Research Help Now!

Its evolution from a collaboration of Michigan community colleges to a nationwide consortium of academic libraries offering virtual research assistance

Stephanie DeLano Davis, Jackson College, Michigan
Sandra McCarthy and Maureen Perault, Washtenaw Community College, Michigan

July 2014
Introduction

While demand for research assistance at the reference desk still exists, today’s students want reference service when they need it. Tech savvy students expect customized attention and want services to be available online and in person. A slow shift has been occurring over the last thirty years in academic reference service and at most institutions student-librarian interaction is not limited to the physical reference desk anymore, “Virtual reference is a reference service initiated electronically, often in real time, where patrons employ computers or other internet technology to communicate with reference staff, without being physically present.” 1. In Michigan, a group of community college librarians coalesced in 2004 to form Research Help Now, a Michigan Virtual Reference Service Collaborative, to serve the needs of distant learners. By collaborating, these community colleges saved money and shared personnel to offer virtual service. During its ten year history, Research Help Now! has developed into a robust collaboration among twelve institutions, including community colleges, universities, and private colleges, working together to meet the reference needs of students virtually.

Background

Offering live virtual reference to community college students had been a topic of discussion since 2000 within the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA), a group of twenty-eight publically funded community colleges, serving the needs of community college students. (2). The emergence of online learning prompted MCCA to form the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative (MCCVLC), “The Michigan Community College Association created the MCCVLC in cooperation with Michigan’s community colleges as a vehicle to provide access to more courses and programs for students.” (3)

In addition to offering online classes, MCCVLC wanted to offer support services to online students such as counseling, advising, tutoring and library services. The impetus to offer virtual reference to distance learning students followed a 2000 survey of Michigan community colleges.(4) The survey identified library services to distance learners as a necessity, including access to full-text research databases, remote user authentication to
research databases, InterLibrary Loan services, document delivery and reserves, and the development of virtual assistance.

Two years later, “….in September 2002, the Michigan Community College Association received notification from the U.S. Department of Education that a proposal to the Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) had been accepted for funding. The grant period was October 1, 2002 through September 30, 2005.” (5) The FIPSE Grant funded the first year of virtual reference service and only covered the costs of the virtual reference software.

The MCCVLC established a library advisory committee to coordinate the “off campus access to library services” (6) portion of the FIPSE Grant. Invitation letters were sent to all community college libraries describing the grant and possible participation in virtual reference. Interested libraries attended a meeting held at Washtenaw Community College that included a speaker from the Library of Congress (7). Of the twenty-eight Michigan community colleges, these seventeen agreed to participate in offering virtual reference to their students by creating a virtual reference service collaborative with the financial backing of the FIPSE grant: Glen Oaks, Gogebic, Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo Valley, Kellogg, Kirtland, Lansing, Macomb, Mid-Michigan, Mott, Muskegon, North Central Michigan, Northwestern Michigan, Oakland, St. Clair, Washtenaw and Wayne County.

Collaborative Organization

The decision to move forward with creating a virtual reference collaborative required establishing an organizational structure see figure 1. INSERT IMAGE

In 2003, the RFI (Request for Information) Committee was created to select the virtual reference software. They sent solicitations to potential vendors, reviewed software demonstrations, checked references, and recommended a potential vendor to the Virtual Reference Advisory Group. The Collaborative received bids from three vendors: Tutor.com, QuestionPoint, and Docutek. Selection was based on multiple criteria, including cost, technical capability of the software, training support, administrative functionality, and vendor reputation (8). The committee was focused on finding a product that offered ease of use for both librarian and user, provided
high-quality reliable service and delivered a robust high-tech experience. Based on product reviews and user experiences (9), Tutor.com was selected as the virtual reference software for the collaborative.

**Developing Policies**

Once the software was selected, policies needed to be created ensuring libraries followed standard procedures for answering online questions. The Service Policies Sub-Committee was established to perform operational functions, create policies, and formulate guidelines for answering reference questions. In addition, the Committee updates the Manual of Policies and Procedures document. A representative from each institution, also known as manager, is accountable for keeping the service functioning at the local library and apprising virtual reference librarians with any new developments. The managers create the policy page for their library with pertinent information on resources and services specific to their library. The policy page is a primary instrument used by virtual librarians to assist users from other institutions.

The number of Research Help Now virtual reference librarians varies according to institutional size. Member libraries agreed to provide a base minimum of three hours of staffing for virtual reference per library. Libraries select specific hours to monitor the virtual reference desk and submit their request to the collaborative scheduler. The Collaborative requires all participating virtual reference librarians have experience working at the reference desk and training on QuestionPoint software.

**Training Librarians**

Training librarians to transfer their reference skills to the online environment was crucial from the very beginning of the collaborative. The Training Committee developed the Research Help Now Training Manual, and three quality assurance documents including VR Competencies for Virtual Reference librarians, VR Research Help Now Best Practices Checklist, and VR Behaviors Checklist, available on the Research Help Now intranet. At the Collaborative Annual Meeting, virtual librarians gather to discuss relevant issues and new developments. Early training efforts underscored the importance of the collaborative nature of Research Help Now with everyone working together to ensure a great online experience for the patron.
With all the organizational elements in place, the software selected, and training completed, the collaborative implemented its vision and started offering virtual reference service to students at Michigan community colleges. The early years were marked by successes and challenges as librarians developed new skills for virtual reference. The commitment to high quality reference service guided the collaborative in their mission.

Launching the new service required marketing virtual reference to students and faculty. The Marketing Sub-Committee created a website for participating libraries. They also created marketing tools such as print ready bookmarks, posters and table tents promoting the chat service, and press releases. The collaborative name Research Help Now! was selected by the Advisory Group.

Grant Concludes

Following the end-of-year one and the conclusion of the grant, five institutions withdrew from the collaborative, determining they could not afford the cost. Three new community colleges, however, joined the group. Beginning with the second year of the chat service, the cost for the virtual reference software was shared among the remaining twelve community college libraries. The start of year two saw the addition of a non-community college participant: the Library of Michigan. While their population of users differed from the core community college members, the Library of Michigan understood in the value of reaching their users remotely.

When the Library of Michigan joined, they agreed to pay for a separate queue to handle the public library questions. From the beginning, Kellogg Community College (KCC) acted as the fiscal agent for the collaborative.

In 2007, The Michigan Library Consortium, now the Midwest Collaborative for Library Services (MCLS) was selected as fiscal agent. They continue to oversee the contract negotiation, invoicing, and assist with other administrative functions. Under the direction of MCLS, the Collaborative moved to a four tier funding formula for cost. The model is based on full time equivalent (FTE) for each participating library. Member libraries with higher enrollment pay more for the service.
Growth of Collaborative

The next major change occurred when two major Michigan universities joined the collaborative. This meant virtual reference librarians would now serve undergraduate and graduate students. Branching beyond community colleges revitalized the collaborative and extended its reach and usage. The Library of Michigan encountered state budget cuts and did not renew their contract with Research Help Now. In 2007, Research Help Now! migrated to OCLC QuestionPoint virtual reference software. QuestionPoint offered more, including co-browsing and 24/7 chat service, and other options such as email, chat widget, and texting with partnership vendors.

Two private institutions joined in 2012 further diversifying the membership, which, as of early 2014, includes nine community colleges, two large public universities and two smaller private colleges. Adding more institutions offers many advantages, including reduced cost and shared responsibilities.

Reference & Service Model

From the beginning, the collaborative has sought to maintain high standards of reference interaction, seeking to make the experience of virtual reference tantamount to the experience at the reference desk. Offering an alternative reference service and maintaining a high quality instructional experience for students is the intrinsic value of Research Help Now. This is well articulated in the collaborative vision statement, “Research Help Now will be a growing, indispensable service that enhances the ability of our collaborative libraries to exceed students’ academic research needs by providing the best instructive user experience possible.” (16)

This collaboration would bring quality control and assurance in reference interactions to the forefront. In addition to the collaborative efforts at quality control, the OCLC Questionpoint service includes a quality assurance team, offering another layer of transcript review and evaluation. Managers have access to the patrons’ transcripts to review for quality assurance.

Reviewing these transcripts serves as one of the best ways for ensuring quality service and instructing librarians on virtual reference. As a demonstration of its commitment to high quality service, the collaborative
instituted a Best Transcript award in 2006, given at the Annual Meeting, to honor three librarians demonstrating
the best service in the Research Help Now! Collaborative. The award motivates librarians and also serves to
highlight the Collaborative’s focus on high quality reference instruction.

24/7 Academic Cooperative

Initially, the Collaborative offered reference service during limited hours. Eventually, participating libraries
recognized the value and need to offer assistance 24/7. By 2009, Research Help Now! Collaborative decided to
participate in the QuestionPoint 24/7 Academic Cooperative. The Academic Cooperative comprises nearly 400
academic libraries internationally who currently use OCLC QuestionPoint providing around-the-clock virtual
assistance. The cost for participation in the 24/7 Academic Cooperative is split among the libraries. By joining
the Academic Cooperative, a library is also required to contribute hours to staffing the 24/7 Academic queue
based on FTE or population served. Research Help Now! Collaborative contributes thirty-five hours a week of
Cooperate coverage concurrent with hours of coverage monitoring the Michigan Academic queue. The 24/7
Academic Cooperative also follows a quality control process. The OCLC Quality Team reviews submitted and
random transcripts for quality review, and provides feedback. What started as a response to the emerging
online education environment, Research Help Now today stands as a model of success. This self-funded,
volunteer based collaborative allows students across the state of Michigan to receive the research help they
need when they need it.

Conclusion

Top ten trends in academic libraries for 2012 included convenient access to all information seeking behaviors
and expectations of users. (19) The increase in technological capabilities to resources, whether human, print or
electronic and ease of access to these resources are an important trend for the future of libraries. This includes
virtual assistance through chat, Iming, or emailing for instantaneous research help. Through its ten years of
existence, Research Help Now! has endeavored to provide convenient access to high quality research assistance
answering an average of 18,275 questions annually. The Collaborative will continue to evolve as new
technologies emerge and membership continues to prosper over the next ten years.

Notes


6. “FIPSE Kick-off Meeting for Online Library Resources” held May 20, 2003 at Washtenaw Community College, Ann Arbor, Michigan.


