AskAway Chat Reference

Actions & Achievements

2021

Message from the Chair

For the second year in a row AskAway experienced unprecedented traffic levels, likely attributable to COVID-19's ongoing disruptions to in-person library services. AskAway participating institutions collaboratively met this increase in demand by contributing more staffing, and opening the service extra days at key points in the year. AskAway also piloted proactive chat and promoted visibility of the service to better serve students where they are, and when they need help most.

Thank you to all AskAway participating institutions and staff that continue to adapt and evolve to meet post-secondary students' needs.

Suzanne Rackover
University Librarian
Emily Carr University of Art + Design
AskAway Advisory Committee Chair
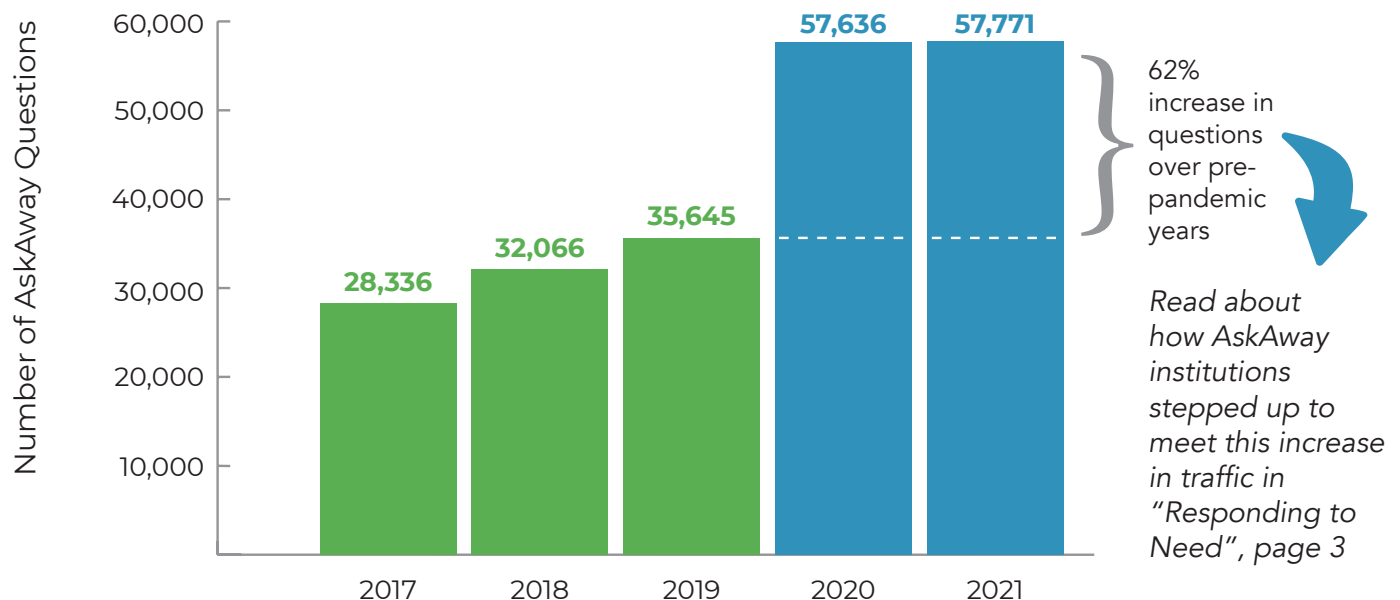
Truly Collaborative

30 institutions across BC and the Yukon collaboratively staff AskAway.

An Advisory Committee, made up of representatives from participating institutions, oversees the service.

The BC Electronic Library Network (BC ELN) manages the AskAway Administrative Centre on behalf of participants.

AskAway Traffic

AskAway has seen steadily increasing traffic over the years, but the pandemic triggered a major jump in usage that has not waned.

Number of AskAway Questions

Year	Value
2017	28,336
2018	32,066
2019	35,645
2020	57,636
2021	57,771

62% increase in questions over pre-pandemic years

Read about how AskAway institutions stepped up to meet this increase in traffic in "Responding to Need", page 3

2021 Achievements

Responding to Need

Despite disruptions caused by COVID-19 in 2021, AskAway allowed libraries to remain "open" – virtually – so that students could get research and citation help from qualified library staff, even as physical locations were closed. To respond to the increase in user need, AskAway:

- ▶ Opened early at critical junctures in the term (e.g. the service opened earlier than usual in January and September);
- ▶ Extended service through break periods (e.g. AskAway was open between April 19th and May 14th when it is typically closed); and
- ▶ Increased staffing (e.g. with direction from the Advisory Committee, base staffing commitments were increased in the summer sections).

> "No suggestions, keep up the good work and thank you for all the support and guidance to students in these hard times."
>
> KPU AskAway User

Advancing the Service

In 2021 the AskAway service completed two top priorities identified by the Advisory Committee:

▶ **Proactive Chat**
In an effort to be more responsive to users, AskAway piloted proactive chat in 2021. Proactive chat is a timed prompt that invites website visitors to chat with a service provider when they have lingered on a page for a certain amount of time. Four institutions tested the new functionality with AskAway in the summer of 2021, and produced a final report with a recommendation for the Advisory Committee. Proactive chat was greenlit for broader implementation in 2022.

▶ **AskAway Visibility**
Research on AskAway usage has shown that visibility of the service in key locations is a primary determinant of how much the service is used. AskAway being available at point-of-need (e.g. in discovery layers, with database results) is key not only to increasing usage, but more importantly to providing students with the help that they need when and where they need it most. In 2021 the AskAway Administrative Centre produced a series of bite-sized, actionable "Visibility Tips of the Month" for institutions to increase AskAway presence on library websites.

Maintaining the Infrastructure

In consultation with the Advisory Committee, the AskAway Administrative Centre is responsible for coordinating the service on behalf of participating libraries and communicating timely updates throughout the year. In 2021, the Admin Centre kept the service running smoothly by training 68 service providers, producing collaborative schedules that incorporate staffing from 30 libraries, and pivoting quickly when circumstances changed (e.g. when the return to campus was delayed in January 2022). Additionally:

- ▶ A Librarian-*Externally Funded* was hired to coordinate the service; the incumbent brings years of AskAway coordination expertise
- ▶ AskAway's coordinator met regularly with other collaborative virtual reference coordinators across North America to share ideas, best practices, and trends in chat reference service
- ▶ AskAway distributed the Chat Box, a newsletter that shares updates and celebrates the good work of service providers
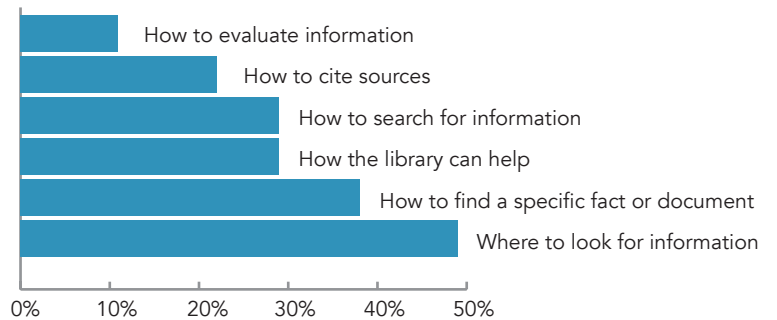
Classroom Connection

"Our University Access Program (UAP) has students in 3 different levels of English. UAP Faculty are big AskAway enthusiasts and asked us to create an AskAway video tutorial to help students understand which questions are appropriate to ask. The instructor for the most basic English level course always asks us to highlight AskAway during our Library sessions."

- University Canada West Library

Supporting Information Literacy

AskAway interactions provide opportunities for students to learn how to search for and evaluate appropriate sources. Students report* learning:

Learning Outcome	Percentage
How to evaluate information	~11%
How to cite sources	~21%
How to search for information	~29%
How the library can help	~29%
How to find a specific fact or document	~38%
Where to look for information	~48%

Percentage of respondents that chose this learning outcome; respondents could select more than one outcome.
*Based on AskAway users that completed an exit survey.

What kinds of questions do AskAway Visitors Ask?

Research (31%)

"I'm looking for articles on how screen time affects kids."

Citation (22%)

"How do I cite this in MLA style?"

eResource Access (14%)

"How do I download this article?"

Ready Reference (12%)

"How do I find a book that the library doesn't have?"

Circulation (9%)
Directional (6%)
Technical (2%)
Interlibrary loans (2%)

"Where can I find course reserves?"

AskAway Financials

Thanks to collaborative software licensing, staffing, administration, and governance, AskAway helps BC and the Yukon's post-secondary sectors avoid $2.3 million in costs.

	2020/21 Actual	2021/22 Projected
	Revenue	**Revenue**
Partner Library Support (Service Support Fee & Flexible Contribution)	96,569	97,873
BC ELN Contribution	10,000	10,000
Miscellaneous Revenue (Carryforward, Marketing, etc.)	2,152	3,833
Total	**108,721**	**111,706**
	Expenses	**Expenses**
Staffing and Coordination Infrastructure	89,118	94,325
Administration/Communication/Governance	1,233	602
Software & Technical Infrastructure	14,542	15,178
Total	**104,893**	**110,105**
Revenue - Expenses (Carryforward)	**3,828**	**1,601**

A Look Ahead to 2022

▶ AskAway will roll out proactive chat to institutions that wish to implement this functionality; supporting these institutions are the best practices recommended by the Proactive Chat pilot group and the Administrative Centre, which will assist institutions with set-up.

▶ AskAway will continue to explore how to optimize the AskAway experience for students.

▶ The service will undergo strategic planning, and Advisory Committee Terms of Reference will be updated to ensure alignment with service host BC ELN and BC ELN's other service areas.

> " This service has been a great accelerator for my research, I can find hard to track down papers in minutes or get questions answered near instantly.
>
> SFU AskAway User

> " Very helpful, and happy to have this ability to ask for help, especially on the weekends!
>
> Camosun College AskAway User

> " Sometimes it can be hard to find the right information and they always know where to find everything.... I always leave with information I can use in the future.
>
> UNBC AskAway User