

Jodi Shepherd and Irene Korber

# How do I search for a book?

## Implementing LibAnswers at your library

**W**ith 1,200 institutions worldwide currently using LibAnswers, it is likely that most librarians have at least heard of the popular knowledge base software from Springshare.<sup>1</sup> In fall 2012, the Meriam Library at California State University-Chico jumped on the bandwagon and began using LibAnswers as their “Ask A Librarian” module for digital reference services. After one year of use, the librarians are very satisfied with the implementation and use of LibAnswers. Since implementation, several libraries have contacted the Meriam Library Reference and Instruction Department with questions regarding set up procedure, use of chat and Short Messaging Service (SMS-texting), interaction with OCLC’s Question Point (QP), and other reference features of LibAnswers. This article provides an overview of how LibAnswers was implemented, and is intended to answer questions for other libraries considering adopting LibAnswers.

### LibAnswers

LibAnswers is a reference tool that provides an easy-to-navigate public interface and an intuitive yet robust behind the scenes component. While several aspects of LibAnswers are unique, one of the highlights is the ability to create a knowledge base of library questions and answers. When combined with Springshare’s LibChat and SMS add-on modules, LibAnswers offers a centralized system for virtual reference transactions.<sup>2</sup>

Every “Ask A Librarian” link from the Meriam Library website goes to our customized LibAnswers landing page. On this page, patrons find the knowledge base, featured questions and answers, a topic word cloud,

the chat button, and additional options for contacting reference.<sup>3</sup> The library’s LibAnswers administrator creates accounts for librarians and/or staff that allow individuals to answer knowledge-base questions, chat, and text messages.

### Knowledge base and reference

The LibAnswers knowledge base is populated with librarian-created and patron-submitted questions. Librarian-created questions are particularly useful for populating the knowledge base when LibAnswers is first launched, and include commonly asked library questions such as, How do I check out a book? How do I search for a peer reviewed journal? and How late is the library open?

To search the knowledge base, patrons enter text into the search box on the LibAnswers landing page. As patrons enter text, potential questions are suggested in a drop down menu, allowing patrons to view existing questions as they type. If the patron does not select one of the dropdown questions, a list of possible knowledge-base questions, based off of the patron’s search, is provided. If a satisfactory answer is not found, or if there are no questions that match the terms entered, the patron is prompted to e-mail their question via a LibAnswers form for their question to be answered by a librarian. Alternatively, patrons are able to select a topic from the word cloud

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to view all questions associated with a specific topic. Topics are created by librarians and are associated with question-and-answer pairs. Currently there are 29 topics in the Meriam Library's topic word cloud, including Library 101, Books, and For Faculty.

At the Meriam Library, the responsibility of answering walk up, phone, knowledge base, chat, and SMS questions falls to the librarian at the reference desk. When a librarian comes on the desk, they log into LibAnswers and answer any questions that arrive during their shift. Librarians are alerted by an audible beep when a question arrives in the LibAnswers queue. Once a librarian claims a question, they either respond to it or unclaim it. Unclaiming a question makes it available for another librarian to answer.

When answered, the patron receives an e-mail with the response. Additionally, when the librarian replies to a question they are able to decide if it will be private or public. A private answer is only viewable by librarians within LibAnswers, while a public question- and-answer pair is viewable in the



Topic Word Cloud from the Meriam Library's LibAnswers

assigned one or more topics and keywords, which provide additional indexing terms resulting in a higher likelihood of patrons finding an answer.

## Chat and text modules

The LibChat and SMS add-on modules are integrated into LibAnswers, providing centralized access for all virtual reference questions. Queries via these services appear in the same queue as knowledge-base questions, allowing for seamless coverage of all virtual services.

The LibChat module is an easy to use chat reference tool, which is capable of sending files to patrons and transferring chat sessions to other librarians. LibChat buttons are customizable, and the Meriam Library has a green "Librarian

Available" button when a librarian is logged in and a gray "24/7 chat" button when a librarian is not logged in. The gray button is set up to link patrons to Question Point, which provides 24/7 chat assistance.<sup>4</sup> We chose to have only one LibChat queue for reference, but queues can be established for any library department.

Id	Date/Time ▲	Question	Answered by	You are:	Updated
P349206	Nov 18 13, 16:28	Is there anyway to order the Maslach Burnout Inventory for a class project? Asked via System View notes	Jodi Shepherd	graduate	Nov 18 13, 16:58

A screenshot from a claimed question in LibAnswers. [View this article online for detailed images.](#)

knowledge base. We have decided to keep all questions and answers private until they are reviewed by one of the two LibAnswers administration librarians. Before making the question public, these librarians review the private questions and edit the question or answer to ensure uniformity across the Meriam Library knowledge base. Common edits include correcting the spelling in a question, removing personal names, and adding additional information to make the answer apply more broadly to patrons. Answers are also

Anyone with a LibAnswers account can be assigned to any queue, allowing a single person to simultaneously monitor multiple queues. Additional features such as canned messages and review of chat transcripts are features that we have found very useful.<sup>5</sup>

For texting, Springshare provides the library with an SMS number, which is distinct from the reference phone number and allows patrons to interact with reference solely via their phone. When a patron uses the SMS number from their phone, the question is identified

in the LibAnswers queue as “Asked via SMS.” The question is claimed and answered via the LibAnswers module and received as a text message by the patron. Answers via text message can be up to 150 characters and, if more space is needed, a second text with another 150 characters can be sent. The reference desk hours are specified in the SMS admin settings, so if a text is received when the reference desk

In addition, LibAnswers includes a “Query Spy,” which records patron’s searches of the knowledge base. The Query Spy is a useful feature to determine how successfully patrons are using the LibAnswers knowledge base. Every “question query” is recorded along with the date, IP address, result of the query, and where the question was routed from. This information allows the library to examine how

2013-03-29 10:37	132.241.247.249	find it (add) (mark as reviewed)	Clicked on How can I find peer-reviewed articles?	System	<a href="#">http://libanswers.csuchico.edu/?utm_source=researchstation&amp;utm_medium=web&amp;utm_campaign=topnav</a>	🔍	✖
2013-03-29 10:25	132.241.247.249	peer (add) (mark as reviewed)	Clicked on How can I find peer-reviewed articles?	System	<a href="#">http://libanswers.csuchico.edu/?utm_source=researchstation&amp;utm_medium=web&amp;utm_campaign=topnav</a>	🔍	✖
2013-03-29 08:49	204.100.220.2	Hi i'm doing a research on your college and i wanted to know how many libraries do you guys have on campus?	Question submitted: Hi i'm doing a research on your college and i wanted to know how many libraries do you guys have on campus?	System	<a href="#">http://libanswers.csuchico.edu/?utm_source=researchstation&amp;utm_medium=web&amp;utm_campaign=topnav</a>	🔍	✖
2013-03-29 07:43	108.76.185.230	how do I find synonyms of my topic (add) (mark as reviewed)	Question not submitted!	System	<a href="#">http://libanswers.csuchico.edu/a.php?qid=238972</a>	🔍	✖
2013-03-29 07:41	108.76.185.230	How do I narrow a topic (add) (mark as reviewed)	Clicked on How do I find articles on a particular topic?	System	<a href="#">http://libanswers.csuchico.edu/?utm_source=researchstation&amp;utm_medium=web&amp;utm_campaign=chalkboard</a>	🔍	✖
2013-03-28 18:57	68.80.209.130	I need help finding a scholarly/ peer reviewed article for my Survey of the new testament article. Can you help?	Question submitted: I need help finding a scholarly/ peer reviewed article for my Survey of the new testament article. Can you help?	System	<a href="#">http://libanswers.csuchico.edu/?utm_source=researchstation&amp;utm_medium=web&amp;utm_campaign=rs</a>	🔍	✖
2013-03-28 10:34	98.208.86.228	What is a primary source?	Direct match via auto-suggest	System	<a href="#">http://libanswers.csuchico.edu/?utm_source=discovery&amp;utm_medium=web&amp;utm_campaign=toolbar</a>	🔍	✖
2013-03-28 09:25	149.136.17.253	Is there a map of California showing areas known to have naturally occurring asbestos? (add) (mark as reviewed)	Question not submitted!	System	<a href="#">http://libanswers.csuchico.edu/?utm_source=researchstation&amp;utm_medium=web&amp;utm_campaign=topnav</a>	🔍	✖
2013-03-28 08:31	66.233.66.215	How can I find peer-reviewed articles?	Direct match via auto-suggest	System	<a href="#">http://libanswers.csuchico.edu/?utm_source=researchstation&amp;utm_medium=web&amp;utm_campaign=chalkboard</a>	🔍	✖
2013-03-27 17:28	132.241.244.38	where do I check out a book? (add) (mark as reviewed)	Clicked on Where do I go to check out a book?	System	<a href="#">http://libanswers.csuchico.edu/?utm_source=opa&amp;utm_medium=web&amp;utm_campaign=rtnav</a>	🔍	✖

Screenshot from the Meriam Library’s Query Spy. View this article online for detailed images.

is closed, an automatic and customizable text message response is sent that the question will be answered when the desk reopens. Other customizable automatic texts can be initiated by keywords in a patron’s text message and sent when the reference desk is closed. For example, if a patron sends a text with the word “hours” in the question, an automatic text could be delivered providing a URL to the library’s hours.

### Statistics and query spy

LibAnswers automatically collects a variety of statistics, including monthly, weekly, daily, and hourly data for the knowledge base, LibChat and SMS. Additional quantitative information is also automatically recorded such as turn-around time for questions, number of answers per librarian, and the operating system patrons are using. These statistics are easy to generate and export from the administration module.

patrons are searching the knowledge base and helps to determine if patrons are finding answers to their questions.

The Meriam Library Query Spy results indicate that some patrons are finding answers while others are not. In the Query Spy, there are four query results that allow us to see how successfully answers were found in the knowledge base. The four options are:

- Direct match via auto-suggest;
- Question not submitted;
- Question submitted <question>; and
- Clicked on <answer>.

Viewing the end user search terms helps us improve the knowledge base by adding questions that did not find a match or were not submitted. We also use the IP address in the Query Spy to determine when a patron asked more than one question, thereby allowing us to track a patron’s complete interaction with the knowledge base. It is also useful to

examine the Question Query entered by a patron to determine user behavior when asking questions. Many queries are formed as full questions such as:

- How many books can we check out?
- How do I access SPSS?
- How do I place a hold?

The alternative is when only a few keywords are entered such as:

- History
- E-books
- Urban agriculture

Obviously, it is easier to determine what a student is looking for when they enter a full question, however, just entering keywords can give us an idea of what patrons are looking for. This also demonstrates the need to associate relevant keywords with question and answer pairs.

Since January 2013, 231 questions have been submitted by patrons and answered by reference librarians at the Meriam Library through the LibAnswers form. In addition to those questions asked, 105 queries had a direct match via the LibAnswers knowledge base and another 143 clicked on a suggested question after entering a query. For our library purposes, these results are seen as positive, as patrons were able to locate answers to their questions. Through the Query Spy, it can also be determined that 343 queries were entered but did not click on an answer or submit a question. In the process of evaluation, the next step would be to examine how well the answer lined up with the query and how many times a patron needed to revise his or her query prior to finding an acceptable answer.

### **Additional features**

We are looking at other features of LibAnswers, such as personal LibChat widgets and the use of Reference Analytics. Personal LibChat widgets allow patrons to chat with a specific librarian and can be created for anyone with a LibAnswers account. When a librarian is logged into LibChat, an individual widget will show him or her as available to chat. LibChat widgets are easily embedded into any web page, including LibGuides, the content management system from ShareShare.<sup>6</sup>

Reference Analytics is a customizable statistics and data gathering module that provides a way to record, track, and assess questions asked. Built into LibAnswers, Reference Analytics allow libraries to gather specific information about reference questions through customizable datasets. Questions can be recorded into Reference Analytics directly after answering a LibAnswers question, or by adding the full question and answer manually.<sup>7</sup> At the Meriam Library, data will be collected in six areas, including the length and difficulty of the question, where the question was asked and what resources were used. This data will provide a more comprehensive assessment of library questions answered by librarians.

### **Implementation and conclusion**

Implementation of LibAnswers, LibChat, and SMS was relatively easy. Librarians initially expressed concern that LibAnswers could become a replacement for traditional reference services, however we have found LibAnswers to be a tool that supplements and complements traditional reference services, rather than something that replaces it. There was also some hesitation about the amount of time it would take to manage and use the system, although this has proven to be a non-issue. The most difficult task of implementing LibAnswers, LibChat, and SMS was training reference librarians on how to use the system. Although these technologies are very user friendly, there was a learning curve for some librarians, particularly those who have limited hours on the reference desk.

Student reception to the adoption of LibAnswers has been very positive. Students in both instructional sessions and at the desk have expressed their interest in the ability to use the knowledge base and chat reference, and are particularly impressed with the ability to obtain reference assistance via SMS.

LibAnswers has been a useful addition to the reference tools of the Meriam Library Reference and Instruction Department. The knowledge base allows librarians to compile a

*(continues on page 214)*


“semi-finalists” being considered for inclusion in the 75th anniversary special issue were selected by members of the *C&RL* Editorial Board, as well as by several former editors of the journal, including Richard M. Dougherty (1969–74), Charles Martell (1984–90), Gloriana St. Clair (1990–96), and William Gray Potter (2002–08). The full text of all 30 nominated articles (as well as every other article we’ve ever published) is available through the *C&RL* Web site, and I encourage you to look back at what authors like Fred Kilgour, Robert Downs, Constance Mellon, David Lewis, and Mark Winston have brought to our work through arguments advanced through their articles in *C&RL*. More information about the 75th anniversary special issue and your opportunity to select your Top 6 from among our semi-finalists can be found at [www.ala.org/acrl/publications/crl75](http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/crl75).

But, wait, there’s more! You may have noticed that we plan to publish seven articles (and companion essays) in the 75th anniversary special issue, but our survey only asks for your Top 6. That is because you will select the final article to be included in the special issue. After you select your Top 6 from the 30 semi-finalists selected by *C&RL* editors, you will be able to make your own nomination for the people’s choice. In casting your vote for

the people’s choice, we ask you to consider the following questions:

- Did this article identify a critical issue that would shape the future of the field, or was it representative of a critical discussion in the field at the time of publication?
- Did this article contribute to an enduring concern in the field that is still represented in the strategic directions of the association, or did it help to launch a new strategic direction?
- Did this article represent the level of excellence in research design or discussion that should be promoted in our journal?
- Was this article simply important to you, a *C&RL* reader, in shaping your own work?

The article that receives the most votes in the people’s choice category will join the other six top vote-getters in the survey to make up the 75th anniversary special issue. The issue will be published in March 2015 and discussed at the ACRL 2015 in Portland as part of the yearlong celebration of ACRL’s 75th anniversary.

A link to the 75th anniversary special issue survey, along with a list of articles, is available at [www.ala.org/acrl/publications/crl75](http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/crl75). Voting is open through April 30, 2014. Vote once, vote well, and come to Portland to discuss the past and future of academic library research published in *College & Research Libraries!* 

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(“How do I search . . .” *cont.* from page 200)

practical and convenient database for patrons, and by combining LibChat and SMS reference services, LibAnswers provides an easy one-stop interface for patrons to get digital reference assistance. The Query Spy and the added feature of Reference Analytics allows librarians to have a more complete understanding of reference interactions, which can further enhance service to patrons.

Overall, LibAnswers provides an easy to use customizable product that has greatly benefitted the Meriam Library.

## Notes

1. LibAnswers Community Site, Springshare, accessed November 22, 2013, <http://springshare.com/libanswers/>

2. Read the review of LibAnswers in the April 2011 *Charleston Review*.

3. More examples of the customizable LibAnswer’s landing pages are available at the Springshare LibAnswers community site: <http://community.libanswers.com/>.

4. More information on Question Point is available at [www.questionpoint.org/](http://www.questionpoint.org/).

5. See William Breitbach’s October 2012 review in the *Charleston Advisor*, “LibChat: An Add-on Module for SpringShare’s LibAnswers,” <http://dx.doi.org/10.5260/chara.14.2.32>.

6. LibGuide information can be found at <http://springshare.com/libguides/>.

7. Reference Analytics information is available at <http://help.springshare.com/refanalytics>. 