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Ask LITS

A novel public question-and-answer board

The Ask LITS board at the Mt. Holyoke College library began as an invitation for anonymous research questions and a public display to demonstrate the type of information librarians can provide. It has become a high profile communication and publicity tool, combining frequent student participation with cross-department staff involvement.

Many students contact librarians for research support via traditional gateways like the research help desk, email, and in-person contact with a librarian. We wanted to offer students a way to ask questions anonymously, and to see that their peers use Library, Information, and Technology Services (LITS) staff as an information source. We sought to make the board informal, fun, and a place for conversation, and we found a medium that felt informal and even a bit transgressive: whiteboard markers on glass.

The ASK LITS board: Inviting student questions in a new way

The Ask LITS board resides in a high-traffic hallway, between the Reading Room and the Information Commons in the library complex. The “board” itself is a multi-lit



The Ask LITS board in full swing. Photo credit: Mary Stettner. [View this article online for detailed images.](#)

glass wall with post-er paper mounted behind the panes of glass, displaying “Ask LITS” in nine-inch high letters, and in smaller text: “Write your question, get an answer!”

Ask about research, LITS, Moodle, RefWorks, the library, or leave a comment about LITS!”

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The poster paper backing behind the panes of glass makes text written on the glass more visible. Students use multicolored markers that are available in a suction cup basket, and clear contact paper protects the painted wood between the panes.

Staff answers: Quick responses using a team approach

Librarians who staff the research help desk check the board for unanswered questions each time they have a reference shift. A librarian will write a brief response with a marker, and date the reply. We expected the board to be used as a place for questions on library research, but it quickly became evident that there was interest in a wider range of topics.

In coordination with department managers, a point person for each area of LITS (everyone from archives and special collections to technology infrastructure and systems support) was identified. When a question comes in about another area, we notify the appropriate point person, who either posts a response directly to the board or sends the librarian a reply to write. Comments and feedback are also passed on to the point person for the relevant area.

Once a question is answered, it remains on the board for a minimum of a week, or longer if the board is not full. Once a week, a student worker takes pictures of each window pane. We use a digital SLR camera with a powerful light sensor because of the difficulties of glare when photographing whiteboard pen on glass, and the uselessness of any sort of flash under these conditions. It's important to make sure markers are fresh and bright, to facilitate photographing and transcribing.

The student employee then records the photos and transcripts of the questions and answers in LibAnswers, and most questions become part of the library's online public knowledge base. There the text and image showing the original context of the question are accessible to anyone on the web.² We sometimes repost particularly interest-

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ing or timely Ask LITS questions to our blog and to our Facebook page.

As mentioned earlier, the board is located in a heavy traffic area, which means it's not only easy to find to ask questions, but it's seen by a lot of people. Students that may be in the building just to use a computer lab or get technical support pass by the board and can see that the librarians are helpful, friendly, and responsive as well as see the answers to peers' questions.

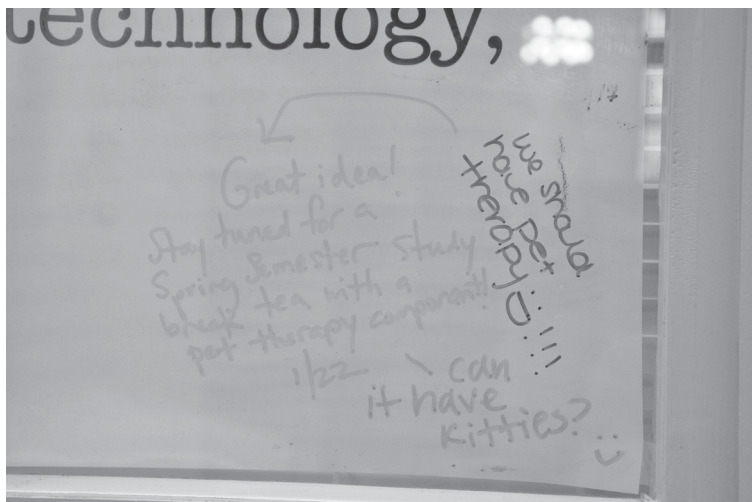
When we receive questions clearly written in the spirit of fun, staff will still answer with accurate information, just like a more "serious" reference question. A recent post referenced the popular Internet song to ask "What does the fox say?" A librarian provided true information on fox vocalizations, along with a short URL and a QR code to an online video of fox calls.

As students got used to having their questions answered on the board, we found the range of topics broadening even beyond LITS' purview. Students sometimes ask questions about courses, for example: "Why do I have to take Drawing I before I can take any other art class?" We confer with the appropriate department (in this case, the Art Department) and provide the asker an answer while building relationships across campus.

We will also refer students directly to the correct department for answering their question if time is of the essence or the questioner is better served by interacting directly with that external department. Students get quick, accurate information from the right source, and the answer gets some publicity for the week or two it is up on the board, and even more exposure if we choose it to repost on our social media accounts.

The goal of the board was to give students another place to get information, but it has informed our understanding of our community's needs, as well. By monitoring the questions and comments on the board, we have a new way to discover what is important to students and hear their feedback. While we welcome feedback at our service points, they are advertised more as places to ask questions or get library materials. Now requests for 24-hour library hours,

wireless network quality, printer issues, and so on. As a result of facilities questions asked on the board, we have provided more power strips, lap boards, and mini-whiteboards for studying, and provided more standing workspaces and upgrades to furniture. We get messages of thanks on the board when we implement changes that were requested there. We also get recurring questions about things we can't change or won't be able to implement in the



Examples of serious and not-so-serious questions and answers on the Ask LITS board. Question: "We should have pet therapy!!! Answer: "Great idea! Stay tuned for a spring semester study break tea with a pet therapy component. 1/22" "Can it have kitties?"

near future, such as 24-hour staffing at times other than during exams or requests for microwaves in the building.

Even when we have to say no to a request, we attempt to answer without talking down to the asker, letting him or her know how things like budgets, hours, and staffing decisions impact what we can do.

HVAC complaints, and kudos to specific library staff, events, or services have a natural, anonymous home. Frequent questions and particularly interesting topics on the Ask LITS board lead to blog posts providing further dissemination of the information that first appeared on the board.

Student questions: serious and silly

What sorts of community conversations take place with whiteboard markers on glass? Our students are very invested in the library as space: we regularly receive requests and complaints about temperature, furniture, noise levels, the need for items like microwaves and power outlets,

Other types of frequent content include a constant stream of directional and functional questions, as well as spikes of the silly and random as students blow off steam during final exams. We respond to it all with a mixture of professionalism and wit.

Our very vocal and collaboration-oriented students also use the board to voice opinions on LITS policy changes. For example, we saw grateful responses when we implemented network username and password logins to library accounts.

Not everything is so simply resolved, however. There have been difficult conversations on the Ask LITS board at various times. Students made a successful request

via the board and other methods for gender neutral signage on our single-stall restrooms, but we were then required to revert to the standard gendered signage due to state plumbing code requirements. We had to refer further questions on this topic to a larger campus conversation about restroom signage, led by the Dean of Students Office.

Our students felt particularly passionate about this issue, and we walked a careful line between being respectful to their requests and honest that this was an area where we had to follow campus-wide policy and wait for it to change. At times like this, our archive of answers has been useful as old questions are repeated, both for providing context to whichever staffer is answering a question, and for helping us to provide compassionate responses.

While we encourage use of the board primarily for asking questions, special consideration is given for alternative uses when merited. This spring a number of our students started a campaign to increase awareness of microaggressions on campus by posting stories of these incidents on slips of paper in various high-traffic places, and particularly on glass walls. The campaign highlighted insensitive things said to members of the community, predominantly about race.²

The board was an opportunity for students to have their voices heard at an emotionally tense time on campus, and we left their contributions up longer than we normally would because it was so important for our students to see their comments stay visible.

What's next for the ASK LITS board?

This board, fueled by student participation and initiation, is entirely different than our website, blog, newsletters hanging in bathroom stalls, and social media presence.³ Our users initiate the conversations on the Ask LITS Board in a way that they don't on our other outreach tools. The result is that we actually have some of our

most sustained non face-to-face interactions with students via the Ask LITS Board: much more than on other social media like Facebook and Twitter.

Over the past year, we have averaged 20 questions on the board per month when classes are in session. We answer more questions on Mondays and Wednesdays than other days of the week, with Fridays as the runner-up. We would like to delve more into tagging the kinds of things answered, as we archive them, to connect our users to information that will improve their library experience, and to share more widely the changes we have already made.

As our spaces and staffing evolve, there is the possibility that our offices will be remodeled to remove the windows that currently host the Ask LITS board. In the event that that happens, it will be important to recreate this service. We will need another location that has high-foot traffic but is out of view from all of the service points in order to provide the combination of accessibility and anonymity that fosters our lively interactions.

The future of the Ask LITS board could be in a different location in our library, and could be on some other sort of large writing surface, but glass and colorful markers have provided the sort of informality and interactivity we needed to build the sense of community in our library, so they are likely to be a part of our future.

Notes

1. See public questions and answers from the Ask LITS board at <http://libanswers.mtholyoke.edu/browse.php?tid=25384>.
2. MoHonest: <http://mohonest.tumblr.com/> and <https://twitter.com/mohonestmhc>.
3. LITS blog: <http://litsmhc.blogspot.com/>; LITS social media accounts: <https://www.facebook.com/MountHolyokeLITS>, <https://twitter.com/LITSatMHC>, and <http://instagram.com/litsmhc>. The newsletter posted in our bathroom stalls is known as LITS InStalls. *zz*