

Librarians at your doorstep

Roving reference at Towson University

Today's busy college students request and receive information in real time. They expect point of need service, including library services. Service models variously named roving reference, off-site reference, library outpost, satellite reference, and remote reference all attempt to deliver information service in a point of need setting. The library literature offers a wide variety of examples of off-site reference service trial projects—all with varied degrees of success.

This article describes two experiments at Towson University's Cook Library, which took library service outside the library directly to places where students gather.

Cook librarians have already established a tradition of department-specific library liaison outreach and course-embedded instruction, using emergent technology tools to create responsive traditional and virtual reference services. Yet the library's numbers for traditional reference desk interactions are declining. The diverse needs and schedule constraints of performing arts and education students at Towson provided a rationale for offering face-to-face reference assistance in the academic buildings that serve these students.

In addition, both authors have significant connections to their liaison areas and strong pre-existing relationships with faculty members: one librarian has pursued an additional degree within the liaison area; the other is a frequent guest lecturer in various courses. We both meet with students in their discipline-specific introductory research classes for two-to-five class sessions. Additional student contact is usually provided through e-mail or individual consultations in the library.

Background

Towson University is a state university with 20,180 students and approximately 2,300 faculty and staff, located in Baltimore County, Maryland. Our students come from Maryland, other surrounding states, and foreign countries. Approximately 694 students (graduate and undergraduate) study music, dance, and theater arts at Towson University in the Center for the Arts building on campus. The Music Department has a resource room that houses a print edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (3rd edition), as well as some listening/reading assignments kept on reserve. The room is staffed by students and open during the week from 9 to 5. The Theatre Arts Department hosts a script library, which is open during the week for three hours daily.

Towson University's College of Education includes six academic departments: Early Childhood Education, Educational Technology and Literacy, Elementary Education, Instructional Leadership and Professional Development, Secondary Education, and Special Education. There are five undergraduate majors offered, with options of 17 certification areas. The College of Education offers eight master's level graduate programs, three post-grad certificates, and one doctoral program. There are just over 2,200 full- and part-time undergraduate education majors, and there are almost 1,500 full- and part-time graduate students.

Claire Holmes is library liaison for special education, secondary education, and education technology and literacy, e-mail: cholmes@towson.edu, and Lisa Woznicki is library liaison for dance, music, and theatre, e-mail: lwoznicki, at Towson University

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The Educational Technology Center, housed in Hawkins Hall (the main education building on campus), is an open computing lab with 30 PCs and several Apple systems. Students use the Internet, Microsoft Office software, and other assorted multimedia applications, including Inspiration software. There are scanners, digital cameras, CD writers, and other media tools available for student use. Limited free printing is available to students in this lab, which is open weekdays 62 hours per week and is staffed by trained technology support students and staff.

In both discipline areas, students are often unaware of library processes and inexperienced with the resources needed to accomplish their research work. In addition, they are pressed for time due to their unique schedules, which include rehearsals, private lessons, internships, prescribed curricula, distance learning needs, and extracurricular responsibilities. The Center for the Arts is a ten-minute walk, and Hawkins Hall is a five-minute walk from the library, so a “quick trip” to the library is sometimes considered a “hassle.”

Service design

Key features of Towson’s roving model have been mobility and student convenience. It seemed logical to design a service offering weekly research assistance beyond the library at the point of need. The performing arts librarian held weekly 90-minute sessions during lunchtime in the relaxed and informal Center for the Arts’ café area. The interactions were truly spontaneous; the point of contact was a walk-up service—no advance planning and no appointments required. The librarian working with education majors chose a slightly different model.

Instead of a fixed location, she visited for two hours weekly in the College of Education’s technology lab, and she met with students or faculty elsewhere in the Education building if a private appointment was preferred. Both librarians found some students wanted private meetings, held away from the public lab or café areas. In both models, the opportunity for follow-up was presented and sometimes used by students and faculty.

Publicity

A variety of methods were used to advertise the service. Both librarians placed prominent notices on their instructional Web pages and sent e-mails to faculty and students in targeted courses. Posters were placed in departments and throughout the buildings where sessions were held. The service was mentioned at departmental meetings, notices were placed on librarian blogs, in newsletters, on Blackboard course pages, and reminders were posted on a Twitter feed. Whether sitting at a café table or in the computing lab, each librarian displayed both a tabletop sign and a wall sign advertising her availability.

Essential tools for service

Because the librarians were not stationed in their offices with a variety of tools at their disposal, it was necessary to create some help guides to be given out during the sessions. A set of research “quick guides” were drafted with step-by-step instructions (including screen shots) for ten different research tasks ranging from searching the OPAC to submitting an interlibrary loan request. Statistic recording sheets were created to track the user types, time spent, and questions asked. Library-generated citation guides for APA, CMS, and MLA formats were packed in the travel bag along with handouts on intellectual property, business cards, and feedback survey cards.

Both librarians carried laptops with wireless Internet access and cell phones to call a library department or campus office to answer a question.

Usage statistics

At the end of two semesters, the performing arts librarian made seventeen 90-minute visits and saw 63 visits from 34 students, one staff member, and 28 faculty members. The education librarian made 24 visits to the education technology lab and hosted 20 reference interactions, specifically two faculty members, one group of four students, and 14 individual students, three of whom made advanced appointments.

Benefits

User survey responses for the performing arts librarian were limited, but of those received, all indicated a positive experience in using the service. Faculty endorsements from all involved departments generated tremendous support. The performing arts librarian was praised by her dean and a department chair for bringing library service that allowed for spontaneous interactions to their building. Many faculty members stopped to say they endorsed the service in their work with students and recommended individual students visit the librarians for some research advice. One department chair mentioned the service during a visit by a national accreditation site visit. In another case, an associate dean e-mailed the librarian stating that seeing the students engaged with her was “uplifting.” She would have stopped to tell the librarian this, but at that point, there was a line of students waiting for assistance, so she e-mailed instead.

One of the greatest benefits of the experiment was the flexibility of service for the intended audience. For shy students or those pressed for time, the ability to grab a bite to eat or get research help on the fly was useful. The interactions also afforded the librarians the chance to form close relationships with students and faculty beyond classroom contact. The informal sessions, nestled among the hub-

bub of the café or the student lab, helped to set the tone for a relaxed reference transaction. Students became repeat customers, and some began to stop by to chat about their studies or ask advice that was beyond the reference context. In some cases, students asked for a private setting in the building to discuss topics that were of a more personal nature, such as a poor grade received on an assignment or advice about their course work or career plans. Because the librarians were working on their own research in between visitors, some students got informal demonstrations of how to conduct a literature search or test search strings in databases, and they often offered insightful opinions that gave the librarians a new perspective on their own work.

One of the greatest rewards provided by the service was the informal, spontaneous engagement with faculty members, especially since new or adjunct faculty can be hard to reach. This service brought faculty and librarians out of their departmental work zones, away from college and department politics, and helped orient new faculty in a casual manner. In this setting, the pair could have spontaneous, frank conversations about course sequencing, activities, materials, research tools, and other topics that may not have occurred otherwise.

Another intangible benefit of the service included chance meetings with administrative assistants, program coordinators, and other staff who do not typically visit the library. We also found ourselves working as student advocates in matters of course content or assignments. Overhearing student conversations and having candid discussions with students sometimes led to diplomatic student advocacy resulting in changes to course requirements, deadlines, and modifications to assignments.

Roving reference service was piloted partly to test the theory that it is important to meet students “where they are”—to demonstrate that proximity and familiarity do make a difference in student comfort level when seeking library assistance. Both librarians agree that the service created a bond between the librarian and the student/faculty member, and required the librarians to rethink some of their refer-

Best practices suggestions

To optimize providing off-site reference service, consider these tips:

- Pick a high-traffic, informal location on campus.
- Carry dependable electronic equipment and relevant supplies in a pre-packed travel bag.
- Tailor marketing strategies to reach the particular audience.
- Keep statistics to track activity.
- Poll users (and non-users) to continually evaluate location and time preferences and to “tweak” the service to ensure its effectiveness.

ence behaviors. Continuity of the service was important; and over the weeks, faculty and students could depend on the librarian to appear and began to anticipate her arrival. Because of routine scheduling in the same location, students would sometimes be waiting for the librarian to arrive and set up. As one student put it, "I knew that you would not mind if I ate with you and talked about my paper. I just don't have any other time today—I am booked straight through."

Next steps

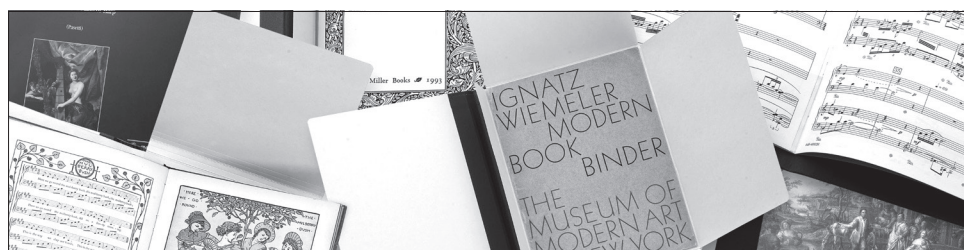
The service has been so popularly received by faculty that college deans on campus are calling the library and asking how their students can have the same service offered in their buildings. Both authors will continue to offer and expand off-site reference service for their students and faculty in upcoming semesters. One will be offering the service on an alternating pair of days to vary the service schedule. With the construction of new residence facilities and an ever growing list of library resources, we will have

plenty of new opportunities and locations for sharing information with students and faculty who drop by for a quick chat.

Summary

Off-site reference delivery is one model that puts library services directly in the hands of students and faculty, within a point of need context. In an academic community like Towson's, where library instruction is embedded and librarians' accessibility is assumed, the individualized research support and face-to-face dimension that characterizes roving reference service effectively affirms our commitment to student success.

Students and faculty have come to rely on the spontaneous and casual nature of this outreach service and acknowledge that it reduces barriers to library interaction. The many benefits of providing off-site reference service include building librarians' relationships with our students and faculty, conveying our collaborative spirit, and high-profile marketing of library services. *zz*



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