

To: Heads of Public Services (HOPS)
From: Digital Reference Common Interest Group

In re: overview of how campuses staff our Digital Reference service (Ask a UC Librarian)

September 23, 2009

This report provides an overview of the two different methods employed by the UC campuses to ensure that the digital reference service (Ask a Librarian) is staffed consistently and that we are meeting our obligation to the QuestionPoint 24/7 Academic Cooperative. The UCs, as part of belonging to the Cooperative, provide 40 hours of cooperative reference service to other member libraries, in addition to providing service to UC patrons. This report also discusses how we are currently managing evening staffing of the service.

Ultimately, we hope that HOPS will provide clear expectations about each campus' commitment to staffing the service; currently half of the campuses rely on volunteers to staff this service. We would also like more of the UC campuses to participate in providing evening service. Currently only four campuses consistently staff evenings for QuestionPoint; relying on the same four campuses may not be sustainable.

Broadly speaking, there are models for how campuses staff their Ask a Librarian hours. It is either required as part of a librarian's regular reference service, or it is done voluntarily. Details about how some of the campuses staff the service are available at the end of this report.

Campuses that have made digital reference an expected part of their total reference commitment

- UCI
- UCM
- UCR
- UCSB

Campuses that rely on volunteers to fulfill their digital reference commitment

- UCB
- UCLA
- UCSC
- UCSD

We believe the use of digital reference will continue to increase, particularly as library hours are shortened and many libraries reduce in-person services due to budget cuts. If digital reference is not mainstreamed and treated as a regular part of reference, half of our campuses could potentially not fulfill their scheduled hours because of their reliance on volunteers who may not view digital reference as a primary duty. We recommend that HOPS discuss how each campus could integrate digital reference services into its reference librarians' regular duties in order to ensure the future success of this program.

Evening staffing:

Our statistics indicate that the service is well used by UC students during evening hours. While we are very happy with the answers provided by the Cooperative to our patrons, we are still committed to having UC librarians available to answer UC patrons' questions during peak times of activity.

Additionally, weekends and hours after 5pm count for double towards the 40 hours of service the UCs provide to the Cooperative. For example, if we provide staffing for the 24/7 Academic Queue from 5pm-9pm we have provided eight hours towards the forty we must provide. This is an additional incentive to staff evenings because we can more easily fulfill the 40 hour requirement. In the past we had provided evening service Sundays through Thursdays. UCLA was staffing both Sunday and Wednesday evenings, UC Irvine had Mondays, UC Santa Barbara had Tuesdays and UC Riverside had Thursdays. These campuses have agreed to provide evening staffing for the past three years. Due to changes in staffing at UCLA we are dropping one of the evenings because they can no longer staff two evenings. It has been difficult to rearrange the evenings when the pool of campuses willing to provide evening service is so limited. If digital reference service is integrated into regular each campus' reference duties, and not treated as an add-on, then other campuses might find it easier to assist in staffing the evening shifts. Mainstreaming digital reference may also make it easier to staff the evenings when Berkeley and Merced begin their fall semesters, which is much earlier than the other campuses begin their fall quarters. We currently rely on volunteers for most of the September evening shifts, and are single staffing (and we are receiving reports that it is busy enough to warrant double-staffing these evening shifts). With digital reference mainstreamed, it may open the way to different staffing patterns for the times when the semester schools and quarter schools are not in synch.

Details about Staffing:

Campuses that have made digital reference an expected part of their total reference commitment

* UCI: librarians are scheduled for no more than ten hours of reference service per week. Reference service can include, but is not limited to, desk reference, email reference, digital reference (QuestionPoint). Librarians in both Langson and Science provide digital reference.

UCM: this is the only scheduled reference that UCM provides.

UCR: digital reference hours count towards the weekly benchmark of total (both digital and the physical desk) reference hours. All librarians at Science & the Humanities/Social Science (Rivera Library) reference departments will be trained by this fall.

UCSB: all reference librarians are expected to be able to provide digital reference, although we ask for preferences when preparing the reference schedule. Digital reference hours count toward the total reference hours commitment for each librarian.

Campuses that rely on volunteers to fulfill their digital reference commitment

** UCB: staff in the Doe/Moffitt [aka 'Main'] library are able to substitute chat reference hours for desk hours. Volunteers from other libraries on campus are strictly volunteers and do chat reference in addition to their desk hours.

UCLA: Consortial services, such as the Ask a Librarian service, will become part of each public service unit's service portfolio. Units will be expected to contribute to enterprise-wide service initiatives proportionate to staffing so as to provide the best service options for their primary user groups. People can volunteer within their units and negotiate their reference workload as necessary/appropriate. Decisions about how to recruit and fulfill

unit staffing obligations to digital reference will be left to the individual unit's discretion.

UCSD: recruits volunteers by saying that one digital reference hour counts as one desk hour. All nine UCSD libraries contribute volunteers to help staff chat, with libraries with the larger reference staffs contributing more hours.

Note: UCSF is currently not providing staffing; UC Davis will begin staffing in 2009/2010.

See <http://ucdigref.pbworks.com/Current-Schedule> for the Fall 2009 campus schedule