4-29-2022

When COVID Struck the Personal Librarian Program Came to the Rescue

Jonathan R. Wilson
East Tennessee State University, wilsonjr3@etsu.edu

Citation Information

Wilson, Jonathan R.. 2022. When COVID Struck the Personal Librarian Program Came to the Rescue.
Community Voices Magazine, Johnson City, TN. (1). East Tennessee State University. 15-17.
https://www.etsu.edu/equity/community_voices_magazine.php

When COVID Struck the Personal Librarian Program Came to the Rescue

Copyright Statement

When COVID Struck the Personal Librarian Program Came to the Rescue

Written by Jonathan Roy Wilson
Photos by Ron Campbell

The COVID pandemic changed life as we know it and transformed how we taught classes and acquired knowledge. And The ETSU Sherrod Library, with the help of Jonathan Wilson, Distance/Online Service Coordinator addressed these challenges by developing The Personal Librarian (PL) program for students, "These services were a logical development in response to the recognition of unmet student technological needs," he explained.

When all classes moved online in mid-March 2020, students' unmet needs for fast, reliable internet service and adequate devices for participating in online classes quickly surfaced. Information Technology Services (ITS), Sherrod Library, and Student Life and Enrollment teamed up to lend the small supply of laptops to students. But there were no mobile hotspots available, Wilson explained. Getting more laptops and hotspots into the hands of students who needed them became the team's main focus.

The University self-funded the project for 200 laptops and hotspots. In early fall 2020, ITS purchased 200 laptops and hotspots, supported in a large part with federal COVID relief funds earmarked to assist students with online learning. The library is responsible for checking out, maintaining, and updating those computers.

The Personal Librarian services were originally proposed as part of the unfunded grant, but Sherrod Library's Dean, David Atkins deemed these services important enough to reallocate its full-time responsibilities to Wilson. So, Wilson's main job became to contact students throughout the semester, and to provide library instruction and assistance with academic research. Wilson also provides assistance with equipment issues and answers inquiries about student services, information technology, and academic support.

The technology made a substantial difference. During the programs' first semester in Fall 2020, 138 students received laptops and/or hotspots and help from their PL. The most satisfying result of the technology aspect is that it made a difference in many students' lives by allowing them secure internet access and a computer that allowed them to successfully complete the academic semester online. Having a PL available to these students during the COVID-19 forced migration of physical classes online, they were able to maintain a sense of community and connection with the campus.

The Lending Technology and PL programs grew in Spring semester 2021 to include 185 students with laptops and/or hotspots and their own PL. Because of the successes experienced, Wilson proposed expanding the Personal Librarian program to include the most at-risk student population for retention. After research, he collaborated with Student Life and Enrollment to determine that the next target group would be transfer and first-generation students.

For Fall semester 2021, a list of transfer and first-generation students was obtained from the Director of Undergraduate Admissions. There was a total of 861 transfer students and 391 first-generation students for whom Wilson was available. Additionally, Wilson worked with the 309 students in the Lending Technology program who checked out devices.

So far in 2022, Wilson is working with 449 transfer students and 172 first-generation students, as well as 384 students who checked out devices. And so far for the 2021-2022 academic year, the Personal Librarian program involved 1,873 transfer or first-generation students and 693 students in the Lending Technology program.

In order to communicate with that many students, Wilson sends out a weekly email, first to introduce himself and then to promote his liaison services for the Library and the University. He makes an effort to let the students know that he is available for

questions, or if they just need someone to listen to them. He encourages the students and reassures them that they are doing well and will survive the semester.

As the program has grown, Wilson and his graduate student, McKenzie Proctor, developed a bi-monthly newsletter for the students to keep them up-to-date with important campus-related deadlines and events, as well as library-related events. The library provides a variety of workshops, a book club, and the Library Student Advisory Council, in addition to an abundance of other resources for students.

The *ETSU Personal Librarian Newsletter* is on the Constant Contact platform and allows the newsletter to be built in that platform and sent from there. And it provides useful statistics. In the Fall of 2021, the newsletter was sent out to 1,609 students and had an open rate of nearly 50 percent. So far this year the newsletter has been sent to 1,986 students and has an open rate of nearly 45 percent. The newsletter, along with the weekly emails, helps keep the students well informed of events and the variety of services that are offered online.

The Personal Librarian webpage on the Sherrod Library's website was developed to promote the program and provide a connection to variety of ETSU student services including financial, counseling, tutoring, career mentoring, and academic research. The biggest challenge is making the students aware of the services that are available to them. Because of the webpage, PL emails, and the newsletter, students are now more familiar with these available services and resources.

In order to see if the programs were helping or making a difference for the students, two separate surveys were developed. One survey was for the Lending Technology Program and the other specifically for the first-generation and transfer students. The survey responses, in addition to providing valuable feedback on the current programs, would also reveal unmet student needs.

The survey results determined that the students had a great need for technology in the Appalachian Highlands communities. Many students did not have access to the appropriate technology required for successfully completing their academic demands. It also determined that the students were uncertain as to

how to navigate ETSU and academic resources. With the conversations initiated by the emails and newsletters, students felt more comfortable asking questions.

Students reported that having a librarian available helped to reduce stress and improved grades. Students were also constantly reassured when someone responded promptly and was available for them anytime they had a question or concern. Often, students who transition to ETSU can be overwhelmed by the changes and expectations they face. The PL program is designed to help integrate them into campus norms while offering readily available assistance to answer questions and steer them in the right direction.

The plan for Fall of 2022 is to again provide PL services to incoming first-generation and transfer students for their first two semesters. Additionally, the Lending Technology Program will be offered. The main mission of these programs is to ensure that the students have what they need to succeed and to help guide them during their time at ETSU.

Interviews with Students

According to Social Work Graduate Student, B. W. Werder, the Lending Technology Program is a great resource," they said. "Being able to check out a reliable laptop and hotspot for the entire semester saves me so much stress, time, and money. I am thankful for this support."

This program has a significant impact on Werder's ability to manage being a student while working. They explained, "Graduate school is not an easy feat. However, it would be ten times more difficult if I had to spend hours on campus each week, relying on library computers for coursework."

Werder, and all students, can connect to the internet almost anywhere with the hotspot. So, in juggling work, internship, and lecture time they are able to complete assignments. And the laptop allows them to fully participate in class, which would otherwise be impossible.

Raven Woods is a junior majoring in Clinical Psychological Science. Her career aspiration is to become a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor, and work with adolescents and their families to navigate life's fluctuating hills and valleys.

She also works at ETSU's Bursar's Office helping staff and students understand tuition, fees, and payments.

"The staff is my family away from home. I am blessed to work with a loving and caring group of people," she explained. "And learning from the staff, I have been able to develop skills, like communication."

Woods is the first in her family to attend a four-year university. She said feels safe and at home in the Sherrod Library, "I also like the aspect of having a personal librarian to assist me with finding resources for my research projects, and reviewing my research essays," she explained. Last semester, Woods completed a small project that required a few children's books. She reached out to her PL and earned an A with Wilson's help.

"In March of 2020, thanks to the Sherrod Library, I was able to check out a wi-fi hotspot so I could attend my Zoom classes from anywhere, Woods recalled. "I am truly thankful for the experience at ETSU, and all the resources provided to help students achieve success!"

https://libraries.etsu.edu/tech/ltp/pls
https://libraries.etsu.edu/tech/ltp