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Satellite Reference at the University of Mississippi

The Oxford campus of The University of Mississippi (UM) currently has approximately 12,600 students; about 3,400 of them are in the School of Business Administration (SBA). There are around 3,300 undergraduates, 47 MBA students, and 62 PhD students (although not all are at the Oxford campus). The UM SBA has forty-two full-time faculty and eighteen part-time adjunct instructors. I arrived at UM in December 2003; it didn't take long for me to realize despite the fact that business students make up more than 25%% of the total student body, they were not coming to the library. I spoke with several business faculty about their frustrations with their students relying too heavily on Google and various Internet sites for their research.

It is not secret that the nature of library reference is changing. Students don't have to come to the library to get everything they need for their assignments. Educating the user to do his or her own research is becoming the norm as opposed to the old reference model of doing the research for the user. So, if students aren't going to come to the library, why not take the library to the students?

In the summer of 2004 I began to explore the idea of establishing satellite reference in the SBA. No one in my library had considered off-site reference, and I wanted to hear from other academic business librarians who had done satellite reference. I emailed the following message to the BUSLIB listserv on July 8, 2004:

This is mainly directed towards academics librarians who are business librarians in general libraries.

Have any of you set up an office in the business school? If you have, did it prove to be worthwhile?

I received numerous responses from librarians who were either holding reference hours or had considered it. My initial listserv post led to several off-list email conversations with librarians who currently had business school office hours. I asked about number of hours, equipment needed, and overall response from faculty and students. I put together a list of what I would

need: a computer, preferably a laptop; a desk, table or office; and signage—none of which I had. I approached the Dean of the School of Business Administration with my ideas.

The Dean was very receptive to my idea. The School of Business Administration would provide a laptop until I received my own through either a grant or university computer upgrade. The SBA did not have an office I could use but the Dean and Associate Dean had several suggestions where I could set up a desk. After a tour of possible areas, the Associate Dean and I decided the best place was an atrium on the first floor of the business school. There were several benefits to this location: it was a centrally-located area, there was a lot of traffic, it was close to the MBA classroom, and it was next to two heavily-used classrooms. The Office of the Dean created a laminated sign with my name and hours that I post during my hours. Unfortunately, there is not any permanent signage advertising my hours. Posters were posted the first semester I offered the service but posters can only be displayed for a certain number of days before they are removed.

Hours and Schedule

Because no one else at JD Williams Library had done satellite reference, I relied on responses I received from my informal poll of the BUSLIB listserv for guidance. After reading responses from other librarians I decided to do three hours of reference in the fall semester. I waited until mid-September to start my business reference hours. This allowed me to start after the majority of instruction was done for the semester. The Assistant Dean of the SBA told me most business classes were taught between 9:00 am and 3:00pm, Monday through Thursday. I established hours on Tuesday 10:00-12:00 and Wednesday 1:00-2:00, from September 14 through December 1.

During the fall of 2004 semester I had a total of seventeen consultations. My interpretation of “consultation” is pretty broad. Initially most of my consultations were faculty stopping by to say hi or see if their students had been asking me questions. Students did ask questions but the traffic was not heavy. Most students who stopped knew I would be there because I had spoken to their class or because their professor told them I was there.

Several observations were made that first semester. Better advertisement was needed, and I needed to change my Wednesday hours. Eleven of the seventeen consultations were on Tuesday. On Tuesdays I was there while students and faculty were changing classes, on Wednesday I was there when they were in class. I decided to change my spring semester hours to Tuesday 10:00-12:00 and Thursday 1:00-3:00.

Consultations have increased during Spring semester. I started my hours on February 8, 2005 and will end them on May 5, 2005, four more weeks than the spring semester. By the end of April, I had twenty-five consultations and only three days where I have had zero questions (in the fall I had eight days without any questions). I have had more students than faculty and more MBA students than undergraduate business students. More students consult me because their professor told them I was there as opposed to those who stop because I came to their class.

Because it is subject reference, most consultations are lengthier and in-depth; most will last twenty to thirty minutes. I am still working on the promotion of my satellite reference, but little by little, the word is getting out. Students and faculty are not beating down the door to get to me, I have had days when I had anywhere from two to four people waiting for assistance.

I have accomplished what I wanted: make business students and faculty aware of the resources the library has available—and one of those resources is me. While forty consultations over two semesters may not seem like a lot, the majority of those consultations would never have happened if I had not been in the business school. Through satellite reference I have developed a rapport with faculty and students as well as developing an understanding of my user group and their needs.