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How Can Libraries Move Towards a More Inclusive Model of Reference? A Practical Approach to Serve Distance Students

Lauren Puzier  
_University at Albany, State University of New York_, lpuzier@albany.edu

Camille Chesley  
_University at Albany, State University of New York_, cchesley@albany.edu

Amanda M. Lowe  
_University at Albany, State University of New York_, amlowe@albany.edu

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How can libraries move toward a more inclusive model of reference?

A Practical Approach to Serve Distance Students
Introduction

UAlbany is a four-year, R1 institution. While it is primarily a residential campus, it has an increasing population of distance learners. We have fully online degrees in several of our Colleges, and online courses interspersed throughout the catalog.

The University Libraries provide virtual reference services through email and chat. Chat is a highly used and growing service. We also offer a popular one-on-one research consultation service for students who would like to sit down with a reference librarian.

But what if you can't make it to a campus library, or live out of state?
Nationwide...

- 15% (3,103,500) of students are enrolled exclusively in distance courses
- Another 18% (3,548,036) of students are taking some courses online

ACRL's Standards for Distance Learning Library Services state:

"[students] are entitled to the library services and resources of that institution, including direct communication with the appropriate library personnel, regardless of where they are physically located in relation to the campus; where they attend class in relation to the institution’s main campus; or the modality by which they take courses."
All this led us to ask...

Are we meeting student needs, no matter where they are?

How can we best meet their needs?

How can we provide equitable research assistance to distance students?
Our solution is to remix our current service

We decided to explore a virtual alternative to reach distance students using our in-person research consultation service as a template.

We focused on:
- Needs of stakeholders (students and staff)
- Marketing
- The user experience of requesting and joining a virtual appointment (software review)
- Generating librarian interest in the service
A few steps to launch the pilot program

1. Gather information from students & staff on needs and wants
2. Investigate and trial screen-sharing platforms (our software review)
3. Provide training to participating staff
4. Market the pilot program
Info Gathering: "Are you interested?"

Students:

“I’d prefer meeting in person. I like being able to follow along as you search. I think [virtual consultations] would be useful for a day like Monday [snow delay] or if someone is unwilling or unable to come to campus.”

Librarians:

“This kind of service would be useful to students in my subject areas. It may be slow to start, but I can envision it becoming popular once it’s well known.”
# Software Review

Our comparison chart was a helpful tool in decision making. Based on the next level of service above a free plan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>SKYPE FOR BUSINESS</strong></th>
<th><strong>JOIN.ME PRO PLAN</strong></th>
<th><strong>GO TO MEETING PROFESSIONAL PLAN</strong></th>
<th><strong>SLACK STANDARD PLAN</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CUSTOMER SERVICE</strong></td>
<td>24/7</td>
<td>24/7</td>
<td>24/7</td>
<td>24/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRICE (PER MONTH)</strong></td>
<td>Free</td>
<td>$20.00/ month</td>
<td>$12.00/ month</td>
<td>$6.67 Per Person Per Month to add Guest Accounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SOFTWARE NEEDED ON PATRON'S END?</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SCREEN SHARING</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes with added app</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RECORD AND SHARE MEETINGS?</strong></td>
<td>Yes, up to 1 GB</td>
<td>Yes, saved within account</td>
<td>Yes, saved on local drive</td>
<td>Depends on video conferencing app selected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SPECIAL FEATURES</strong></td>
<td>Access provided by Institution</td>
<td>Personal URL &amp; custom background image</td>
<td>Personal URL meeting link.</td>
<td>Add students as temporary guest accounts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Librarian Training

Librarians volunteered to participate.

We provided
• In-person training sessions on how to screen-share and video conference
• A Virtual Research Consultation Training LibGuide
• Practice sessions with librarians
Marketing

Targeted emails to groups that we wanted to use the service

Creation of a logo that would differentiate this service from an existing consultation service.

Creation of a print postcard to be given out at resource and faculty fairs
Technical Specs & Requirements

To help ensure a positive user experience for librarians and students, general best practices and recommendations for video chatting were communicated prior to the consultations.

- removing ambient noise that can be picked up by a microphone
- using broadband internet
- being cognizant of light sources and backgrounds
- testing webcams, microphones, etc.

Service Hours

For the pilot, we kept regular business hours for service hours. Moving forward, we would like to add additional hours for this service.
Scalability
Feedback indicated that the service could be attractive to on-campus students. We worried about meeting the demand for virtual appointments with our existing number of staff.

Target Audience
Due to concerns, we planned a limited pilot, targeting students in graduate and undergraduate fully-online degree programs.

Scheduling
We modified our existing consultation request form using conditional logic.
Assessment

We built upon existing data collection for on-site research consultations by adding reporting features to capture missed appointments and other time and location issues unique to virtual meetings.
Assessment

In addition to recording demographic data about students, a post-consultation assessment survey tool included measures to assess student satisfaction, confidence, and reasons for selecting a virtual consultation.
Positive Response

The pilot had a small number of participants, but the response for the service was overwhelmingly positive.

"The session was tailored to my specific needs and topic of study...The whole process was extremely easy, no complications at all."

Next Steps

- Explore using Springshare's Zoom integration to offer virtual consultations
- Open up the service to all students
- Explore possibilities for expanding our hours to offer evening appointments
Contact Information

Camille Chesley
cchesley@albany.edu

Amanda Lowe
amlowe@albany.edu

Lauren Puzier
lpuzier@albany.edu