AskMN Virtual Reference Librarian is Available Now

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This fall, students in need of research help will no longer be able to find in-person assistance at the library's reference desk on Saturdays. Due to budget cuts, the library administration has reduced the hours it employs community faculty on weekends. However, there is an alternative for students who need research support.

Christine Schafer, dean of Library and Information Services, has acknowledged that the library is facing a reduced budget this year. According to Schafer, “Like almost all the units at the university … the belt has been tightened. So, we had about a 3.5 percent budget cut.”

In order to maintain services while still operating within their new budget, library administrators have had to make some hard choices. The reference desk, in particular, has taken a hit. Traditionally, the library has employed members of the community as part-time faculty to cover the reference desk on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. This allowed full-time staff to attend meetings and attend to other duties on Fridays and take time off on the weekends. However, the community faculty members' hours have now been reduced to just Sundays for the fall semester and will be cut entirely by spring. Schafer is uncertain of what will happen to weekend hours in the spring, but through the end of December reference services will be closed on Saturdays and available on Friday and Sunday from 12 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Weekday hours will not be affected by these changes; the reference desk will continue to operate Monday to Thursday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Also, the change will not have any effect on the operating hours of the library, the circulation desk, or the computer lab. They will continue to be open every day of the week.

For students who need research help outside of reference desk hours, there is another option. AskMN (pronounced “Ask-Minn”) is an online chat service available to all Minnesota residents. It connects students with real librarians from all over the country. Students can type research questions into a chat box on the library home page, and within a few minutes a real librarian will be online to discuss the question and help students locate resources. While the physical reference desk is open, questions asked in the chat will be answered by Metro librarians, but during off-hours the chat queue is flipped over to AskMN.

As part of their participation in the program, Metro librarians collectively volunteer three hours per week to help answer student questions online. AskMN is a member of the 24/7 Reference Cooperative, which includes librarians from all over the country, who donate time to the project. This allows it to provide services all day, every day. As Schafer points out, “While face-to-face reference is really nice, I feel like there are students who are doing homework at odd hours, maybe late at night when our reference desk isn't open. I really like having that available to them anytime, in the middle of their homework. At least it's a starting point, even if they can't be there in person.”

Students who need online research help can go to Metro's library website or the AskMN home page at askmn.org.

Photo file: Library.jpg

Photo caption: Due to budget cuts, the library administration is reducing the hours it employs community faculty on weekends.

Photo credit: Kevin Miller