

Strategies for Planning Virtual Reference Service Hours



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Abstract

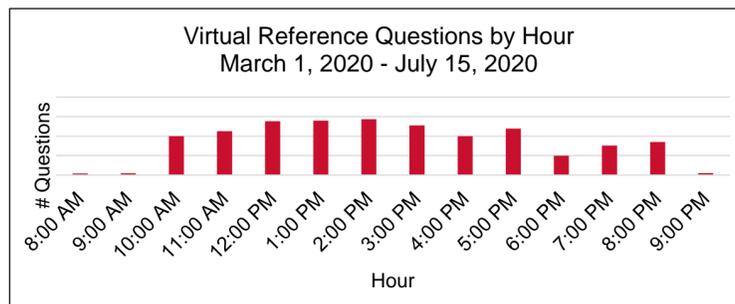
This poster presents a case study about how a strategic approach to collecting and analyzing data can be of significant value for advising the Library administration on service hours of a critical important activity, such as the virtual reference/chat service of an academic library. We demonstrate how large amounts of data from different sources such as library webpage visitors, activities from subject guide pages, chat and email transactions can be summarized and presented in a meaningful format. We also show how this data and an environmental scan of peer institution service hours can be leveraged to solicit input from our library colleagues. Although limited to our chat reference service, the findings show that an analysis of this type provides valuable results and has the potential to help make evidence-based recommendations for services hours.

Stage 1: Data Collection

In order to make evidence-based decisions, NIU Libraries gathered and analyzed large datasets pertaining to the month, date, and time of library homepage views, virtual reference submissions, LibGuide views and an environmental scan of service hours at peer institutions. These multiple data points from different sources provide more context for decision-making.

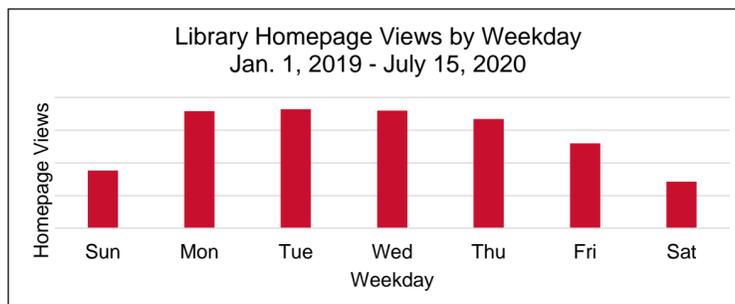
Current Service Use

Data about the current use of your service tells you how your service is being used. At NIU, we analyzed large datasets of chat reference submissions to understand what months, weekdays and hours are most used.



Potential Service Use

Looking at the potential demand for a service allows you to compare with current service use. At NIU, we know that anyone using our virtual reference service needs to access our website, so we looked at website views (by month, weekday and hour) to understand the potential demand for the service.



Environmental Scan

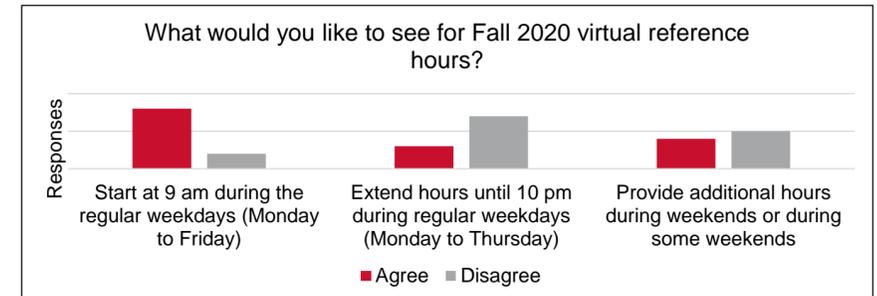
What service hours are your peers offering? At NIU, we asked 10 peer institutions to see how our virtual reference service hours compared to theirs.

Service Hours at Peer Institutions							
Monday-Thursday		Friday		Saturday		Sunday	
Start	End	Start	End	Start	End	Start	End
9 AM	10 PM	9 AM	9 PM	10 AM	9 PM	9 AM	10 PM
8 AM	11 PM	8 AM	11 PM	10 AM	6 PM	10 AM	9 PM
7 AM	1 AM	7 AM	9 PM	10 AM	7 PM	10 AM	1 PM
8 AM	10 PM	8 AM	6 PM	10 AM	6 PM	12 PM	10 PM
10 AM	9 PM	10 AM	5 PM	Closed	Closed	10 AM	9 PM
9 AM-5 PM & 6-9 PM		9 AM	5 PM	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed

24/7 service

Stage 2: Start a Conversation

Use the data collected to start a conversation with staff about service hours. At NIU, we sent out a report with a survey asking for staff opinions on service hours. The survey allows everyone's voice to be heard, and to base decisions on data and experience.



Stage 3: Make Decisions!

Collect the data from the staff survey and have a conversation which balances staff experience/opinions with the data and decide. At NIU, we decided to pilot an expansion of our service hours during key weeks in the term.

Stage 4: Evaluate

Continue to monitor the data after making the decision to ensure that you've made the best decision. At NIU, we will revisit this data before the end of the Fall 2020 term.

Conclusions

At NIU, we experimented with this method and the data available to us to make evidence-based decisions about our virtual reference service hours. This case study shows how big data can be leveraged from multiple sources to inform decision-making for service hours. By supplementing quantitative data with feedback and experiences of staff, this method uses a wholistic approach to decision-making. Overall, the method used and developed in this case study is believed to be replicable for other libraries without too much cost or time.

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