

**Replacing staff with students to monitor LibChat service: transition
process and lessons learned**

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**Replacing Staff with Students to Monitor LibChat Service:
Transition Process and Lessons Learned**

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Structured Abstract

Design/methodology/approach

This article reviews the existing literature on the topics of student assistants participating in library reference services and peer-to-peer engagement. It then details the first step of the transition process used for moving primary chat monitoring responsibility to library student assistants and away from staff and librarians as it existed previously.

Purpose

This article details the incorporation of student assistants into a newly implemented chat service. It details the approaches used for training students and developing the chat repertoire.

Findings

Incorporating student assistants into the chat rotation was beneficial to the libraries and to the students participating in the chat service. While librarians and staff enjoyed help in covering the hours, student assistants learned research skills on the job that would potentially assist them in completing their course assignments.

Originality/value

Utilizing student assistants in library chat services is becoming increasingly popular with budget cuts and the scheduling demands that continue to grow for librarians and library staff. This article provides context for incorporating students and shows the value that the students receive via their participation in a chat service.

Introduction

Integrating student assistants into virtual front-line reference services can bolster and support the work of librarians (Fruehan, & Hellyar, 2021; Lupien & Rourke, 2007). It is already a fairly common practice in academic libraries for student assistants to serve as the first line of help at a variety of service points, including circulation desks, reference desks, information desks, computer labs, and technology centers (Arnold-Garza & Tomlinson, 2017). Involving student assistants in reference services, such as chat, should not be understood as undermining or undervaluing professional librarians' labor and expertise. Rather, student assistants can answer inquiries that do not require a complex answer or reference consultation, and call upon help from a library staff member or librarian as the situation warrants. This is akin to the practices at reference desks and circulation desks in many academic libraries when a student calls upon additional help as needed (Barrett & Greenberg, 2018; Lux & Rich, 2016). The LibChat initiative presented in this article serves to demonstrate how student assistants can support reference services in the library while also allowing them to assist and engage their peers.

This article reviews the existing literature on the topics of student assistants participating in library reference services and the benefits of peer-to-peer engagement. It will follow with evidence from a program implemented at The University of Alabama Libraries which capitalized on the use of student assistants toward the development of an enhanced chat reference service. It will then detail the first step of a transition process for moving primary chat monitoring responsibility to library student assistants, highlight key insights, and report on lessons learned toward improving and expanding the role of student assistants in our chat service.

Literature Review

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3 Reference services in academic libraries are vital and continue to evolve based on new
4 technologies and changing user needs (Buss, 2016; Jameson, et al., 2019). The immutable nature
5 of reference services is that a user receives assistance with some type of research query and,
6 historically, this process takes place between a user and a professional librarian (Lux & Rich,
7 2016). However, various pressures including, but not limited to, librarians' increasing
8 workloads, decreasing budgets, and evolving professional expectations, have necessitated that
9 other persons - beyond highly skilled librarians – may need to assist in reference activities in
10 some contexts (Harrington, et al., 2021; Keyes & Dworak, 2017). This, in turn, gives rise to
11 concerns about the quality of these reference interactions (Barrett & Greenberg, 2018; Bennett &
12 Stout, 2021; Langan, 2021; Lux & Rich, 2016; Seeholzer, 2013).

26 ***Quality of student assistants' work***

28 Student assistants are defined in this article as college or university students who work in
29 the academic library on campus for pay while they complete their undergraduate degrees.
30 Quality, particularly as it relates to user experience, does not necessarily decline when students
31 perform tasks previously reserved for librarians or even professional library staff (Barrett &
32 Greenberg, 2018; Harrington, et al., 2021). Student assistants have a history of serving the
33 library in different ways. Their contributions might give confidence to the concept of having
34 students also work in reference services, which is core to the academic library service repertoire
35 (Seeholzer, 2013). Part of the concern about their quality of work may stem from student
36 assistants traditionally having been looked upon more as assisting with library tasks rather than
37 serving on the front lines of library services (Logan, 2012). But, if the perception of student
38 assistants were to evolve, it could shift the notion to one wherein student assistants could serve
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3 as the approachable “face of the library” for users, particularly for their peers (Brenza, et al.,
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5 2015; Harrington, et al., 2021; Jameson, et al., 2019).
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8 Perhaps not every student assistant working for the library would be selected to provide
9
10 reference services. When hiring student assistants, some libraries have instituted behavior-based
11
12 questions to more deeply evaluate those students who would have reference responsibilities
13
14 (Bennett & Stout, 2021). Another key may be to determine which students are best suited to
15
16 which tasks. In the Kent Library Spaces, for example, tasks were differentiated between those
17
18 that were appropriate to undergraduate students (serving as library tour guides, peer tutors, etc.),
19
20 versus those that were deemed more appropriate to graduate students (such as overseeing a
21
22 satellite reference service in a popular residence hall) (Seeholzer, 2013).
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26
27 Librarians are defined by their ethos of service, their willingness to collaborate, and their
28
29 ability to assist users with their information needs (Buss, 2016). These traits are not necessarily
30
31 limited to professional librarians. Fundamental to student assistants performing reference
32
33 services at a high level is their understanding of the quality standard, a commitment to said
34
35 standard, and their completion of training necessary to perform at that designated level (Barrett
36
37 & Greenberg, 2018; Bennett & Stout, 2021; Canuel, et al., 2016; Faix, 2014; Harrington, et al.,
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39 2021; Langan, 2012; Tang, 2020; Stanfield & Palmer, 2010). A review of training programs for
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41 student assistants who work closely with library users will illustrate the keys to success in
42
43 training students for reference duties.
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46 47 ***Reference training*** 48

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50 Training is the most essential aspect to ensure success when student assistants are
51
52 involved in a reference service (Barrett & Greenberg, 2018; Firouzeh, 2012; Harrington, et al.,
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54 2021). This training needs to begin upon hiring and remain continuous throughout the students’
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3 experience (Stanfield & Palmer, 2010). Anyone who has served in reference (desk or chat)
4
5 understands that one must also be prepared for both positive and negative interactions with users,
6
7 as both types are inevitable no matter the preparation and training (Harrington, et al., 2021).
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10 While there is variation in the frequency and intensity concerning incoming reference questions,
11
12 sometimes user queries can be answered rather quickly, but training for more in-depth reference
13
14 interviews is necessary because it aids in creating lifelong learners (Cottrell & Bell, 2015).
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17 Analysis of chat transcripts at the Humanities and Social Sciences Library at McGill
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19 University in Montreal, Canada, demonstrated that most interactions involve basic questions, or
20
21 known item searches (Canuel, et al., 2019). Answering directional questions (“where is the
22
23 bathroom?” or “where is the group study floor?") correctly is important to the notion of excellent
24
25 customer service, because those are the most frequently asked questions in reference, but training
26
27 also needs to have a strong reference and research skills component to address research questions
28
29 equally as well (Barrett & Greenberg, 2018). Proper training and education of student assistants
30
31 give librarians a chance to prove that information literacy instruction works and demonstrate
32
33 why building these skills remain important (Stanfield & Palmer, 2010). The tiered model of
34
35 reference services was developed from this model, wherein student assistants can answer
36
37 directional questions and queries that do not involve extensive reference (Faix, 2014). Setting up
38
39 this type of “students as reference partners” model creates an environment wherein student
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41 assistants, library staff, and librarians might all contribute to reference services (Gamble, et al.,
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43 2020).
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49 One of the most effective training methods is “shadowing,” wherein the student assistant
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51 closely watches and mirrors a seasoned librarian on reference services. Subsequently, that
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53 librarian can serve as a back-up or be “on call” if the student needs assistance when they initiate
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3 their own chat operating endeavor (Faix, 2014). Online training, in the form of modules, can also
4
5 be effective in preparing student assistants to work in reference services, as it might prepare them
6
7 for the deluge of information they will learn during their in-person training (Mitchell & Soini,
8
9 2014). To ensure that student assistants had tangible materials to refer back to, Missouri State
10
11 University training included checklists, meant to serve as “quick help” guides, in addition to
12
13 phone etiquette charts, chat interface instructions, and paths to knowing when to contact a
14
15 librarian back-up (Bennett & Stout, 2021). Another way for student workers to actively engage
16
17 with their training process is to have them develop their learning outcomes, competencies, and
18
19 standards to address service point needs as was affected at the University of California, Berkeley
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21 (Harrington, et al., 2021).
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25 26 ***Benefits to student assistants*** 27

28
29 There are benefits to the student assistants in acquiring reference training. Students who
30
31 are treated like professionals and who are given elevated tasks may develop an interest in the
32
33 work, giving the job a value above and beyond the paycheck (Cottrell & Bell, 2015). Cultivating
34
35 this work ethic while still at the undergraduate level would undoubtedly be useful to them as they
36
37 move into their careers. Also, entrusting students with meaningful library service work means
38
39 that student assistants may become invested in their job activities and even stay for multiple
40
41 years of their college experience - which is also advantageous to the library from a training
42
43 perspective (Cottrell & Bell, 2015; Logan, 2012). Some student assistants at the University of
44
45 British Columbia who served in reference and peer tutoring roles took steps in forming their
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47 professional identities through participating in the service on their way to becoming librarians or
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49 other types of professional service providers (O’Brien, et al., 2014).
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There are some academic benefits for students working reference duties as well, as a student assistant who successfully conducts a library catalog search for a library user has also de facto enhanced their own ability to find materials to prepare their research papers, etc. (Peach, et al., 2016). Effectively, students who serve in this way learn library skills on the job (Stanfield & Palmer, 2010). Higher student academic performance, higher student retention rates, and higher graduation rates are all correlated to student employment (Brenza, et al., 2015).

Participating in reference services allows student workers to identify and mediate challenges that can occur in professional settings, such as learning when to use hard versus soft skills (O'Brien, et al., 2014). Also, the accountability inherent in reference activities requires schedule adherence and the development of effective time management practices on the part of the student assistants. This is a requisite competency for their undergraduate experience and essential to success in almost any post-college job arena (Tang, 2020). Collegiality is another skill set helpful in the professional arena, and it can be acquired through peer-to-peer engagement within the reference services context.

Peer-to-peer

Peer dynamics are powerful in collegiate contexts (Bodemer, 2014). Student assistants can influence the first impressions of a space by serving as unofficial ambassadors to the library for their peers (Brenza, et al., 2015). Peer support has also been shown to enhance the transfer of a wide range of academic and job skills, including but not limited to, information, digital, and academic literacy (Ryder, et al., 2017). Some studies have confirmed the phenomenon that, when given a choice, some students would rather approach a peer at a reference desk than a person whom they readily identify as a library professional (Bennett & Stout, 2021). Some student library users report that it is easier to approach a peer than someone with an advanced degree in

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2
3 the field - whether that is a library degree or otherwise (Peach, et al., 2016). The underlying
4
5 concept of this peer-to-peer interaction is that the differential between the helper and the helped
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7 is reduced and it creates the perception of a level learning field (Bodemer, 2014). In other words,
8
9 an intimidating power structure is removed in these peer-to-peer interactions (Ryder, et al.,
10
11 2017).
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15 The peer-to-peer model of library reference services complements lived experience to
16
17 enhance cognitive benefits (Bodemer, 2014). Often, student assistants enjoy assisting fellow
18
19 students and it can even be a way for them to make acquaintances and get to know current or
20
21 future classmates (Peach, et al., 2016). For example, a student assistant may be better able to
22
23 answer a question from their classmate than a professional might, having the same assignment
24
25 and more readily understanding the parameters (Brenza, et al., 2015). Academic libraries stand to
26
27 lose a valuable opportunity to assist users by not harnessing peer learning dynamics to enhance
28
29 student learning and success (Bodemer, 2014).
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33 Library users approach a desk or initiate a chat because they need assistance with a
34
35 request. Visual cues cannot always be relied upon to determine if the person they approach at the
36
37 desk is a librarian, a library staff member, or a student assistant. They certainly would not know
38
39 anything about the person's status when communicating with them through chat unless the
40
41 person operating chat self-discloses their status. It is important to highlight that having
42
43 undergraduates serving at service points (virtual or in-person) does not impact user willingness
44
45 to ask for help whether they are faculty members, community users, or graduate students
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47 (Arnold-Forbes & Keeran, 2020; Garza & Tomlinson, 2017). Any concern regarding the quality
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49 of the response should be mitigated by the fact that student assistants are trained to respond to
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51 questions that are appropriate for them to address and are instructed to call for assistance or refer
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3 a question to a librarian when the need is beyond their capacity to fully answer (Alenzuela &
4 Kamilova, 2018). Some questions require follow-up from librarians with subject expertise. In
5
6 those cases, the librarian covering chat would do the same thing a student assistant would do in
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8 that they would notify the patron that the appropriate liaison will be in contact shortly to address
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10 their question (Fruehan & Hellyar, 2021).
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14 **Background**

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17 The University of Alabama (UA) Libraries in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA, are comprised
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19 of five campus branches and support a student community of over 38,000 undergraduates (as of
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21 2017, 2018, and 2019). At the time of the writing of this article, one branch library, the Angelo
22
23 Bruno Business Library, was closed for renovations. The University of Alabama has achieved
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25 R1 status, “very high research activity,” in the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher
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27 Education. UA is a four-year, doctoral-granting university and offers more than 70
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29 undergraduate programs in 12 colleges and schools. Before the pandemic, the UA Libraries did
30
31 not offer a live chat service. The service was set up in March 2020, at the start of the campus
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33 closure related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Online chat services are now a significant aspect of
34
35 the University Libraries’ reference services and are hosted through Springshare’s LibChat
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37 platform.
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42 At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic-related shutdown, The University of Alabama
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44 Libraries realized that access to the information desks (or circulation desks, depending upon the
45
46 specific branch library’s nomenclature) would be inaccessible to students. At that time, the
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48 expectation was that the impending COVID-19-related closure would only last a week or two
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50 beyond the campus-wide spring break which was scheduled from March 16 through March 20,
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52 2020. As a hedge against an extended closure, however, the Dean of Libraries recommended that
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3 the University Libraries set up a live chat. The closure lasted until the reopening of the
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5 University Libraries on July 6, 2020.
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8 In retrospect, it was unusual that the University Libraries were not already making use of
9
10 LibChat. It was available as part of the Springshare platform which contained several other
11
12 applications in use within the Libraries. A recent publication details The University of Alabama
13
14 Libraries' launch of the live chat service in response to the COVID-19 closures (Decker &
15
16 Chapman, 2021). The present article, however, will move forward from that initial experience to
17
18 focus on the subsequent decision to incorporate student assistants into the regular chat service
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20 rotation beginning in August 2021.
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23 24 **Student Chat Program**

25 26 *Initiative*

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28 After adding LibChat as a service during the COVID-19 shutdown, there was a need to
29
30 design ways to make the service stronger and more sustainable. With chat, there now existed a
31
32 method to address the increased workload for librarians and staff. During the work-from-home
33
34 phase of the pandemic, staff was tasked with covering chat shifts during the day, and librarians
35
36 were tasked with covering the service during the evening and on weekends. The service had now
37
38 become a fixture of the University Libraries' service repertoire (and is likely to continue
39
40 indefinitely). As such, the priority shifted to seeking solutions for the long-term success of this
41
42 service. As workloads for librarian liaisons continue to increase in other areas such as instruction
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44 and research consultations (especially virtual), finding ways to distribute other tasks was worth
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46 considering. As staff have returned to pre-pandemic job duties, more flexibility with their
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48 schedules was required as well.
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3 Student assistants were essential to The University of Alabama Libraries' operations
4 during the pandemic re-opening phase. They demonstrated the capacity to work beyond what
5 they had been asked to do for the libraries in the past and they were able to adapt to a rapidly
6 changing environment. They played a leading role in managing a new reservation system which
7 was an integral part of the Libraries' method for controlling building capacity following CDC
8 guidelines. Student assistants also enforced COVID-19 protocols, which often required them to
9 manage confrontations with patrons. Student assistants also kept workspaces sanitary by wiping
10 down frequently-touched surfaces with paper towels and anti-viral solutions discharged by spray
11 bottles. In addition to these new protocols, they also had to perform the functions that library
12 student assistants routinely perform. Through this process, they demonstrated a great deal of
13 flexibility, professionalism, and dependability. As The University of Alabama Libraries
14 transitioned back to more normal operations, the adaptability of our student assistants gave us
15 confidence in attempting this LibChat initiative.
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33 As noted in the research, the persons staffing the service points tend to function as the
34 faces of the library (Brenza, Kowalsky, & Brush, 2015). What better "face" is there than student
35 assistants who have grown up in a largely digital world? While remaining cognizant that not
36 every student assistant might be equally suited to this type of responsibility, the UA Libraries
37 selected five students who each came highly recommended by their area supervisors from
38 various departments within Gorgas Library or the branch Libraries. The request was made for
39 dependable students who could work independently and have excellent customer service
40 instincts.
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51 While training remains foremost in influencing success, some degree of communication
52 skills coupled with the capacity to manage positive and negative interactions was also important
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3 (Stanfield & Palmer, 2010). The ultimate hope for the program was that student assistants might
4 ultimately provide equal service quality to users as do library staff and librarians. Since many
5 questions that come in through chat are from students, and the research indicates that peer
6 learning can be a very effective way to meet user needs because students tend to be comfortable
7 with each other, they also might better understand the digital-based communication style (Ryder,
8 Russell, Burton, et. al, 2017).

17 ***Training and Orientation***

19 In addition to a formal training session before each student's first LibChat shift, student
20 assistants were also paired with established staff members who were experienced in operating
21 the service. During the first week of training, student assistants shadowed staff members and
22 reviewed previous chat session transcripts to get an understanding of how the chat service works
23 (Faix, 2014). This pairing also allowed for flexibility should the student worker have a conflict
24 or need to miss a shift for any reason.

33 The formal training was accomplished both in person and in a group setting. Since the
34 goal was for the student assistants operating chat to function like professionals, that is how they
35 were treated, per the guidelines in the research (Cottrell & Bell, 2015). In the group training
36 session, students received an orientation to the LibChat interface via a live demo with sample
37 questions and responses. This live demo was led by two experienced librarians who thoroughly
38 covered the basics of LibChat, and key functionality, and shared their personal experiences.
39 From there, the focus shifted to tips and best practices which were anticipated to help the student
40 assistants become comfortable operating chat. As an example, the sharing of proxy links, as
41 opposed to permanent links, can cause frustration for patrons, so the proper method for sharing
42 links in chat was addressed at the outset of the student assistants' training as a helpful tip. There
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3 are also times when it is more appropriate to create a ticket or referral to a librarian specialist so
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5 methods for determining when to attempt an answer and when to refer it to someone else were
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7 discussed, too. Having worked at physical service points, student assistants already understood
8
9 this concept, but it was important to discuss the principle within the chat space as well.
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12 The University of Alabama Libraries' existing FAQ page contains answers to questions
13
14 commonly asked in chat, so student assistants were given the link to this regularly updated
15
16 webpage. In addition, to ensure that student assistants had something to refer to post-training,
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18 librarians created a LibGuide for LibChat which contained information such as chat schedules,
19
20 best practices, and the like, to serve as a helpful resource for all LibChat users (Bennett & Stout,
21
22 2021). Interlibrary loan (ILL) and document delivery (DD) information deserved a particular
23
24 highlight during training as those services are frequently included as part of the response to chat
25
26 inquiries. Another important point was the reminder that chat covers all UA Libraries areas, and
27
28 not one branch or discipline. This necessitates clarifying what a patron is referring to when
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30 asking about hours, study rooms, resources, etc., as the answer can vary depending upon
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32 location.
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37 Etiquette is a very important aspect covered during chat training and orientation. Included
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39 under the aegis of etiquette are behaviors such as timeliness of reply, responses of reasonable
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41 length that use courteous language, and the employment of a greeting and a salutation. Etiquette
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43 must work both ways as The University of Alabama Libraries do not condone disrespectful or
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45 inappropriate patron responses. Student assistants were told that if they encounter such behavior
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47 from a patron, they should end the conversation and report the interaction to a supervisor. While
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49 it is difficult to be precise in describing "inappropriate," this principle applies when language is
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51 crass, threatening, clearly a prank question, etc.
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Scheduling

The objective during week 1 of the semester was to simply confirm the students' schedules and identify an ideal time to get them together for their group training. The training was then conducted during week 2. Details of those training sessions are outlined in the previous section. As mentioned, the semester began with a full schedule that did not yet include students. Communication was particularly critical at this time because the transition to including the student assistants in the chat lineup was gradual and resulted in an evolving (and potentially confusing) schedule for everyone for a few weeks. The emphasis for week 3 was to build on the training with a full week of shadowing between student assistants and experienced chat operators (Faix, 2014).

During the shadowing exercise, the student assistant was directed to observe, explore the interface, and ask questions should any arise. It is important to note once again that these were student assistants who were already comfortable fielding questions about the library from working at various physical service points; they simply had to acclimate to operating the LibChat interface. By week 4, LibChat was staffed with a full complement of student assistants into the daytime schedule and an expectation that the student assistants would jump in and answer questions although they had a staff member logged in to serve as "back up." At the time of the writing of this article, student assistants are not scheduled for evenings or weekends. Those shifts are currently monitored by librarians, and the hope is that with the success of the program utilizing student assistants during the day, they will be able to expand covering those shifts in the future, too.

It is critically important that student assistants be responsible and proactive in communicating any scheduling conflicts (Tang, 2020). Over time, as student assistants transition

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3 to more responsibility for covering chat service, it is imperative that they can be depended upon
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5 by communicating any scheduling issues promptly. Overall, the student assistants did an
6
7 excellent job of this. Out of 150 shifts, there are only 3 recorded instances in which students
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9 communicated an inability to cover a shift. In each case, the student assistants communicated
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11 enough ahead of time that it allowed for alternative arrangements to be made. This level of
12
13 dependability is critical to success now and in the future.
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16 17 *Performance*

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19 This initiative provided the opportunity for student assistants to contribute meaningfully
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21 to the Libraries reference portfolio (Brenza, et al., 2015; Harrington, et al., 2021). By serving as
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23 operators of LibChat, they had experiences that enabled them to learn more about the research
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25 lifecycle, enhance interpersonal skills, and problem solve. These skills can benefit them now and
26
27 can be documented on their resumes to benefit them in the future. As it pertains to The
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29 University of Alabama Libraries, the student assistants are saving 20 hours per week of staff time
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31 by providing excellent service in LibChat. This is not to imply that reference services are an
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33 insignificant part of a librarian's role, but rather an acknowledgment of an effective way that
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35 student assistants can assist in supporting a part of the library's reference service. If this chat
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37 program continues to be successful, students might eventually be able to cover the times
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39 librarians are committed to operating the service (evenings and weekends). This is an important
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41 point as the realities of budgets require that libraries identify ways to become leaner and operate
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43 services and programs with fewer resources (Barrett & Greenberg, 2018). Success in this
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45 initiative also potentially frees up valuable time for both staff and librarians to commit to any
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47 number of other important duties and tasks.
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3 During the semester, 428 total transactions were answered in LibChat. The total number
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5 of transactions answered by students was 71. Student response times, answers quality, and
6
7 referrals' understanding were all performed at effective levels.
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10 Figure 1

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12 Total Chats 428 - Aug 1 - Dec 31
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19 Figure 2

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21 10 am - 4 pm busiest time. That is when we have our student assistants working.
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26 Figure 3

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28 The busiest days are Monday-Thursday. That is also when we have our student assistants
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30 working.
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35 Figure 4

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37 71 total chats answered by students
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42 Figure 5

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44 The busiest days for student assistants were Monday and Friday
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49 Figure 6

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51 Busiest times for student assistants.
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Findings and Discussion

Initial analysis indicates that the student assistants are engaged and participating actively when covering their respective LibChat shifts. The highest demand for the service was 10 am-4 pm, Monday through Thursday. This coincides with the times designated to have students participate in the chat service, so we are confident that they are scheduled at the appropriate times.

Feedback from student assistants during the fall semester occurred via check-in-style emails and informal, in-person discussions. Student assistants indicated they felt properly trained, supported, and comfortable operating LibChat. As we concluded the first year of student assistants participating in chat, we polled them to assess how this experience has impacted them. We also endeavored to understand the advantages, from their perspective, of student involvement in the chat initiative and their thoughts for continuous improvement.

Each student provided positive feedback. One reflected on being exposed to new questions from patrons by stating, “this experience was beneficial because it gave me a little more insight into the library as it relates to ILL, which materials are available for borrowing, and the process a patron needs to go through to donate materials to the library.” Multiple students indicated that the experience benefited them by introducing them to research problems that users have and helped with their development of valuable customer service skills.

The students also identified a couple of advantages they brought to the LibChat service. They felt very well positioned to answer questions from fellow students. Since many of the student assistants have taken the same classes as each other, they indicated that they do indeed have a valuable perspective in terms of understanding exactly what our users need for a given

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2
3 assignment and what they are requesting (Peach, et al., 2016). The student assistants were also
4
5 keenly aware of their participation's positive impact on full-time staff and librarians. One student
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7 noted, “we take the pressure off the regular staff and librarians who are still working on their
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9 normal day-to-day tasks. When we are logged into LibChat, we are not at our respective desks
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11 and thus we are not in the position to be distracted or pulled away from other tasks.” Another
12
13 student added that their participation, “eases staff workload and teaches student assistants new
14
15 skills.” As for the future, student assistants were unanimous in their recommendation to allow
16
17 student assistants to continue participation in the LibChat service moving forward.
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22 As we enter a new normal era with COVID-19, we are observing consistent patterns of
23
24 demand for the chat service that might help inform staffing decisions in general and allocate
25
26 student assistants more broadly going forward. For example, perhaps as our numbers indicate,
27
28 we will be able to reduce the staff and librarians’ participation in the chat service on the
29
30 weekends as there is very little demand. Furthermore, expanding student coverage to include
31
32 weeknights is also a possibility if students continue to perform positively as demonstrated thus
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34 far. Additionally, students may be able to completely cover daytime hours Monday through
35
36 Friday which would allow staff to pivot back to pre-COVID-19 job duties without the added
37
38 responsibility of managing chat shifts. Continuing to identify good students, providing them with
39
40 adequate training, and seeking regular feedback from them are all activities that will continue
41
42 moving forward. The next step will be increasing the pool of student assistants and scheduling
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44 some shifts that are covered exclusively by students. If successful, this will lend itself to the
45
46 possibility of eventually having the service covered primarily by students.
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52 Perhaps the most significant lesson learned is the benefit of assigning this type of work to
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54 student assistants that are familiar with the library system, can easily find the answers to
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3 common questions, and know the community we serve. The students included in the first
4 iteration of this project were comfortable answering questions, so that aspect was not an issue.
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6 Additionally, this group of student assistants appeared to be comfortable communicating in a
7
8 virtual space. Once they were familiar with the functionality of the interface, they acclimated
9
10 very quickly and have been consistent and effective in responding to chat questions. Related to
11
12 this competence was their notable dependability. They took the opportunity to serve in The
13
14 University of Alabama Libraries reference services seriously and have conducted themselves in a
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16 very professional manner. Hiring vetted student assistants has been the key to the efficacy of this
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18 initiative. Perhaps that may be the most important lesson learned.
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23 24 **Future Directions**

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26 Although the experience of incorporating student assistants into the chat rotation for Fall
27
28 semester 2021 was successful, a few questions remain for the future. The first one pertains to
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30 scheduling. The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the attendance of student workers
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32 across the UA Libraries. Isolation and quarantine guidelines made the schedule difficult to
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34 uphold after it had been set. This difficulty extended well beyond the student assistants
35
36 scheduled for chat, as library staff and librarians were affected, as well. Nevertheless, even in a
37
38 post-COVID-19 environment, chat staffing must continue to be evaluated based on the user
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40 population and service usage patterns which vary from semester to semester (Barrett &
41
42 Greenberg, 2018). Also, how might well-trained and confident student assistants be able to
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44 relieve librarians during evening and weekends? The hope is that librarians might be able to
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46 transition into serving more in a backup role in forthcoming iterations of the service instead of
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48 serving designated hours in the chat service (Bennett & Stout, 2021).
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3 Assessment is critical to understanding and improving any library service, and chat
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5 reference is no exception. One aspect to measure is the impact of the peer-to-peer portion of chat
6
7 on the student users served (Mitchell & Soini, 2014). This can be accomplished in several ways,
8
9 but perhaps the most obvious is the verbatim evaluation of transcripts to better ascertain impact,
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11 while acknowledging that additional methodologies need to be employed to determine whether
12
13 peer-to-peer learning took place (Bodemer, 2014). Also, an assessment of training will be critical
14
15 to understanding where we might improve and where students are continuing to struggle. Over
16
17 time, this activity should result in a formalized training repertoire that can be repeated every
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19 semester when new student assistants are tapped to serve in chat. Training is expected to evolve,
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21 and this will also aid in keeping the training fresh and relevant instead of letting it stagnate
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26 (Harrington, et al., 2021).
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29 User experience is also another important aspect of the assessment. While surveys can
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31 become tedious for those asked to participate, they can serve as effective ways of collecting data
32
33 related to the individual user's chat experience. Qualitative data collected from brief surveys
34
35 (approximately 5 questions) would likely assist in understanding the efficacy of the peer-to-peer
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37 chat program (Faix, 2014). Surveys may also allow for a deeper examination into any concerns
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39 about uneven service that users may express (Lux & Rich, 2016). Student assistants serving in
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41 chat may engage differently than professional librarians might, but this does not mean that any
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43 given interaction was insufficient (van Beynen & Swenson, 2016).
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47 Well-trained student assistants are capable of augmenting full-time library employees as
48
49 it pertains to covering chat services. That is not to suggest that students should replace librarians
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51 or library staff; rather, libraries faced with limited full-time personnel or demand beyond what
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53 librarians and staff can cover can be well-served by incorporating student assistants into chat to
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3 bolster their efforts. Student assistants can be hired and trained to serve in chat much as they are
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5 hired and trained to serve on the front-line at other library service points. If this initiative is
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7 replicated at other libraries, it potentially gives them the potential to meet a service demand that
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9 is likely to grow. As many libraries face budget challenges and personnel cuts, it might be
10
11 important to consider leveraging student workers in creative ways to include chat. The future
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13 likely includes more demand for virtual services and continued pressure on limited resources. As
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15 such, the future might include consideration for initiatives that incorporate the talent and
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17 potential of student assistants.
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21 **Conclusion**

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23 In an environment with ever-increasing fiscal pressure, budget cuts, and increased
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25 demand for quality information services we must continue to find innovative ways to meet the
26
27 needs of our users. Users may expect more virtual offerings in a continuing or post-COVID-19
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29 environment. Online reference consultations appear to be the option of choice for interactions
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31 that were once typically conducted in person. Academic libraries may then be expected to
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33 provide more virtual services while maintaining all of the other in-person services and functions
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35 of a traditional academic library. Staff hours are finite, so a reasonable evolution is to incorporate
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37 highly trained student workers into services they can adequately meet. This project is one such
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39 example.
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Figure 1

Total Chats 428 - Aug 1 - Dec 31



Figure 2

10am - 4pm busiest time. That is when we have our student assistants working.



Figure 3

Busiest days are Monday-Thursday. That is also when we have our student assistants working.

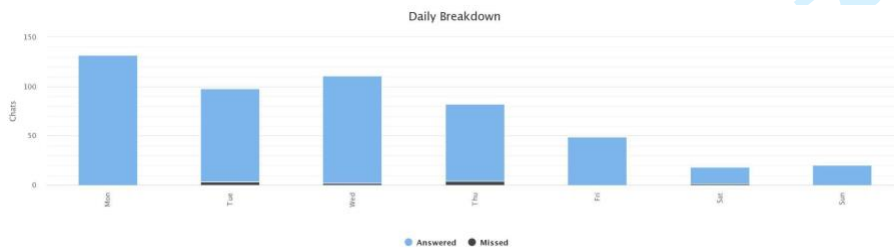


Figure 4

71 total chats answered by students



Figure 5

Busiest days for student assistants were Monday and Friday



Figure 6

Busiest times for student assistants.

