

QB Online

How an old-fashioned question board went electronic

by Wei Ma and Joyce Wright

Can a person get too much calcium drinking one gallon of milk a day?

- What makes your stomach gurgle?
- Is there such a dish called "chicken fried chicken"?

- Why do princesses wear those pointy hats?

If you must know the answers to these and many other questions, all you need to do is access QB Online (<http://www.library.uiuc.edu/ugl/qb/>).

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) undergraduate library's question board service, affectionately nicknamed "QB" by students, was established in the early 1970s as a bulletin board service of questions and answers.

Now, it has gone electronic. Users anonymously pose questions on a variety of topics, including the silly, trivial, consumer issues, local community issues, personal relations, and things that people wonder but would be reluctant to ask a librarian.

QB was created as an extension of the reference desk, where information sought is related to research, term papers, or assignments.

This QB service, while not a typical service of academic libraries, has fit in well in this academic undergraduate library setting, where the primary users are young, active, full of curiosity and wonder, but may not be willing to approach a librarian with "silly" questions that they feel may make them appear stupid.¹

QB, in addition to providing library users with a place to ask questions anonymously, also provides an excellent training ground for the future librarians enrolled in the Reference Sources and Services class of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science. QB presents an opportunity for graduate students to answer "real"

reference questions and, thereby, gain hands-on experience.

How does QB work?

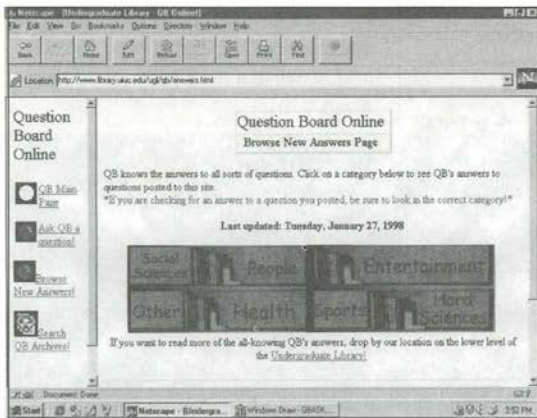
Donna Pittman, former assistant undergraduate librarian at UIUC, published an article entitled "The Question Board,"² which detailed how it works. In brief, library users write questions on a slip of paper and drop them into a box attached



The undergraduate library's traditional question board—an 8 x 10 foot cork bulletin board located on the lower level of the library.

About the authors

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Browse New Answers Page

to the QB at the lower level of the library. Graduate assistants of the undergraduate library research the information requested and post the answer on the QB attached to the original question slip. The answer includes the source(s) where the information was located and is signed with the initials "QB." Not every question can be answered, however. Some questions, such as "What is love?," go unanswered because there are no fact-based or easy-to-reference answers.

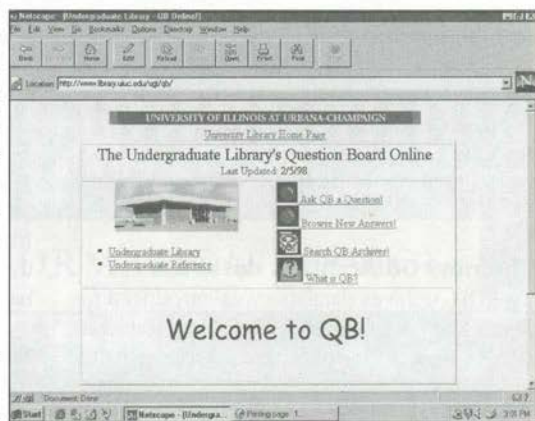
QB goes online

In the summer of 1997, QB went online for the first time. A Web page (<http://www.library.uiuc.edu/ugl/qb/>) was created to allow users to submit questions and read answers from their desktop computers. QB Online was not created to replace the traditional QB, but was developed to augment the original service. Students and library users can still visit the

traditional QB in the library, where they can read answers to the questions posted to this bulletin board. QB Online mirrors the traditional QB in that it has six subject categories: social sciences, people, entertainment, health/science, sports, and miscellaneous. It posts answers to the questions submitted through the Web site.

How does QB Online work?

The QB Online Homepage can be accessed via the Undergraduate Library's Homepage (<http://www.library.uiuc.edu/ugl/>). When visiting the Web site, curious QB users are greeted by a page that briefly explains the purpose of QB and invites them to ask questions or look at previous answers.

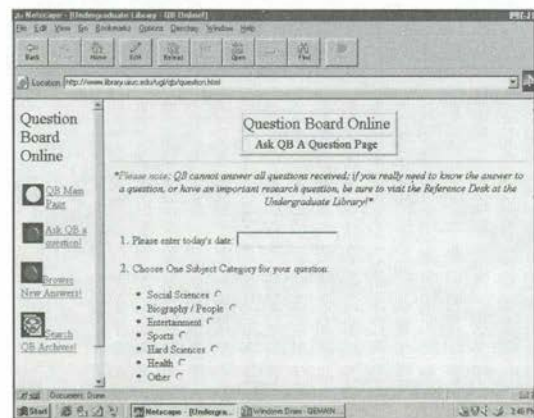


The Question Board Homepage (<http://www.library.uiuc.edu/ugl/qb/>)

If the Web surfer chooses to ask a question, a short electronic form—which includes the date, the subject category of the question, and the actual question—must be completed. The question will be sent to the QB Online liaison (a graduate assistant) who prints out the question and leaves it in the QB Online folder on the graduate assistants' work table. The QB Online questions are researched and answered by the same group of graduate assistants who research and answer the questions from the traditional QB. The answers are entered in the Web server by completely updating the answer file.

The impact of QB Online

The use of QB is shifting with the online forum (see table on following page). Statistics show that with the increasing number



Ask QB A Question Page

Question Board (QB) Statistics

Year	# Quest. traditional QB	# Quest. QB Online (after 8/97)	Year total
1997	486	148	634
1996	603		603
1995	620		620

of questions submitted to QB Online, the number of questions submitted to the traditional QB fell. QB Online provides a convenient service to many students and library users who prefer not to trek to the undergraduate library to submit the questions that plague them. Many students and QB users, however, still prefer the traditional QB, since they study at the undergraduate library. The traditional bulletin board provides a break from their studies. Questions submitted to QB Online are usually more well thought out and serious than those submitted to the traditional QB.

The new QB Archives database

The QB Archives database was introduced to library users at the beginning of spring semester of 1998. This database allows users to search the archives of QB questions and answers accumulated over the last nine years. QB Archives is available on the Web at <http://www.library.uiuc.edu/ugl/qb/qbsearch.htm>.

Users simply type the keyword(s) that describe their query to retrieve relevant questions and answers, complete with sources consulted and date of the answer. This database offers the option to search by keyword(s) from the question/ answer fields and in the titles of sources cited for QB answers. It also allows users to limit their search by year. QB Archives, about 15.MB in size, contains over 3,000 questions and answers dating back to 1989.

The great value of QB Archives

QB Archives is an accumulation of heartfelt "real world" questions, which are researched and answered (with sources noted) by a group of future library information professionals. Users of the database may also benefit by learning how to use library and reference sources on their own. QB Archives also

provides an engaging sociological perspective on the questions, interests, and issues that are prominent during a given year.

Conclusion

Since its inception, QB has been one of the most popular sites in the undergraduate library. Many alumni stop by the library during campus visits and inquire about QB. Students continue to enjoy the services and are ecstatic that

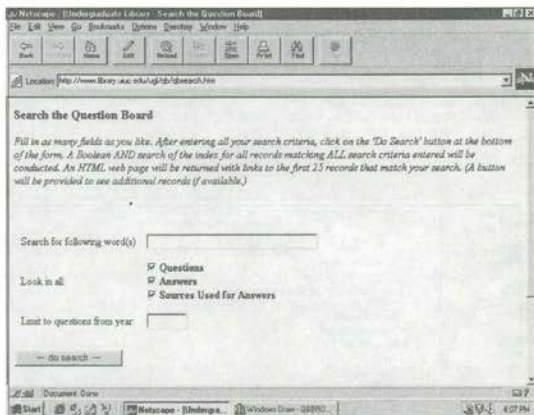
it is now available on the Web. During the next months, we plan to monitor QB Online to see if there are any substantial changes in the types of questions being asked and the number of questions received weekly. We hope that QB Online will continue to contribute to all users in the academic community and satisfy their information needs in the midst of the electronic revolution.

Special thanks

Thanks to Jon Ritterbush and David Ward, the graduate students in the School of Library and Information Science, for physically constructing the QB Homepage and the QB Archives database.

Notes

1. Swope, Mary Jane and Jeffrey Katzer. "The Silent Majority: Why They Don't Ask Questions," *RQ 12* (Winter 1972): 161-166
2. Pittman, Donna. "The Question Board," *College & Research Libraries News*, (June 1987): 327-330. ■



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