



One Library's Success Story

BY ERICA SWENSON DANOWITZ

Erica Danowitz reports on Delaware County Community College's successful, ongoing experience with **Ask Here PA**, the state's new virtual reference service. Her column provides many excellent marketing suggestions for those libraries already participating in Ask Here PA, and offers an inside view for those considering participation.

Ask Here PA is interested in having more academic libraries participate, but a library does not need to contribute to the service in order to link to it. The Ask Here PA Web site states, "Pennsylvania libraries and organizations are welcome to use our logo for linking to the Ask Here PA service from their Web sites and for other promotional, noncommercial purposes." The advantages of participating in the service are many; for starters, participating libraries have their own unique URL "gateway" that tracks usage. Visit <http://askherepa.org/participant.htm> for more information on "How libraries participate" and <http://askherepa.org/participant-libraries.htm> for a current list of participating libraries.

— Linda Neyer, editor of *It's Academic* and member of Ask Here PA

In the fall of 2006, Delaware County Community College (DCCC) joined **Ask Here PA**, the new statewide collaborative virtual reference service. As Vince Mariner, the virtual reference service coordinator, wrote in this column in September 2006, Ask Here PA is more than just "live chat." Ask Here PA provides patrons of all ages with information and answers to reference questions — free of charge — 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Prior to starting my position at DCCC, I provided virtual reference for three years at another institution, so I immediately recognized the benefits of joining this service. With the support of the library director, DCCC librarians collaborate to contribute staff time in exchange for participation. Since joining the service in October 2006, patron use and feedback have been very positive.

Background on DCCC Library

Founded in 1967, Delaware County Community College's main campus is located outside of Philadelphia in Media. The college also has four branch campuses located in both Delaware and Chester counties, and other sites where DCCC classes are held. During the 2006 fall semester, 10,627 full- and part-time students were enrolled in classes at all campuses and in online distance education courses. Statistics show steady, continuing growth in enrollment at the branch

campuses. Despite this growth, the college only has one library, located at the main campus. Students at branch campuses are served by learning resource centers that provide access to selected materials, and to classrooms where librarians at the main campus teach library classes via videoconference. Librarians from the main campus also visit these satellite campuses a few days each semester to offer reference assistance. The library strives to provide as many online resources as possible; however, meeting the reference needs of DCCC students at branch campuses remains a challenge. The DCCC librarians hoped that joining the Ask Here PA service would not only enhance library services for main campus students, but also better serve the reference needs of students located at other campuses.

Training and Scheduling

Five librarians were trained on the virtual reference software used by Ask Here PA, OCLC's QuestionPoint product. Training included an overview of the Ask Here PA service; best practices to use when assisting patrons virtually; a software demonstration; and hands-on practice sessions during which the librarians took turns playing the role of librarian and patron. After the initial training session, the librarians continued to practice with the software for three weeks before "going live."

For busy librarians juggling workdays that include library instruction sessions, staffing the “face-to-face” reference desk and working evening hours, scheduling our Ask Here PA service hours was the biggest issue. To facilitate the process, times were chosen that would conflict least with library instruction sessions, and one librarian was always designated as “backup” to cover hours when a regularly scheduled librarian could not staff a shift. Having an internal backup has allowed the DCCC librarians to avoid seeking coverage from the Ask Here PA collaborative.

Marketing

Once the library was ready to join Ask Here PA, marketing the service became top priority. The library’s marketing team spearheaded the Ask Here PA publicity campaign that included announcing the launch in a variety of formats. The new service was introduced to faculty through handouts, campuswide memos and e-mails written by the library director, and during faculty meetings. Librarians advertised the service in their library instruction sessions and encouraged students to use it, especially when the DCCC Library is closed. The Ask Here PA logo was placed prominently on the library’s home page and on other parts of the library’s Web site. The service was also promoted on other pages of the college’s Web site and on the college’s internal closed-circuit digital network, which transmits to television screens throughout campus. DCCC Library bookmarks were redesigned to include the Ask Here PA logo. A large sign announcing the service was posted at the library’s entrance and posters were placed prominently around campus.

Off-Campus Marketing

By joining Ask Here PA, the DCCC librarians hoped to expand the library services available to distance learning

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students and students who attend classes at satellite sites. The Distance Education staff helped market the service to their students and faculty by adding a link to Ask Here PA to their course management software. The library staff created large promotional signs that were placed in all the off-campus learning resource centers. The library’s marketing team plans to repeat this publicity campaign at the start of each semester to target new students.

Statistics

Since October 2006, when the DCCC library joined Ask Here PA, more than 95 DCCC students have used the service. Reference questions range from finding books and articles on a topic, to help with citing sources, to finding statistics. The DCCC librarians have answered over 70 questions asked by patrons from across Pennsylvania. While staffing the service, librarians monitor two separate question queues: an academic queue for patrons conducting college-level research and a public queue for patrons with more general questions. Monitoring both an academic library queue and public library queue has allowed the librarians to answer questions on an eclectic assortment of subjects, including the climate in ancient China, science fair projects, and poetry criticism.

More Academic Libraries Needed

Despite the success of Ask Here PA, the academic question queue never has much traffic. More academic libraries should consider joining the service, which can complement and expand their

capability to provide reference service. In fact, I would encourage **all** libraries in Pennsylvania to consider joining Ask Here PA. The benefits are well worth the involvement. Costing only a few hours of participation a week, contributing to this service gives reference librarians an opportunity to hone their skills in the important area of virtual librarianship. The librarians at Delaware County Community College have found this service to be a valuable addition to the library services available to their students and to the community as a whole. 

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