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Scheduling research consultations with YouCanBook.Me

Low effort, high yield

Research consultations—or meetings, or appointments, depending on the institution and its nomenclature—provided through an academic library are a well-accepted means of serving university or college constituents.[1] These one-on-one meetings with students, faculty, or staff serve the space between the traditional reference desk and the in-class instruction session, and are designed to meet library users where *they* are and in the information-seeking needs they have. Research consultations have been shown to impact students' research skills and develop information-seeking behaviors and strategies that can be transferred *beyond* the assignment at hand.[2] Providing these appointments, then, is a way academic libraries can reach patrons on a personal level.

In the Fall of 2012, Oakland University (OU) Libraries began to reconsider how it could offer this service to its students and faculty. While research consultations (commonly dubbed "RCs" by OU Libraries' faculty and staff) had been offered by OU's librarians for more than ten years as a function of the libraries' instructional or reference programs, a shift to the liaison librarian model brought a renewed focus to this particular service. At the time, the libraries provided all users with a generic web form to request an appointment; this kind of scheduling tool is typical for academic libraries.[3] But as librarians developed deeper and more meaningful relationships with their assigned academic areas, it was anticipated that faculty and students would seek to schedule one-on-one meetings with *their* librarian.

Since OU runs Google Apps institution-wide, librarians initially used Google Calendar's Appointments feature to set up blocks of time where they could meet with students and faculty. While this feature did not work perfectly—for instance, students whose calendars were set to a different time zone often showed up several hours early, or late, for scheduled appointments—it helped librarians advertise office hours and research consultations to their subject areas. But, Google announced in December 2012 that it would discontinue Appointments the following summer.[4] After only a semester of use, OU Libraries had to find another tool.

To paraphrase Plato, the necessity of this deadline became the mother of discovery for OU Libraries. Other universities, too, grappled with this issue, and professional publications[5] and education bloggers alike recommended the free online scheduling tool YouCanBook. Me.[6] This resource was particularly appealing because I, as OU Libraries' eLearning and instructional technology librarian, led the transition effort, and had previously worked with the tool in K–12 education. So with the imminent demise of Google Calendar Appointments on the horizon, YouCanBook.Me and its features for scheduling research consultations were investigated in the Winter 2013 semester.

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First, a little about the tool. YouCanBook.Me is an external appointment booking service that links directly with an individual's Google Calendar, and it is managed by Softly Software out of the United Kingdom.[7] To set up a YouCanBook.Me account, all a Google user need do is log in via Google, and the service will connect to the user's Google Calendar. From this connection, a user can tell YouCanBook.Me which calendar to use, and designate on this calendar when appointments, reservations, or meetings can be scheduled. From this information, YouCanBook.Me generates a grid of available time slots on a freestanding web page that can be shared so others can make appointments. From the user's standpoint, the scheduling process is simple: once on the web page with the scheduling grid, a user need only click an available time slot, fill out a reservation form, and submit it to schedule an appointment. Both parties then receive email confirmation of the appointment, and the event displays on the linked Google Calendar.[8]

For OU Libraries, YouCanBook.Me offered several important features that were enticing and important to librarians. First, it integrated with Google Calendar, which all library faculty used to schedule meetings, block off time, and set availability, but existed *separately* from Google Calendar. Previously, if students or faculty wanted to sign up for an appointment on a librarian's calendar, they had to be logged into their OU-provided email account and *then* access a librarian's calendar; this was a clunky extra step. Also, when a student or faculty scheduled a research consultation using the Appointment slots feature, there were *two* Google Calendars at play—and these calendars were not guaranteed to have the same settings. With this system, OU librarians experienced many moments of confusion because calendars' time zones were set to the Pacific, or in one case Hawaii, time zone. This led to a frustrating experience for both patrons, who needed help but came to the library only to find they had missed their appointments, and librarians, who were often otherwise occupied when a student or faculty member stopped by. By pushing the scheduling *outside* of Google Calendar's Appointment slots, these unnecessary layers of confusion peeled away. Scheduling became easier for users and was reflected more accurately on both the librarian's, and the user's, calendars.

Second, YouCanBook.Me allowed librarians to personalize the research consultation scheduling process. While easy to create on a calendar, the Google Calendar Appointment slots did not require users to input any information. Librarians often found themselves with appointments without students' names or any information on their research need. With YouCanBook.Me, librarians can personalize the appearance of their public schedule and craft a scheduling form that works for their particular needs in their liaison areas. By setting up a form that requires students, faculty, and staff alike to provide their name, email address, and research need, librarians can better prepare for these meetings, which is a key benefit of research consultations compared to reference desk interactions.[9]

Some tips for using YouCanBook.Me

• Create a separate Google Calendar for YouCanBook.Me to use, rather than linking the service to your default Google Calendar.

• To ensure continuity between your YouCanBook.Me calendar and your default Google Calendar, copy any YouCanBook.Me events onto your default Calendar.

• Make sure that any appointment times are marked as *Available* in your Google Calendar—this is the most commonly encountered answer to the very common question of, "Why isn't my appointment showing up?"

• Use the on-duty events feature, but beware—the text field is case-sensitive!

• If you'd like to use YouCanBook.Me, email Softly Software and let them know you're an academic library, they may provide additional services you can integrate into your system.

Third, YouCanBook.Me offered the ability to combine the librarians' calendars into a single, one-stop research consultation calendar while *also* maintaining separate calendars for their liaison subject areas. Previously, librarians had to schedule appointments on a shared calendar through the libraries' generic reference email account and from this calendar, library users could make appointments based on time availability within Google Calendar. As aforementioned, this was clunky at best. Using YouCanBook.Me's Teams feature, OU's librarians were able to consolidate their available times into a single, embeddable schedule that could be placed on the libraries' website. This allowed library patrons to schedule an appointment at a c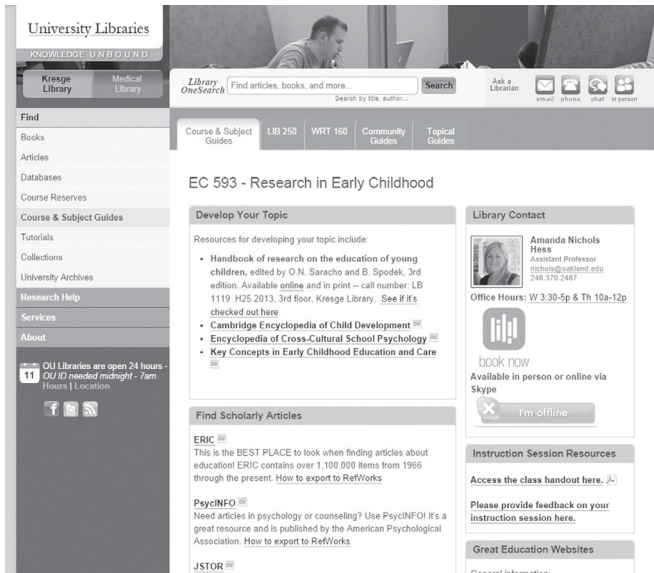onvenient time—an important feature for students and faculty at a commuter school. But librarians were also able to maintain separate scheduling calendars for their liaison areas, and embed or link to those calendars on their own personal web page or library course pages. This served those students or faculty who needed to meet with a specific library faculty member.

Upon investigating YouCanBook.Me and discovering the full set of features it offered OU Libraries, the librarians decided to implement it system-wide beginning in August 2013. However, several librarians implemented the tool during the Winter 2013 semester as a pilot; this helped determine its feasibility for use with individual librarians and identify any issues that needed to be addressed. Some librarians used it to schedule research consultations with students; others used it to set meetings internally. During this pilot period, both librarians and students found the tool easy-to-use and virtually issue-free. This confirmed that YouCanBook.Me would be a workable and user-friendly resource for scheduling research consultations.

To deploy YouCanBook.Me for the 2013-2014 academic year, I provided training in several formats to meet all librarians' needs. First, for the self-directed learner, I created a series of short videos detailing the steps for setting up both a personal YouCanBook.Me calendar and appointments for the library-wide research consultations calendar.[10] I also led a training at a back-to-school retreat in late August 2013 to ensure all librarians had their YouCanBook.Me calendars set up for both their liaison areas and for the general library calendar. As part of this workshop, I created a step-by-step job aid that helped librarians work through the setup process and embed their calendars, or links to their calendars, at various points of student need (i.e., the librarian's web page, the librarian's information in the course page system).

Once this was set, I worked with the libraries' coordinator of web services to embed the Libraries' general research calendar into the website in time for the start of the Fall 2013 semester.

With an academic year of YouCanBook.Me appointment scheduling under its belt, OU Libraries can report a bug-free, stress-free rollout. The system has been widely adopted and

This image represents how the research consultation option can be embedded in a library course page for a specific class. View this article online for more detailed images.

no issues have been reported by either librarians or students. At the start of each new semester, I make sure to revisit the YouCanBook.Me setup process to ensure that all library faculty have updated their office hours or research consultation availability. To simplify this process for library faculty, I developed a simple, step-by-step reference guide, which is emailed to all librarians at the beginning of each semester. So far, this has provided the only regular point of maintenance.

YouCanBook.Me simplified and streamlined OU Libraries' process of scheduling research consultations. This tool helped the university's librarians serve its users more effectively and efficiently by focusing on what is important: using one-on-one meetings to develop library skills and increase confidence in the research process. By breaking down unnecessary administrative barriers, OU's librarians have been more able to address students' and faculty members' information needs.

Notes

1. Crystal D. Gale and Betty S. Evans, "Face-to-Face: The implementation and analysis of a research consultation service," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 14(3) (2007): 85-101.

2. Trina J. Magi and Patricia E. Mardeusz, "Why Some Students Continue to Value Individual, Face-to-Face Research Consultations in a Technology-Rich World," *College & Research Libraries* 74(6) (2013): 605-618.

3. Iris Jastram and Ann Gwinn Zawistoski, "Personalizing the Library via Research Consultations," in *The Desk and Beyond: Next Generation Reference Service,* ed. Sarah K. Steiner and M. Leslie Madden, 14-24. Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2008. See also Gale and Evans, "Face-to-Face," and Magi and Mardeusz, "Why Some Students Continue to Value Individual, Face-to-Face Research Consultations in a Technology-Rich World."

4. Venkat Panchapakesan, December 14, 2012, "Winter Cleaning," Official Google Blog, http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2012/12/winter-cleaning.html.

5. George Williams, January 7, 2013, "RIP Google Calendar Appointments: Detailed Tutorial on Possible Replacement YouCanBook.Me," *The Chronicle of Higher Education ProfHacker,* http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/r-i-p-google-calendar-appointments-detailed-tutorial-on-possible-replacement-youcanbook-me/45183.

6. Jack Dougherty, "How to Customize YouCanBook.Me to replace Google Calendar Appointment Slots or Tungle scheduling tool," last modified September 2, 2013, https://commons.trincoll.edu/jackdougherty/how-to/customize-you-canbookme/.

7. "About Us: YouCanBook.Me," Softly Software, accessed March 17, 2014 https://ga.youcanbook.me/about.jsp.

8. "How It Works:YouCanBookMe," Softly Software, accessed March 17, 2014 https://ga.youcanbook.me/howitworks.jsp.

9. Gale and Evans, "Face-to-Face: The implementation and analysis of a research consultation service," Magi and Mardeusz, Why Some Students Continue to Value Individual, Face-to-Face Research Consultations in a Technology-Rich World."

10. Amanda Nichols Hess, last modified January 15, 2013, "YouCanBook.Me How-To Guide," www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLoh0_dgawrN5-ByZlM1PcGWMf9uT3kbvy. ✍

This image represents the shared research consultation calendar, where a patron can select an available research consultation by time.