

Evaluating the Impact of Personal Librarians on Academic and Affective Outcomes

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Introduction

In fall 2019, the UDC Library conducted a pilot study to determine the impact, if any, of a personal librarian (PL) intervention on student academic outcomes and confidence with information literacy (IL) skills.

PL programs are a proactive form of librarianship that exemplify the growth of library services beyond the physical library. PLs reach out to and act as primary contact for the library for a population of students, with the aim of improving students' familiarity with academic libraries, academic and research skills, and relationships with librarians.

Methodology



- A PL was randomly assigned to four of 10 sections of a general education class. The PL:
 - Sent monthly emails to students in their class sections with library use and research tips;
 - Taught two IL sessions, covering research question development, search strategies, database searching, evaluation of sources, citing, and synthesizing sources;
 - Met with students in one-on-one appointments when requested.
- Outreach and support of the PL was a supplemental intervention on top of current library services. Students and faculty in sections not assigned a PL had access to normal services offered and marketed by the library.

Data collection & analysis

Students in nine of the 10 sections of the general education class were invited to participate in the study; 37% (n = 83) participated. The study collected the following data in order to identify potential correlations between the presence of and engagement with the PL and IL-related academic and affective outcomes:

- Presence of PL: whether the student's course section is assigned a PL.
- Level of engagement with the PL: 1) attendance at IL sessions taught by the PL, 2) number of appointments scheduled with the PL, or 3) self-reported engagement with emails from the PL.
- Academic outcomes: Scores on IL-related section of the rubric used to anonymously grade final papers.
- Confidence applying IL skills: Responses on 5-point Likert scale surveys given to students at the beginning and end of the semester.

How confident are you in finding sources to use in a research paper?

Very Unconfident

Somewhat Unconfident

Neutral

Somewhat Confident

Very Confident

| Criteria | Levels of achievement | | | |
|---|---|--|---|--|
| | Proficient | Competent | Novice | No evidence |
| Use of sources Weight: 20% | 100% The artifact shows high proficiency in the use of primary and secondary sources, demonstrating awareness, pertinence, and breadth with appropriate citations | 75% The artifact shows adequate proficiency in the use of primary and secondary sources, demonstrating awareness, pertinence, and breadth with appropriate citations | 50% The artifact shows low proficiency in the use of primary and secondary sources, demonstrating awareness, pertinence, and breadth with appropriate citations | 25% There is no evidence of use of sources |
| Format Weight: 20% | 100% The artifact shows high proficiency in the use of relevant or appropriate format | 75% The artifact shows adequate proficiency in the use of relevant or appropriate format | 50% The artifact shows low proficiency in the use of relevant or appropriate format | 25% There is no evidence of format |
| Usage (2 content) Weight: 20% | 100% The artifact demonstrates high proficiency in the use of Standard Written English (SWE) with 0-4 errors in usage and mechanics (spelling and punctuation) | 75% The artifact shows adequate proficiency in the use of SWE with 5-8 errors in usage and mechanics (spelling and punctuation) | 50% Low proficiency in the use of SWE with 9-11 errors in usage and mechanics (spelling and punctuation) | 25% There are more than 12 errors in usage and mechanics (spelling and punctuation) |
| Writing style Weight: 20% | 100% The artifact shows ample evidence of the student's having used and mastered writing style and mechanics from a variety of disciplines | 75% The artifact shows some evidence of the student's having used and mastered writing style and mechanics from a variety of disciplines | 50% There is little evidence of the student's having used and mastered writing style and mechanics from a variety of disciplines | 25% There is no evidence of the student's having used and mastered writing style and mechanics from a variety of disciplines |
| Research Weight: 20% | 100% The artifact shows ample evidence of the student's having located, interpreted, and synthesized the sources, providing an original and provocative thesis | 75% The artifact shows adequate evidence of the student's having located, interpreted, and synthesized the sources, providing an original and provocative thesis | 50% The artifact shows some evidence of the student's having located, interpreted, and synthesized the sources, providing an original and provocative thesis | 25% The artifact shows no evidence of the student's having located, interpreted, and synthesized the sources, providing an original and provocative thesis |

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Results

Results from the pilot suggest that the presence of and engagement with the PL had minimal and not statistically significant effect on academic outcomes, but engagement with the PL somewhat correlated with growth in IL confidence.

Does the presence of a PL in a class affect IL-related academic outcomes?

- Higher mean rubric scores for students in PL sections, but the difference was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).
- Weak positive correlations between the presence of the PL and rubric scores.

Does the level of engagement with a PL affect IL-related academic outcomes?

- Negligible to weak positive correlations between rubric scores and 1) the number of IL sessions attended, 2) self-reported engagement with PL emails, or 3) having had at least one consultation with the PL.

Does the presence of a PL in a class affect student confidence in applying IL skills to coursework?

- Higher mean IL confidence gain for students in PL class sections, but the difference was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

Does the level of engagement with a PL affect student confidence in applying IL skills to coursework?

- Weak negative correlation between the number of IL sessions attended and net gain in IL confidence.
- Weak positive correlation between the self-reported engagement with PL emails and net gain in IL confidence; the correlation was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).
- Weak positive correlation between having had at least one consultation with the PL and net gain in IL confidence; the correlation was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

Discussion

The strongest correlations in the study—between weak and moderate—were found between gains in IL confidence and either self-reported engagement with PL emails or having had at least one consultation with the PL, suggesting that supplemental interactions with the PL have more of an impact on IL confidence than instruction alone. Where librarian capacity permits, further engagement with a librarian may serve as a natural follow-up on introductory instruction for boosting student confidence, helping students fill in the gap that they identified as a result of instruction between what they do and do not know.

IL sessions were intended to be a differentiating feature of the PL intervention; i.e., we expected that only PL sections would have two instruction sessions. However, all participating sections scheduled IL instruction, reducing the intended “personal” nature of instruction. Minor modifications, including regular in-person class visits, were made to make the PL intervention more “personal” in spring 2020, but the study was interrupted due to COVID-19.

Other benefits to the PL intervention included a substantial (though anecdotal) increase in research consultations, opportunities to strengthen faculty relationships, and a deeper understanding of the general education coursework. Future research may evaluate long-term impacts of PLs, the role of PLs in upper-level courses, or how overlaps or differences in student and librarian social identities affect student interactions with PLs.