Fish, Not Fishing Lessons: A Pragmatic Reprioritization of Reference Services

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abstract: Reference services in academic libraries often focus on user education and giving students the skills to perform their own searches. This article describes a new Research Concierge Service established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic by Ozarks Technical Community College (OTC) in southwest Missouri. The service entails library staff curating a small number of sources in response to a student's research request. In many cases, the librarians' guidance has led to sustained interactions with students, refining their questions and helping them to focus their research interests. The Research Concierge Service has become so popular that the high level of individual contact it requires may eventually exceed the capacity of OTC's limited staff. OTC librarians believe, however, that such personal interactions are more valuable than any of their current opportunities for group tutorials or library instruction.

Introduction

Reference services in academic libraries traditionally tend to prioritize user education and empowering students to conduct their own searches. Much criticism has been levied against librarians taking the role of "information guru,"[1] and many educators advocate that academic librarians support students' abilities to answer their own inquiries, rather than find the answers for them.[2]

Ozarks Technical Community College (OTC) is an open-admission institution in southwest Missouri. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the college already had robust online course offerings and extensive library electronic resources and virtual services, such as chat reference. As the pandemic dragged on, however, OTC experienced unprecedented demand for online courses. Fully 45 percent of students in the fall 2020

semester registered for this virtual format, while enrollment in seated courses at the main campus in Springfield, Missouri, dropped by 20 percent. This shift continued into the spring 2021 semester. Except for several weeks early in the pandemic (mid-March through mid-May 2020), all of OTC's campuses and centers remained open in person. The college provided for remote work, however, for employees with high-risk health concerns, insurmountable caregiving responsibilities, or both.

With many classes shifted entirely online for the fall 2020 semester, OTC's Sam and June Hamra Family Library experienced an immediate decrease in walk-in reference traffic. The library also had a surplus of staff time for those working remotely, who had hours freed from physical tasks, such as shelving or creating book displays. In response to these factors, the library launched a new Research Concierge Service. To use the service, students complete a simple Web form, shown in Figure 1, indicating their research topic, course, and the number and type of sources they require. In response, an assigned library staff member curates a small number of sources, often between three and five, and delivers them by e-mail within 24 hours.

During the fall 2020 semester, the library considered the Research Concierge Service a pilot project and did not market it, though students and faculty alike rapidly discovered it. Some instructors reported to librarians that they planned to recommend the service to their students.

In many cases, the Research Concierge Service has led to sustained interactions between librarians and students, fine-tuning their questions and helping them to narrow their research interests. This service, though unconventional, has been described as "a small act of mercy" in a time when stress and anxiety are high. The goal of the Research Concierge Service is to decrease the cognitive load of research and therefore enable students to approach their writing assignments with greater persistence.[3]

OTC librarians believe that the Research Concierge Service also provides other unintended benefits. This interaction gives librarians an important opportunity to guide students with unsuitably broad research topics—for example, "radicalism" or "public transportation"—toward more manageable subtopics. Librarians also have a chance to give students tertiary sources, such as encyclopedia articles that provide broad background information and overview but might not be suitable to cite as references. Few students seek tertiary sources or even believe they are allowed to use them, though such resources can be useful to inform understanding of a topic. The librarians can sometimes tactfully direct students toward reevaluating their initial theses. A recent example involved a student requesting sources that supported 9/11 conspiracy theories. The librarian responded with materials that documented the experience of conspiracy believers, as well as sources that discussed the contrast between "belief" and "evidence."

The Hamra Library uses a discovery service to help students find materials in its collections and gain access to items of interest through other means. Without sufficient staffing to reach all students with library instruction, technological barriers such as link resolvers and unfamiliar database mechanics can become significant issues for users of the discovery service.[4] Seamlessly directing students to the location of full-text sources with Research Concierge seems to improve the likelihood that they will access (and hopefully read and synthesize) relevant content. Launched in September 2020, the service has so far fielded more than 130 requests in its first academic year, some from repeat users.

Figure 1. The form students submit to request help from the Research Concierge Service at Ozarks Technical Community College in Springfield, Missouri.

Users are asked to rate their likelihood to use the Research Concierge Service again or to recommend it on a 5-point Likert scale; ratings have been unanimously "5-yes," with a response rate of approximately 17 percent of users. OTC librarians have become concerned that the popularity of this "high-touch" service, which requires a high level of personal contact and extensive time, might eventually exceed the capacity of the limited library staff. They continue to believe, nevertheless, that these individual interactions are more valuable than any of their other current opportunities for group tutorials or library instruction. They expect to see continued demand during the coming academic year. The library has also directed the vendor who monitors its chat reference service on weekends and off-hours to refer students to the Research Concierge Service whenever applicable.

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Because the Research Concierge Service is offered via a Web form and does not require a face-to-face interaction, it may help to mitigate shame and library anxiety. Constance Mellon describes three main components of library anxiety: (1) students' belief that their library skills are inferior to those of their classmates; (2) students' feelings of shame about their perceived inadequacy, leading them to try to hide their weakness; and (3) students' fear that asking for help will reveal their deficiency.[5] By simply submitting a research request, students can sidestep library anxiety and the potential barrier of believing that library staff are unapproachable, unkind, or too busy to help them. When they receive a prompt, useful, humane e-mail in reply, their perceptions of the library staff may change. Furthermore, because there is no expectation that students already know how to navigate the library, the service enables them to avoid feeling inept or ill-prepared for college-level research. Finally, because the library staff provides sources that students will be able to access, they do not become bogged down due to the mechanics of various search tools.[6] Such tools may present a distraction from arguably more important information literacy skills, such as understanding the processes of information production.[7]

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To riff on an adage, forcing a student to learn how to fish when they are drowning helps no one. OTC students are all pursuing two-year degrees, many of them remotely, and they may have little, if any, contact with the library throughout their time in college. Many of the students struggle with work, family obligations, debt, food insecurity, housing problems, or some combination of those challenges. Ozarks Technical Community College serves a high-poverty region of southwest Missouri; the counties in the surrounding service area have poverty rates of up to 28 percent, and more than 66 percent

of OTC students receive federal financial aid. In OTC's service area, between 15 and 24 percent of the residents are food insecure, 21 percent of those 18 and older had a mental illness in the past year, and 5.5 percent had a serious mental illness. In short, the population OTC librarians serve is highly vulnerable, both economically and emotionally.[8] As in communities across the country, this population comes to college to pull themselves out of those vulnerable conditions, seeking a stable, supportive environment where they can try to achieve something that, for most, is a big risk. The librarians believe that the least they can do is offer information services that provide access when and where students need it most.

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OTC librarians see all requests for help in a social context, considering the economic, social, and cultural forces that may hinder students' learning. They feel it their responsibility to take down as many barriers to success as possible, especially ones for which they have a clear solution. The kindest, most humane way to support students with their research is to give them the help they need when they need it, and to believe them when they say they are struggling. As of fall 2021, as COVID-19 raged on, OTC librarians used the Research Concierge Service to reach students who might otherwise be too overwhelmed to seek their help. Furthermore, the precarity of OTC students' success will continue long after the pandemic subsides. The librarians plan to continue to provide this service because as long as there are vulnerable students, librarians will need to reach them where they are.

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Notes

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