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ONSITE REFERENCE: THE ONLY WAY TO DELIVER USER-CENTERED SERVICES? ¹

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Introduction

With the rapid advancement of computer technology, electronic full-text content databases and resources have become more readily available in academic libraries across the world. This has led to a significant decline in the use of physical library facilities. However, not all students are equipped with sufficient information-literacy skills needed to perform productive and successful research to meet all of their academic needs. As a result, innovative outreach efforts are becoming increasingly important to counter this trend.

Four years ago, I started a pilot onsite reference services project that allowed me to provide weekly office hours for reference consultation in the departments I was a liaison for. Positive feedback and comments received from faculty and students demonstrated that the pilot project has been successful. Bringing reference services to liaison departments allowed faculty and students to have personal contact with a subject librarian without leaving their physical location. It also opened doors for a variety of collaborative activities between the Library and pertinent campus units.

Unfortunately, due to the university-wide budget crisis and consequent reduction of staff in the library, the number of remaining subject librarians at the University of Arizona Library is now insufficient to cover all campus departments. Thus, the onsite reference pilot project came to a halt. In order to minimize the negative impact of changes caused by fewer subject librarians, the library is now striving to improve existing services such as chat reference service as well as developing new innovative products such as user-centered interactive online tutorial guides, which instructors can easily incorporate into their course management system.

Literature Review

In comparison to the large number of articles published on virtual, chat, or digital reference activities, only a relatively small number of recent studies related to onsite reference services or reference services provided outside library facilities have been

¹ This article is based on the presentation titled "Onsite Reference Hours: Benefits, Opportunities and Challenges" delivered as part of the library panel "Teaching, Research, and Library Resources" at the annual meeting of the Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies in Tucson, Arizona, October 23, 2009. The author wishes to thank Gail King for coordinating the panel and proofreading.

published. In Lee, J., K. A. Hayden, and D. MacMillan (2004), the authors suggested that librarians should provide reference services outside the library as some students may not go to the library reference desk to ask questions for fear of being embarrassed. The authors also believed that if librarians could bring this service to those liaison departments, it would help to foster closer and stronger relationships with those learning communities. Wagner, A.B. (2004) stated that the onsite reference hours not only outreached isolated faculty but also helped to benefit students in other majors who were taking classes in the department. The article suggested that visibility in department activities were invaluable in strengthening librarian-patron interactions.

Most recently in academic library research and publications, there has been extensive research conducted on new library roles, especially changes in the role of liaison librarian in academic libraries. This new focus on role changes could be a major factor explaining the limited number of publications regarding onsite reference services. Karen Williams (2009) stated that a librarian's position description is a living document that should be regularly reviewed for a close alignment with the constantly changing organizational structure. She asserts that the position description also needs to reflect each institution's vision of new or changed roles for liaison librarians as well as for librarians with other types of responsibilities. Karla Hahn (2009) emphasized that new activities for liaison librarians were growing and it is illogical to expect these librarians to be expert in each new assignment. Working collaboratively with other team members or colleagues will be the key to the success of the future liaison roles.

Methodology

The pilot onsite reference services project at the University of Arizona started in fall 2006 at the beginning of the semester and was discontinued in December 2008 at the end of the school year. No services were provided during the summer months or winter breaks. Onsite reference services were offered one hour per week in each of the author's two liaison departments: the East Asian Studies Department and the Spanish and Portuguese Department.

Location and time were two factors that contributed a great deal to the success of the project. The conference room used at the Spanish and Portuguese Department was an ideal location because it was connected to the lobby. Likewise, the seminar room in the East Asian Studies Department had access to hallways. Both locations were visible and allowed for easy access to customers. Signs prepared by both departments were displayed on the doors to the respective rooms with my name, contact information and weekly office hours. Selecting a time that would work for the majority of my customers was also crucial. Informal surveys were emailed to faculty and student lists to find the best times for reference hours. I also asked the administrative assistants of both departments to add my name to their faculty and student email lists, so I could send email messages to them about the onsite reference hours, location and services I would provide there. I also sent reminders from time to time, especially during the weeks before midterms and finals.

When I first started this service in those departments, I did not know what to expect. Would I spend an entire hour doing nothing? If I could only help one person during that hour, would it be worth the effort?

In the final analysis, holding onsite reference hours proved to be worthwhile. Although there were days when no one showed up, on most days during reference hours at least one or two people would come seeking assistance. The small number of customers allowed me to spend more time with each person on in-depth reference questions without the pressure of other students waiting in line to be helped. Lack of line-ups definitely helped the reference interaction feel more relaxed and flexible. As a result, more and more students started to feel comfortable asking me questions about their term papers, research projects or dissertations. It turned out to be a very rewarding and successful experience for me, and my weekly presence in the departments really increased the library's visibility. Students and faculty appreciated the convenience brought by the services that I provided. This onsite reference pilot project greatly helped to foster closer and stronger relationships between the Library and the departments.

People who took advantage of the onsite reference hours ranged from students (mostly graduate students), faculty members (tenured and tenure-track with their different needs), GATs (Graduate Teaching Assistants) to visiting scholars (both national and international). GATs were a very important customer group because after they themselves benefited from the service, they would in turn help their students or refer them to the reference service. Most GATs were graduate students from other departments, such as Linguistics, Anthropology, Psychology, History, and SLAT (Second Language Acquisition and Teaching). The onsite reference also helped benefit foreign exchange students who came to the University of Arizona for a short period of time. Most of them needed to fulfill research requirements but felt uncomfortable asking questions at public reference desks, because of the worry that their English would not be understood. It is evident that the people who benefited from this service extended beyond the two liaison departments of Spanish and Portuguese and East Asian Studies.

The onsite reference service also brought some unexpected positive outcomes such as outreach to faculty members or students who otherwise would have not been reached. Those users began to learn more about the library's collections and online resources and initiated collaborative activities such as library instruction and culture related exhibits in the Main Library. Two examples provide good illustrations of this benefit.

During onsite reference hours a faculty member from the East Asian Studies Department who rarely used the library before stopped by. He asked me if I was willing to teach a session on library resources for his Research Methods class. While discussing topics that would be covered in the session, the conversation expanded to other areas such as plagiarism, copyright, open access, and fair-use. Not only have I continued teaching the Research Methods class for him since then, the professor is now a heavy user and passionate advocate of the Library.

As part of my onsite reference service I also worked with a graduate student from the Spanish and Portuguese Department on a Cuban Art and Culture Exhibition. The collaborator was a native Cuban who had been living in the United States for three years at that time. His heavily accented English had discouraged him from using many of the services that the Library provides. The exhibit coincided with Hispanic Heritage Month when several large-scale campus and city events occurred. The exhibit was a big success; not only was it visited by numerous library visitors, it was also used as a teaching resource by many classes from the Spanish and Portuguese Department. The exhibit served as an interactive classroom for students from multiple sessions of Spanish 102, who happened to be reading about Cuba in their text books at that time. They enjoyed Cuban music and conversation with the Cuban student immensely. After the exhibit, the graduate student himself became a frequent library visitor, utilizing a variety of Library resources and services for his personal research needs, which helped him to complete his PhD studies in May of 2010.

Reflections

Like many universities across the nation, the University of Arizona has been experiencing tremendous financial difficulties. The university president Robert Shelton said, *“Over the past two decades the portion of the state budget dedicated to higher education has decreased by half ... we cannot continue with business as usual nor do everything that we have done in the past... That is a sad reality, but it is the reality nonetheless.”*

This statement reflects precisely the challenges that the Library is facing. Due to the consistent budget shortfall, the Library continues to lose vacant personnel lines through each budget cut, retirement or resignation. As a consequence, all library staff have to take on extra responsibilities in addition to their already heavy workload. Research also shows a strong trend that interdisciplinary studies are gaining in strength and number. Therefore, librarians are required to push beyond their specialties to provide assistance to support new subjects or interdisciplinary areas as resources become scarce. Current economic difficulties and reduction of human resources severely hinder the library from thoroughly supporting departments and colleges, while at the same time trying to respond to the new demand of cross disciplinary subjects. Thus, the traditional subject liaison model is no longer affordable or feasible for the Library.

In addition to the financial challenges, the changing information-seeking behaviors of library users are also the driving forces behind the new direction that the Library is heading. Technological developments have affected not only the format and sources of the information used by the Library to provide reference services, but also how and where they provide those services. Technology now allows users to submit their queries to the library at any time from any place. Virtual reference is the most ideal alternative to respond to patrons' needs for convenient access to reference services.

To respond to this trend, libraries and their resources have partially moved to the virtual environments inhabited by students, faculty, and researchers. The ubiquitous presence of WiFi enables mobile users to easily access library related resources and services from

any geographic location through hand-held communication devices such as Kindle, iPhone, or smart phones, in addition to computers or laptops. Innovative collaborations and new partnerships will become increasingly important in the future in order to adequately provide content, tools, and services.

To better support faculty teaching and student learning on campus and economize their human resources, the Library is developing a scalable method of enabling faculty to identify, locate, select, and organize library resources and tutorials in a way that is useful to specific classes and students. This mechanism will be easy to access and use. It will also be able to seamlessly integrate multiple course pages into a single course management system such as D2L, where pertinent library resources and services can be highlighted and distributed.

Even with the discontinuation of the weekly onsite reference hours, users can still easily reach librarians through chat reference (instant messaging), which is available almost 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Library's email reference service allows users to make appointments with librarians for a research consultation with a turnaround time of 24 hours or less during the work week. Customer-oriented interactive online tutorials and guides, some with built in self-assessment tools, have been developed to teach users how to find information efficiently in the Library's online catalog as well as in many other databases. More and more electronic resources including full-text e-journal, e-book or e-reference databases are now accessible anytime and anywhere.

Conclusion

Traditional reference services face challenges caused by a combination of factors including declining library budgets, shrinking staff, increasing availability of online resources and the transforming nature of how library users do their research. As a result, academic librarians must consider strategies to creatively maximize their resources while continuing to provide quality service to meet the changing expectations and needs of their customers. Institutions also need to better understand how their users are utilizing web services and other technologies in order to devise a strategy that will allow them to support new methods of communication and dissemination of information.

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