

Though Virtual Reference Services Have Increased, They Face Challenges and Opportunities in the Wake of COVID-19

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Evidence Summary

Though Virtual Reference Services Have Increased, They Face Challenges and Opportunities in the Wake of COVID-19

A Review of:

Gerbig, M., Holmes, K., Lu, M., & Tang, H. (2021). From bricks and mortar to bits and bytes: Examining the changing state of reference services at the University of Toronto Libraries during COVID-19. *Partnership*, 16(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v16i1.6450>

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Abstract

Objective – To compare data about the provision of reference services at the University of Toronto Libraries (UTL) prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to identify obstacles and opportunities facing UTL reference services in the future.

Design – Survey questionnaire.

Setting – A large public research university in Ontario, Canada.

Subjects – Thirty-nine libraries across the three campuses of UTL.

Methods – A Microsoft Forms survey comprised of 37 questions was distributed in August and September 2020.

Main Results – Twenty-four libraries responded to the survey, for a response rate of approximately 62%. UTL’s chat service saw a 200% increase in September 2020 compared to September 2019 (since UTL participates in chat as part of the Ontario Council of University Libraries Scholars Portal, some traffic may have been from non-UT users). The option to book a reference appointment with a librarian was available at most of the libraries before the pandemic, and remained available during the pandemic. The survey results suggested that the shift to remote learning resulted in a significant expansion of virtual reference appointments; 75% of libraries reported offering virtual reference, compared to 17% before the pandemic.

Consultations and in-depth reference questions rose during the pandemic, with a quarter of responding libraries reporting an increase. Librarians became a larger share of the staff providing reference services during the pandemic, whereas the number of libraries using library technicians or student assistants to staff their reference services decreased. There were changes to formal reference service hours as well, with half of responding libraries reporting a reduction; however, most noted that they continued to answer reference questions over email at other times.

In response to the survey question asking for general comments about reference services, some respondents described worries about whether students taking only online classes would engage with online reference services, and whether overstressed faculty members would refer their students to librarians. Several respondents noted positive outcomes in moving towards a primarily online reference model, including more options to connect with students and an uptick in reference requests.

Conclusion – The authors note several challenges and opportunities for libraries in shifting to a remote reference model. Challenges include confusion on the part of users about where to go for help and increased workload for librarians. Opportunities include the chance to explore how virtual technologies can be used to make reference services more easily available to library users even after physical spaces have opened back up.

Commentary

This article’s findings on the challenges of conducting reference and engaging faculty and students in a remote environment reflect other recent research on this topic (Cohn & Hyams, 2021; Mehta & Wang, 2020). While virtual reference services have been around for several decades, there was a sharp increase in virtual reference activity during the pandemic (Ayeni et al., 2021). Libraries have confronted numerous challenges in shifting most of their reference services online, including confusion on the part of library staff and users about how to use online resources and difficulties in collaborating on reference questions across library units (Ayeni et al., 2021).

Glynn’s (2006) critical appraisal checklist was used to evaluate this article. The study’s response rate of 62% is well above the average when surveying librarians (Vander Kooy, 2020). The use of descriptive statistics limits its generalizability to the wider library community; however, since its objective was focused only on understanding the local environment at UTL, this is not a source of criticism.

There are a few methodological elements that would have been good to include, such as the survey instrument used and a description of how the authors analyzed responses to the additional comments or feedback. The article states that the survey was sent to each library, but it is unclear exactly to whom it was sent. This would be useful information, particularly for understanding the responses to the final question, which elicited reflections on the challenges and opportunities for reference services in the wake of the pandemic.

A notable finding is that the percentage of librarians staffing reference services increased during the pandemic, while the number of libraries with library technicians and student assistants performing

reference decreased. It would be interesting to dig into why these staffing changes occurred and to compare them with staffing changes at similar institutions; such an exploration could potentially shed light on the types of library labour issues that have occurred in the wake of the pandemic.

This article joins a small but growing body of research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic library services. Much of the literature on this topic to date consists of case studies (Ayeni et al., 2021). This article's use of a survey may provide a general guide for other libraries wanting to conduct a similar study at their institutions. While the article is limited in its generalizability, its recommendations for future research are valuable for librarians wanting to explore the impact of the pandemic on library services. These suggestions include studies on how well the changes to reference services met user needs as well as on the impact of the increased workload on library workers' wellness and mental health.

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