

The Personal Librarian: Enhancing the Student Experience

Richard Moniz and Jean Moats, eds. *The Personal Librarian: Enhancing the Student Experience*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2014. 143 pp. \$58.00. Softcover. ISBN: 97808838912393.

The librarian. *My* librarian. A simple change from the definite article to a possessive pronoun produces a profound change in meaning. In academic libraries “the librarian” is often seen as an administrator or organizer rather than an approachable provider of essential resources and services. What if such a simple change could demystify the library and its wardens, granting to students and faculty the perspective that they have their very own personal librarian? Flowing from the endeavors of editors and contributors with a wealth of academic library experience, this book presents the origin and results of personal librarian programs. Arising from current trends and practices in librarianship and higher education, personal librarian programs assign incoming students with a specific librarian who maintains a relationship with each student throughout his or her course of studies.

Both of the editors and all but one of the contributors hail from Johnson and Wales University in Charlotte, North Carolina, where they implemented a personal librarian program in the fall semester of 2012. Every contributor is a librarian, and together they possess expertise in a variety of subject areas. Editor Richard Moniz, Director of Library Services at Johnson and Wales, holds a Doctorate in Higher Education Administration. Editor Jean Moats is library liaison for the College of Culinary Arts at Johnson and Wales, and holds a Master of Divinity in Pastoral Ministry from Duke Divinity School. These veterans of the profession assert that readers can adapt the personal librarian concept to their institutions with just a slight alteration in philosophy of service and a few tweaks and changes.

A personal librarian program is by no means a replacement for current practice. Rather, one might compare it to a library website’s discovery layer. It is an overlay for existing programs, marketing existing resources and services to students through personal relationships with librarians. The writers trace the development of the personal librarian concept from the rise of information literacy, embedded librarianship, and library liaisons. They also point to a growing emphasis on student retention in higher education as impacting the development of personal librarian programs. Student retention refers to the rate at which freshmen successfully continue into their sophomore year. Correlations between student retention and success on research projects suggested that cultivating personal relationships between new students and librarians might be the key to increasing student retention and producing a higher quality student.

The book has ten chapters. An introductory chapter locates the origin of the personal librarian concept. Another chapter details the implementation of personal librarian programs at several institutions, including Johnson and Wales. Three chapters are devoted to explaining information literacy, embedded librarianship, and library liaisons, respectively, and how each relates to the concept of the personal librarian. Two chapters are explorations of what personal librarians can learn from other businesses and other student services about marketing and relating to students. In these the authors mine for-profit businesses such as banks and airlines, as well as student health and career services, for ideas. Another chapter takes a look at the faculty response to the personal librarian program at Johnson and Wales, providing both quantitative and qualitative data. The penultimate chapter serves as a guide to best practices for personal librarians. The last chapter takes a look at the future of the personal librarian concept, noting that the issues and concerns surrounding it were discussed at the First National Personal Librarian and First Year Experience Library Conference at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, in April 2014.

The writers of this book help readers to understand how the concept of the personal librarian relates to current library practice. They do an excellent job of defining information literacy and distinguishing between embedded librarians and library liaisons. Perhaps it is an unintended consequence, but librarians who are not as familiar with these terms will be

brought up to speed. Perhaps they are new librarians or serve at smaller institutions with fewer programs. This book could be a jumping-on point for those who feel out of the loop for whatever reason. For all others, this book might serve as a refresher for these concepts.

All readers may be surprised to find that the “personal librarian” is not really a new kind of librarian, but rather a new perspective for students and faculty. It is not a renovation, but a rearranging of the furniture; sometimes simply moving the chairs and tables around can make a space profoundly more inviting. The writers assert that personal librarian programs do not necessarily result in more work for librarians. They back this up with references to the literature. Furthermore, the tasks they propose for implementing and maintaining such a program are not numerous. In fact, the reader may wonder while reading, “Is that all it takes?”

This book is a call for a kind of efficiency not measured in sharper tools or faster workflows but in transformed dispositions and raised affections brought about through the cultivation of relationships. A personal librarian program provides a handle for students and faculty to eagerly grab onto librarians and benefit from the work that they already do so well. If any library context is appropriate for a personal librarian program, it is the theological library, where librarians are called to be shepherds for those seeking to know and share truth.

The Personal Librarian is well written and stylistically consistent despite its several contributors. That the book is mostly written by librarians at the same institution might be considered a weakness. This is not to say that any of the material should be replaced, but that one could wish for more voices to add to those already present. On the other hand, that would require a more exhaustive treatment, and the present book is tidy and very readable as it is. In any case, it is packed with notes, and each chapter has a bibliography for further reading, so the reader will not have to go far to find other voices.

The best thing about this book is that the librarian will put it down knowing that he or she really can develop a personal librarian program at his or her institution; the writers even provide a checklist for doing just that in the book’s penultimate chapter. Purchase this book. Pass it around at your institution and get to work on that checklist for developing your very own personal librarian program.

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