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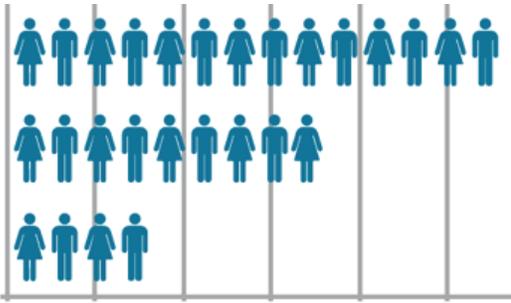
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Personal Research Sessions: A consultation-based program for research support

BY JENNIFER L.A. WHELAN | AUGUST 20, 2015



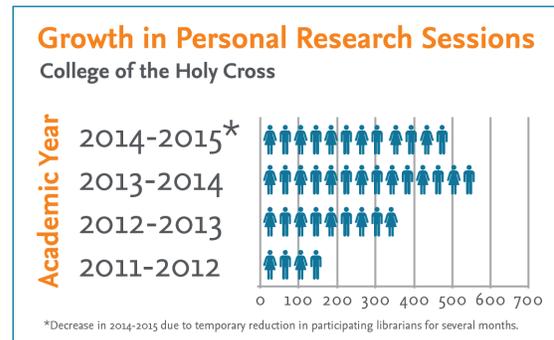
Like many academic libraries, the Holy Cross Libraries have seen a gradual decline in reference questions in recent years. The number of extended questions has been particularly low, yet our librarians sensed that there were more in-depth questions out there — we just weren't seeing them. We found ourselves asking, Where do we engage these questions, if not at the reference desk? The solution was the launch of our Personal Research Session (PRS) program in fall 2011.

Building a research consultation program

Coordinated first via email and later with Springshare's LibCal product, Personal Research Sessions allow students to meet one-on-one with a research librarian by appointment. The bulk of the sessions are handled by four to five generalist librarians, with referrals to subject specialists in art, music and science when appropriate. Each week our generalists identify and submit their available 30-minute slots, which are then uploaded into LibCal. When students book an appointment, a quick and easy online process, they include the topic they are planning to research.

The PRS program relies on a few ideas: first, that librarians can answer in-depth questions more satisfactorily given time to prepare; second, that students prefer meeting with librarians privately; and third, that students benefit from one-on-one interaction, even if they have previously been exposed to library instruction. Because PRS librarians have had a chance to familiarize themselves with a topic (and the best tools for that topic) in advance, students end up with more in-depth and specific help than they might otherwise encounter.

Positive results



Now entering its fifth year, the PRS program has become increasingly popular and successful. While the number of extended reference requests continues to drop, the number of PRS appointments increased from 159 in the 2011-2012 academic year to 476 in 2014-2015. Feedback from our students, both during appointments and through an anonymous end-of-semester survey, has been positive and appreciative on the whole. Our librarians also have benefited from the program, which allows us to get to know students and

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engage them on a deeper level — as well as to stay abreast of major assignments and other aspects of the college's curriculum.

Of course, this success would not be possible without continual work on the program's infrastructure. We regularly reassess the PRS program's structure and consider ways to streamline our efforts, whether by standardizing data collection, opening lines of communication, increasing marketing or developing instructional tools. As the program continues to grow, these efforts have become increasingly important to keeping our workload sustainable.

Lessons learned: Establishing your own program

Consultation-based reference is becoming increasingly popular, and may be a model you wish to explore at your own institution. Below are some of the considerations that have been most important in administering our PRS program:

Organization: Think about how you will run your research consultation program. How will you accept requests, assign librarians, and retain appointment information? Who will participate? Aim for a system that is as centralized and automated as possible, to limit the time commitment for both administrators and participants.

Time management: Workload management is crucial. Personal research sessions are often more taxing (and, of course, require more preparation) than traditional reference transactions. It is important for each participating librarian to be realistic about the quantity and frequency of time slots they can offer each week, taking into account not only their other responsibilities but also mental fatigue. It's easy to fall into the trap of opening each "unscheduled" moment to consultations, but during busy periods this can quickly become overwhelming!

Communication: Our program is a team effort that works best with open communication among participating staff. While students often prefer a "favorite" librarian or a class liaison, that person is not always available. We've found it important to be able to redirect students to colleagues with the (honest) assurance that they are (or will be!) up to speed on the syllabus, assignment and previous appointments. This is especially true when a professor requires appointments for an entire class! Communicating about frequent issues can also help your team identify trends or prepare for future appointments. This could mean sending a quick email about a common topic or project ("I've had three students with the NGO assignment this week; these are the resources we found most helpful.") or collaborating to identify classes that should be targeted for instruction in the future.

Assessment: Take the time to analyze your program. This includes collecting important data, such as student majors, popular booking times, or other information, as appropriate for your local context. Keep data collection centralized and standardized to the extent that you can. It's important to investigate not only popularity but also whether consultations are having the desired instructional effect. Are students getting what they need? Are they satisfied with their experience? Are librarians reaching a good balance of offering in-depth assistance without doing work for students? Finally, you should periodically examine the program's management. Is any information slipping through the cracks? Is any one part of the process becoming overly burdensome? How could these problems be avoided in the future? Whether it's once a semester or once a year, administrative maintenance will help the entire program run smoothly. **LC**