

Librarians Have Left the Building: Ask Us HERE! at Simon Fraser University

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It's the next step in reference and information services – librarians are leaving the library and providing in-person reference services in areas on campus where students congregate.

In the spring of 2003, Simon Fraser University Library became interested in offering a mobile reference service similar to the Roving Librarian established by Harvard University. There, a librarian

with a laptop offers reference services in Loker Commons, an undergraduate student centre. During the summer of 2003, Katherine Miller and Anne O'Shea, two enthusiastic co-op students from the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia, investigated whether a mobile reference service was feasible at SFU. Miller and O'Shea provided the SFU Library with a comprehensive report covering everything from technological needs to recommendations for locations and hours of service. They also interviewed student advisers and other stakeholders in academic departments and service points around campus. Their report is the foundation of the service now being delivered.

Background

The W.A.C. Bennett Library is the only library at the Burnaby campus of SFU. In-person reference and information services are offered at a single general service point called the Alumni Information Commons Service Desk (formerly the Reference Desk). Many classrooms, lecture halls and academic departments are quite far from the library building. With increased access to online resources, there seemed little need for students

and faculty to come into the Bennett Library. Reference transactions at the service desk were declining, and a way to reach out to students and faculty who were unaware of library services needed to be found.

Meanwhile, as early as 1999, SFU's Computing Operations and Technical Support began experimenting with wireless access. By the summer of 2003 most of the campus was accessible to a wireless network. The infrastructure was now in place for librarians with laptops to leave the Bennett Library and go to where students were hanging out.

SFU Library opened *Ask Us HERE!* at the Burnaby campus on September 17, 2003, with the following goals in mind:

- To provide in-person reference service using electronic sources in specific locations on campus.
- To promote the library as a centre of learning and research on campus.
- To market the library's services and resources.

Locations, hours, staffing and equipment

According to Miller and O'Shea's report, enthusiastic support for this service came from the faculties of



Photograph by Catherine Louie

Mark Bodnar, Liaison Librarian for Business Administration, sits at the Ask Us HERE! desk with all of the equipment needed for SFU Library's mobile service.

Business Administration and Science. Therefore, we chose to establish two service locations: the West Mall Complex, which houses the faculties of Business Administration and Economics, and the Applied Sciences Building. Our criteria for choosing an optimum spot at each location included:

- A high volume of pedestrian traffic. Locations should be near student study areas, classrooms, coffee bars and other food services; but we did not want to be directly in the line of traffic, blocking the general flow of pedestrian movement.
- Appropriate light level. Locations needed to be away from windows and direct sunlight to accommodate viewing of the laptop screen.
- Proximity to a power source.
- Strong wireless signal.
- Easy accessibility from the library, with elevators and automatic doors en route.

Each service point was staffed by one librarian one day per week for a two-hour shift. Shifts were shared by the librarians responsible for each location. Liaison librarians Carla Graebner (Economics) and Mark Bodnar (Business Administration) shared the West Mall Complex, while science librarians Gordon Coleman and Sandra Wong staffed the Applied Sciences Building.

Other than the purchase of a laptop devoted to this service, our equipment needs were minimal. The Library Facilities Manager found a portable cart with wheels that could double as a desk. Two folding chairs

that could be easily carried on top of the cart were also commandeered. We created two poster-size (18" x 24") signs, which were laminated and dry-mounted on a foam core by the printing service on campus. At the service locations, one sign was mounted on a lightweight collapsible tripod and the other sign was propped up against the cart. A small box carried useful supplies such as scrap paper, pens, pencils, statistics sheets, evaluation forms and bookmarks.

Service evaluation

Katherine Miller and Anne O'Shea returned to SFU in January 2004 to evaluate the *Ask Us HERE!* service as a part of their library studies at UBC. Using in-depth surveys, they polled the reactions and experiences of patrons, and assembled a profile of the typical user.

They found that the majority of questions at the *Ask Us HERE!* desk involved true reference. Students wanted to know how to start a research project, find more sources, use a database or index, or locate an item online. Many non-research-related questions tended to be about other library services. Only one person polled had asked for directions!

Reaction to the service has been very positive amongst the users polled. Users consistently reported that their interactions with the librarians at the mobile desk helped them to locate new sources and taught them new research strategies. As well as helping with specific research projects, the service increased the patrons' use of other library services. Most students

reported that their experience with *Ask Us HERE!* resulted in a plan to use the library's electronic resources or to visit the library in person. Another identified benefit of the service was that patrons received referrals to subject specialists for additional help.


Most patrons reported that they approached the *Ask Us HERE!* desk after seeing it in the hallways on previous occasions. The lesson here? Although the service may seem slow initially, statistics have indicated that *Ask Us HERE!* averages 2.5 questions per hour, students do notice the desk and are more likely to approach you the second time they see you.

The profile of patrons using the mobile service was very interesting. The vast majority of users were third- or fourth-year undergraduate students between the ages of 20 and 25. They tended to be heavy users of the library and the library's electronic resources but were infrequent users of reference services. This finding suggests that the mobile model is successful in uniting librarians with patrons who would otherwise not receive reference assistance.

Conclusion

With very little investment of resources, *Ask Us HERE!* is successfully providing in-person reference and information services to students outside the library building. *Ask Us HERE!* is also an excellent marketing tool in the promotion of information literacy on campus. *SFU News*, the biweekly campus newspaper, ran a feature on *Ask Us HERE!* in

November 2003. And more recently, the service was highlighted in the President's annual report, which drew attention to the major achievements at SFU in 2003.

All in all, *Ask Us HERE!* has proven to be a satisfying venture for the library. Students who would not otherwise seek reference assistance are receiving help in person and are made aware of other useful library services. Because of this service, SFU's administration recognizes and even promotes the library's contribution to the academic mission as a centre for learning and research. 

Sandra Wong is a science liaison librarian at Simon Fraser University, and Anne O'Shea has recently completed her MLIS at the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia. The principal authors wish to thank Mark Bodnar, Gordon Coleman, Carla Graebner, Katherine Miller, Kim Minkus and Catherine Louie for their contributions.

Notes

- ¹ "Reference on the Road: A Roving Librarian in Loker Commons Brings Library Services to Students" (hcl.harvard.edu/news/stories/libinloker.html).
- ² Diane Luckow, "Help for the Google Generation," *SFU News* 28:6 (November 13, 2003). Online at www.sfu.ca/mediapr/sfu_news/archives_2003/sfunews11130306.htm.
- ³ "Information Literacy," *Simon Fraser University 2003: Unconventional Wisdom*. Online at www2.sfu.ca/report2003/Learning/unconventionalllearning-literacy.htm.