

A COLLEGE STUDENT'S DREAM: A REFERENCE LIBRARIAN 24/7 AT THE CLICK OF A MOUSE

A college student needs information for a paper, but the library isn't open, or it's almost impossible to get there. Today, the answer is an online reference librarian available 24/7. OK! Now, how do we do it?

The Alliance Library System (ALS) wanted to acquire not one, but several college reference librarians, to help college students with class assignments and general reference questions. As usual, the problem was money. Putting all its grant writing experiences together and knowing it had a first class idea on its hands, (ALS) set about drafting a proposal to provide round the clock reference service seven days week. In the spring of 2001, the Illinois State Library, administrator of federal Library Services Technology Act (LSTA) funds, awarded ALS a grant for \$69,500 for the demonstration project.

For their innovative and collaborative approach to the project, eight college libraries were chosen to participate. Both two-year community colleges as well as public and private four year institutions are taking part in what is thought to be the first of its kind in the collegiate environment. Running through the 2001-02 academic year, the service can potentially impact more than 41,000 students with 24/7 reference service. A qualified reference librarian is on duty at any given time. The impact and extent of usage will determine the need for a continuous 24/7, reference service, once the demonstration period is over. Another element in helping determine the overall value of the program is a 10 question user satisfaction survey.

The "Ready for Reference" project was developed through a consortium of libraries that utilizes online research assistance of a trained reference librarian available at any time. Mary-Carol Lindbloom, Project Director at the ALS said, "this is the first college effort in the world and we are really excited about it. This will meet users at their point of need. There will be a real flesh and blood librarian behind the screen," she said. "What it means is, you can go online anytime of the day or night and talk with a question or problem and talk to a real person, a real librarian." Lindbloom said about 200 'hits' a day were recorded for the month of September, "however, " she said, schools are just starting to gear up for the academic year and September is traditionally one of the slower months."

To access the service, users must select an icon on the Web site of a participating library in the ALS system. While the service is free and there is no user ID or password required, users will be asked to state their affiliation before receiving assistance. Librarians will answer reference questions drawing on a wealth of electronic databases available only through libraries.

“Non-traditional college students can benefit from this service to,” Lindbloom said, “making use of it from their home or place of business. On campus students, faculty and staff can benefit as well. The service compliments traditional reference service, but does not replace it. Sometimes questions cannot be handled online.

“If the service shows promise beyond the initial demonstration period,” she said, we would like to expand it to all elementary and secondary schools within the Alliance Library System.”

The service adheres to the **Library Bill of Rights** and takes specific measures to ensure that every users privacy is upheld at all times

9FOR FURTHER INFORMATION REGARDING THIS GRANT CONTACT: MARY CAROL-LINDBLOOM, ALLIANCE LIBRARY SYSTEM 845 BRENKMAN DR., PEKIN, IL., 61554-1593 309-4110 add QUINCY OFFICE & E-MAIL