

E-mail Reference: Another Path to Knowing

By Maira Bundza, Central Reference

WMU Libraries has always provided reference services at desks throughout the libraries, and librarians have been available to answer questions by phone—or even by “snail mail.” However, the e-mail revolution of the 1990s created a faster, more responsive approach to anyone, anywhere, who found a spot on the computer screen to “ask a librarian.” The Central Reference Department in Waldo Library first designated a special e-mail account in the late 1990s for patron questions, and started keeping statistics in February 2000. In the beginning, only a couple of faculty librarians handled all of the questions and during the first year only 116 questions were recorded.

As the new decade and century advanced, e-mail became more and more important as did the means by which to integrate it with other reference services. The WMU staff, as did the staff in other institutions, tried various systems for e-mail reference or e-ref, as we call it. The first need was to assure that every public service staff member could monitor the system, provide prompt answers to patrons, and easily keep track of questions asked. In 2008, the current public e-ref system was implemented for the WMU Libraries. The Central Reference Department serves as a primary clearinghouse since scheduled desk staff looks at all the incoming e-ref questions, answers them, or transfers them to a department (e.g., Access Services, the Music and Dance Library, Archives and Regional History Collections, etc.) or to an individual who can respond to the query more efficiently or effectively. Periodically, in addition, e-mails are exchanged that ask for clarification of the question from the person who has asked for information. Also, on occasion, if the user is located on-campus, the librarian may request an in-library session so that the complexities of the inquiry are fully addressed.

Access to the e-ref system is found at: <http://social.library.wmich.edu/cgi-bin/ask/ttx.cgi>. More important, almost every major screen on the Libraries' site has the heading: **Ask A Librarian**. Found in obvious, eye-catching location(s) on most library screens, this link offers phone numbers, instant

messaging, and e-mail reference. The e-ref link transmits the question that then is chronologically listed on a screen that the librarian sees when first entering the system through a special login.

<input type="checkbox"/>	id	name	email	operator	subject	status	created	updated	affiliation
<input type="checkbox"/>	1999			mayhem	help me please!	Solved	11/04 15:59	11/04 17:17	WMU undergraduate student
<input type="checkbox"/>	1997			post	lost of previous checked out	Solved	11/03 21:06	11/03 21:29	WMU faculty
<input type="checkbox"/>	1999			bundes	Ecology of the Family	Solved	11/03 12:38	11/03 12:51	WMU undergraduate student
<input type="checkbox"/>	1995			bundes	question about periodical	Solved	11/03 12:31	11/03 12:51	Other
<input type="checkbox"/>	1994			knipin	Employment	Solved	11/03 09:39	11/03 10:34	WMU undergraduate student
<input type="checkbox"/>	1997			broken	How do I put a book on hold?	Solved	11/03 09:02	11/03 10:38	WMU undergraduate student
<input type="checkbox"/>	1992			their junk USB	usb	Solved	11/02 23:47	11/03 07:55	WMU undergraduate student
<input type="checkbox"/>	1991			lib access-revs	failure to receive	Solved	11/02 19:23	11/02 22:05	WMU faculty
<input type="checkbox"/>	1991			arch-collect	Reference Request	Responded	11/01 20:32	11/01 20:32	Other
<input type="checkbox"/>	1988			vandemp	Books and Gold records	Solved	10/21 22:02	11/01 19:53	WMU alumni
<input type="checkbox"/>	1999			vandemp	The Grand Design?	Solved	10/21 22:25	11/01 09:45	WMU undergraduate student

Once the question is “opened” by the reference librarian, it is “owned” by that individual who is responsible for answering the question or transferring the query to a more appropriate staff member or department. At least 80% of the questions are answered within two hours of receipt—unless the University or the Libraries is not in session. A transcript of the question and the response, including any follow-up information, is recorded and archived.

In addition to this institutional “ask a librarian” e-ref, individual librarians continue to answer questions that come to their personal e-mail accounts. This is a natural outcome of the fact that reference librarians also serve as liaisons to certain academic departments found at WMU. The liaison listing, arranged alphabetically by discipline, is found at <http://www.wmich.edu/library/liaison/> on our main site. Each entry provides a direct link to the librarian so that any user can personally e-mail, for example, laurel.grotzinger@wmich.edu if resources related to, for example, philosophy or psychology are needed. Since the Central Reference staff began tracking reference answers in an online system where all library departments participate, some departments, e.g., the Off Campus Library Services, are shown to answer almost all their questions through e-mail.

In the first half of 2010, the staff in Central Reference answered a little over half of all reference questions coming in through e-mail. Archives, Science Reference, and Off Campus Library Services answer another third. Over half the questions get answered while the librarian is working at a reference desk, but most of the rest are answered in offices, although “online” library staff continues to answer questions, in respective liaison areas, even when not physically in the WMU Libraries. More

and more often, the “reference librarian” is wherever the user has the technology to “connect.” Smart phones, tablets, and other mobile communication devices have created a virtual reference environment far beyond earlier expectations. At the same time, and somewhat contradictory, the WMU Libraries, especially Waldo Library, has ongoing and increasing demands to be open more and more hours during the periods when classes are in session—and especially during examination periods. Dual demands, physical access vs. mobile access, for differing user needs, complicate scheduling and effective responses when public services are needed.

Who uses e-mail reference? Again, from the statistics of the first half of 2010, there is an equal split between undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty. Each population accounts for a bit less than 25% of all e-ref questions. But, taking into consideration the differences in numbers of each population, we can say that faculty use this service the most, followed by graduate students, and then undergrads. This is also a popular avenue for channeling questions from people outside of the current WMU community; 5% of whom declare themselves as WMU alumni.

We have begun to track how long it takes us to answer questions, and another interesting statistic about e-ref is that these questions take much more time than the questions we answer in person, on the phone or on chat. At least 66% of e-ref queries take more than 15 minutes to answer, whereas overall, there are only 32% of the questions (phone, in person, IM) that take that much time. Of the hardest questions, those that take over 75 minutes, we answer 36% of those by e-mail, whereas, overall, only 8% of our questions are answered by e-mail.

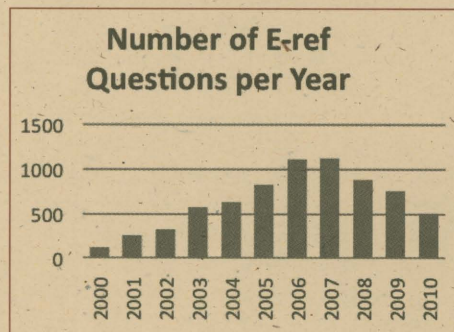
Historically, in the WMU Libraries, there was a steady growth in the use of e-mail for questions from 2000 to 2007, when the general library e-mail box received 1127 questions versus only 116 the first year. The numbers, at first, seem to be declining, but in 2009 we reestablished our chat service, and for the first few months more people were asking questions via IM (instant messaging) than e-mail. (See the article elsewhere in this issue of *Gatherings* on IM reference by students.) Now they are about equal, with a small percentage

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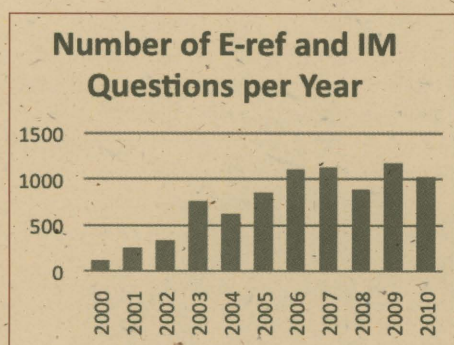
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choosing e-mail. The following charts show the use of the e-ref system over the years and e-ref combined with IM, with data for only the first 9 months of 2010.



* 2010 includes only the first 9 months



Let me conclude with some personal observations. Answering a question by e-mail is different than if we see a patron face to face, hear them on the phone, or link in chat. Although we do ask the questioners to identify themselves as undergraduates, graduates, faculty, staff, alumni, or other, we do not get the same interpersonal cues to help us work through a question and the level of sophistication needed in the answer. We do not see the glimmer of understanding in their eyes, or hear the frustration in their voices. The biggest drawback to answering e-mail questions is that we do not have the opportunity to hold a reference interview. We can ask a patron to clarify a question for us, and we may or may not get a reply, but mostly we try to interpret and answer the question as it is written.

The greatest advantage to answering an e-mail question is that we have time to think out a careful answer. Usually, when working at a reference desk, we are answering multiple questions "on the fly," and at times under pressure if there are a number of patrons needing help—or we are multi-answering. When we have taken on an e-mail question, we

have the leisure to consult with a colleague, look something up in a book, try numerous online searches, or even call an expert. Then, we can take time to formulate our answer, using full sentences rather than the chat style short hand.

Time to interview, to think, to explore, to learn, and to reflect does provide better "answers" in almost every instance—especially in a world no longer limited in time and place to local collections of print and non-print materials. The world of information is unlimited, almost unrestricted, and virtually uncensored. For the best information in a virtual world, ask a librarian by e-ref.

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WRAP Up Your Research

One of several formalized, instructional interactions offered by the Libraries' public services librarians is the Western Research Assistance Program or WRAP session. A researcher—student, faculty, or staff—works side by side with a subject librarian liaison for an extended period of time. Whether the seeker of knowledge is at the beginning stages of a quest or tying up loose ends of a significant study, an academic librarian can be of great value.

To illustrate the value of a WRAP Session to the WMU community, the following example of the efficacy of this service is provided. The collaborators were Professor Maria Perez-Stable, University Libraries, and a graduate student of Dr. Eli Rubin, History. Professor Rubin writes:

"Dear Maria,

I just met with my RA, Ryan Storr, who is helping me this semester and into next with my research for my third book on destruction in German cities in WWII. He clearly benefitted a great deal from working with you [during a 90-minute WRAP Session] and I wanted to express how grateful I am.

This is a really important part of the project and it takes an (academic) village for these kinds of studies to come together, but you really helped him out—his first week was highly productive.

Please let me know if there is any other information that I can furnish you with that would make cooperating with him easier."

[Permission to use granted by Professor Rubin.]

WRAP inquiries may be sent through **Ask a Librarian** or link to: <http://www.wmich.edu/library/ask/>. To contact your subject liaison directly, check the Library Liaison Directory at: [http://www.wmich.edu/library/
liaison/](http://www.wmich.edu/library/liaison/).