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Improving a Library FAQ: Assessment and Reflection of the First Year's Use

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Abstract

In 2020, the Leonard Lief Library created a searchable online knowledge base (FAQs) as a complement to virtual reference during the library's pandemic-related closure. One year of search query data was used to assess the online knowledge base. This paper discusses the assessment's findings and planned improvements to the FAQs.

A content analysis of user queries revealed what users are seeking in the knowledge base. The study examined the actions taken by users after conducting a search to determine the knowledge base's success rate.

The knowledge base was successful in answering user questions almost half of the time. The top three query categories were *access*, *non-library* and *instructional*. The frequency of access-related queries was expected, due to COVID-19 library building closure. The prevalence of questions about other campus units was unexpected. This finding suggests a perception of the academic library as a source of campus information and supports including this type of information in the library FAQs.

This study adds to the body of assessment research within reference services, an area not well represented in the LIS literature (Allen et al., 2018). The methodology employed provides a model for assessment of online FAQs that can be adopted by other libraries.

Keywords: knowledge base, FAQ, assessment, online reference, Query Analyzer

Improving a Library FAQ: Assessment and Reflection of the First Year's Use

On March 14, 2020 a decision was made to close the Leonard Lief Library of Lehman College based on the threat of rising COVID-19 cases. Black and Latinx students with the lowest socioeconomic status, who predominantly make up Lehman College's student body, were most affected by the pandemic (de Freytas-Tamura, Hu and Cook, 2020). The sudden switch to online library services was challenging for this population, many of whom were not familiar with using the library remotely, and who usually relied on in-person assistance from librarians at the reference desk.

In response, the Leonard Lief Library created an online searchable knowledge base using Springshare's LibAnswers platform. FAQ entries contained information about library operations and how-to videos of basic library use. The goal was to enhance the library's remote reference offerings (chat and email) and to supplement library instruction. Question and answer pairs were created based on librarians' experience at the reference desk and questions coming in via online reference during the spring 2020 semester. The nine questions initially selected to go into the knowledge base were:

- How do I find library eBooks?
- How do I find sources on my topic?
- How do I contact a Librarian?
- How do I cite sources properly?
- How do I find library databases?
- How do I renew library books?
- How can I return books I borrowed?
- How can I borrow a laptop?

- How do I clear a hold or block on my account?

The knowledge base went live at the beginning of the fall 2020 semester and questions were added or updated as the need arose, growing to 24 questions by the end of the 2020-2021 academic year. This study assessed the knowledge base's first year's performance using data collected by the system's Query Analyzer tool. To conduct the assessment, the authors analyzed users' queries submitted during fall 2020 (August-December) and spring 2021 (January-May). The assessment sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What type of information are users seeking in the FAQs?
2. Are users finding the information they seek?
3. How can the knowledge base be improved?

Analyzing query data gave a sense of the questions library users ask and how the resource created answers those questions. Ultimately, this analysis provided concrete ways of improving the knowledge base such as categories for creating new FAQs, methods for refining existing ones and long-term solutions for maintaining the knowledge base. This analysis also showed how to expand its potential as an enhancement of virtual reference services, by answering more basic reference questions. This study contributes to assessment research within reference services, an area not sufficiently highlighted in LIS literature (Allen et al., 2018).

Literature Review

Library FAQs

The use of FAQs as a means of organizing and showcasing answers to common user questions has a long history in libraries. Placed behind the library desk for internal use or as handouts to give to users, the print iteration of FAQs has traditionally taken the form of question lists compiled by librarians based on their experience at the reference desk. According to Anello

and Bonfield (2007), to evolve from simple lists, libraries began constructing online knowledge bases of frequently asked questions aiming to "meet patrons where they are, giving them a customized, interactive, always-on database of questions and answers that can be searched or browsed for useful, succinct answers to their most pressing questions" (p. 32). Currently, online library FAQs are recognized as a tool that "can serve to improve the efficiency, accuracy, comprehensiveness, and sustainability of virtual reference services" (Labrake, 2019, p. 15). Further, other academic libraries such as the Benjamin S. Rosenthal Library at Queens College, City University of New York recognized the value of centralizing important information in an FAQ page during the emergency move to remote services due to the pandemic (Sugrim, 2020).

Among the earliest references to online library FAQs found in the literature is the one created by the Lippincott Library, the Business Library at the University of Pennsylvania, launched in 2004. Halperin et al. (2006) described the creation of this large knowledge base, for which they developed their own platform. The Lippincott Library used two sources for the content of these FAQs: information available on their website and reference librarians' own experience. Although the article focuses on the implementation process, it also acknowledges the importance of continually updating the FAQs and monitoring search query statistics.

In contrast, Hesburgh Libraries at the University of Notre Dame set out to construct a knowledge base "derived from actual FAQs (as opposed to anecdotal ones)" (Jones et al., 2009, p. 72). They analyzed three years of virtual reference transcripts and, based on that analysis, chose about 100 questions to include in their FAQs. The questions were grouped into six categories: "General Information, Library Facilities, Library Services, Reference and Research, Research Skills, and Visitors" (p. 75).

More recently, Montalvo (2016) described why the University of Puerto Rico Library System decided to use Springshare's LibAnswers platform to create a knowledge base of library questions and shared the findings of an assessment done two years post-implementation. Their assessment evaluated their FAQs based on knowledge base growth and usage statistics. The focus of the assessment is on the resource's use, not on the content of the knowledge base. However, Montalvo acknowledges that the user query data available in the LibAnswers platform "does provide some ideas about subjects which should be included" (p. 33), hinting at how this data can be used to assess and improve a knowledge base.

Analysis of FAQ Queries

In 2018, the University of Nebraska's Medical Center Library used Query Analyzer data to improve the content of their FAQs by analyzing the queries submitted into the search feature. While this library's knowledge base had been in existence since 2010, only moderate cleanup had been undertaken over the years. After analysis of the queries and overall activity, findings revealed that "83% of the questions asked did not match to answers found on the FAQ page consulted by the user" (Drummond, 2019, p. 113). The analysis also discovered that many queries appeared to be for specific journals, books or articles, items usually found in the library catalog or databases. As a result of the study, the Medical Center Library added more FAQs to cover commonly searched topics and tweaked existing ones based on users' questions. Additionally, navigational buttons were added to the knowledge base's homepage for finding articles, searching for eJournal and eBook content, and contacting a librarian. While these actions were based on the questions received and the top twenty keywords, no formal categorization of the questions was described. This resulted in a piecemeal approach of creating individual FAQs rather than subject categories, which could then be further broken down.

Because Query Analyzer data was used eight years after implementation, 60 FAQs had to be rewritten. This library's experience thus supports conducting an assessment sooner after implementation.

Between 2018 and 2019, librarians at the University of Colorado's Strauss Health Sciences Library attempted to revamp their knowledge base using a similar approach. Wilairat et al. (2021) reported that their query analysis informed which FAQs to add and which needed to be updated or deleted. Special attention was paid to the language patrons used and FAQs were amended to read similarly, using keyword and subject indexing. The whole process took six months after which reference librarians were given new instructions for creation and maintenance of new FAQs. These best practices included "adding keywords and topics, avoiding jargon, and ensuring that FAQs were not duplicated" (p. 158). No methodology for categorization of the queries subjects was explained. The authors referenced the data fields from Query Analyzer and how they focused on unanswered questions. Still, there was no assessment of these queries as belonging to specific library areas. Rather, queries were reviewed individually with matching FAQs added.

Walden University Library also used Query Analyzer to evaluate their knowledge base in 2016, four years after implementation. Unlike the University of Nebraska or University of Colorado, their knowledge base was placed on departmental web pages beyond the library, including the institution's center for research quality, student support, academic skills center, career services, and writing center. This led to a much larger dataset to sort through and a likelihood of higher failure rate of unanswered questions. Three months of data from May, June and July 2016 revealed "26,814 unanswered queries and 41 categories' ' (VanLeer, 2018,

PowerPoint slide 13). This data was presented in a PowerPoint presentation and there was brief mention of creating the categories but no in-depth explanation.

Citations, topics, and natural language were the top categories, echoing what the other two schools found of users not really knowing what the FAQ's purpose was, and therefore searching for things that did not belong there. This analysis led to them adding more keywords, based on user searches for similar terms within the Query Spy search engine, to existing FAQs and creating new ones based on "trends." It does not appear that the categories influenced the creation of new FAQs but rather they were there for classifying purposes only.

Classifying Queries

Different models of classification of reference interactions – both in person and virtual - have been developed, applied and revised by scholars focusing on reference services (Radford, 2013). One of the most widely used and adapted models is the one developed by Katz (1997) that includes four broad categories: *directional*, *ready-reference*, *specific search* and *in-depth research*. Variations of these categories are typically found in forms for gathering reference desk statistics across academic libraries and are familiar to reference librarians.

User queries in public FAQ sites are different in nature to reference interactions. Still, they express information needs and can be categorized following the models mentioned above. Lewter and Profit (2018) categorized user queries from their library's LibAnswers FAQs to compare them with posts about the library on a social media platform by applying "the same taxonomy employed for recording patron transactions" (p. 111) to both the social media posts and to the knowledge base queries to facilitate comparison.

Method

To learn about the information users are seeking within the FAQ, the authors used search data from Query Analyzer, a statistic feature within Springshare's LibAnswers. This data allows the knowledge base administrators to view the terms users have entered into the search box within the FAQ public site. As such, it provides direct information about what users of the knowledge base expect to find within it. Additionally, the system records the action the user took after completing a search query, which can serve as an indication of whether the search was successful. Unfortunately, the data does not distinguish between searches performed by chat librarians and those done by students or other library users. However, considering that a chat librarian would likely conduct a search in the FAQ to answer a question from a patron, the queries can still provide insight into our users' information needs.

The platform collects the queries anonymously and retains them for six months. For this study, data generated from the public FAQs site during fall 2020 (August - December) and spring 2021 (January - May) were downloaded. The data included 106 timestamped search queries, their status, result, IP address of origin, the source, the FAQ group identification number/name and the referring URL. Data not relevant to the study (IP addresses, source and FAQ group identification) were deleted. X university's Institutional Review Board determined that this study was exempt.

Relevant to this study were the queries themselves, their status and the result of each query. The status of the query describes the action the user took after searching the FAQ with their question. LibAnswers (2022) classifies the possible outcomes as:

1. **Question Not submitted**: indicates that a user made a query, but did not click on any results or submit a question.

2. **Match via auto-suggest**: indicates that a user selected an FAQ from the auto-suggest list while typing their query.
3. **Question submitted**: indicates that a user made a query, but submitted a ticket instead of clicking on any results.
4. **Clicked on question**: indicates that a user made a query and clicked on an FAQ from the results. (para. 3b)

In the dataset analyzed, no queries fell under the "question submitted" category. For the purposes of the study, queries the system classified as "not submitted" were considered unsuccessful searches where the user did not find the information they were seeking. Queries in the "match via auto-suggest" and "clicked on question" categories were considered successful searches. This was used to determine the success rate of the knowledge base and answer research question 2: *Are users finding the information they seek?* It is worth noting that the success rate based on these outcomes can only be an approximation since there is no guarantee that the user found the information they needed once they clicked on an individual FAQ.

To answer research question 1 (*What type of information are users seeking in the FAQs?*), a content analysis of the queries was conducted. Holsti (1969) defined content analysis as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (p. 14). In this case, deductive coding was done, informed by the reference question classification models discussed earlier. While applying predetermined codes can be limiting, it made sense to use it here because the Leonard Lief Library had recently conducted an internal assessment of chat transcripts and, while reviewing an initial sample of the query data, it was evident that the codes generated from that previous analysis also described the majority of the FAQ queries. Applying categories from the previous chat transcript analysis to

FAQ search queries could facilitate a future comparison of questions received via the two platforms, as Lewter and Profit (2018) noted in their comparison of social media posts about the library and FAQ queries mentioned earlier.

Still, coding proved challenging due to the nature of search queries. In contrast to chat reference transactions where the interaction between user and librarian clarifies the nature of the information needed, search queries are usually short and lack context. For example, sometimes a query was very clear ("I want to speak to undergrad admissions"), but other times it was unclear what the user was seeking ("off"). This led to the decision to code queries collaboratively rather than seek inter-rater reliability by establishing categories and coding independently. The authors' combined experiences at the virtual and physical reference desk often provided context necessary to interpret ambiguous queries. For example, one librarian recognized the query "mandatory and benefits" as a research topic that had come up in library chat. The status "clicked on question", which shows which public FAQ the user chose, also helped inform the coding as the question selected shed light on the intention of the original query.

After multiple rounds of coding, the queries were coded into ten categories. Seven out of those ten categories overlapped with those generated in the internal chat assessment previously conducted. The table below shows the categories and their definitions along with a sample query for each category.

[INSERT TABLE 1 NEAR HERE]

Once the coding was completed, the date and timestamp on unsuccessful queries were used to manually search the FAQ to see if an existing question and answer pair could have potentially been a good match for those queries, but were not chosen. When searching the FAQ,

the authors noted the creation dates of public FAQs that were added after these unsuccessful questions were asked. This was done to avoid unnecessary duplication of similar FAQs.

Results

Success Rate

Of the 106 queries made by users during the knowledge base's first year, 52 were deemed successful according to the parameters outlined in the methods section. This represents a 49% overall success rate. When looking at the success rate by semester, a slight improvement was found from fall 2020 (47%) to spring 2021 (51%).

Types of Queries

The top three query categories were access, instructional and non-library. Access was the predominant category with 30% of queries (n=32) falling under it. The category distribution of all queries is shown in figure 1. Access-related queries were also the type of question the knowledge base answered best, representing 40% of successful queries (Figure 2).

The instructional and non-library categories were in a virtual tie for second most popular type of query with 17 and 16% respectively. Not surprisingly, non-library queries were the least successfully answered by the FAQ since the resource was conceived to be library-specific. The categories for all unsuccessfully answered queries can be seen in figure 3.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE]

Mismatched Queries

Reviewing the timestamps of unsuccessful queries revealed that some pre-existing FAQs in the knowledge base would have answered them, but they were not selected. It is likely that discrepancies in the language employed by users and the terms found in the knowledge base

prevented the correct FAQ from appearing in the search results. A notable example was the unsuccessful query “borrow tablet” that would have been answered by the FAQ describing the College’s device loan program had the term “tablet” been included in the text in addition to “laptop” and “device”.

Limitations

Because the knowledge base assessments found in the literature do not focus on the process of analyzing FAQ queries, the authors had to create their own system for categorizing the contents of the queries, based on reference transactions classification models. Challenges related to this are discussed in the methodology section. These challenges led to the decision to code queries collaboratively which resulted in not establishing inter-rater reliability. As a result, there may be skewed data because the authors coded each query together rather than independently.

Another limitation is the small size of the dataset (total of 106 queries) when compared to the large number of queries other FAQ assessments analyzed. However, the small size makes sense in the context of analyzing the first two semesters after implementation of a new resource. Additionally, this research does not consider overall use of the knowledge base in terms of total views for each FAQ, usage of the chat feature located on the homepage or general page visits. It is also impossible to factor in users who browsed the FAQ looking for assistance and left empty handed or whether the users were students, faculty, staff or others.

There was also a limitation related to the dataset. The result column only populated for queries that fell into the clicked-on question or not submitted categories. In contrast, queries that fell into the match via auto-suggest category did not retain the original user queries, only the public FAQ that was chosen. This may be construed as a limitation of the Query Analyzer functionality because it would be beneficial to see what users started typing before choosing an

FAQ to better understand their information needs. Data from the match via-auto suggest is therefore not as precise as data from the other two categories.

Discussion

Search Behavior of Knowledge Base Users

Similar to the assessments conducted by Drummond (2019) and VanLeer (2018), Leonard Lief library's analysis of FAQ queries found users searching the knowledge base for information that did not necessarily belong there. However, the nature of these questions differed greatly.

The University of Nebraska's Medical Center Library discovered in their analysis that their top queries were specific journals and information contained in the library catalog or databases (Drummond, 2019, p. 113). This was indicative to them of a concerning trend "that users, both within and outside of UNMC, were using the FAQ as a way to find articles, books, or questions that are better utilized in the literature or clinical databases" (p. 114). Along the same lines, Walden University observed that 50% of their unanswered questions centered on citations, research topics, and natural language questions that did not belong in the FAQ (VanLeer, 2018, slide 16).

In contrast, Leonard Lief library did not find a significant proportion of users looking for journals, citations, or research topics in the FAQ. Although the knowledge base did receive some known-item questions, they only represented 2% of total queries. Research topic questions were also few, representing only 3% of queries. The authors will continue to monitor the search queries to see if a trend similar to the one identified by these other libraries emerges. However, at the Leonard Lief Library a different trend was observed: a significant proportion of

unexpected queries about other departments or services on campus, which were categorized as non-library queries. The implications of this finding will be discussed in the next section.

The fact that there was little evidence of the FAQ search being used as a place to ask research questions was encouraging and supports the idea that this type of knowledge base complements online chat by providing answers to more basic reference questions, freeing up librarians for more complex research questions. LaBrake (2019) noted that through Berkley College's use of the FAQ "we can see that librarians are spending more time teaching higher-level information literacy skills in their interactions with students when FAQs are used for basic support" (p. 17). Further research would be needed to determine if the implementation of the FAQ at X library has had a similar effect.

Most Frequently Asked Question Categories

The frequency of access-related queries was to be expected, given that the Leonard Lief Library building remained closed during the 2020-2021 academic year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was interesting that despite access queries being the most successfully answered type of question, the same category also figured prominently in the unsuccessful queries. Unsuccessful access queries included "who uses the library?" "can all CUNY students go to the Leonard Lief Library?" and "access to library after graduating." These indicate the need for long term additions to the knowledge base in this area.

The prevalence of questions related to other campus units, such as admissions, information technology, and human resources (non-library category) was unexpected. Most of these queries did not have relevant FAQs due to the library-specific scope of the knowledge base. However, the proportion of non-library questions demonstrates a need for FAQs on such topics, even though these questions fall outside the realm of library-related questions. In such

cases, the FAQ would function as a source of information, not just library information, similar to how libraries are seen as "major sources of information for society" and "serve as guardians of the public's access to information" (American Library Association, 2015, para.1). Furthermore, the knowledge base's ability to answer any question may strengthen the user's confidence in its abilities and persuade them to return for more questions and answers. Additionally, including campus information in the FAQ presents the library with an opportunity for outreach to other campus departments, which can foster collaboration and assist with consistent information and messaging to the benefit of students.

The assessment also revealed a relatively high percentage of instructional related questions. It was also the second most successfully answered type of question. This was gratifying because one of the intentions in the creation of the FAQ was for it to serve as a learning tool for students. To achieve this, appropriate videos were embedded within certain individual FAQs to serve as learning aids. An example included How do I find library eBooks, which featured a video of a Lehman librarian demonstrating this task (Leonard Lief Library FAQ). Based on this observation, instructional FAQs with videos will continue to be added to strengthen the knowledge base's potential as a learning tool. This will be reinforced by promoting this use of the knowledge base both during library instruction and reference interactions.

Amending Existing FAQs Based on Queries

As noted earlier, several existing FAQs would have been suitable matches for unsuccessful queries. In addition to the one discussed in the results section, some examples from Leonard Lief Library's FAQ include the following:

- How do I contact a librarian?

- How do I access free subscriptions to the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*?
- Can I find all of the Library's electronic resources in OneSearch?
- A print copy of the textbook for my course is available at the Library. Can I borrow it?" (Leonard Lief Library Homepage).

In these cases, the FAQ was missing a term that would have retrieved them had it been used in its description or tagged with it. For example, the search term "research librarian" for the FAQ "How do I contact a Librarian?" Another example was the query "borrow tablets" where the existing FAQ of "How can I borrow a Laptop?" may have answered this question. These examples highlighted the exactness of the user's search terms and how the knowledge base matches queries. In response to this, the authors later amended the FAQs to include some of the search terms in the answers or as subject tags. Continuing to add search terms commonly used where appropriate is a long-term solution to improving discoverability of existing FAQs. Tobias (2017) discusses this concept and recommends making use of the keyword and subject tagging options within LibAnswers, and using the same language as the library's website for consistency.

Timing of Conducting Knowledge Base Assessment

Conducting the assessment in the first year of implementation helped pinpoint early on some of the knowledge bases' strengths and weaknesses. Shortcoming could then be addressed going forward in a timely fashion before the FAQ became very large and required a much longer process to revamp. This seemed to be the case for the University of Nebraska Medical Center, where a thorough library knowledge base assessment took place eight years after implementation. Based on this observation, conducting an assessment soon after implementation is recommended to simplify improvements and increase success rates. Interestingly, Leonard Lief Library FAQ showed a higher success rate compared to the University of Nebraska Medical

Center Library where 83% of queries failed to find a match. While there are likely a variety of factors to explain their high failure rate, an earlier assessment would have probably increased their success rate.

Query Categories and Long-term FAQ Management

A critical outcome of this assessment was the creation of the query categories. Since the few assessments found in the literature did not discuss categories used in their analysis of FAQ queries and their definitions, the authors turned instead towards categories that had emerged from a previous assessment of the library's chat reference transcripts.

Ultimately, these categories will have a practical application beyond the original intention of learning about the type of information users of the library FAQ expect to find. Classifying and grouping individual FAQs according to the same categories would enable a more systematic approach to the addition of new ones and upkeep of existing ones. This is different from creating one-off FAQs based on individual questions to the knowledge base that were not answered - a piecemeal approach not sustainable in the long-term.

Further, grouping the FAQs by categories would facilitate distributing the responsibility for creating and updating the knowledge base among library departments. For example, all FAQs in the access category would be assigned to the access services unit for upkeep. This type of shared approach was used by the University of Nebraska Medical Center for their FAQs. Assigning FAQs to the relevant department could distribute the workload more equitably and result in more timely updates, since the responsibility would not fall solely on one person. These options could serve as a long-term plan for maintaining the knowledge base and ensuring its relevance as new information is sought by users.

Future Research

An extension of this assessment project would be to compare reference questions, both in-person and via chat, with user queries in the knowledge base to understand similarities and differences in the subjects users are requesting assistance with in all three formats. This would provide a more complete picture of the information needs of the library user community.

A finding that invites further exploration is the presence of non-library queries. It would be interesting to investigate the prevalence of these types of questions in other reference formats. Indeed, one of the authors of this article is currently participating in a project comparing the prevalence of campus information questions in chat across different academic libraries.

Finally, other assessment methods can be implemented to evaluate a library FAQ. Notably, an assessment from a user experience perspective where knowledge base creators receive qualitative feedback from users can shed light into additional improvements not revealed by analyzing search queries.

Conclusion

The assessment of X library's public FAQ based on two semesters of search query data has demonstrated its strengths and shortcomings. Its strengths include a relatively good success rate of answering user queries, after only two semesters of implementation. The large percentage of successfully answered queries in the instructional, access, and circulation categories showed its utilization by users in library-centric topics. Using the Query Analyzer tool, categories such as non-library and access questions were asked most frequently but not well-answered by the knowledgebase, pointing to the knowledge base's weakness in these subject matters. Additionally, the preciseness of the manner in which the knowledge base matches FAQs with users' queries highlighted the need for appropriate tagging, linking and multiple term

usage. These outcomes necessitate new FAQs in the non-library related category and the refinement of existing categories such as access and instruction.

The creation and use of the categories for the assessment has emerged as a long-term solution towards the overall maintenance and improvement of the system. It is expected that these will evolve as the authors continue to monitor searches within the FAQ that appear in the Query Analyzer data, with an attention to new topics. These will form the basis of new categories and new FAQs within them.

The authors hope this assessment can serve other institutions interested in implementing or maintaining a knowledge base for their campus library. Given the popularity of Springshare's LibAnswers as an online chat platform, it is likely that many libraries already have access to the FAQ module but may not have explored it, or have created one but not leveraged the Query Analyzer data. With the rise of remote learning, both at Leonard Lief Library's institution and others, an online knowledge base will be an increasingly important tool to communicate information to library users. Simultaneously, the search queries to the knowledge base provide useful insight about those users' information needs. Both of these functions make a library FAQ an important resource that should be regularly assessed and continuously improved, as demonstrated by this assessment.

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