

Rebecca Starkey and Barbara Kern

# The class librarian

## Putting a friendly face on library service

**N**avigating the extensive world of information today can be difficult, and it can be especially challenging for undergraduate students attending large research universities, such as the University of Chicago (UC). While the enrollment of the College of the University of Chicago continues to grow each year, graduate and professional students still comprise approximately two-thirds of our student body. As a result, our libraries are primarily designed to serve and support the research needs of graduate students and faculty. The size of our collections, as well as the organizational structure of

the library, can quickly intimidate new undergraduates. Where graduate students and faculty may delight at the prospect of browsing through our millions of print volumes, many undergraduates feel overwhelmed and frustrated by just trying to identify a few books for the paper they are writing.

In order to better serve undergraduates within this environment, the UC Library formed a committee to focus specifically on improving the library experience of our college students. The group, College Instruction and Outreach (CIAO), is composed of reference librarians and bibliographers (subject specialists) from each of our campus libraries. One of

the key challenges that CIAO faced was how to reduce our undergraduates' library anxiety. Even though the library can be challenging to navigate, we found that our undergraduate students are often reluctant to ask staff for assistance. The UC undergraduate curriculum does not focus on research for the first few years. Consequently, most course-integrated instruction occurs in upper-level classes during the third and fourth years of college, leaving

students with little formal library instruction when they begin to use the library. There is no mandatory library orientation for incoming students. Since these training opportunities are not required, we

found that students may fail to make the important connection that is essential for the successful use of a large research library—meeting a librarian. How do we help students develop a relationship with a librarian early on so that they feel comfortable to seek assistance? Our solution was the Class Librarians Program.<sup>1</sup>

**CLASS LIBRARIANS**

**What is a Class Librarian?**

The Class Librarians are a special group of librarians dedicated to helping College students navigate the enormous range of resources and services available at the University of Chicago Library. Each Librarian serves a specific class of The College Library, starting during the summer before Orientation until Graduation (and beyond).

You can feel free to contact your Class Librarian with any question you may have about using the Library, such as:

- How can I find books on reserve for a class?
- What database should I search to find articles for my paper?
- How do I cite a resource in my paper?
- Who can I speak to about a problem with my Library account?

In addition, your Class Librarian has created a Library guide designed specifically for your Class. This guide includes links to research guides and tutorials, as well as an "FYI" section, which includes weekly reminders about upcoming due dates, services, special events, and training sessions. To begin, just select your class to the left, and get to know your Class Librarian. They are a great resource!

Class Librarians (From Left to Right):  
Rebecca Starkey (2006), Paul Belton (2006),  
Nancy Spiegel (2007), and David Pawelch (2010)

The Class Librarian Web site can be found at [www.lib.uchicago.edu/classlibrarians](http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/classlibrarians).

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## Program origins

The Class Librarians Program was established in 2002 as a way for librarians to connect with undergraduates throughout their years in the college. The program was derived from the successful graduate and faculty liaison model currently in place at the UC Library.

The library has more than 30 bibliographers who support the research of faculty and graduate students, not only through their collection development responsibilities, but also by providing reference and instruction services in their subject areas. New graduate students are introduced to their bibliographer shortly after arriving on campus, providing them with an opportunity to build a relationship with their librarian that often lasts long after the completion of their PhDs.

The Class Librarians Program provides a similar liaison for undergraduates. Each undergraduate class is assigned a librarian, who acts as its contact for the UC Library. The class librarian volunteers to serve that class for four years, so that students have a consistent person whom they can approach with their questions during their years at UC.

## Meet your class librarian

The class librarians are introduced to students in a variety of ways. First-year students receive a welcome letter from their class librarian in an orientation package, which is distributed the summer before they arrive on campus. Even while still at home, incoming students can contact their librarian about work-study positions, library instruction sessions, and other concerns.

Upon arriving on campus, students have the opportunity to meet their librarian in

person during workshops and tours that the library offers during fall orientation.

Internet services such as e-mail and Web pages are another way to build the relationship between students and their class librarians. The class librarian Web site includes photos and contact information for each librarian, as well as information for their undergraduate class. The site is updated regularly to guide students to the various library resources and services they need at each specific point of

their education. For instance, first-year students can locate information about course reserves, while third year students can find information about how to use electronic resources when studying abroad. Such customized content is also used in e-mails to students. The librarians use a university electronic list, which allows them to easily distribute an e-mail to their entire class. About once a quarter, e-mails are sent to remind stu-

dents about library services or to notify them of programs or workshops. The Class Librarian for the senior class, for example, may notify students that research help is available if they are writing a BA paper:

Hi, have you started thinking about your BA paper? Let me know if you would like some help locating resources, conducting searches (of the catalog or a database) or even just figuring out where to start your research. You can contact me via e-mail or by phone or even just drop by!

In addition to serving as reminders, the e-mails present students with an easy opportunity to ask a question—all they have to do is hit

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ONLINE ONLINE

**Email Rebecca**

Name:

Email:

Subject:

Message:

Send

Contact form for the class librarian of 2008.

reply. As one student wrote, It's a blessing that you emailed. I've been having problems with how to come up with a research methodology when I begin my research . . . Most e-mail solicitations from the class librarians result in several immediate questions from students on a variety of topics.

In cases where the class librarian cannot answer a question, he or she will forward the message to the appropriate staff member or bibliographer. Questions about fees, for instance, would be brought to the attention of the library's Circulation Department. These referrals not only ensure that students receive the best service possible, but also broaden their understanding of the various library staff members who are available to assist them.

For example, a class librarian who was helping a student working on a paper about teacher assessment in public schools wrote:

We also, however, have a librarian who specializes in education. If you would like to meet with her, I can help you get an appointment. The student was previously unaware that the library had subject specialists, and as a result of this correspondence, quickly requested a research consultation with the education bibliographer.

### Reaching beyond the Web

The class librarians' outreach is not limited to the Internet, however. The program is prominently featured each year in our annual *College Library Guide* and advertised on bookmarks that are distributed at various undergraduate events. Library programs for undergraduates are hosted annually by the class librarians, including study breaks or exhibition showings in our Special Collections Research Center. Additionally, the class librarians meet with various college departments and administrators, such as the career resources center and undergraduate advisors, to build awareness of the program throughout the university.

### Conclusion

Overall, the response to the Class Librarians Program has been very positive. A June 2006 survey of graduating college students

revealed that 89 percent of the respondents were aware that they had a class librarian. While not all of these students contacted their class librarian for research assistance, we believe the program has been an effective and innovative way to introduce students to the UC Library and their librarian. In the words of one graduating student: The library and the class librarian are awesome.

We continue to look for other means for reaching students and improving the program. In the fall of 2006, we began using Facebook accounts and instant messaging to communicate with our classes. Our hope is that by building these relationships early in their college years, our students will continue to see their librarians as resources should they continue on to graduate programs or as they move into their future careers.

### Note

1. To learn more about the program, visit the University of Chicago Class Librarians online at [www.lib.uchicago.edu/classlibrarians](http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/classlibrarians). *zz*



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