# Leveraging Chaos: Innovation and Renovation in an Academic Library

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My observation hours were spent at the library of a state university with a large, urban campus that serves approximately 25,000 undergraduates, 5,000 post-graduates, and 4,000 faculty and staff. The library itself is currently undergoing expansion and renovation, so the library’s reference collection, public workstations, and staff have been moved into a temporary annex. Despite the all-hours access to the annex itself, almost all of the circulating collection is currently in storage. Patrons must request materials from storage, which has a 24-hour turnaround. In order to compensate for the chaos of this transition, the library staff focused on three areas of concentrated effort: an integrated service desk, expanded virtual reference services, and personalized outreach and marketing.

# **Integrated Service Desk**

The annex is essentially a giant, weatherproofed tent enclosing an enormous space. In order to direct patrons to a centralized place to seek help, and to leverage a limited amount of staff throughout 74 hours a week of reference service, the administration created an integrated service desk. The desk runs along one quarter of one side of the annex, and it provides staff a clear view of the rest of the space. There are occasional issues with the acoustics, so staff must be careful to keep their voices at a minimal level when helping patrons or the sound carries throughout the cavernous annex. The integrated service desk contains three service points: circulation, information technology, and reference. The first point of contact, closest to the entrance of the library, is Information and is staffed by circulation personnel. The next is Tech Help and is staffed by a student assistant who helps patrons with basic technical troubleshooting on the library’s workstations and software. The last is Research Assistance, which is the reference desk. Staff at the different service points interact with each other and refer patrons to each other. They are also able to provide backup assistance, if necessary.

The integrated service desk is a relatively new concept that is gaining momentum as staffing is frozen or decreased in this economic climate. In order to prevent library services from suffering, existing staff must be deployed in the most effective way possible . While combining reference and circulation staff at one service point may seem like a straightforward task, the amount of planning and training behind such an endeavor is considerable. There may also be a moderate amount of institutional inertia to work past. However, the integrated service desk supports a “tiered” model of reference which addresses the needs of most patrons quickly and effectively. In the tiered reference model, non-degreed library personnel answer simple questions and refer difficult ones to librarians (Brunsting, 2008).

The librarian sits facing the rest of the cavernous annex building at a small desk that is primarily occupied by a workstation and a clipboard for tracking hourly statistics. Approximately ten feet behind this desk is another small desk with a telephone and another workstation. This workstation has two monitors and was expressly used for fielding questions via telephone, instant messaging (IM), and Short Message Service (SMS). Also on the second desk is a locked box that contains the Android OS mobile phone used for receiving and sending SMS messages. Both the IM and the SMS questions are managed by the library’s LibraryH3lp account.

While assigned to the desk, always in one- or two-hour shifts, the librarian is responsible for answering research assistance questions from all access points: in-person, telephone, instant message, and SMS. There is an additional librarian assigned for telephone, IM, and SMS question backup, but I only saw this situation occur once as usually the questions did not come in concurrently. During the research assistance shift, each librarian is expected to conduct other work-related business that can be done on the desk, such as responding to work email and maintaining subject guides. The librarians’ contact information is freely given to students who need research assistance, and there is also a general email address listed on the library’s website.

## **Expanded Virtual Reference**

Email reference was already an integrated part of the services offered, but to compensate for the lack of on-hand print collection and to encourage more ways for patrons to ask for help, IM and SMS reference services were strengthened and marketed. IM/SMS reference service is provided via the LibraryH3lp software, which I was able to observe in action while at the research assistance desk. When the library is open, the IM/SMS service is available from anywhere it is embedded on the library’s website; when closed, the embedded IM/SMS widget is clearly marked as offline . Because of this functionality, it is superior to advertising an IM account through one of the standard services like Google Talk, Yahoo Messenger, or AOL Instant Messenger. With the standard services, a patron can assume that she has made contact with a librarian simply by sending a message, even if the service is offline. With LibraryH3lp, there is no ability to leave a message when the service is offline. LibraryH3lp is also more stable than free instant messaging services like Meebo (Shanley & Cairns, 2010). The librarians have been well-trained in LibraryH3lp and are comfortable using it. As a result, they are able to provide the same quality of reference in the virtual space as they are in person .

Each librarian I observed had a distinct style in the reference interview, but there were a few similarities. At the beginning of each in-person reference interview, each patron was greeted cordially with appropriate eye contact and body language (Cassell & Hiremath, 2009, pp. 16-19). However, most of the questions received during my observation took place over IM, where eye contact and body language are irrelevant. The librarian conducting the virtual reference interview, then, must rely heavily on “typing quickly and fluently” . As I observed, timeliness was the most important factor, and each librarian took this aspect very seriously, responding to the IM or SMS as soon as the chime sounded.

The questions received via IM and SMS were fairly straightforward. Even two years after the beginning of the library renovations, there were a considerable number of questions about the procedure for requesting books from storage. Even if the question was not asked, librarians were excellent in reminding patrons that the circulating collection was in storage and had to be requested.

* Directional questions were the most common questions asked. Examples include: “How do I find [library materials] in the online catalog?” or “Where is the printer?” These questions took anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes to answer in person and virtually.
* Reference questions were occasionally asked, and more frequently over IM than in person. Examples include: “I am looking for criminal justice sources on the topic of how poor urban communities affect youth to be anti-police.” These questions took anywhere from 5 minutes to 15 minutes.
* Instructional questions were rarely asked. Example: “I have to write a paper on the Cold War. Where should I start?” These are the most time-consuming questions because the patron is displaying a lack of basic information literacy that must be amended before the research goal is achieved. The question in the example took 30 minutes for the librarian to answer and involved some explanation about the difference between primary and secondary sources.

In each exchange, the librarian first greeted the patron and, if the question had not already been asked, asked if there was anything she could do to help the patron. If the question asked involved walking the patron through a number of steps in the OPAC or in an online database, then the librarian’s multitasking skill was put to the test. Each librarian I observed was able to perform “minimal multitasking” by switching back and forth between the web browser and the chat window . In most cases, the librarian responded quickly with small portions of information and clarification questions in order to mitigate the “left in limbo” feeling for the patron at the other end of a dormant chat window (Cassell & Hiremath, 2009). At the end of each interaction, the librarian used the follow-up question as a method of determining whether or not the patron’s question was answered (Cassell & Hiremath, 2009, p. 21).

# **Personalized Outreach and Marketing**

Academic librarians are traditionally assigned subject areas based on institutional need as well as individual expertise. Each librarian I observed has at least two subject specializations and is responsible for bibliographic instruction in these subjects as well as the corresponding subject guides, managed through LibGuides (Springshare LLC, 2011). Librarian A is responsible for international relations, political science, public administration, international business, and Middle-Eastern studies. Librarian B is responsible for accounting, business, film, finance, hospitality management, and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Librarian C is responsible for Raza studies and education. Librarian D is responsible for communication studies, journalism, law, and news. Librarian E is responsible for anthropology, archaeology, psychology, GLBT studies, and sexuality studies. Through concerted, strategic effort, these librarians offer subject-specific assistance in a personalized and personable manner.

When a librarian is assigned to a subject area, she makes contact with the department’s faculty and requests copies of the syllabi. The purpose of this is twofold: the librarian now knows which topics the students will be expected to research for their assignments, and the librarian can base future collection development on the specific topics covered by each course. Sometimes, faculty will request that a librarian teach a specialized bibliographic instruction session for a course. In this session, the librarian is able to establish herself as the students’ “personal librarian.” This type of relationship-building is crucial in helping students “better take advantage of the library’s resources” (Nunn & Ruane, 2011).

In addition to syllabus review and bibliographic instruction, each librarian is responsible for creating and maintaining subject-specific research guides. These research guides are created with the LibGuides website and are linked to from the library’s website under the Research section. Each research guide contains the following sections: Finding Books, Finding Articles, Reference Sources, Web Sites, and Citing Sources. Students and faculty may subscribe to the RSS feed of each research guide in order to receive notification when it is updated (Springshare LLC, 2011). LibGuides also provides each librarian with a profile page that contains contains a biography, current color photo, contact information, and links to all of the librarian’s subject guides. Some librarians choose to provide additional instant messaging accounts so they can be reached even when the library’s IM service is offline. The overall effect is a comprehensive, personalized overview that creates a friendly first impression to students new to the subject matter. This first impression is crucial; in 2009, four librarians at a large academic library found that use of LibGuides at their institution was “causally related to the relationships between the guide author and their users, particularly those relationships fostered through in-person library instruction” (Foster, Wilson, Allensworth, & Sands, 2010).

**An Uncertain Future**

The renovated and expanded library is due to open next year. Luckily for the librarians and their patrons, it was designed with the flexibility to implement the changes born from this particular brand of chaos. The integrated service desk will remain. The librarians I spoke with are hopeful that they will be able to maintain the current level of personalized marketing and virtual reference, but “the reward for an effective librarian is more work” . Staffing limitations may curtail this new growth, with unfortunate repercussions to the level of library service to which patrons are now accustomed.

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