

The Meaning of Life: meaningful relationships in lean times.

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Abstract

When I took on the responsibility of Off Campus Library Services at the Mount Gravatt Campus of Griffith University, I knew that meaningful relationships had to be the total focus of our customer relations philosophy. When you have no official budget line, you need as much cooperation as you can get! Annual costing and justification of services, lean and efficient work practices, and clearly defined parameters within which we operate, provide us with the synergy to succeed.

What did I Inherit?

I was offered and accepted the role of Off Campus Librarian in January 2000. I was informed that this would be a service that officially has no budget, and staffing would be negotiated around current roles. Funding, up to this point, had always come out of campus funds. With the move of the Faculty of Applied Psychology (who have a largely Off Campus student population), to the Mount Gravatt Campus of Griffith University, I was well aware that there would be pressure on both Off Campus Library Services and the Reference Services section to deal effectively with higher workloads. I would have some backup help with reference queries via a team member in an 80% position and a lending assistant to retrieve and photocopy. However it was the perfect time to streamline the work processes of Off Campus Services, while maintaining current services and decreasing turnover times. The previous Off Campus Librarian averaged 14.3 hours per week in 1999 answering Off Campus queries. Through proactive marketing of both remote access to databases, and better turnover times for email/web requests, the average hours per week in 2000 was reduced to 9.38 hours per week or a 13.6% reduction in time spent on queries. So how did we do it?

First Priority – Web Page

We knew technology and lifelong independent/self-directed learning would be our allies in streamlining services. We needed a really dynamic web page that made everything easy to “get at”, a relentless marketing campaign to back it up and to proactively use ejournals where possible.

We were fortunate enough to have the backing of the Mount Gravatt Library Manager, Veronica Lampkin, with regard to a web page. Veronica put in a successful bid for \$2000 for the set up of the Online Guide for External Students. I decided as part of my own professional development, I would design the framework and contents for the site, then hand it over to the Web development section of the Division of Information Services for completion. We came in under budget (\$1600) and were able to carry over the rest of the funds for an update in 2001. This gave me time to participate in Dreamweaver training for the next update, so that I could complete future development.

Push your Products & Services

I have been again fortunate to wear two hats as part of Reference Services at Mount Gravatt Library – I am also the generic Information Literacy Coordinator. I have found that the two roles feed and nurture each other in such a way that I continue to design learning tools that work on a number of levels. I developed self-paced library tutorials (A3 size page folded into A4) that use mock assignment questions to teach Search Strategy theory and screen capture graphics to walk through the processes of accessing specific databases. They are in PDF format on the Online Guide for External Students, are used in hardcopy format in our Off Campus workshops as well as the majority of our Information Literacy sessions and compliment the web based Library Research Tutorial (LRT).

We continually market the merits of attending Off Campus Weekend Workshops, run at the beginning of each semester. They are five hour intensive workshops in which both undergraduate and postgraduate students are invited to work through database tutorials, using either the mock assignment question given, or their own topic of relevance. This gives students immediate “hands on” experience in using databases in our Electronic Training Room. Students are able to take home the tutorial packages they work through for future reference. They are encouraged to email me throughout the year to brainstorm their assignment questions, query database selection and gain general advice. I also produce and promote the 26 “Guides to Internet Sites” in specific subject areas studied at Mount Gravatt Campus – all are loaded in PDF format on the Online Guide for External Students and updated each semester.

There is benefit in having all these brochures in both paper and electronic form. Many of my students are teachers who live west of the Great Dividing Range in Queensland, where their “work tool” sometimes amounts to an old 286 computer that only has access to email. If we send them any large files as an attachment, their computer may crash. We always plan to be able to supply services and products to both the “best case” scenario student (with the latest technology etc.), and the “worst case” scenario student (lives in the Gulf of Carpentaria, no computer, lousy mail service and gets flooded on an annual basis). We feel there is equal importance in being able to service both categories of students.

Set Out Clear Service Parameters

Each semester the Off Campus Library Services document is sent out via the students mail package along with their study materials from Griffith Flexible Learning Services. This document sets out definitively who is eligible for mail out services and who must use the library in person. What our annual costs for photocopying are, how to make requests for information/books, information on reciprocal borrowing rights, how to remotely access the

library databases and even our preferred modes of conducting business – again this information is on the web site. It also clearly states what steps they must go through before they will receive services – ie. signed authority for document delivery – and what forms to fill out (web or paper) for specific requests.

Our main criteria for this information document is that it must be succinct, and able to be changed and reprinted with monotonous regularity. It should also be in a basic format that can be sent electronically or faxed and still be readable. Beautifully printed glossy brochures may make our service look very prestigious, but as soon as it becomes out-of-date then it is just a waste of money. In a previous life, I managed a library in the Research Department of a Stockbroking firm. In the intense and dynamic field of stockbroking, they had to produce very professional looking research reports that could be changed quickly. This problem was solved by having A3 size printed “shells” which had professionally printed colour banners. They “filled in” the black & white contents by photocopying - simple by very effective.

I have also come to realise as Off Campus Librarian that accurate timely information written in a concise format has a much higher chance of being read by the new student overwhelmed by, (read “drowning in”), the plethora of university information.

As mentioned before, a relentless marketing campaign is essential – people won’t know what services you are able to provide, if you don’t tell them over and over and over. To sell the merits of services delivered through technology successfully, you must be able to prove to the clients that THEY will gain some benefit. If we can’t complete the research for an email query within 24 hours, we send a short email letting them know where we are at and how long it will take. We also promote/inform clients what we are not able to do. We actively promote the fact that email and faxed requests are a much quicker alternative to phone requests. We warn clients that in busy times, and when we are on the Reference Desk, we will not be able to take their phone calls and will have to ring them back as soon as we are free. I also promote the fact that I work Monday evening shifts, so if they want to phone me this is the ideal time. Eventually students realise that if they work with me, turnover times decrease.

Communication is the Key

Open communication with remote students is essential in maintaining good client relations. We try to email students on our mailing list once a month and keep them up-to-date with any changes in databases, any upcoming workshops, IT maintenance downtime and generally any information that will help them negotiate the rigours of university study. We remind them of services we offer, reinforce our preferred methods of communication and offer advice on planning for their next assignments. Postgraduate students are expected to conduct their own research at Griffith University. However this does not stop us from suggesting search strategies, advising on the best databases, making individual appointments for information literacy, and generally offering guidance. It is important to make remotely located students feel that they are part of the Griffith community and valued as clients.

Negotiate Preferred Outcomes

We all appreciate that there are going to be times when no matter what you do, it is never enough. We always let students know which of their demands are reasonable and which aren’t. If for some reason we simply can’t find what they are searching for, we suggest viable alternatives. At times students choose extremely hard topics to research. They hear about

some medical or technological breakthrough on the radio, discovered by a privately owned company in the last week and they are dismayed that they can only find a couple of short newspaper articles/press releases on the subject. We are honest with undergraduate students about any difficulties we encounter when researching unusual topics. We also advise Postgraduate students when they may need to rely heavily on Inter-Library Loans and the costs and time factors involved. We try to encourage students to manage their time proactively with requests – the old “early bird catches the worm” scenario.

Justification of Costs

There are many efficiencies to be gained from constant record keeping/spreadsheets for time management of tasks. After two years we now know when we have peaks in requests and how to prepare for them. For instance, there is a Criminology & Criminal Justice subject called Behaviour Management for first year second semester undergraduate students, that requires research for empirical journal articles. Around August we get higher amounts of requests from undergraduate students to research and supply articles on this topic. In July, I email everyone re the three assignment topics, list the most suitable databases and search strategy statement. Once we start doing the searches, we keep a record of the best references and share this information with the rest of the team – when the same assignment comes again, as an internal or external student request, we are prepared.

At the end of every month the Off Campus Library Services statistics are put into an excel spreadsheet on a shared drive and I must say that I have had a few eye-opening moments with statistics. In 2001 out of a total of 3641 students at Mount Gravatt campus, 9.5% of those are Off Campus students. Collectively out of all the larger campuses of Griffith University – Mt Gravatt, Nathan, Logan and Gold Coast (the smaller campuses, Queensland College of Art & Queensland Conservatorium, do not have Off Campus students) the Mount Gravatt campus handles 62.68% of all Off Campus students. Now these statistics are not entirely accurate. Why? There are quite a number of postgraduates who have been allowed to enrol in internal subjects, and therefore the administrative system does not recognise them as external mail out students, even though they are remotely located (our latest student is in County Durham, England).

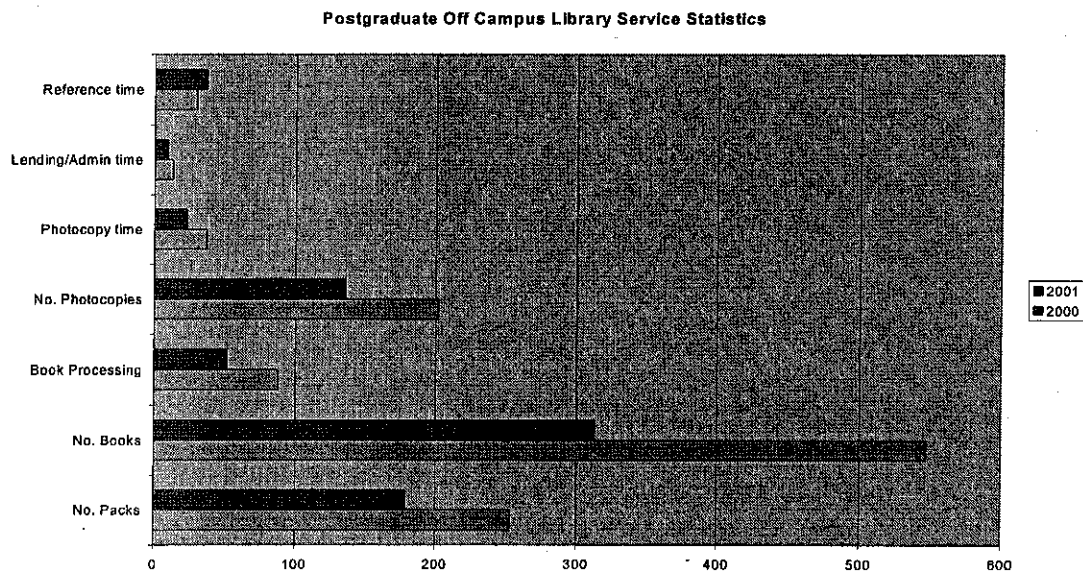


Figure 1.

We have learnt a very valuable lesson with statistics – even if you don't think its worth counting, do it. We have been accounting for ejournal time in reference research time, the result being photocopying numbers are down and reference research is up – 53.25 hours in 2000 to 88.7 hours in 2001 for undergraduates. This result is despite the numbers of Off Campus students on the administrative system having remained fairly flat over the last couple of years (350 in 2000 and 346 in 2001). When we look at the statistics in Figure 1 we can see that postgraduate demand is down markedly in all areas except reference time which I believe points towards a trend. Postgraduate Off Campus students WANT to be self-directed life-long learners. They WANT to do their own research. Hence their higher participation rates at Off Campus Weekend Workshops (an average of 61% postgraduate attendance in 2000 and 2001) and the fact that they are the only students who go to the trouble of making individual appointments (phone appointments or in person, when they visit their supervisor).

On the other hand Undergraduate Off Campus Library Services Statistics are the opposite. The number of books, number of photocopies and reference research time are all up in Figure 2. From experience, we find new undergraduate students are at quite a loss when they are confronted by the “double whammy” of trying to adjust to university culture while not actually experiencing it. They automatically feel isolated and vulnerable, and we are asking them to be able to differentiate between a library catalogue and a database as if it was second nature to them. Some of the undergraduate mature-age students have not been in a library for 15 years or more. It takes time for undergraduate students to become comfortable with the complexities of research – this is evident as the year progresses.

Undergraduate Off Campus Library Service Statistics

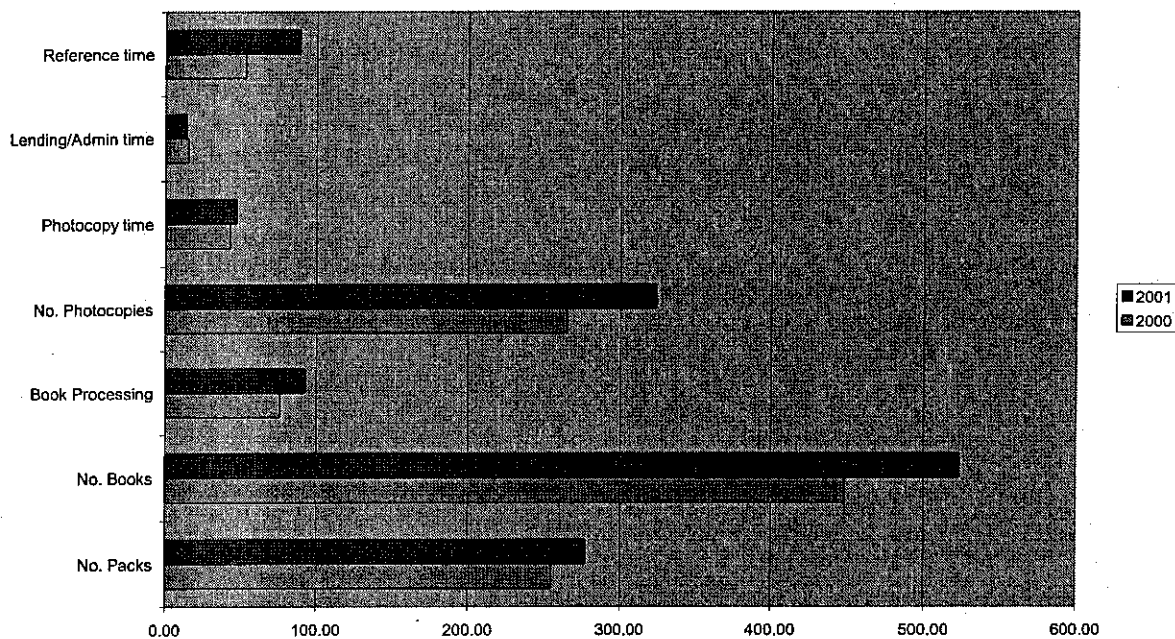


Figure 2.

First semester Off Campus undergraduate requests accounted for 42% in 2000, compared to second semester which was 57%. In 2001 first semester Off Campus undergraduate requests were 1940 (35%) while second semester requests increased dramatically to 3595 (or 64%).

Now you may think that we only have a small client group compared with other bigger universities. This is true except that my role as Off Campus Coordinator is only allowed to assume 30-35% of my position – the rest is taken up with generic information literacy planning, coordination and delivery, reference desk shifts, web page maintenance and collection management. In reality, we play an endless game of juggling, as we have waves of Off Campus requests that require surges of energy. This is complicated by the fact that my other roles can peak at the same time. My fellow reference team member (80% sessional staff member) successfully manages my inconsistent overflow of requests. The lending assistant (80% position) who retrieves and photocopies for us, at times ends up with quite a bottleneck of work, when we both reach maximum research output.

What of the Future?

Some people say they hope science will come through for them – I know that technology will come through for me! All praise the mighty Virtual Private Network (VPN) which should be up and running by late March at Griffith University. The VPN is a private network that extends itself over a public network ie. the Internet. Essentially it allows the client to make a secure connection to the University network using any Internet service provider and therefore allow access to over 250 index databases, 4,500 electronic journals, lecture notes and reading material from anywhere around the world. This access to restricted materials is fully encrypted from end to end. This means we can provide secure access to the growing number of overseas students we are now attracting and provide a more equitable service to all.

In Conclusion

Yes, we have very demanding roles. I find it requires you to prioritise, organise and negotiate to such a degree that it becomes second nature to you. It also requires you to examine and re-examine your processes and procedures as you strive to gain continuous improvement. And as time goes by and statistics accumulate, the numbers give a certain sense of satisfaction that the careful planning and persistence have eventually paid off. But the most important and most satisfying part of my role is the relationships we build. We have a responsibility towards our internal clients – the team we work with daily, the other campus library teams and the wider Griffith University community – as well as our “external” clients. Without all their cooperation and willingness to work with us, we would not be able to provide the services Off Campus students have come to rely on.