



Yes Virginia, It Will Scale: Using Data to Personalize High-volume Reference Interactions



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ABSTRACT

This examination of an on-going embedded partnership between Penn State University Libraries business librarians and an instructor in the Smeal College of Business confronts the question of scalability for one-on-one reference consultations for high-enrollment classes. Through these in-person interactions off-site and in the library, the librarians hope to build student confidence in librarians as information resources as well as increasing business literacy through research using established, authoritative sources. This article documents the first four semesters of this evolving project to demonstrate the logistics of managing a high volume of student interactions using library data as support for decision-making and action.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years in higher education settings, a frequent concern is the scalability of student services. For librarians, this includes the traditional reference interaction, a staple of library services and a primary contact point for many students. When confronted with providing reference support for classes with enrollments in the triple or quadruple digits, librarians may feel overwhelmed or uncertain of how to maintain a level of personal interaction while avoiding professional burnout. Adding this to ever-increasing service demands and other duties within academic libraries, attempting a personalized and systematic approach to high-enrollment reference support can feel impossible without an established model. This article will outline such a model that can not only scale up, but also scale down, making it an adaptable tool for librarians at any sized institution. Developed by business librarians at Penn State University in partnership with an instructor at the Smeal College of Business, this newly developed model of scalable consultations answers the question of “will one-on-one, in-person reference interactions scale” with a resounding “yes.”

This article will outline the first four phases, each a semester long, of this continuing program along with the iterative changes made to the process along the way. At the core of this partnering project was a business information literacy paper, focusing on company research done through vetted business resources. This project hinges on an assignment developed specifically for a required management class (Management

301) by Diane Zabel, head of the Schreyer Business Library, and Ron Johnson, the class instructor. These factors, however, should not discourage librarians from other disciplines from attempting this model. The key points of interaction remain a research-heavy assignment and a required/gateway class, both of which exist in nearly every discipline. The librarians' part in this was a one-on-one in-person reference interaction with each individual student. During these research consultations, the librarians explained the resources, discussed search strategies, addressed proper citation, and generally provided guidance on understanding the function of these resources for beginning researchers. In two academic years, the Schreyer Business librarians have consulted individually with approximately 3500 Management 301 students while maintaining reference, instruction, collection, and other liaison support and continuing to participate in other library duties. Over the course of this project, the number of librarians in the Schreyer Business Library vacillated between four and six full-time librarians with two full-time support staff members providing significant contributions of time and skill. With consultations ranging from five to 45 min, but averaging between 10 and 15 min, the Schreyer Business Library spent an estimated combined total of 875 h working directly with Management 301 students.

This article will help allay general fears about attempting large-scale reference projects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In-person reference service, while a mainstay of library service models, is a costly undertaking. In her 2008 article *Reference Transactions Analysis: The Cost-Effectiveness of Staffing a Traditional Academic Reference*

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Desk, Susan Ryan of Stetson University reported that 73.8% of reference desk transactions tracked and analyzed over a four year period at her institution did not require a librarian's input. After cross-referencing this statistic against librarians' average hourly pay, Ryan concluded that a traditional reference desk model may no longer be cost-effective for libraries. When considering those figures set against a large-scale outreach project, concerns about return on investment for librarians' effort came into play. Ryan's article, however, tracked drop-ins, not interactions embedded within a class structure as the Management 301 consultations were.

Other concerns about the value of in-person interactions on a large scale were raised in light of success with virtual librarianship. The majority of academic libraries use online guides, tutorials, videos, and other digitally-enhanced learning objects as standard parts of their reference experiences. In Zhang, Watson, & Banfield's, 2007 article, *The Efficacy of Computer-Assisted Instruction Versus Face-to-Face Instruction in Academic Libraries*, an analysis of CAI (computer-assisted instruction) and face-to-face instruction was found to yield similarly effective results for teaching basic information literacy skills. Another study by Anderson and May (2010) suggests that the method of information literacy instruction (e.g. online, blended, or in-person) does not affect students' retention of the skills relayed. If learning outcomes for librarians' interactions with students is unaffected by the method through which they are delivered, attempting to individualize a high volume of student consultations appears to be an inefficient use of librarians' time. Schreyer Business Librarians, however, believed that there were qualities present in in-person, synchronous reference interactions that were of value to students despite these concerns. This was supported in part by a study from Gale and Evans (2007) at Missouri State University, indicating that 60% of surveyed students involved with face-to-face librarian-led consultations experienced increased confidence in the use of library resources for research.

Literature from the past several decades indicates that other librarians have been interested in exploring the value of face-to-face reference assistance as well (Attebury, Sprague, & Young, 2009; Auster, Devakos, & Meikle, 1994; Cardwell, Furlong, & O'Keeffe, 2001; Faix, MacDonald, & Taxakis, 2014; Fields, 2006; Magi & Mardeusz, 2013; Meyer, Forbes, & Bowers, 2010 and Yi, 2003), though none have focused on the issue of scale. This partnering project was meant to determine the possibility of managing one-on-one, synchronous research consultations in classes with large student-to-librarian ratios. This would afford librarians and students, at scale, with the many benefits that research into individualized reference services has uncovered. Yi (2003) presents individual research consultations as an essential supplement to library instruction and a critical piece of an information literacy program, providing students with an opportunity to address needs not covered in class, offer personalized attention and help at a point of need, and contribute to overall student information literacy. Fields (2006) also argues that individualized research consultations are an opportunity to improve student learning in a social environment. In the one-on-one reference setting, librarians can leverage the social nature of problem-solving and provide "soft scaffolds" with prompts to coach students through problems.

The social nature of problem-solving in the information seeking process is also suggested by Gross and Latham (2009) who found that while undergraduate students seek out the Internet to find information, they also seek out people, specifically people who are convenient, available, and with whom they have already established a relationship. These criteria may exclude librarians and professors from being a part of the information-seeking process (Gross & Latham, 2009), but being aware of these factors can help librarians establish themselves as part of students' trusted information network. Embedding in classes to offer individualized reference assistance is a step toward building relationships and being perceived as convenient and available.

Other research has determined that one-on-one sessions are helpful for improving student perceptions of libraries and librarians. For example, studies by Attebury et al. (2009)) and Magi and Mardeusz (2013),

both found that individualized sessions relieved library anxiety among students. Additionally, in their review of ten years of data on personalized reference consultations, Attebury et al. (2009)) also noted that reference consultations are driven by user needs rather than librarians' assumption of user needs and provide an opportunity for instant feedback. Magi and Mardeusz (2013) report that their survey revealed the importance of face-to-face communication in the individualized reference interaction. The in-person consultations allowed for the possibility for an exchange of ideas and nonverbal information. Notably, those surveyed also believed a research consultation to be quicker, easier and more efficient than getting help by email or chat reference. These benefits of face-to-face interactions recall Radford (2001) who draws from communication theory and suggests a librarian-user interaction model that emphasizes the importance of relaying empathy, interest, and attitude, and non-verbal cues. Additionally, Fitzpatrick, Moore, and Lang (2008)) found that face-to-face reference interactions were strongly preferred to phone, chat, or email because of their "reassuring nature" and also noted that users found the interactions to be positive, friendly and helpful in overcoming library anxiety.

Given these reflections on the positive qualities of in-person reference interactions, Schreyer Business Librarians were determined to confront the issues of return-on-investment and time management by crafting a tailored information literacy assignment and fully embracing an embedded position within the course framework. At the heart of this project was the issue of scale, and while daunting, librarians believed that using an in-person, synchronous approach to the interactions was key to building trust with these students as a foundation for future learning.

BACKGROUND

The origin of the Management 301 partnering project at Penn State University Libraries comes from a central question: how to scale in-person library services for high enrollment classes. As a university with 24 campuses and a total enrollment of over 95,000 enrolled students, Penn State is constantly grappling with scaling education, resources, and services. This issue affects not only faculty and instructors teaching credit courses, but also the University Libraries. The Libraries' mission includes bringing the highest quality of resources and services to its patrons, a task that becomes more and more challenging with ever-increasing enrollment. Like many colleges across the world, the Smeal College of Business is dedicated to graduating students with the diverse range of competencies and skills necessary for personal and career success. Among those skills is a keen sense of information literacy, particularly the capability to find, analyze, and synthesize current and past business data. As this dovetails directly with the University Libraries' mission, partnering in order to advance student skills in this area was a natural fit.

The Schreyer Business Library, located in the Paterno Library at the University Park campus, has had a longstanding onsite presence in the Smeal College of Business' building. Prior to this project's beginning, business librarians have offered reference services four days a week in the afternoon (Monday to Thursday, 1:30 PM to 4:30 PM) for students to drop-in without making an appointment. Traditionally, a typical week of onsite services yielded approximately 12–15 interactions with the majority being intensive research queries from graduate students and faculty. These usage statistics, when compared against Smeal's average enrollment of 5500 students indicate an underutilization by students both of the skills offered by librarians and the opportunity for individualized, tailored research assistance. In direct opposition to dealing with too many students, dealing with too few students can negatively impact librarians' morale, causing a sense of disillusionment or disconnection from the heart of their profession. While Schreyer librarians have a strong presence and tradition of classroom instruction for business students, it was this desire for increased personal connections to students that inspired the Management 301 partnering project.

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