

“2020 Vision”

Telling the Story of Academic Library Virtual Reference Services from the Pandemic to the Present

Introduction & RQ’s

This project investigates the ongoing impact of the COVID pandemic from 3/20 until 5/24 on academic Virtual Reference Services (VRS) & its impact on interpersonal relationships among librarians, staff, & service users. It builds upon Phase 1 results, conducted from 3/20 to 12/20, consisting of a nationwide survey (n=300) and 28 interviews with VRS leaders (Radford, Costello, & Montague, 2022, see QR code below).

RQ1 What changes have taken place, if any, during the long-tail of the pandemic in the experience of live chat VRS encounters, especially relating to relational aspects from the viewpoint of both librarians & service users?

RQ2 What changes have taken place, if any, during the long-tail of the pandemic in the relationships among librarians providing VRS?

Methods

For Phase 2, our team of 4 conducted 37 semi-structured interviews from 3/24 to 5/24 with leaders of academic library VRS via Zoom. Interview questions centered on the pandemic’s impact on VRS, and on relationships between librarians/staff & service users, & among librarians. Results are being analyzed inductively using the Constant Comparison Method (Charmaz, 2014), building upon the Phase 1 coding scheme (Radford et al., 2022).

Conclusion

These are preliminary results, as data analysis via NVivo coding of 37 interview transcripts & inductive theme identification is nearly completed. The expectation is that all analysis will be completed by 12/24, & that a full paper will be submitted for publication in the spring.

Major Themes - Preliminary Results

*“I’m looking down with 2020 vision.” (P21)
“It was just a whole weird time” (P5)*

Theme: VRS Surpasses In-Person Reference

VRS, including chat reference, video consultations, & digital scheduling, have largely eclipsed traditional reference models in the wake of COVID for most of our participants. A few reported that they still have vibrant in-person reference, mostly community colleges.

Theme: Change & Innovation

Libraries have experienced massive change in staffing levels, staff organization, budget, communication mode, & work patterns. Participants have innovated to meet users’ & colleagues’ needs.

“They’ll do zoom anywhere.” (P4).

“Despite all the stuff we’ve been through, some people still do have warm relationships with their colleagues, which is nice, but just maybe not quite in the same way that we used to.” (P10)

Theme: Hybrid Work Environments Persist (for Better or Worse)

Participants work remotely 1-5 days per week, with some feeling isolated & excited to see each other when in person. Remote work has, in some cases, strained relationships between colleagues, & in other cases, brought colleagues closer together. Some participants assert that there is better life-work balance with hybrid work.

Theme: Reconnecting & Reestablishing Relationships

Participants report that interactions between themselves and users feel more “normal” when compared to the initial shutdown period, but that topics, interactions, modalities, and behaviors are still clearly affected by the pandemic shutdown.

“I feel that the world’s not on fire anymore.” (P22)

“We’re always willing to go the extra mile for them. But I would say we’re going 2 or 3 extra miles.” (P2)

Theme: Reference Team Effort & Camaraderie

Reference services staff feel camaraderie as they face new standards of increasingly virtual services. They are eager to adapt to ensure that library users are supported during reference encounters.

Theme: Supporting Academic Struggles & Vulnerabilities

Participants describe students emerging from “survival mode” (P10) as they renegotiate life in hybrid environments. They feel that students need greater support from reference staff.

“The students seem like they are more lost than they were before. So the reference interview has become ever more important...” (P21)

