A Library Scholarship
By Sara M. Volmering, Education Library

Whether it is a dash for some last minute research, a quiet place to study before exams, or a place to relax with a good book, the University Libraries is an integral part of most students’ academic lives at WMU. Many people are needed to keep the library operating, some working behind the scenes and others working directly with the public. Student employees make up a large part of the University Libraries workforce. In twenty-four departments at four different locations across campus on day and night shifts, hundreds of student employees support library staff and faculty and keep the Libraries running smoothly.

As an essential academic service, the WMU Libraries is heavily engaged in the education of students enrolled at WMU. Articles in this and earlier issues of Gatherings describe the library staff and their services that directly and indirectly supplement and complement the WMU academic programs through many forms of information literacy. In other words, one of the primary purposes of the Libraries is to enhance each student’s skill in locating and evaluating information—in the pursuit of degrees as well as in future endeavors. At the same time, library staff members also wish to offer a more tangible support of WMU’s students. As a result, in the spring of 2010, the University Libraries Student Employee Scholarship program was implemented and first awarded to two student employees of the Libraries. Each scholarship that is awarded is a recognition and appreciation of the “good work” that has been completed as student employees and is used to support, with actual dollars, their classroom endeavors.

Initial planning for the scholarship began in November 2009 when the idea was submitted to the Library Staff Advisory Board (LSAB). After working with various departments outside the library and researching the logistics of creating such a scholarship, LSAB also met with the Executive Committee of the faculty to involve the library faculty and gain input. Additional strong support came from many areas of the Libraries. LSAB then defined the basic eligibility requirements for the scholarship and formulated a proposal.

After receiving approval from the WMU Development Office and the Libraries’ administration, the scholarship proposal was presented to the Friends of the University Libraries. The Friends of the University Libraries lent their support with a generous financial contribution and promised future funding to the scholarship. In addition to this founding contribution, donations from staff and faculty throughout the University Libraries and the related University community made it possible to offer the first two $500 awards.

Twenty student employees in various library departments applied for the first scholarships. In order to apply, students needed to meet several eligibility requirements:

- Must be a University Libraries student employee:
- Must have completed 24 weeks of student employment at the University Libraries.
- Must be enrolled at WMU in the semester following application submission (excluding summer 1/11).
- Must be in “good standing” with the University.
- Must be enrolled full-time.

Although the scholarship awards will help ease the increasing cost of higher education, the applicants are evaluated on their performance as an employee rather than their performance as a student. Because the focus of the scholarship is on performance as an employee rather than on academic success,
there is no minimum GPA needed to apply. However, students must be in "good standing" and not on academic probation; a 2.0 GPA is required.

A selection committee comprised of representatives from library staff, faculty and administration, and the Friends of the University Libraries reviews the applications and evaluates the essays and letters of recommendation in order to determine the recipients of the awards.

2010/2011 AWARDS

On April 22, 2010, the University Libraries and the Friends of the University Libraries hosted a reception to recognize the first two scholarship recipients, Maria Benson, from Technical Services, and Staci Stutsman, from Rare Books and Special Collections.

Stutsman, a senior English major, said that receiving the award was an honor and it will be helpful in her next semester. "Having the extra money will go a long way with purchasing books for next semester."

Benson, a senior English major, said that the scholarship would help ease some of the financial worries about her final year. "By being awarded this scholarship, I can focus fully on my studies without the need to compromise on buying the books required for my courses."

In addition to meeting the basic requirements noted above, applicants were required to submit a short essay and a letter of recommendation from their supervisors. The essay topic is focused on how employment at the Libraries has impacted the student's pursuit of his or her degree. The first two winners clearly articulated the value of their library experiences on their future endeavors.

"My favorite parts about working at the library are the networking opportunities it presents, as well as the incredible access to information on a daily basis," Stutsman said.

Benson said that employment at the library is great preparation for a future career and [that it] has created an interest in the book industry. "I love that my job at the library gives me responsibilities that value me as a serious employee, while at the same time respecting my needs as a student."

On Wednesday, December 8, 2010, the Friends of the University Libraries and the University Libraries hosted another reception to honor the second set of award winners of the Student Employee Scholarship, Jessica Beach of Science Reference and David McNish of Stacks. Both Beach and McNish will receive a $500 scholarship for the spring 2011 semester.

"I feel very honored and grateful for this opportunity," said Beach, a junior interdisciplinary health major. "Working at Waldo Library is honestly my dream job. I love the quiet, the smell and the fact that I can help people use the library efficiently and hopefully change their minds about coming more often."

McNish, a senior chemical engineering major, also expressed an appreciation for the people that he meets on the job.

"My favorite part of working at the library is the people. Everyone is so nice and helpful—a better group of people couldn't be found anywhere."

With ongoing financial support from the Friends of the University Libraries, as well as other donor contributions, the University Libraries will continue to award scholarships to student employees. Although the number and amount of the scholarship may vary, the scholarship will be awarded biannually, during the fall and spring semesters.

For further information about the scholarship, please contact the University Libraries administration office at (269) 387-5202. Donations to the scholarship can be made online at: www.wmich.edu/foundation/.
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 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/ltx.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.

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 email 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.grottinger@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—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 channelling 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 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 1277 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...
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.

Number of E-ref Questions per Year

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* 2010 includes only the first 9 months

Number of E-ref and IM Questions per Year

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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/.

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Instant Messaging Reference by Students

By Kate Langan, Central Reference

At Western Michigan University Libraries, virtual reference service, sometimes called chat reference, has been offered via Instant Messaging (IM) by using Meemo, a free online instant messaging program. IM reference service started in the summer of 2008 when a Meemo widget was embedded into the Libraries’ homepage found at www.wmich.edu/library. Patrons can use the IM link to connect directly to a library staff member. The computer where the Meemo client is logged in is adjacent to the main reference desk, and, from the initiation of the service, a student assistant has been assigned to be the “first responder.” Seated nearby, at the main desk, are one or two professional staff members. The decision to staff the IM system with students was deliberate in that it was originally argued that the “chat” interchange was a commonplace skill among students. Furthermore, the close proximity of professionals would provide skilled assistance when needed.

As a result of the staff and physical configuration, the reference data on chat reference for the spring semester of 2010 were not at all surprising: students handled almost 84% of all instant messaging transactions. Librarians answered only 8% and the remaining 8% were answered by paraprofessionals. These numbers are not a bad thing in and of themselves and do not indicate poor reference service. However, what the numbers do suggest is that we need to be the “first responder.”

Reference service principles should be understood and integrated into the training process.

**Millennial Students: Workers and Users.** Many of our student workers now belong to the millennial generation (also called Nexgen or Generation Y), those born roughly between 1982 and 2002. Therefore, they will be coming through the ranks at the University level for at least another decade. It is relevant that we know how to best reach them through training as information professionals.

Current theory and practice suggest that the most successful way to reach these millennial reference employees is not only to give them the HOW of performing “appropriately” with technology for a reference interaction, but also provide them the WHY. Other factors also come into play:

- While training students, supervising librarians also need to remember that the students are adults, albeit young adults.
- They want to be entertained as they learn.
- They expect a certain level of personal challenge, but work best in teams or in pairs.
- Sufficient time needs to be allotted for orientation. Orientation should have shorter modules, test and review often, and be fun.
- Assignments should be appropriate and meaningful, not wasting the student assistants’ time: team or collaborative efforts and assignments are preferred.
- They want their opinions to be heard because they have the expectation that their opinions matter.
- Millennials will respond best to an orientation program that is hands-on and moves at a rapid pace.
- Incorporating some computer-based instruction allows students to go at their own speed and acknowledges their ability to manage information.

**Results.** Based on the analysis of the IM transcripts and the knowledge of the millennial characteristics of new student...
employees in Central Reference, revised training policies regarding IM reference procedures were drawn up in the spring of 2009 and were added as a professional development opportunity mid-semester. The fall class of 2009 was the first incoming group of new Central Reference student employees who had a special session on IM reference policies and procedures built into their formal training. The training is broken down into two major sections.

**Steps 1 & 2:** Training for IM reference was initiated early in the twelve-week course, but not before formal instruction has taken place regarding reference philosophy of service and the reference interview. When ready for the IM portion of the training, the process is to walk the students through the five-part IM procedure. Breaking down the IM reference interaction into smaller steps makes it easier for the student to self-police and see if he or she is hitting all of the benchmarks for a successful IM reference interaction.

**Step 3:** Once the procedures have been introduced and the philosophical background has been explained, the students then practice, not with live IM reference interactions, but with assigned actual transcripts from archived IM sessions. Students are given several different examples of chat reference transcripts, both good and bad ones. Student trainees will use these transcripts in lieu of shadowing, but also as an actual training assignment.

The assignment is to go through the transcripts and correct them. By correcting, the student must review and make sure that the tone of the reference chat is appropriate and that the basic elements of the RUSA guidelines and "politeness theory" are being followed. Students can edit, delete or add comments to the reference transcript. Usually, they work individually and then together in pairs fulfilling an inherent need to work in groups. Also, working collaboratively will let them share ideas and learn different styles from each other. The students share their transcripts with each other, which ensures that both good and bad ideas have had a shared discussion. Students should walk away from the assignment with a stronger, more complete idea of what a successful IM reference interaction should be.

**Conclusion.** In order to guarantee the same level of quality reference service via IM as in person or through e-mail, the Western Michigan University Libraries implemented a special policy regarding IM reference and trained the students accordingly. Among other outcomes was a revised reference training manual that is distributed to new students. The IM/Chat Reference Policy and Training Guide can be accessed online in the Libraries. Contact kate.langan@wmich.edu for additional information.

The new IM reference guidelines:

- are grounded in the RUSA (Reference and User Services Association, American Library Association) standards for best practices for reference interactions;
- incorporate politeness theory, that is, strengthen skills that facilitate social interaction and affirm that all parties' interests are addressed in the reference encounter;
- support valid responses, but IM does not mean that the patron or staff member is in a hurry. We have time to slow down. A thorough session that gives users what they need is better than a hasty session where the patron exits the system still needing information; and
- identify and respond to the intricacies of computer-mediated communication while also keeping in mind generational preferences of the current student reference assistant.