At both the public and university levels, libraries “are often viewed as opportunity spaces” (Mattern, 2014). The concept of libraries as opportunity spaces is effective when considering what happens when access points, such as the physical space, are inaccessible (Mattern, 2014). When New York declared a lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, many parts of library everyday practice were stifled. The academic library centers opportunities for growth, and particularly within the State University System at SUNY New Paltz, this concept of “opportunity institution” is compounded. Libraries are not platforms but rather essential infrastructures; in physical buildings, in collections, and in digital spaces, libraries are pedagogical devices and tangible research structures (Mattern, 2017; Bennett, 2013).
Setting

The Sojourner Truth Library (STL) at the State University of New York at New Paltz (SUNY New Paltz) serves as the main access point for research support and collections. When the physical library space could no longer be relied on, staff needed to quickly recalibrate and adapt using available reference tools to communicate with and support our community during a transitional, unpredictable time. Evidence-based practice in this instance is being used to engage with the localized library community in a space that is not entirely new but experiencing entirely new circumstances.

SUNY New Paltz is a residential public university located in the Hudson Valley between New York City and Albany, with undergraduate and graduate programs in the liberal arts and sciences (SUNY New Paltz, n.d, b.). As of fall 2019, the combined full-time enrollment of undergraduate and graduate students was almost 8,000 according to the available student profile (SUNY New Paltz, n.d., a). STL serves SUNY students, faculty, staff, and the surrounding community in New Paltz.

The last typical, operational day at SUNY New Paltz was March 13, 2020. STL’s shift to fully remote services began the following week by strategizing short- and long-term plans for delivering services and support to our community virtually. STL utilized Springshare’s LibAnswers to facilitate virtual reference but was forced to reexamine and amplify how STL used these programs.

STL is supported by student workers across all departments, including circulation, interlibrary loan, tech services, special collections, and reference. Student workers play a crucial role in everyday library operations, including book repair and processing, collection maintenance, troubleshooting technology, and answering virtual or in-person reference questions. Reference work has shifted forms in the recent past, allowing for the reference desk to differ from institution to institution (Fargo, 2018). As libraries continue to push student workers to the forefront of services, their influence is not limited to only other students. In many libraries, student workers are peers of the librarians at the reference desk and should be elevated as such in the same way that the library reference environment shifts to meet information needs. It is important to trust students as experts in their experiences and skills as peers in the field of librarianship (Fargo, 2018). Academic libraries need to have the ability for both library student workers and librarians to collaborate on not only reference tasks to benefit our communities but also push the field of reference librarianship forward.

Students doing reference work are literate in the university and student needs in unique ways. The role they hold behind the reference desk responding to inquiries from other students and faculty, as well as in the classroom, allows them to experience varied levels of authority and power in higher education. The library spaces in which students are allowed power are further pushed throughout this paper and case study. At STL, the drive for more engaged student library workers also includes them in online reference spaces as well as at the desk. Student voices move beyond the temporary rotation of student labor and into a stable authoring space in these digital spaces and as parts of the evaluation of reference services. A larger power-sharing is occurring here, guided
by concepts of knowledge democracy. Localizing knowledge spaces and opening them up to share authority advances expertise in the higher education library. In this context, knowledge democracy refers to affirming and sharing knowledge created in varied forms (Hall & Tandon, 2017). Expanding authority strengthens knowledge-sharing spaces. This is a new approach to critical practice and offers a deeper commitment to student voices.

The authors of this chapter include two reference librarians and a reference student worker. Kate Bellody is the reference program coordinator and a research and education librarian at STL. As the reference program coordinator, Kate oversees the broader goals of the library’s reference services and daily operations, including the Research Help Desk (RHD), collections, and supervising student workers. Adrianna Martinez is a research and education librarian at STL. During the physical library’s closure to the public in 2020, reference work was conducted virtually with Springshare platforms, occurring both physically and virtually as we began to return after lockdown in 2021. Emily Smith is a student worker at STL. She originally worked at the library from 2010 to 2015 as an undergraduate and graduate psychology student and returned as a student worker while pursuing her second master’s degree in communication disorders. Emily has worked in every department at STL as a student worker, giving her an expansive understanding of STL and creating many opportunities to collaborate with librarians.

Previously, we relied upon physical presence to build relationships on campus and provide most reference services. In this chapter, we explore the possibility of fostering library community before the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to during and immediately following lockdown. We investigate this topic by looking at STL’s frequently asked questions (FAQs) to examine our virtual services. The FAQs are community-driven and representative of our collaborative efforts with student workers to provide services and information that evolve to meet the needs of their fellow students.

Articulate

We reflect on reference practice critically and succinctly, engaging with Schon’s (1983) concept of reflection on action and focusing on what Booth (2006) would describe as an exploration question, centering the experiences of students. This type of research in librarianship allows for the inclusion of observational evidence, data-based evidence, and professional knowledge to be measured and explored together (Booth, 2004b). For reference services, using these types of knowledge in tandem centers the importance of connection and interpersonal work in library science.

All reference student workers are essential to the success of STL. Students work at the RHD during all open hours and are trained to support questions across disciplines. Student workers begin in the circulation department to build a foundational understanding of the library before working in reference. Reference student workers are trained to understand our resources, services, and search strategies. They are guided through how to conduct a reference interview, provide informed referrals, and are encouraged to work collaboratively alongside the librarian at the desk. Their support has been crucial and constant prior to the pandemic and as we navigated its resulting challenges. The
knowledge and insight that students bring from their academic disciplines add depth to the support and services we offer.

Emily’s experience as an undergraduate and graduate student while working at the library offers the unique perspective of being both a student and worker. She has gained essential knowledge regarding searching for sources and assessing the quality and authenticity of sources from working at the RHD. Learning these skills influences her life as a student and affects interactions with her classmates. Many times, colleagues have come to her with difficulty finding research and library information. She has explained digital library resources, supplied patrons with library flyers and contact information for librarians, and shown students how to access crucial parts of our website. These students have expressed gratitude and, through self-report, have felt much more confident in their studies after learning about and using the library resources.

Student workers are, of course, students. Students who do not work in a library or research field may feel more comfortable asking students for advice and guidance. Students in Emily’s current cohort have expressed a level of comfort approaching student workers, especially those they recognize from their classes. Student workers’ experiences with and perspectives on research and library accessibility influence their peers, so it is critical that they understand and can communicate information.

Reference services informed by the perspective of individual library staff, including student workers, are essential to our functionality. This chapter demonstrates that the insights of student workers are of equal importance to librarians. We will examine the experiences of student workers at STL and analyze data from our FAQs. The FAQs, maintained by librarians and student workers, were an essential virtual platform for us during COVID-19. They allowed us to create and disseminate timely, evolving information to our community. Exploring the FAQs in tandem with student worker support, allows us to examine how we may enhance future services so that they are both collaborative and responsive.

Chat reference and online asynchronous communication between libraries and their patrons existed prior to the pandemic. Connecting individuals with tools to bridge technological barriers has been a core tenet of libraries, from pens to fax machines to chat and asynchronous web-based reference (Yang & Dalal, 2015). Digitally, only 16% of library websites used live chat software on the main website, and 31.2% featured them on significant subpages of academic libraries as a featured part of their digital presence (Yang & Dalal, 2015). At the onset of COVID-19, STL had both the library website with a link to the live chat software on the main website as well as subpages that linked to it.

The data of interest in this context utilizes the popular library software from Springshare LibApps—specifically, LibAnswers. Even in 2015, Springshare led the market for knowledge base programs in academic libraries and it continues to be used at STL (Yang & Dalal, 2015). All data work is informed by the perspective of its framework creators. The systems used to gather this data are provided by various librarians and student workers that staff the RHD. This is manual work curated via LibAnswers and analyzed by Emily. These digital tools provide us with insight into how our community engages with information, library services, and staff so that we may evolve to meet their needs.
Before 2020, STL reference librarians were available in-person and virtually, though virtual services largely supplemented in-person interactions. Librarians could be reached via email, text, question form, and phone, but the majority of these interactions were handled during a traditional in-person desk shift. STL also participated in a chat consortium with other New York State academic libraries to provide 24/7 chat service to our community. Coincidentally, STL was moving away from participating in the consortium to only use the in-house LibChat service at the time we were forced to go remote.

The FAQs supplemented in-person interactions and were used as a repository for information that may evolve or not require permanent documentation on the website. It was frequently used as a reference for staff when answering in-person questions. FAQs were maintained by the reference coordinator but could be created and updated by all librarians and select library staff. This ensured that questions included addressed topics related to all the library departments and not just reference.

In March 2020, when shifting to an entirely virtual environment, LibAnswers tools became the primary mode of contact for reference interactions. Virtual reference shifts involved monitoring the LibAnswers dashboard and LibChat. Librarians also had to incorporate these newer methods into their teaching and liaison outreach.

This shift required reimagining available resources in order to support our community during a time of uncertainty and in the absence of the physical space. The FAQs became a crucial access point during this time because they were able to be easily updated and organized to reflect changing policies and services.

Once the FAQs became a key tool for communication, Kate took on regular maintenance of the entries including adding, updating, or shadowing outdated information to avoid confusion. Specific FAQs were prominently displayed on the library homepage and they were used in outreach more intentionally during this shift. FAQs were also utilized and spotlighted within research guides as a widget or link. This kept staff from duplicating efforts and ensured accuracy and consistency in the answers we were providing across the library.

The FAQs became a reliable location for current information during an uncertain time. FAQs were added to account for new policies and processes. Or, if no new information was known but an existing service was impacted, edits were made to acknowledge this uncertainty. FAQs were also added to relay campus-wide information, such as available study spaces, when this information overlapped with reasons people may go to the library. Additionally, using the FAQs during this time ensured that library staff was communicating consistent information when answering questions remotely.

The FAQs were undergoing revisions during the transition to remote learning. At the end of 2019, a review of the existing FAQs was conducted to update them for accuracy or shadow ones that were no longer relevant. With oversight from the reference coordinator, student workers were an integral part of this process. Each student would work on the review during their shift and contribute feedback in a shared Google Doc. Phases of the review included going through over 100 FAQ entries to review content and links and researching up-to-date information. They were also given the opportunity to contribute ideas for FAQs that they believed would be beneficial to fellow students. This evaluation
process continued into March 2020. Student workers were able to work remotely during this transitional time so FAQ evaluation could move forward and position librarians to use the FAQs more effectively in a critical moment.

During the initial process of reviewing and editing FAQs (beginning in November 2019), 38 have been created and 82 have been updated. Updates range from changing links or instructional content to reviewing the FAQs for accessibility. Fifteen FAQs were created from March to August 2020 to address the virtual environment. Altogether, from March 21, 2020, to November 4, 2021, 31 new FAQs were created.

Assemble

Reference services are about connection and communication. Utilizing mixed methods research allows for a combination of both quantitative and qualitative evidence to provide a more comprehensive overall understanding. By using localized statistics, our evidence sourcing is focused on building documented evidence and ethnographic reactions to action in our reference practice. Statistics, librarian observation, anecdotal evidence, feedback from the user community, and documentation are all parts that are considered in this space.

Library observation, anecdotal evidence, and feedback from the user community in this context are evidence from the traditional in-person reference experience. It is expressed through the perspectives of librarians behind the reference desk, those conducting consultations, and those teaching instruction sessions for students, faculty, and staff members. This chapter particularly focuses on the perspective of library student workers. There is an element of tacit knowledge that reference student workers bring to the FAQs due to their diverse embodied experiences as members of the STL community. The labor that student workers do in the reference department at STL is invaluable.

Localized evidence sourcing focuses on building document evidence and interaction with our shifting practices. This evidence is a part of the larger and continued experience at the reference desk. Including the 20 months before the onset of the pandemic facilitates a full exploration of the events and library engagement at that time. This evidence source can grow, change, and adapt as necessary.

The FAQs themselves are a form of documents in EBPL evidence and are created out of feedback from the user and in discussions with student workers. They are also created by librarian observation and anecdotal evidence of library staff on use of library space, database issues, and the observed issues that arose from the pandemic and resulting shutdown of the entire campus to student access. The combined tacit knowledge of reference library students and the professional expertise of the reference librarians overseeing and contributing to the FAQs strengthens its value.

We worked collaboratively to define specific questions on parts of the reference service. The statistical evidence was gathered and assembled according to each question. This was done within the context of the larger question we were interested in and with the awareness of collection after the period of analysis.
All virtual and in-person data were retrieved from Springshare LibAnswers software. In-person interactions were manually entered into Springshare LibAnswers by librarians and students working at the Research Desk while virtual interactions (emails, texts, LibAnswers question form submissions, Live Chat interactions) and FAQ page views were automatically recorded in the LibAnswers data analytics. Live Chats included both AskUs 24/7 and LibChat; the AskUs interface was retired in January 2020, and, at that point, LibChat (through LibAnswers) was utilized for all live chat purposes. User interactions with the FAQ pages whereby patrons actively searched for keywords, were obtained through saved Query Spy data, now called Query Analytics in LibAnswers (Zivkovic, 2007). IBM SPSS Statistics Version 25 software was used to conduct all statistical analyses (IBM, 2021).

Our first analysis was conducted using an Independent Samples t test because there were two discrete groups of a single independent variable and a continuous numeric dependent variable. Results showed significant differences in the number of page views in two specified groups: the 20-month range before March 2020 and the 20-month range after March 2020. Data from March 2020 was included in the “After COVID” group since more days in March were spent navigating the pandemic following closure. Additional analyses were conducted that excluded March 2020, which will be discussed later. Results from the independent t test revealed significant increases in FAQ page views after the COVID-19 pandemic closures ($t(38) = 2.086, p = .044$).

The second analysis conducted assessed how the number of FAQ page views changed when grouped by semester including one semester prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic closures (fall 2019), one semester during the initial shutdown period (spring 2020), and two semesters after onset (fall 2020 and spring 2021) (see Figure 7.1). Fall semesters included data from August through December while spring semesters included January through May. Summer semesters were not used in this analysis since considerably fewer students enroll in summer courses compared to the primary fall and spring academic semesters (SUNY New Paltz, n.d., c). Results from a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed significant differences with a large effect size in FAQ page views across selected semesters ($F(3,16) = 5.008, p = .012, \omega = .62$). Post Hoc Tukey HSD test results revealed significant differences specifically between the fall 2019 and fall 2020 semesters ($p = .023$) as well as between the spring 2020 and fall 2020 semesters ($p = .037$).

The last statistical analysis conducted examined various types of interactions with reference services as well as FAQs. In-person interactions, virtual submissions (texts, emails, live chat interactions, and LibAnswers Question Form submissions), and interactive experiences with the FAQ section were grouped per semester (fall 2019, spring 2020, fall 2020, and spring 2021) and analyzed using three One-Way ANOVAs. Results revealed significant effects for in-person ($F(3,16) = 14.361, p < .001$) and virtual interactions ($F(3,16) = 3.451, p = .042$) as well as interactive FAQ experiences ($F(3,16) = 4.775, p = .015$) (see Figure 7.2). Post Hoc Tukey HSD test results revealed in-person interactions demonstrated significant differences specifically between fall 2019 and spring 2020 semesters ($p = .046$), fall 2019 and fall 2020 semesters ($p < .001$), and fall 2019 and spring
2021 semesters (p < .001). Interactive experiences with FAQs, defined by patrons utilizing the search bar in some capacity and using specific keyword searches within the FAQ database, showed significant differences specifically between spring 2020 and fall 2020 (p = .016) and fall 2020 and spring 2021 (p = .045). In line with our running narrative, the fall 2020 semester (the first full semester back directly following COVID-19 closures) displayed marked differences in library use via the FAQ section in addition to virtual and in-person interactions. Virtual interactions showed a steep increase specifically between the fall 2019 and fall 2020 semesters (p = .032).

After reviewing the data, it became obvious that online reference points were heavily used when the library was closed. There were several components that comprised the “virtual” category, each sub-variable was then parsed apart to examine exactly which virtual option displayed the most dramatic differences across semesters. Follow-up ANOVAs were conducted using the number of text messages, emails, LibAnswers Question Forms, and Live Chat interactions as individual dependent variables. Results showed the Live Chat ($F(3,16) = 5.887$, $p = .007$) and Text message ($F(3,16) = 3.180$, $p = .053$) fields were utilized significantly differently across semesters (see Figure 7.3). The Text message variable is being marked as significant because when rounded to two decimal places, the $p$ value is .05, which is the cutoff level designating significance (Field, 2005). Specifically, Live Chat interactions showed significant increases between the fall 2019 and fall 2020 semesters ($p = .005$) and fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters ($p = .045$). Text message interactions approached significance between fall 2019 and fall 2020 semesters but were not statistically significant ($p = .066$).

**Figure 7.1**
FAQ page views separated across four semesters.
**Figure 7.2**
Virtual vs. in-person interactions over the course of four semesters.

**Figure 7.3**
Visual depiction of different virtual components which comprise the “virtual” category.
Assess

This work utilizes the UK Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) framework and TAPUPAS for assessing evidence (Long et al., 2006; Pawson et al., 2003). This framework for weighing evidence has been highlighted in Koufogiannakis and Brettle (2016) as a method that may be applied to library science. Anecdotal knowledge is paramount to our main access point of student needs and utility. This value is highly transparent in input but may be biased because this perspective only represents students who feel comfortable visiting the library’s in-person access points. A significant form of evidence in this work is library reference student tacit knowledge. Emily contributes both tacit and anecdotal knowledge. Emily studied statistics used in quantitative psychological experimental research, taught statistics for two years as a graduate teaching assistant, and has analyzed data while working in two different research laboratories.

Student tacit evidence is transparent and accurate to their experience and other students around them—a key utility. The population of students interested in reference work may be more engaged in the library than the average student population, making it possible that their input is more literate than the general population. Both forms of evidence are accessible and specific to this localized work.

The FAQs themselves are document evidence built from anecdotal and tacit evidence. This source of evidence is not only accessible and accurate but also sustainable in sourcing, beyond the TAPUPAS framework. The FAQs fulfill the purpose of a stable access point for information for users and hold data that are specific to the library community looking for reference services digitally.

The localized statistical evidence in this mixed methods research are specific, accurate, and transparent perspectives on actual usage beyond the perspectives of individuals where engagement in library reference services may be higher. One pitfall in utilizing this form of evidence is that in assessing these localized statistics, it may be less accessible to understand because it reaches beyond the standards of EBLP and into the field of statistical analysis.

The first statistical analysis conducted examined whether the number of views of the FAQ section changed before COVID compared to afterward. We hypothesized there would be differences, considering that the campus had switched from largely in-person courses and services to completely virtual in March 2020.

An independent t test was employed to evaluate how FAQ page views change (if at all) before compared to after the onset of COVID-19 on campus. An independent t test was used instead of a dependent-means t test because the data repository used does not possess information showing whether the same people viewed FAQ pages across all pertinent months; it is plausible that entirely different groups of people accessed the FAQ pages due to turnover rates of students.

When the sample size was increased to include 22 months’ worth of data before and after COVID-19, results were insignificant ($t(42) = .988, p > .05$). The 21st month prior to the onset of COVID was deemed to be an outlier because it’s greater than two times
the mean (Field, 2005, p. 78). As per Field's (2005) guidance, this data point was excluded from the analysis, and only 20 months’ worth of data before and after COVID were used. Insignificant results were found when March 2020 was excluded from the analyses (t(38) = 1.513, p > .05). Because March 2020 marked the beginning of many changes, we hypothesized that page views increased at the initial onset of the pandemic closures, which remained high but then leveled off later as students and staff alike became more adjusted to intermittent educational modifications. Keeping March 2020 data in the analysis was relevant because it marked the initial need for and appreciation of digital services and virtual information acquisition.

In analysis 2, significant differences between the fall 2020 semester and fall 2019 and spring 2020 semesters were noted. We hypothesized that because the fall 2020 semester was the first traditional semester back directly following the COVID-19 closures, more students, staff, faculty, and community members were actively searching through the FAQs to see if there were any major changes. It is also possible that by the fall 2020 semester, students, faculty, and staff became accustomed to utilizing online resources from other facets, as many organizations optimized their virtual presence out of necessity. Future qualitative research should assess personal reasons for the increased reliance on the FAQ forum.

Since significant differences were found among virtual and in-person realms, assessing differences among various virtual components became an important topic of interest. Text messages and live chats displayed the greatest increases in use across semesters, suggesting a heavier reliance on these forms of virtual communications. The “Email” subgroup is composed of emails that were sent through the library website, rather than students reaching out to library staff privately. It is suspected that private emails to librarians and staff directly also increased dramatically; however, comprehensive data on professional private email use does not exist at this time. A future study whereby librarians and staff are asked about their personal experiences leading up to, during, and following the COVID shutdown, is recommended to assess the overall nature of communication.

Agree

Reflecting on the results of this project provides clear indicators of where and how the library has reached its community. It is clear that the investment in virtual tools allowed the library to be more consistent and approachable. Students are still utilizing these digital contact points. This expansion of access still allows community members to interact and foster relationships with librarians and library workers. As our library community becomes more familiar with these digital services, and the face-to-face spaces become accessible again, these virtual spaces will rise in importance as a primary access point. In this process, there was a clear shift in the questions asked, what information is accessible through the library, and where it is located. The digital reference space will remain a layer of transparency iteratively created and consumed by the community.

The collaborative nature of this project makes reference librarians and a graduate student equals. The labor of student workers has been vital in academic libraries and
academia at large. This benefits campus administration’s efforts to invest less in permanent, full-time positions. The work that has been done by students brings in a level of expertise that may allow for a generative exploration of their future at SUNY New Paltz, as students and employees. Collaboration between librarians and students at the reference desk will continue to shape how we build and reflect on reference services.

**Adapt**

This is the first time that statistical analysis has been a part of reference services in the digital space locally at STL. The structure and impact of this evidence represent perspectives of interest in a cyclic evaluation. The work done in digital reference continues to be relevant in reaching the STL community. Additionally, in the summer of 2021, Emily revamped an FAQ Zine to include several library updates reflecting COVID-19 changes. This zine was distributed among campus orientation tours, research-based classes, and at the RHD for students and community members alike. This evidence allows us to think about the implications of digital reference continuing to be a major access point in reference services. There is potential for a more nuanced view of library reference services, which includes this asynchronous access point in a more elevated way.

Analysis and evaluation of the FAQs will inform future services and assessment practices at STL. This analysis does not account for the many interactions that librarians and library staff had with students outside of LibAnswers. This suggests an area for future exploration and assessment regarding how patron-staff interactions have evolved with the enhancement of virtual services and resources due to COVID-19. There are also opportunities to redefine assessment within the library community by utilizing data-driven evidence-based practice. Collecting data through software (e.g., LibAnswers) allows librarians to quantitatively assess which facets are utilized, the extent to which they are utilized, and which aspects require improvement. The data will shape the library experience and opportunities for information access. Evidence-based practice has provided structural stability and holistic engagement with digital reference work, encouraging the continued growth of reference services at STL.

**Reflections on Lessons Learned**

This work has tested the theoretical concept of opening up library criticism from a different type of expertise. It has been successful because it allowed for power to be shared in an iterative way, elevated student expertise, and used this shared knowledge to gain new perspectives. Our FAQs amplify the voice of students and the library community in real time. Student-worker perspectives are vital for librarians to learn about academic needs and issues facing our students. We may expand on this practice to become a true space for knowledge exchange by investigating other platforms that may benefit from student expertise. Our findings are a valuable tool for staff to advocate for adequate compensation and recognition of students. This process of reflection and critique enables us to end this work in a state of creation (Hall & Tandon, 2017). We have an opportunity to build out
a digital presence that centers on sharing authority and valuing localized knowledge and expertise within the library community as peers in the pursuit of knowledge.

References


