

Meeting Students Where They Are: Enhancing the Library's Physical and Virtual Presence at High Point University

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Abstract

This article recounts the experiences of the library staff at the University Center Learning Commons at High Point University. Opening the Learning Commons as a satellite library in a residential/recreational building gave staff the opportunity to meet students where they were physically. It also provided the opportunity to launch a Facebook presence for the libraries at HPU and virtual reference with a 24/7 chat service and meet students where they are virtually.

Recently, High Point University's library had the opportunity to enhance both its physical and virtual presence on campus. On November 30, 2009, High Point University launched a unique 24/7 satellite library in the new University Center. This \$65 million building of 277,000 square feet combines a residence hall (housing 500 students), dining (a bakery, grill, and steakhouse), entertainment (including a movie theater and arcade/gaming area), and the Learning Commons as a research and study space. With this space, the staff has the opportunity to take their expertise and resources directly to where the students live – where they eat, sleep, and play. In the history of academic libraries, branch or satellite libraries are not unusual. However, they are usually part of a school or academic department. Even embedded librarians are usually embedded in a specific department or class¹ – not in a building that is used mainly for non-academic purposes.

The library space itself is unique in its appearance. It is a large space with wood paneled walls, desks with leather chairs, cozy couches, oriental rugs, and fine art (paintings and sculpture) displayed around the room. Computers surround columns in the middle of the space and a printer/scanner/copier is housed in a side room. Large glass windows overlook the heart of the campus. The space doesn't resemble a library so much as an inviting den in a well-appointed home, appropriate for an institution that values the comfort of its students.

With an enrollment of around 3,100 students and a campus of 140 acres, High Point University sounds a lot like the typical liberal arts university. Why add a second library space on such a campus? One of the reasons was to include academics in a building that was focused on student life and recreation. The library presented an idea for a space with computers, large study areas and a reference desk. The administration was aware of the heavy use of the main library and wanted to relieve that pressure. Adding a satellite library would provide ready access to library services for the students that live in the University Center and surrounding residential buildings. There was also a need for a designated area for quiet study.

HPU has been experiencing tremendous growth in recent years. Since 2005, undergraduate enrollment has grown by 75% and the freshman class has grown by 172%. The library wanted to prepare to serve the larger student population and campus footprint that will certainly continue to increase. With more students living across more acreage, an extension of library services in a new location was an important part of the overall campus expansion.

With the space available, adding a satellite library did not take as large an investment in resources as one might think. Much of our students' research is conducted online, enabling us to launch a library without the typical paraphernalia. As David Shumaker says "...the same technologies that are

competing with traditional reference service have freed us reference librarians from the chains that have kept us in the library."² So, our initial investment in "collection development" was 10 desktop computers (two at the desk and 8 for student use), 4 mini-laptops for student check-out, and a small reference collection, which included writing/citation style guides, an encyclopedia set, language dictionaries, test study guides (MCAT, GRE, etc.), and a Bible commentary set. The library also features a "leisure reading" collection of popular fiction and a bit of popular non-fiction. During winter break, we added bookshelves and began building this collection – first by pulling appealing titles from the main library, then ordering new books. Right after opening, we distributed surveys asking students about their reading preferences. With that information, we were able to order books according to their expressed interests.

Our most important resource investment was a quality staff of two full-time and 4 part-time librarians who would keep the UC Library open 24/7 while classes are in session. This increase in library staff provided opportunities for new projects and additional services, especially to provide outreach to students. To complement our newly designed space and our mission to meet students where they are physically, the lead librarian and her staff decided to upgrade the libraries' online presence to meet students where they are virtually through Facebook and chat reference.

Facebook

The staff at the Learning Commons was eager to launch a Facebook page for HPU libraries. We knew by observation that students were on Facebook very frequently. While studying, they would pop in and out of their Facebook accounts. The lead librarian set up a profile and started connecting – first with other campus services and staff and then almost immediately with students. We launched our profile at the beginning of January during winter break. By January 12, the HPU libraries profile had 70 friends. Just two weeks later, we had 250. At the writing of this article, we have a total of 500. We were excited to use Facebook to publicize new library materials and events. Our status often advertises new movies or books. We've created Facebook "events" for upcoming classes and programs and invited our friends to attend. Facebook provides a chat feature, which students use to ask librarians questions. The library's presence on Facebook gives students another means to connect with the library in a place where they already spend a good deal of time, just like our presence in the University Center.

Chat

Virtual reference has become ubiquitous in a modern academic library. Due to time and staffing constraints, a personalized service had not yet been added to the otherwise modern HPU library. With new 24/7 staff members and a commitment to customer service built in to High Point University's philosophy, the staff at the Learning Commons felt the time was right to add chat reference.

Once we decided to add this service, we were faced with the question of how to best make it happen. Our research for this involved two steps. First, we looked at local colleges and universities to see what they were using for virtual reference. Second, we reviewed the most current literature to see what chat reference software had been successful.

Our considerations were ease of integration (into our staff's duties as well as into our website), price, and capability to add multiple gateways, including an embeddable widget.

We reviewed the listing and links at www.libsuccess.org of libraries using Instant Messaging reference. It appeared that libraries in North Carolina were currently using one of two chat aggregators. The first was the completely free option of Meebo, which offered chat widgets for our website and the ability to include aliases on other instant message clients, including Facebook. The other was a service called Libraryh3lp, which, for a modest hosting fee after a free 90 day trial period, was an open-source option started by librarians working at a university in North Carolina who wanted to design a service specifically for libraries.

After reading the case study by William Breitbach et al. entitled "Using Meebo's embedded IM for academic reference services," and viewing the sheer number of libraries utilizing Meebo on www.libsuccess.org, we decided to go ahead with Meebo³. Embedding a widget into our newly created "Ask an HPU Librarian" page was very simple as was creating aliases for various IM services. We chose AIM, gTalk, MSN, and Yahoo, since they were the most popular of IM services and offered free email addresses. We also added our Facebook account to take advantage of the extremely popular Facebook chat capability.

Although we had been aware of it from the beginning, the major drawback of Meebo became immediately apparent as we started our soft roll-out of service. Only one librarian could be logged into Meebo at a time. HPU is a very service-oriented university, and we wanted to ensure the chat reference service remained uninterrupted during mealtimes, when the librarian had to step away from the desk, during shift changes and when traffic increased. We knew from experience how unlikely users are to come back to a website after they are greeted with a "service unavailable" message. Despite this limitation, students seemed interested in the new service when it was announced in library instruction sessions and traffic began to build.

Drawn to the service by the success stories of other local academic libraries, the

lead librarian began to seriously consider Libraryh3lp for their new chat aggregator. After some research and reading the article written in Code4Lib by the creators of Libraryh3lp⁴, we decided to switch over in January 2010 for four major reasons:

1. The ability to have multiple librarians signed in would help eliminate downtime.
2. The easy customization of the embedded chat widget allowed the University to brand the widget.
3. Libraryh3lp's administrative account allowed for monitoring chat traffic and saving transcripts.
4. The switchover from Meebo to Libraryh3lp was virtually seamless and all-inclusive of every chat gateway through which we wanted to reach students.

Marketing

The campus at High Point University has a system of advertising announcements to students via daily emails and video monitors all over campus. Campus groups and individuals who need to "get the word out" can submit images to be included in these emails and screens. The library submitted two advertisements to be included, one about our Facebook account, and one about our chat reference service. A second method of marketing has been more word-of-mouth based, introducing students to the service in library instruction classes and at the reference desk on a one-on-one basis. We also put links to our Facebook profile on the library website and in staff email signatures. These methods were all mentioned in Andy Burkhardt's article, "Social Media: A guide for college and university libraries."⁵

Future plans

While early statistics from our chat reference service appear positive - 108 chat questions answered in March 2010 - we anticipate doing an even better job of marketing in the new school year starting in August 2010.

We plan on re-launching our virtual reference program at the beginning of the Fall 2010 semester. We are placing a greater focus on the chat widget, which will be right

on the front page of our newly designed website, where students are sure to notice it. We'd like to put the chat widget on our subject research web pages and maybe in the OPAC, as other libraries have reported success with this.⁶ We are considering borrowing some ideas from a 2008 article entitled "It's All in the Marketing," in which the authors combined what they had learned from literature reviews and in conversations and information gathering from target groups in their university, Texas A&M.

Our future plans include attending faculty meetings to promote the service and sending advertisements to target groups included in the article: incoming freshmen and our evening degree students.

Freshmen will be extremely familiar with new technology and electronic resources. Our evening degree program students do not visit the main campus as often as traditional students, and so the 24/7 chat service would be another way of making ourselves available to them.⁷

We plan to include text reference at some point, which will feed into our Libraryh3lp system and appeal to our students who depend heavily on texting.

We are in the process of getting all reference staff better trained in delivering chat reference to our users, to meet the growing need for having back-up to our Learning Commons staff.

Conclusion

The response to providing more virtual services has been overwhelmingly positive; most students respond with interest during library instruction classes as well as with words of gratitude in chat interactions. Thanks to the addition of a spacious and inspiring study space, HPU's libraries are also better able to meet students where they are – online. To those academic libraries considering starting a personalized chat reference service for their students, the experience at High Point University has proven that such a quality service is easy to implement and worth the effort.

References

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- ⁵ Andy Burkhardt, "Social media: a guide for college and university libraries," *College & Research Libraries News* 71.1 (2010): 12.
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