
Special Forum: Distance Learning

How Can We Help?

Supporting Online Students through Asynchronous and Synchronous Library Services

by Joshua Waltman and Jeremy McGinniss

In addition to serving residential students, the Jerry Falwell Library at Liberty University provides library resources and services to thousands of online students enrolled in over 450 online programs, including divinity programs at the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels. As the majority of Liberty students are studying from a distance, the library has adapted its model to ensure comparable levels of service and access are available to students who are not on-site. Examples of how the library has addressed this issue include expanding e-resource purchases and shipping physical items from the library's collections to online students through interlibrary loan processes. The library has also reimagined the workflows for supporting online students' research and for providing virtual library instruction. It is on this front that we would like to share both successes and learning opportunities gleaned from our experiences.

The library's multi-year evolution supporting online students in research and library instruction has taken on both asynchronous and synchronous components. Asynchronous services are needed because of time zone differences, non-traditional student scheduling, and the fact that online students are working within a digital environment that creates different expectations and questions. Accordingly, our library has addressed this need in three ways: website development, testing, and usability; the development and maintenance of a library FAQ knowledge base; and the development of a video tutorial channel. Synchronous services are also needed to give "real-time" feedback and interaction to provide a sense of connection to the library's resources along with more detailed instruction and assistance as needed. Our synchronous efforts have involved leveraging a variety of technologies to facilitate communication as well as the creation of our Research Support Center, which serves as the library's "virtual front desk."

The first asynchronous focus is in our general approach to website development, testing, and usability. After all, for online students, the website *is* the library. The library site prominently features an assistance dropdown with multiple points of contact (phone, chat, and email). An online student landing page was created to highlight specific resources available for this student population. We have found that our thought processes have fundamentally changed in regards to the website development process. We now are as concerned, if not more so, about the online user perspective and experience in navigating the website. For example, new website changes should always include testing from mobile devices, since we have found that a significant percentage of our online users rely on smartphones when accessing library resources.

In addition to the shift in attitude toward website development, another asynchronous component of our approach includes the creation and maintenance of a library FAQ knowledge base using Springshare's LibAnswers. Users are able to filter according to topic and also search by keyword for their research question. This knowledge base provides opportunities for library faculty and staff to provide information to help users develop library skills, such as Boolean search formations,

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and also to foster some basic information literacy competencies at the point of need in the more expansive entries.

A last major component of our asynchronous approach involves the creation of a video tutorial channel to complement both the website and the FAQ knowledge base. At the time of this writing, there are 179 tutorial videos on the channel, all of which include requisite library branding, include closed captioning, and adhere to our internal set of best practices for video recording. Tutorials are created using Camtasia—a screen capturing and video editing software. Tutorial videos are hosted through Kaltura, a video-hosting platform, and embedded into many of the knowledge base FAQs as well as the database listings on our website. One major lesson for us has been the success of embedding these tutorials in the library's database descriptions on the webpage to make them available at the point of discovery and use. Some students are indeed proactively searching for tutorials through the library video channel, but embedding these at the point of database access encourages use by those who are more inclined toward serendipitous discovery or who have more restrictive deadlines that prevent video tutorial browsing.

We have found the videos to be highly used, with 44,988 total views to date. However, ongoing challenges with this use of technology are twofold. First, librarians and staff must develop effective video capturing and editing abilities. While it has become more commonplace in recent years to expect academic librarians to acquire these skills, it nevertheless can be a learning curve for those with no previous background in this area. Second, effectiveness hinges on ensuring tutorials are kept up-to-date, reflecting ongoing changes to the website and databases. We have found that even small discrepancies between the live website environment and the presentation of that environment in our video tutorials are confusing for users. Accordingly, establishing a plan for the maintenance of video tutorials is a prime consideration before starting any such initiative. For us, part of this maintenance effort has included incorporating evaluations of our tutorials in our regular workflow. We have also found that making the homepage of the featured database the starting point for many of our tutorials helps to decrease the number of video updates we have to make since our website changes more frequently than the database interfaces.

Last, the creation of the Research Support Center (RSC) is the most impactful effort we have made to provide synchronous library support for online students. The RSC consists of eight highly trained full-time staff members, titled “research consultants,” who provide front-line assistance to online students through phone, chat, and email. Along with contributing to the creation of the tutorial videos, maintaining the knowledge base entries mentioned above, and providing proactive resource checks and testing, these staff are dedicated to fielding all manner of library questions. They provide extended hours during nights and weekends and respond knowledgeably to the vast majority of research inquiries. They are likewise trained in providing customer service-friendly referrals to the appropriate departments or liaison librarians. While the increase in online students served as the impetus for the creation of the RSC, on-campus students have benefited as well from the increased library support.

A challenge with such an initiative can be the initial personnel cost. However, the student-to-librarian ratio increase that comes with a burgeoning online population creates a logistical problem for libraries who still serve the residential population as well. This model efficiently uses the Research Support Center to ensure librarian expertise is directed toward higher-level research and instruction needs while also working within current faculty personnel budgetary allocations. Thus, the hiring and training of these staff has arguably greatly increased the library's reach to students,

demonstrating a strong return on investment in creating these positions. We have found that the Research Consultants field, on average, 14,988 emails, chats, and phone calls per year.

One major lesson we have taken from the creation of the RSC has been the need to cultivate strong lines of collaboration and communication between departments in order to facilitate effective customer service in the interactions between research consultants and the students they serve, both residential and online. Matters relating to circulation and group study reservations, for instance, require consistency in communication between the research consultants and our Learning Commons department. Additionally, cross-training in these areas as well as the development of cross-departmental documentation of workflows has further aided in the communication. Determining best practices in practical procedures, such as call transfers, has been important as well.

Various technology has likewise been leveraged to efficiently facilitate synchronous research instruction for online students by librarians. Namely, individual research consultations are conducted not only through phone but also through teleconferencing technology. Through Cisco Webex or MS Teams, librarians can share their screen while talking with students across the globe. The investment in this technology has also opened opportunities to host online student research presentations during our annual research symposium as we pursue a comparable and seamless integration of the online population into the event. Moreover, teleconference technology supports the library's regular webinars highlighting subject specific research skills and issues. In this way, distance students are able to attend these library instructional sessions alongside residential students.

The areas highlighted in this essay demonstrate how the faculty and staff at the Jerry Falwell Library are utilizing technology and personnel to provide a range of research assistance and learning support for the online students at Liberty University. It is important to point out that we have found there is no one-size-fits-all model that perfectly identifies how to support online students. Rather, any model needs to recognize that student populations are very fluid because student needs are ever-changing, as they may be pursuing degrees entirely online, fully on-campus, or a combination of the two. What is present in each of these areas is a commitment to library service regardless of the medium, a willingness to experiment with different models and tools, and an outward communication that demonstrates the library is present to answer questions regardless of how a student receives his or her education.