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Librarian on-site service at the University of Alberta: How the Science and Technology Library Took its Information and Reference Service from the Library to the Faculty

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Introduction

In fall 2003, two engineering librarians at the Cameron Science and Technology Library, University of Alberta, began offering four hours a week of information and reference services to students and staff, on location in the Faculty of Engineering. Each librarian worked a two-hour shift, from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday and Thursday afternoons, in the largest nonteaching computer lab in the Engineering Teaching and Learning Complex. The service was offered from September 2003 until April 2004.

Background

Staff members of the Cameron Science and Technology Library at the University of Alberta serve a wide range of clients. The collections, reference and information services, library and research skills instruction, and liaison service support the teaching and research in the faculties of Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics, Engineering, and Science. The library is home to the Canadian Circumpolar Library, a world-class special library supporting research in northern Canada. Two small satellite libraries operate outside of the Cameron Library building: the Mathematics Branch Library and the Physical Sciences Library (chemistry and physics), in addition to the Science and Technology Special Collection, housed on the fourth floor of the Science and Technology Library. Finally, the Science and Technology Library houses the William C. Wonders Map Collection, one of the largest collections of cartographic materials in Canada, including more than 525,000 maps, 1.4 million aerial photographs, atlases, globes, and other related materials.

The Faculty of Engineering at the University of Alberta began offering courses in 1908. In 2004, the faculty continues to develop its world-class reputation for teaching and research in the following areas: Chemical, Chemical (Computer Process Control), Civil, Civil (Environmental), Computer, Computer (Software), Electrical, Materials, Mechanical, Mining and Petroleum Engineering, and Engineering Physics. The faculty hosts ten Canada Research Chairs, nine Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) Chairs, and three NSERC Stacie Fellows.

The Faculty of Engineering has experienced enormous growth in the past few years. Since 1972, the number of undergraduates has nearly tripled from 1,180 to more than 3,400 students. In the same time period, the number of graduate students has increased from 191 in 1972 to 1,018 in 2003–04, an increase of more than 530 percent. More than 100 new engineers have joined the faculty since 1996, representing a 60 percent increase in total faculty members since that time.[1]

Until 2001, the departments in the Faculty of Engineering were found in two locations on campus. The Departments of Electrical and Computer, and Civil and Environmental Engineering, and the School of Mining and Petroleum Engineering were housed together in one building, which is connected to the Science and Technology Library. The environmental engineers were, in fact, separate from this group, at another site some distance away. The remaining engineers were across campus, in two buildings housing the Department of Chemical and Materials Engineering and the Department of Mechanical Engineering.

The ongoing expansion and consolidation of the Faculty of Engineering has resulted in the construction of new buildings to accommodate the increasing numbers of students and staff. In 2002, the Engineering Teaching and Learning Complex (ETLC) and the Electrical and Computer Engineering Research Facility (ECERF) opened—two new buildings connected by walkways to the mechanical and chemical/materials buildings. As a result, the only engineering students and faculty within close proximity of the Science and Technology Library were those in civil, environmental, mining, and petroleum engineering. Eventually they too, will move: the new Markin/CNRL Natural Resources Engineering Facility (NREF) is under construction, and will be home to the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, and the School of Mining and Petroleum Engineering when it opens in fall 2004. At that time, the Science and Technology Library will be a good distance away from all its engineering clients.

In addition to the foregoing, the National Institute for Nanotechnology (NINT), a joint partnership among the National Research Council of Canada, the Government of Alberta, and the University of Alberta, began operation in 2002 in the ECERF building. A

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separate NINT facility is under construction at this time, scheduled for opening in 2005, with expectations that more than 400 staff members will work in the building on "all things nano!"

Survey of Current Practice

Earlier in 2003, librarians in the Science and Technology Library began discussing the option of providing remote or satellite reference service in the Faculty of Engineering. We thought it wise to ask other librarians if they had tried a similar service at their locations. In the week of April 7, 2003, we posed an informal, hypothetical question to five discussion lists, SLA-ENG, PAMNET, STS-L, ILI-L, and ELDNET-L: "Does your library offer remote reference and information services?"

Respondents worked in a broad spectrum of subject fields normally present on any large campus. Their comments and observations of their own experiences provided us with an indication of what we could expect once our service became operational, and gave us the confidence that we were on the right track in offering a remote reference service. Some respondents shared common building space with their subject departments; others were located at opposite ends of the campus from their subject departments. We learned that the notion of a remote reference service is not new. Virginia Tech, for example, had been offering this service since 1994[2]. Different terminology is used to describe librarians who provide off-site service, including "bookless,"[3] "field,"[4] and "roving."[5]

As indicated by Adele Barsh, business and economics librarian at Carnegie Mellon University Libraries, in her response, a common but crucial element for a successful operation was to provide the remote service in a highly visible, high-traffic location. In our case, the working environment would be the instructor's workstation in a networked computer lab in the main engineering building.

Librarians felt the convenience of a locally provided reference services led to heightened visibility, accessibility, and collaboration between librarians and the faculty, students, and researchers of target departments. The closer interaction led to a better understanding of course requirements, often resulting in the creation of subject resource Web pages and more highly relevant BI sessions that addressed specific assignments. Caroline Smith, astronomy and physics librarian at Cal Tech, pointed out that it became easier to develop an overview of how the engineering collection was used and to become better informed about the information needs of researchers within their physics department.

Faculty, students, and researchers availed themselves of the opportunity to ask questions about their specific research topic in passing, whereas they might not have taken time to phone, e-mail, or walk the distance to a reference desk on the other side of campus. Students were able to receive course-specific help and bibliographic instruction by simply stepping out of a classroom adjacent to the remote reference service.

We received twenty responses to our question, which were summarized in a post to the blog, The SciTech Library Question[6].

The Library Considers Remote Reference Service

Following the survey, librarians in the Science and Technology Library wrote a proposal for offering liaison outreach services to the Faculty of Engineering. The proposal, asking for use of office space with Internet access to be provided by the faculty, was as follows:

"In order to maintain and build upon the good working relationship between the Science and Technology Library and the Faculty of Engineering, and to keep the profile of the University of Alberta Libraries strong in this Faculty, we propose to place engineering liaison librarians in the Faculty, on a pilot basis, to provide library services four hours per week, in two two-hour time periods. Service to begin in September 2003, and run until at least December 2003, perhaps until April 2004, at which time the service will be reviewed."

The reasons for considering this service were twofold: First, the engineering field has been a leader in the conversion of research materials to electronic format. An increasing number of major reference tools in all engineering disciplines are moving to online access, lessening and in some cases eliminating the need to search these resources in the library. Second, by fall 2004, construction of NREF will be completed and the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, along with the School of Mining and Petroleum Engineering, will move to that facility. When the move is complete, the Faculty of Engineering will have relocated completely to the west side of campus, a considerable distance from the Science and Technology Library.

As a result of these developments, we anticipated a continuing reduction in the number of engineering clientele in the Science and Technology Library.

The target user groups were undergraduate students (primary), and graduate students and faculty (secondary). The proposal requested that we use a computer lab or office space with an Internet connection to be provided by the Faculty of Engineering. The faculty would also provide access to a computer station and telephone, if available. The librarians would offer library and research skills instruction, consultation, and information services to the students and staff.

To assess the service, statistics would be kept, identifying numbers of questions and users (undergrads, grads, etc.) Users would be asked to complete an optional follow-up questionnaire. The service will be evaluated when the pilot is completed.

The library also considered the following preferred outcomes:

Preferred Outcomes for Engineering:
• Increased awareness and use of online engineering resources
• Increased awareness of services provided by the Science and Technology Library and the engineering librarians
• Savings of time and money through increased access to and use of information resources purchased by the library
• Greater awareness among library staff of the changing needs of the Faculty of Engineering

Preferred Outcomes for the Science and Technology Library:
—Increased visibility of the UA Libraries for all users in the Faculty of Engineering
—Increased use of the Libraries' services, particularly the online resources
—More one-on-one and small-group library and research skills instruction
—Ongoing development and strengthening of liaison relationship with the faculty

The proposal was submitted to library administration for approval, and librarians Jerry Kowalyk and Randy Reichardt met with senior administrators from the Faculty of Engineering dean's office, together with ETLC building and lab managers, to discuss the proposal. They supported our idea and offered us use of the largest computer lab in ETLC.

Librarian On-Site Begins Operation

Our first challenge was to advertise the service to the students, staff, and faculty members. We designed a large sign, which was printed using the University of Alberta's plotter. The sign was attached to a sandwich board that was literally built from parts by a colleague in the SciTech Library for our use. Letter-size versions of the poster were sent, along with a detailed e-mail message, to all faculty members, graduate students, and eight undergraduate engineering student societies. Information about and notification of the start of the service was submitted to and published in the *Bridge,* the newsletter of the Engineering Students Society.

The Librarian On-Site service to students and staff began operation in September 24, 2003, in Room E2-006 in the Engineering Teaching and Learning Complex on the University of Alberta campus, and continued each Wednesday and Thursday during fall and winter terms, until March 31, 2004.
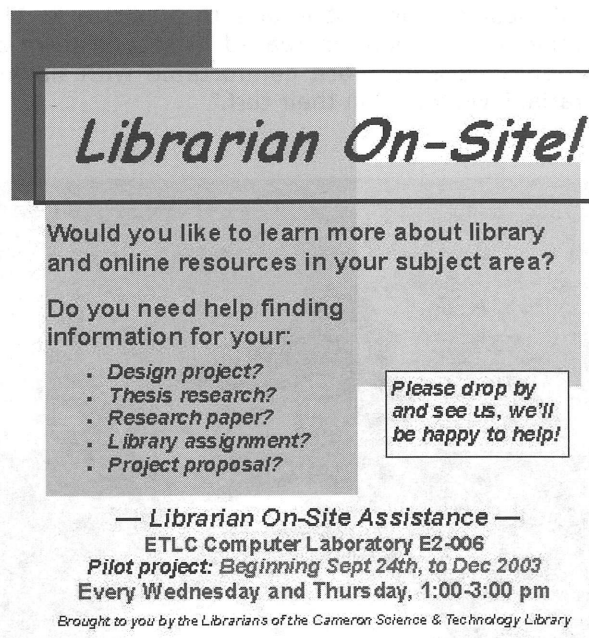

Figure 1: Poster used to publicize Librarian On-Site service, also used on sandwich board outside of computer lab when a librarian was present to help students.

Results and Observations

The Librarian On-Site service was provided forty-four times in two-hour periods. At least sixty-nine questions were answered, although the figure is probably higher, because students working in groups sometimes asked questions together. For example, next to the computer lab is a design lab. A fourth-year chemical engineering design class was scheduled in the design lab each week at the same time we were providing information service in the computer lab. On more than one occasion, a group of fifteen or more would come into the lab asking for help. The time spent answering questions ranged from one minute to an hour. Most questions were of a detailed nature, involving major design projects or research papers, and took more time to answer.

While answering sixty-nine questions in eighty-eight hours of availability seems low, we noticed that in most cases the questions took a considerable amount of time to answer. We experienced few lineups for help, and thus were afforded more time to go into greater detail when we provided help. At a busy information desk, this would not be possible. We also believe that because the service was new to students, they may have been hesitant to approach us for help in the first few weeks, or not known about the service

at all despite our best efforts to publicize it. The number of questions increased in second term as students became more comfortable with having librarians working "on their turf."
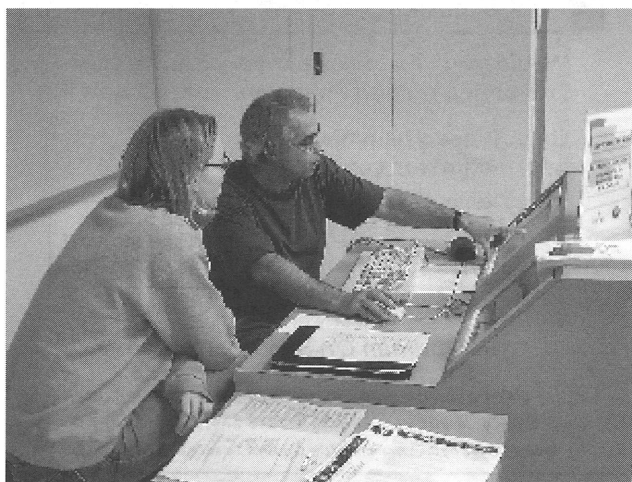

Figure 2: Angela, a fourth-year chemical engineering design student, works with engineering librarian Randy Reichardt during a Librarian On-Site session.

User Feedback and Evaluation

We received twenty-three evaluations from students who used the service. Questions we asked included "Why did you choose the service?" and "Would you like to see it continued?" Respondents were pleased that a librarian would come to their lab to offer reference service. A sample of responses:

"It makes accessing information much easier. I really appreciated the help I received this year (on four or five occasions)."
"This service is excellent. I wish I would have had access to this service in my earlier years."
"It's helpful and we don't have to go to Cameron (Library)."
"I learn best with one-on-one, and then I also remember it better for next time."
"Extremely convenient and good for students who are unfamiliar with the library."
"Makes it accessible to us and we are more likely to learn what resources the library has to offer."
"It is very handy and helpful. Most engineering work is done in ETLC at the computers, and it is great to have such accessable [sic] references."

We asked for suggestions to improve the service. The most common response was to increase the days and hours of availability. Respondents were satisfied with the location of the service. One suggestion was that we offer more in-class instruction, in addition to the courses in which we provide library and research skills sessions.

Eighty-two percent of respondents were undergraduates, with the majority of students working in chemical/materials, mechanical, and electrical/computer engineering. When civil/environmental and mining/petroleum engineering move across campus to their new building later in 2004, we expect the number of students from those areas who use the Librarian On-Site service to increase.

Service Concerns and Final Thoughts

The provision of a credible remote reference service away from the architectural confines of the traditional library building has been made possible by the growing conversion and availability of research materials in electronic format. While online access to an increasing number of major reference tools has obviated the need to physically search these resources in the library, researchers still need a mediator in the form of the librarian to alert them to the existence and suitability of specific resources supporting a researcher's needs. As in the real estate industry, in on-site reference service "location, location, location" is critical. In the highly visible, high-traffic location of a networked computer lab, the service promotes itself among researchers who are casual witnesses to its operation and regular availability. Further, offering the service in a computer lab ensures that students are able to follow up at their own terminal on what they learned from their reference interaction with the librarian, and gives them confidence that academic support is always within easy reach should they have further need.

The mediator librarian, in turn, cannot provide a remote reference service in isolation but requires a minimal number of communication-related supports for the service to succeed. First among these is the presence of adequate computing hardware and software that promote the qualitatively excellent communication of information through crisp, clean visual displays (large flat screen, LCD monitors, good working mouse and keyboard, USB key functionality). Second, the hardware should be networked so that information can be either taken away on a variety of storage media or transferred by e-mail, FTP, etc., to the researcher's account.

The on-site librarian also requires easy accessibility to support personnel responsible for maintaining the computing facility (hardware, productivity software, printing) as well as the library's online resources (catalogs, databases, handbooks, manuals, etc.). If the computing facility has no local telephone, the library should consider acquiring a cell phone for librarians to use away from the central library.

We thank all our predecessors in the academic library environment who so freely offered their lessons learned while developing their own versions of on-site library services. Our local adaptations have

proven to be a popular success with our community, and we anticipate a positive success in the growth of this service over the next year as the remaining departments in the Faculty of Engineering move to a more centralized location.

Appendix 1:

The questionnaire used by students to evaluate the service, along with the compiled results, is available for viewing at: http://stlq.info/loseval.pdf

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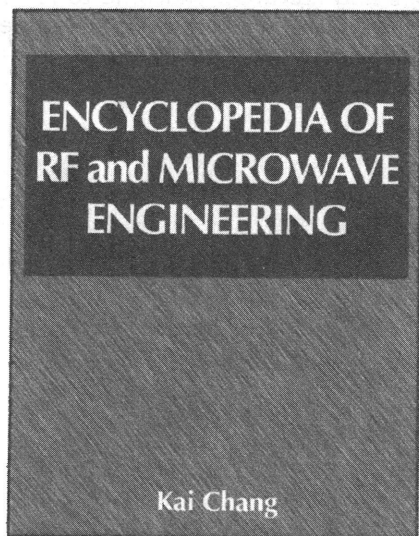
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