Assessment Annual Report

Service or Collection
Front-line Reference Services

Fiscal Year
2020-2021

Overview
OSU Libraries Reference Services normally offers in-person and virtual reference help. The Libraries' Ask a Librarian help includes email, text, chat, phone and in-person support. These services fall under the Library Experience and Access Department's (LEAD) portfolio of services, with the Coordinator of Reference Services as the primary contact. The Coordinator manages the Info Desk (in-person reference services), Learning Commons, and virtual reference service (drawing on library staff/librarians across several different library departments to complete the roster of service hours for the virtual reference service).

Typical non-COVID reference services are provided for 140 hours per week; during COVID operations, total reference service hours dropped to approximately 85 hours per week, primarily due to physical building closure or curtailed building hours. To accommodate building closure from March to mid-Sept 2020, all reference services were provided virtually and included extended virtual service hours to better support patrons during this time. During curtailed building hours (mid-Sept 2020 forward), virtual reference service hours have been extended beyond physical building hours four days per week (Monday through Thursday, typically the busiest days for reference services).

Strategic Significance:
The OSU Libraries Reference Service connects most strongly to **OSULP Strategic Goal 1**, as our reference service staffers strive to provide **High Quality Services and Expertise** to all library patrons. In delivering this service, we are operationalizing **Strategic Priority B.1**, an external-facing priority that focuses our efforts on **Optimiz[ing] the library experience in support of learning success, scholarly excellence and community engagement.** Our service providers include student employees who utilize their deep knowledge of campus culture, customs, and opportunities to connect other students to needed resources. The same student employees are also well-trained to provide basic level guidance to students and other patrons using a myriad of library-based information and space resources. Professional library staff and librarians provide expert services for in-depth inquiries ranging from the nuances of 3-D printing to appropriate discipline-specific information resources to best practices for literature reviews...and everything in-between.

Takeaways:

- Takeaway 1: Having a well-established virtual reference service helped OSU Libraries maintain an all-virtual reference service environment while campus was closed and allowed for seamless transition into continued robust reference services when campus and the library did reopen in a very limited way.
- Takeaway 2: When policies and procedures are changing quickly and often, a central, updated "ready reference" document and dedicated channels on instant communication tools like Slack were/are key to keeping everyone on the same page.
- Takeaway 3: Training new Info Desk students for reference duties via virtual tools like Zoom is doable but challenging; moving portions of the training to virtual tools like Canvas will keep this process sustainable for the future, but this conversion process is time-consuming.
- Takeaway 4: Students trained via virtual tools like Zoom and Canvas still need hands-on, on-site training for some of the in-person tasks they need to perform.
- Takeaway 5: While use of virtual reference tools like chat increased during 2020-2021, those increases did not make up for the overall drop in reference service transactions (especially those delivered in-person).

Next Steps:
The OSU Libraries Reference Services will be implementing - during Spring 2021 term - a proactive (timed-delay auto slide-out) chat widget on several key library pages. Implementation of this enhanced functionality at other academic libraries has shown substantial increases (40-700%) in the use of library chat reference services when patrons do not have to initiate the chat contact (find the tab and then start the chat). With the majority of our campus population still studying and working remotely, it is our understanding (based on the experience of other academic libraries who have implemented this service) that this proactive approach will further increase the library's engagement with our patrons and provide quality and expert virtual services to more patrons, especially students. This pilot project offers one way in which we continually strive to **optimize the library experience in support of learning success, scholarly excellence and community engagement,** especially during this time of intense disruption in normal productivity routines of all kinds for all members of the OSU community. While this proactive approach to chat reference service will still not make up for the substantial drop in reference transactions generated from walk-in interactions, it will get the opportunity to engage with library staff and librarians in front of more library patrons than our current static chat button option offers.

Assessment:
The dropoff in reference transactions between comparable time periods pre-COVID and during COVID is stark (Appendix A). The bulk of reference service transactions are generated by in-person visits to the library during non-COVID times (14264 walk-in transactions during the featured 24 week period pre-COVID vs 4633 walk-in transactions during the same 24 week period under COVID operations). While chat reference transactions have more than doubled during these comparable time periods (578 vs 1386) and email transactions increased by nearly 62% (461 vs 745), the increase in these two categories of virtual reference transactions does not make up for the decrease in walk-in transactions. Pursuing a way to better engage our library patrons in virtual reference services led to the coming pilot project to implement a proactive slide-out chat option (see Next Steps above).

Respectfully submitted,
Uta Hussong-Christian, Erin McCaslin Kooyman, Beth Filar Williams, 4/1/21

Attachments

Appendix A: Assessment Data

Reference Category Comparison
mid-Sept - end Feb
pre-Covid vs during Covid

Category	pre-Covid 2019-2020	during Covid 2020-2021
Walk In	14264	4633
Phone	919	816
Text	63	87
Email	461	745
Chat	578	1385
Other	122	32
No Value Set	313	539