how many students opened the painstakingly crafted emails or clicked on any of the links. Though SLC had tried to utilize bit.ly to collect data on student clicks, the inability to track email open rates made this method insufficient. The open and click rates that MailChimp provides therefore made this an invaluable communication platform.

Thornell created extensive training manuals outlining the workflows that had been developed and used at Fairfield. At both institutions, documentation on how to use MailChimp was created and distributed to all PLs. At Fairfield, emails were created and sent by Thornell, while librarians at SLC were excited to learn the new product and send their own emails. Fairfield PLs expressed their appreciation for the automated process and Thornell feels more librarians are likely to volunteer as a PL in the future because they are not be required to send these emails themselves, which saves them time. Similarly, despite the different workflows, SLC librarians also found that using MailChimp saved time as it streamlined Maluski's workflows in managing the graduate component of the PLP.

## **Promotional and Outreach Initiatives**

At both Fairfield and SLC, numerous outreach initiatives are tied to the PLPs in order to cross-promote library resources and to strengthen student engagement across all interconnected outreach programs. Furthermore, conversations between the librarians at different universities about PLP-tied outreach and marketing campaigns allowed for inter-institutional collaboration, which resulted in a sharing of valuable ideas and critique of these PL promotional practices.

One example of such a collaboration is the "Trick or Treat to Meet Your Personal Librarian" event that Thornell developed at Fairfield. Fairfield PLs had wanted to have a PLP "Meet and Greet" event since the time Duffy had run the program. The PLs were able to promote the event as one of the university's First Year Experience (FYE) events since the FYE program requires students to attend a specific number of events for class credit. The goal was to encourage first-years to "drop by" to meet their PL at their office and to receive Halloween candy. The trick or treat concept was devised to emphasize the quick drop-in nature of the event. Students were welcomed in the library lobby by student workers, given their PL's name, and then told to follow the color-coded arrows to their PL's office. Once they found their PL's office, they were warmly welcomed and given a brief explanation of the PLP and what librarians could do for them. PLs were encouraged to make friendly conversation with students about their research needs, major, upcoming assignments, and the transition to Fairfield. Some students

took candy and quickly left while others ended up staying for several minutes and getting research help. In total, 48 students attended.

When Fairfield was first developing this initiative, Thornell shared this idea with Duffy. Duffy was extremely interested in attempting a similar event at SLC. A “Meet and Greet and Trick or Treat” with a PL was conducted at SLC in the fall 2017 semester. Unfortunately, it was not as well-received at SLC, with only two students attending. A key component of this lack of engagement could be that SLC did not have a built-in mechanism for attracting students like the FYE requirements at Fairfield. SLC also did not have lobby-greeters directing students to PL offices. SLC will have to evaluate if it is worthwhile to attempt this event again or to re-conceptualize the meet and greet.

In addition to the meet-and-greet event, other marketing and outreach initiatives that SLC and Fairfield found fruitful in communicating the program’s value to other campus partners and students were:

- A web page on the library’s website dedicated to the PLP with a PL lookup feature. Librarians were able to then share the link with various university departments and staff that work with students.
- Introducing the PLP to department coordinators who work with “at-risk” student groups, and instructing them about how to locate PLs.
- Adding language about the PLP to all communications for first-year, transfer, and/or graduate students, whether digital or printed on-boarding.
- Attending student orientations and/or creating orientation activities that introduce students to the PLP or to their specific PL.
- Reinforcing value of the PLP to first-year students through their mandatory library instruction classes.
- Reaching out to admitted students through providing promotional materials at events and coordinating with the admissions office to encourage tour guides to mention the PLP during campus tours.

Having conversations and collaborating on these initiatives with other university offices was another example of how open communication assisted both institutions in improving their programs and creating long-term goals.

## **Reflection**

The process of collaboration and knowledge sharing between the librarians at SLC and Fairfield has prompted librarians to reflect on the successes and failures of the PLPs at each school. While the processes of building and changing the programs has been done separately by the library staff at each school, these conversations have created a window between the initiatives at the other’s institutions and introduced potential directions for growth and change.

PLs at both Fairfield and SLC seem to be pleased with the change to MailChimp, with several mentioning positive aspects of the program, such as cleaner design and better

functionality, easier mail merge function, and the gratification of knowing how many students are actually looking at the emails. Since participation in the program is voluntary for PLs and because it presents additional work for librarians who volunteer, it is important to maintain positive morale and confidence in the program as well as allow the process of building and changing the program to be democratic and participatory.

Though Fairfield and SLC typically see very few students who make direct contact with their PL as a result of getting the monthly email, numbers show that students are opening the emails. This is reassuring. In addition, teaching classes led to a noticeable correlation of more students getting in touch for research appointments. Some librarians who taught mandatory first-year library instruction sessions during the fall semester were able to endorse and promote the PLP. In addition to this, the SLC librarians began to track the number of research consultations made in direct response to PL emails through the YouCanBook.Me request form (which asks students to self-report what prompted them to book a consultation) and saw an uptick in bookings after a PL email was sent out. This could indicate that the PL emails are effective reminders even when students select their reason for booking was at the urging of a professor or as a result of a library instruction session. The PL emails at Fairfield also highlight research consultations, but the request form does not prompt students to indicate why they decided to book an appointment. After speaking to SLC, Fairfield will consider incorporating the reason for booking an appointment into their booking forms, once again highlighting the value of open dialogue between the two institutions.

Future plans in consideration at both institutions include surveying the student recipients of PL emails at the end of the academic year to find out if they found the communications from their PL helpful and welcoming. This information would be incorporated with feedback from the participating PLs, possibly in the form of an anonymous survey or one-on-one conversations. Progress reports on all changes to the PLP this past academic year and PL feedback will be presented to library staff with statistics about student email engagement and selective reporting of anecdotes about student interactions throughout the year. There are also plans to assess engagement with the program and to identify possible areas for growth or change. This would include using MailChimp data, especially in regards to analyzing what resources and services are the most important to feature and integrate with the program. These figures would be reviewed in conjunction with other data sources, such as research consultation statistics, including what made students choose to book consultations.

In addition to these combined goals, Fairfield plans to reach out to additional campus departments (such as Athletics and Counseling & Psychological Services) and encourage them to connect PL support to students in need. Thornell also plans to meet with organizers of the University's First Year Experience program, who create lesson plans for the mandatory weekly fall semester FYE classes, to promote the PLP in the teaching resources guide and lessons that deal with academic support. This outreach to student support staff, along with other initiatives outlined in this article, would need to be continuous in order to be effective.

It is very likely that SLC will completely rework the concept of the PLP to become an all-student monthly newsletter. In this case, the PL model would be maintained for graduate students and transfer students, and possibly opened up to include other student groups, such as

international and first-generation students. This change is being considered since much of the content featured in PL emails is not specific to first-year students only, and because despite efforts to “personalize” the emails, there does not seem to be much interaction happening in terms of email replies.

## Conclusion

Despite some differences in approaches to the PLP, the most important outcome that emerged from this collaboration was innovation that was spurred on by collective brainstorming and idea sharing. While librarians learned quickly that PLPs would vary among different institutions (on account of different student populations and needs), having conversations with other PLP coordinators can yield new ideas and lead to learning and implementing best practices. Growing out of this collaboration is a mutual interest between Fairfield and SLC librarians in creating an online resource and discussion forums for other librarians involved in PLPs to network and share ideas. PL email templates, MailChimp (or other email communication platforms) user guides, and bibliographies of useful PL readings are some examples of the types of resources that could be discussed and featured. In addition to building such a space, librarians would aim to expand professional networks for PLPs and promote beneficial collaborative practices, in essence, encouraging colleagues to become each other’s PLs.

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