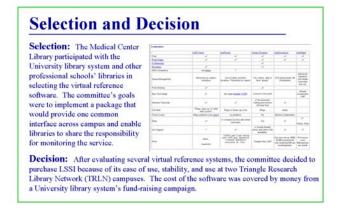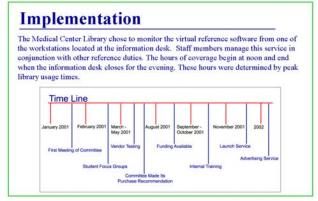# "The Big Decision: Is Creating a Virtual Reference Service in an Academic Medical Library Worth It?"
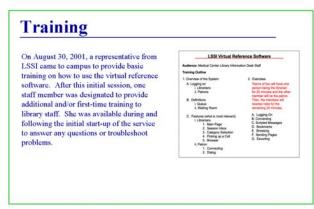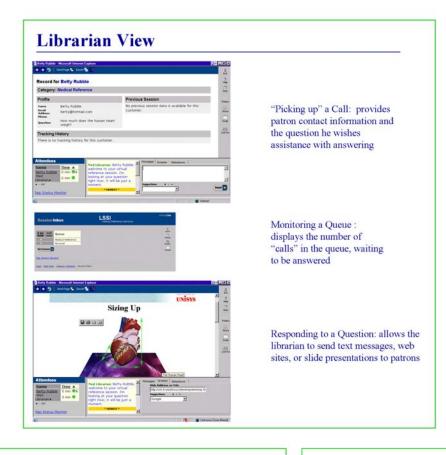
Marlyse H. MacDonald, Information Services Librarian, and Eric D. Albright, Assistant Director, Public Services
Duke University Medical Center Library, Durham NC

The Library began to use a virtual reference desk service in October 2001 to provide its clients an additional point for assistance. This poster will explain the library's experiences with implementing and using a virtual reference service. It will cover cost and selection of software. It will outline training staff members and launching the service, including timing and level of publicity. The poster will present information about staffing and statistics. The statistics will be for a given time period and will include the number of questions the library answered, the type of questions asked, and the length of response time. Finally, the poster will explain whether investing in the service was the right decision for the Library.

Selection and Decision

Selection: The Medical Center Library participated with the University library system and other professional schools' libraries in selecting the virtual reference software. The committee's goals were to implement a package that would provide one common interface across campus and enable libraries to share the responsibility for monitoring the service.

Decision: After evaluating several virtual reference systems, the committee decided to purchase LSSI because of its ease of use, stability, and use at two Triangle Research Library Network (TRLN) campuses. The cost of the software was covered by money from a University library system's fund-raising campaign.

Implementation

The Medical Center Library chose to monitor the virtual reference software from one of the workstations located at the information desk. Staff members manage this service in conjunction with other reference duties. The hours of coverage begin at noon and end when the information desk closes for the evening. These hours were determined by peak library usage times.

Time Line

January 2001	February 2001	March – May 2001	August 2001	September – October 2001	November 2001	2002
First Meeting of Committee		Vendor Testing	Funding Available		Launch Service	
	Student Focus Groups			Internal Training		Advertising Service
			Committee Made Its Purchase Recommendation			

Training

On August 30, 2001, a representative from LSSI came to campus to provide basic training on how to use the virtual reference software. After this initial session, one staff member was designated to provide additional and/or first-time training to library staff. She was available during and following the initial start-up of the service to answer any questions or troubleshoot problems.

LSSI Virtual Reference Software

Audience: Medical Center Library Information Desk Staff

Training Outline

1. Overview of the System
   A. Logging on
      i. Librarians
      ii. Patrons
   B. Definitions
      i. Queue
      ii. Waiting Room
   C. Features (what is most relevant)
      i. Librarians
         1. Main Page
         2. Session Inbox
         3. Category Selection
         4. Picking up a Call
         5. Browser
      ii. Patron
         1. Connecting
         2. Dialog

2. Exercises

Teams of two will have one person being the librarian for 25 minutes and the other member will be the patron. Then, the members will reverse roles for the remaining 25 minutes.

A. Logging On
B. Conversing
C. Scripted Messages
D. Bookmarks
E. Browsing
F. Sending Pages
G. Escorting

Librarian View

"Picking up" a Call: provides patron contact information and the question he wishes assistance with answering

Monitoring a Queue: displays the number of "calls" in the queue, waiting to be answered

Responding to a Question: allows the librarian to send text messages, web sites, or slide presentations to patrons

Patron View

Patrons see a web page divided into frames with one half functioning as a web browser and the other half as the login area for the virtual reference service.

The login area changes to a dialog frame once the patron has signed on to the service. In this frame, a transcript of the conversation between the library staff member and the patron will constantly be refreshed. The active web browser will change as the librarian "pushes" relevant pages.

Publicity

To advertise the virtual reference service, the Library first made links available from its homepage. The service's existence was not overtly apparent to users. This approach allowed staff time to adjust to monitoring and using the new service.

A more formal announcement was made on November 8, 2001 via the Medical Center Library's web site. It provided a brief description of the service and instructed users how to connect to it.

Not until February 2002 did the Library re-publicize the availability of the virtual reference service. Through a newsletter article, the Medical Center community was reminded about what the service is, how it can connect, how the software works, and the benefits to using this type of assistance.

Future Advertising
- Devise a plan to reach a larger population of users,
- Re-advertise on the Library's homepage,
- Select high traffic Library web pages to link from, and
- Work to create an identity for advertising.

Statistics

First Call: October 26, 2001
Average Time on Hold: 2.65 minutes
Average Response Time: 25.77 minutes
Total Number of Questions: 21 (as of April 30, 2002)
Types of Questions:
- Directional, which relate to information about the library or using its collection
- Reference, which require use of local resources or databases

Issues that Impact Statistics:
- Not hearing the arrival of a "call"
  - Low or nonexistent speaker volume
  - Distance from the workstation where the service is located
- Disruption in web connectivity
- System problems
  - Locking up
  - Dropping the library staff member or user

Conclusions

The staff is divided on the value of the virtual reference service in an academic medical center library. For the time and money invested, the call volume has been low and somewhat discouraging. Part of this is due to lack of advertising by the Library, the type of population being served, and technical issues associated with the software.

The Library will continue to offer the service. It will reconsider the hours of coverage, where the workstation is located, and how virtual reference is publicized. If the call load does not increase, the Library will consider suspending the service.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, contact **Marlyse MacDonald** at *marlyse.macdonald@duke.edu* or **Eric Albright** at *albri008@mc.duke.edu.*