

Improving Interaction in Online Liaison Services through Skype

Peace Ossom Williamson, University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

This article describes a pilot project of enhanced virtual reference services through a multifaceted model of services that includes the addition of Skype reference. The project was created as a response to a growing need for advanced liaison services to the College of Nursing at The University of Texas at Arlington, which predominantly consists of online students. The number of online nursing students and degree and certificate programs offered by the university has grown exponentially in current and previous years, making this a particularly significant case study. Detailing of the method used to respond to user needs and of the outcome of the project will further the conversation about supporting online student success.

Keywords: *Academic Libraries, ChatReference, Distance Education, Embedded Librarianship, Multifaceted Reference Model, Nursing, Online Learning, Outreach, Text Reference*

INTRODUCTION

Online student learning has increased from 1.6 million students in 2002 to more than 7.1 million undergraduate and graduate students who took one or more online classes in 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2014), and this trend continues as an increasing number of learning objects migrate to the online environment. In response, academic libraries are evaluating and adapting their services to suit distance students' needs. Chat, phone, and text reference services—in combination with teaching and learning through LibGuides and digital learning objects—often assist students who are in need of quick and straight-forward information, and these services have largely been adapted from in-person services already existing in libraries. While these efforts have worked to improve online assistance, it is greatly advantageous for libraries to determine user needs in the online or virtual environment and subsequently create services to fill those needs. Providing multifaceted services based upon new models of reference assistance that consider the experience of the online student can improve liaison librarians' effectiveness in assisting distance students.

University of Texas at Arlington

More specifically, at The University of Texas at Arlington (UT Arlington), online education is a prime focus. UT Arlington is a growing research institution centered between Dallas and Ft. Worth in Texas. It is the second largest student body in The University of Texas System, only

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trailing The University of Texas in Austin. It also consists of a very diverse student body: It is tied with five other institutions as the fifth most diverse university in the United States (U.S. News, 2013). Although UT Arlington is developing into a residential campus from a commuter campus, its more than 33,000 students are either from or located in every state in the U.S. and 120 other countries, and more than 11,000 of these students take online courses (The University of Texas at Arlington, 2014). The online course offerings of the College of Nursing have drastically increased, as have the number of online students, and its students make up one fourth of the university population along with the overwhelming majority of online students; thus, an effort to better serve these students was crucial for UT Arlington Libraries.

UT Arlington Libraries

The mission of UT Arlington Libraries' is to foster and promote Knowledge Creation, idea eXploration, and learning Innovation (CXI), and this is put into action by focusing its initiatives on values including its services, flexibility, and community. This mission largely drives the nearly 20,000 reference transactions and 700 instruction sessions completed each year (The University of Texas at Arlington Libraries, 2014). In accordance with this mission, the Libraries' Department of Outreach and Scholarship has three subgroups: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM); Social Sciences; and Arts and Humanities. These groups consist of full time liaisons who serve the various departments on campus. In addition to these often-called *core* or *primary liaisons*, librarians in most of the other departments also serve liaison roles as *dual liaisons*. This allows for a varying number of liaisons serving departments, depending largely on the department's size and the department's needs. In service to the College of Nursing, the UT Arlington Libraries' STEM Outreach and Scholarship department head developed a team of four nursing liaison librarians. One librarian is a full time liaison, while the other three are dual liaisons with their primary responsibilities being in other departments. These librarians have offered several supplemental services to improve the experience of distance students. This effort includes increased chat reference offerings and availability and includes Skype consultations. Also, local research had been completed on the role of LibGuides in learning, and the librarians updated the nursing subject, topic, and course guides using this evidence of teaching and learning.

The liaison services and the subsequent experiences at UT Arlington serve as a preliminary framework for developing a multifaceted model of service that pays particular attention to the needs of distance students. This article will utilize this framework in discussing the role of liaison expertise and job function in the general structure and division of library services. The discussion will be further augmented by an explanation of the multifaceted model, as well as an illustration of the outcomes of the pilot project at UT Arlington.

BACKGROUND

User Preferences and Characteristics

There have been drastic changes in the ways that people obtain information, and many describe this age as a time of information renaissance. Information is conveniently at a user's fingertips in the sense that a quick search in a search engine will usually provide them with all of the information they need. According to the *principle of least effort*, referred to in both psychology and in library and information science fields, most individuals seek the method of accomplishing an act that has the least amount of barriers; therefore, a particular method of information-seeking highly values convenience over other attributes, such as accuracy or consistency (Bierbaum,

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