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“Can you see my screen?”: Utilizing Virtual Appointments for Remote Research Support

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Recommended Citation

Hahn, Amanda and McGinniss, Jeremy, ""Can you see my screen?”: Utilizing Virtual Appointments for Remote Research Support" (2021). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 208.
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Can you see my screen?

Utilizing Virtual Appointments for Remote Research Support

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Summary

During the 2020 spring semester our Research and Instruction department was planning the rollout of a new service using Microsoft Bookings for students to quickly and easily schedule a research appointment with a librarian. Plans quickly accelerated as COVID-19 spread across the globe and higher education rapidly made the switch to a virtual environment.

The new, centralized service became a key component of our library's response to COVID-19, allowing us to virtually meet with students to assist them in navigating library resources and conducting research.

Microsoft Bookings

Image: Computer on desk with wall calendar

Bookings is one of many possible choices for scheduling and appointment software. Our institution provides access to the Microsoft platform which made Bookings a logical choice.

It integrates with the Outlook calendars of Research and Instruction librarians and we were able to later connect Bookings with Microsoft Teams, our platform for virtual appointments.

Students access the Bookings tool through a link on the library website. If the student wants to meet with a specific librarian they can choose the librarian's name from the drop-down list and select from available times. Students can also set a date and time first and then view a list of available librarians.

After choosing a librarian, date, and time, the student is prompted to provide:

- name,
- email address,
- phone number,
- their research question or topic.

The required notes field often provides valuable information about what the student is researching, what class they are in, or which databases they have tried.

This allows the librarian to conduct preliminary research prior to the scheduled appointment and serves as a starting point for the reference interview.

Image: Student on computer writing in notebook

Best Practices

After an appointment is scheduled, the librarian is automatically notified. Initially the librarian needed to schedule a Microsoft Teams meeting and email the student a confirmation, which included a meeting link. These first appointments required some troubleshooting as students were unfamiliar with how Teams worked compared to Zoom or Skype. Some students accessed the meeting by calling from a phone, which took away the benefits of being able to speak face-to-face or share their screen.

Librarians drafted a template email that addressed the most common problems. Technology glitches decreased over time as librarians and students adjusted to online learning and became more comfortable with the Teams software.

A later Microsoft update enabled a more seamless integration between Bookings and Teams that automatically scheduled a Teams meeting, eliminating the need for the librarian to send additional confirmation. Another best practice that has been identified is waiting several minutes for the student to log on. If they do not, the librarian then emails or calls the student to connect with them.

Getting the Word Out

The virtual appointment was highlighted on the library's social media platforms as well as in a library newsletter emailed to faculty. The appointment link was also embedded on the library's Facebook page.

For the first few months of COVID-19 the library website featured an alert bar that informed students of the library's response, limited hours, and the virtual appointment option.

Image: Announcement header at top of Lynch Library website

This alert bar was removed prior to the start of the 2020 Fall semester. A permanent link was added on the services page to continue to support students.

Assessment

The appointment service has successfully connected the library with over 330 students seeking research help. While we anticipated interest from undergraduate students, the data below shows that the largest and most consistent group of users has been graduate students.

This point of connection has often led to further appointments or email exchanges between the librarian and the student. Students have been appreciative of the opportunity to talk with someone face-to-face. A short survey was developed to assess student satisfaction with the service, which is often emailed to the student following the initial appointment.

Unfortunately, responses to the survey have been very limited and do not provide enough data at this point to draw any conclusions. Discussions of how to improve assessment practices are ongoing, but the anecdotal evidence has been overwhelmingly positive.

Data

Data

LUO = Liberty University Online
LUR = Liberty University Residential

Data

Data

336 Sessions

Total number of appointments since beginning the service

284.35 Hours

Total number of hours for appointments

55 Minutes

Average length of time for an appointment

56 Hours

Average number of hours spent by five librarians*

*In January 2021, a sixth librarian joined the department.

Future Steps

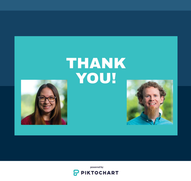
The research appointment is not new but the ability to provide it virtually during COVID-19 was a tremendous benefit to our student body.

Even as life returns to something closer to normal, the virtual research appointment has continued to be a valuable service for the student body. This has been particularly true for graduate students who are enrolled in online programs.

While especially beneficial during COVID-19, the demonstrated success of this service ensures that we will continue to utilize it as an essential component of library services.

Considering Virtual Appointments

- Evaluate and select a platform
- Determine integration with current librarian schedules, calendars and workflows
- Advertise, promote and otherwise make the service visible
- Establish best practices for student communication and engagement
- Check in for librarian feedback for consistency and adjustments
- Assess impact and effectiveness, sharing successes



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