

The Little Box in the Corner: Chat Widgets Offer Safe and In-Depth Reference

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DYLAN DELOE (he/him) works at Blue Mountain Community College (BMCC) as a Library and Learning Support Assistant. He just graduated with an Associate's degree of Applied Sciences in Agriculture Production from Blue Mountain. Initially, he pursued this as a foundation for his dream of operating tea fields and/or a tea house, but he has been won over lately by other passions in libraries and political activism. He's now looking for ways to advance in those fields in a more moderate climate outside of eastern Oregon's deserts. He is the primary author drafting the in-progress textbook affordability plan for the institution and has lobbied on behalf of student interests with the state legislature. He plays video games, enjoys takeout, and hikes in green spaces with beautiful views.



ASHLEI EMMONS (she/her) studied at Willamette University and has an Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer degree from Blue Mountain Community College, as well as a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Portland State University. She has worked mainly in libraries—including the Blue Mountain Community College Library—since her time as a student worker, but currently she is the Learning Management System Technologist (also known as the Canvas administrator) at BMCC. She considers herself a lifelong gamer and a technology enthusiast. Writing has always been one of her passions. She lives in her childhood home with her two cats, Cheddar and Bugs, who are the purrfect companions for this journey we call life.

Those of us working in libraries, including university and college libraries, know the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light. However, we also know that many (if not all) of these challenges existed pre-pandemic and will continue to exist when we have reached a post-pandemic future. Issues of connectedness and access to services—and to

people—will continue to be a concern for any institution aiming for improved equity and outcomes for those they serve. Blue Mountain Community College (BMCC) in Pendleton, Oregon, implemented LibChat, an online live chat service made for libraries and hosted by Springshare. Since its implementation in April 2020, LibChat has already assisted the BMCC Library and its wider community with these issues, as it applies to everything from internal communication, flexible work schedules and environments and, of course, response to student, faculty, staff, and community needs. Additionally, LibChat can continue to assist with these issues as we move forward and evolve with our community and its needs.

Coworker Communication

While BMCC adopted LibChat mainly for the purpose of reaching students and community members who could not interact with us in person—a goal we wished to achieve even pre-pandemic—we found an even more impactful use for the software: keeping in touch with each other as a cohesive library team. When present in the physical library space, it was always easy to simply walk the few feet to someone’s office to ask a question or have a conversation. However, once we were working from different locations, that ease of connection was not as naturally present. One could always use email, but being asynchronous, that form of communication always felt a bit disjointed.

This was where LibChat really shone for us. Rather than sending a chain of disjointed emails, in which multiple people may be responding at once and responses may be missed, instead we could send quick, brief chat messages. LibChat allowed us to send images and links, and we could easily plan meetings or get needed information on the spot. For those of us working on projects together, collaboration became much more manageable and much less confusing. When tasked with a large project to update the knowledge base for a school-wide chat bot—a process we had to do multiple times within a few weeks, due to website and link changes—we were able to swiftly coordinate our efforts and avoid duplicating our work, rather than hoping everyone caught emails in time. And this was all with a library team of less than 10 people, including student workers. The benefits, if applied well, could be even greater for larger library teams.

While allowing the BMCC Library team to stay connected with one another, LibChat has also provided a way to keep BMCC as a whole more connected. When one of the BMCC Library team members moved to the Distance Education department, that team member remained on LibChat to stay connected with the library team and improve department-to-department collaboration and workflows, whether working from home or from the main BMCC campus.

In addition, BMCC’s Tech Hub—a faculty-led group aiming to improve technological solutions and connection at BMCC—has access to LibChat and has considered expanding its use to yet more departments, which could improve our campuswide operations in the future.

On top of the benefits of having this easy form of collaboration, we also had an easy way to stay in touch as people. During a time when everyone felt isolated and many faced mental health issues, this was invaluable. It was simple to check in on everyone, share a joke or interesting video, or discuss the hard things we were all dealing with and seeing in the news. We could also easily communicate the need for breaks or even to take time off when issues arose. To top it all off, we were able to easily plan parties via LibChat, including a Zoom Halloween party and a Zoom baby shower. While chatting over the internet

has never been the same as chatting in person, it felt like we really were still a team, despite being spread across our little town.

Work-From-Home Option for Students

One of the issues BMCC had never foreseen, and therefore never prepared for, was the need to keep students employed during a time when they couldn't physically come to the school. For many departments, the nature of the work meant many student workers were laid off or temporarily unable to work during the pandemic. However, for the library, LibChat provided a way for student workers to "watch the front desk" while working on projects they could do from home. We used LibChat to assign tasks for updating documents or working with library staff on virtual book club activities. Student workers could easily ask questions, share their ongoing work, or request their next tasks or projects.

Without this way to both collaborate with students and maintain a connection with the community during work hours, the library would have had difficulty maintaining student positions, much like other departments in the school. For some of our student workers, maintaining their positions with the library was the only way to ensure they could continue their education, and it provided a much-needed connection during an isolated time. Student worker, Dylan DeLoe—co-author of this article—echoed many of the benefits of utilizing LibChat for work-from-home options. "I didn't have to feel alone. And minimizing the risks of the pandemic by working from home felt good as a baseline, just in terms of taking care of myself and my family. The flexibility it offered was a bonus."

We were able to meet the needs of our diverse group of student workers and ensure that they were able to continue earning work experience and financing their educational goals. LibChat can have an additional positive impact on equity by bringing access to those who cannot drive, have mobility issues, have busy lives, or live on the outskirts of our wide service area—whether they are our library student workers or the fellow students and community members they serve.

Research Questions are the Norm in Chat

Not everyone has time to sit in the library to do their research, and with the steady proliferation of personal computers and laptops in many homes—and especially in those homes in a socioeconomic situation that enables the pursuit of higher education—many opt for more flexible options. This most impacts those reference questions that often take the longest, whether they are asked in person or not. Looking more closely at the kinds of questions the library received over the course of the pandemic and comparing them to questions received after returning, in-depth research reference questions occurred at the same frequency during both periods and were almost exclusive to the chat service.

We cannot compare our usage of LibChat itself pre-pandemic and during lockdown and onward, as we did not implement LibChat until one month into the pandemic. However, we can see that students are electing to use the chat service rather than come into the library space for the same assistance. In fact, we have witnessed students already in the library space using LibChat to get their answers rather than approaching the desk. We have not collected student feedback to assess why this pattern is occurring or whether it is the best option for our students, but that is one area for further exploration as we move forward with the service.

Research help has included answering questions about osteopenia (bone density), the history of hacky sack, and the effects of a broken heart and how to fix it (which was during the pandemic, of course—an apt summary of the time). Because LibChat offers the ability to switch between internal (staff-to-staff) chat and patron chat, that means any staff member can quickly crowdsource an accurate response from the whole team (whether you need an expert at hacky sack or breaking hearts).

These examples aren't just pulled from thin air, either; LibChat integrates directly with the other Springshare products to track the kinds of questions the library receives, when they receive them, and who answers each one. This further informs effective scheduling and training of our team.

Further research shows correlation between positive patron responses and the chat option generally as well (Dempsey, 2019). Each example question presented here is a real question asked by a real student or faculty member, because LibChat allows us to pull metadata in beautiful Microsoft Excel spreadsheets for any kind of analysis we aim for. And it isn't limited to in-depth questions, either.

Quick Faculty Questions and Basic Reference

Since returning to campus and the fluid classroom dynamic associated with in-person learning, and having attained an affinity for LibChat over the course of online classes, students and faculty feel especially adept at rapid online interactions. They quickly reach out for a library card number, for example, or for a password to access library databases. Where an email just wouldn't guarantee the same reply speed, hosting live chat monitoring on a circulation desk computer or in library staff offices can guarantee incredible results. Leave it open for the day and respond whenever you are "dinged." These faster questions also included:

- "How do I contact financial aid?"
- "Are there laptops available for checkout still?"
- "Do you have tutors available for [course]?"
- "Is there coffee on campus?"

No question is too big or small to bring to our online chat, and with LibChat's help, the BMCC Library can help people find the answers they are looking for.

While we have limited feedback from faculty on the impact LibChat has had for them, we know that some faculty have been impressed by the service. BMCC's Tech Hub—the faculty-led technology solutions group—became familiar with the service's basic functions during conversations with library staff. They decided quickly to implement LibChat as one way to get connected with BMCC staff and placed the link where students could easily find it. So far, only library and Distance Education staff are active responders via LibChat at BMCC, but they are able to act as human door greeters to reassure students and send them on to the resources they need. Ideally, more departments will be incorporated into the service in the future.

Good for Our Large Service Area

While LibChat serves as an access point for BMCC Library service, our chat widgets are also the only live chat widgets available for help on the college's website. They are in visible locations: next to the student email login widget and the registration and financial aid

self-service portal (named WolfWeb, in honor of the Timberwolves mascot), as well as on the main library page and in nearly all of our LibGuides (see Figure 1).

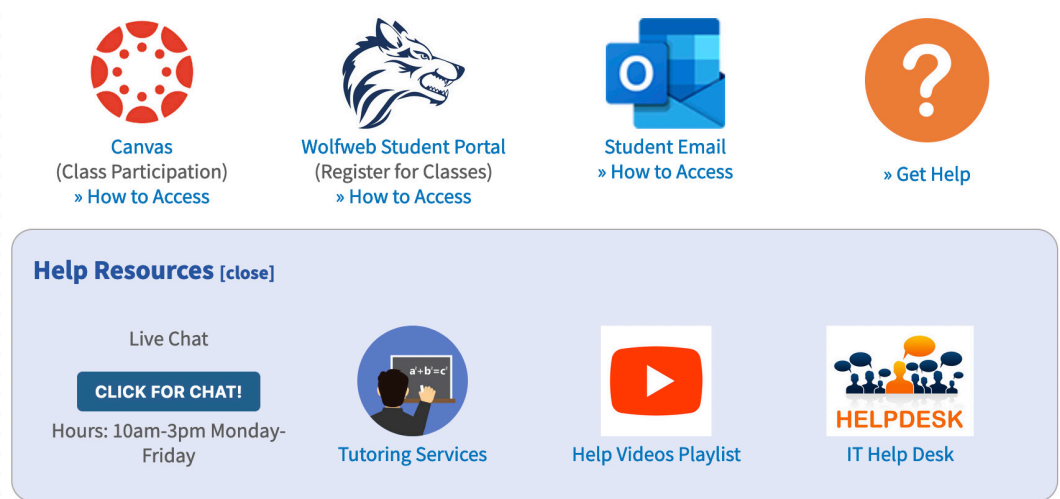


Figure 1. The LibChat widget appears in the lower-left corner of the first screen on the college’s Current Students web page.

This strategy of wide implementation means we answer any and all directional questions—not just for library services, but to lead students to on-campus resources like financial aid, tutoring, the food pantry, the health and wellness center, and the other campuses that cover nearly 18,000 square miles between them. The large service area is not matched by having separate libraries and staff in each satellite campus, leaving students wanting for options that can connect them with services that libraries often provide.

Live chat is a previously unavailable service for students in those hard-to-reach rural areas, as well as those whose lifestyle, socioeconomic situation, or ability simply doesn’t allow for travel to our central campus. Having live chat at all is an improvement because more options mean more access points for the information students are seeking. In continuing our use of LibChat, we hope to gather more information about how this new option has served our students. This will improve our understanding of the real equity results LibChat has had, as well as the ways in which we can improve its equity impact for our institution in the future.

The Future of LibChat at BMCC

As we move forward into a post-pandemic future, it is easy to see the ways in which the BMCC Library and the wider BMCC community can continue to use LibChat to positive effect. All these uses—improved coworker communication; upgraded access for students, staff, faculty, and the community; enhanced responses to in-depth research questions and quick reference information; and more equitable access for our large service area—continue to be relevant.

We're also considering how best to add response fields that allow us to collect demographic information about those we serve through LibChat in order to ensure equitable access for all in the community and to address areas where we fall flat.

In addition, the BMCC Library—which is evolving into the Library and Learning Hub—is developing a Student Tech Help Desk. This desk will provide basic technological help for students, faculty, and staff, and will also assist with the checkout and management of laptops and other applicable equipment. We hope this will be an opportunity for students to gain important experience and maintain employment while in school, and the service will be accessible both on the Pendleton campus and via LibChat.

We are confident that more departments will agree to integrate LibChat into their service cycle to further enhance student access. In combination with the Student Tech Help Desk, this could create a strong network through which our students can receive the help they need.

Continued advancements in equipment and student connectivity will be the primary path forward to expanding access to services like the library—via LibChat—and Blue Mountain Community College as a whole. Whatever the next moves are for this service, the library will be leading the way.

For more information about BMCC's implementation of LibChat, feel free to reach out to the co-authors.

Reference

Dempsey, P. (2019). Chat reference referral strategies: Making a connection, or dropping the ball? *College & Research Libraries*, 80(5), 674–693. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.80.5.674>

