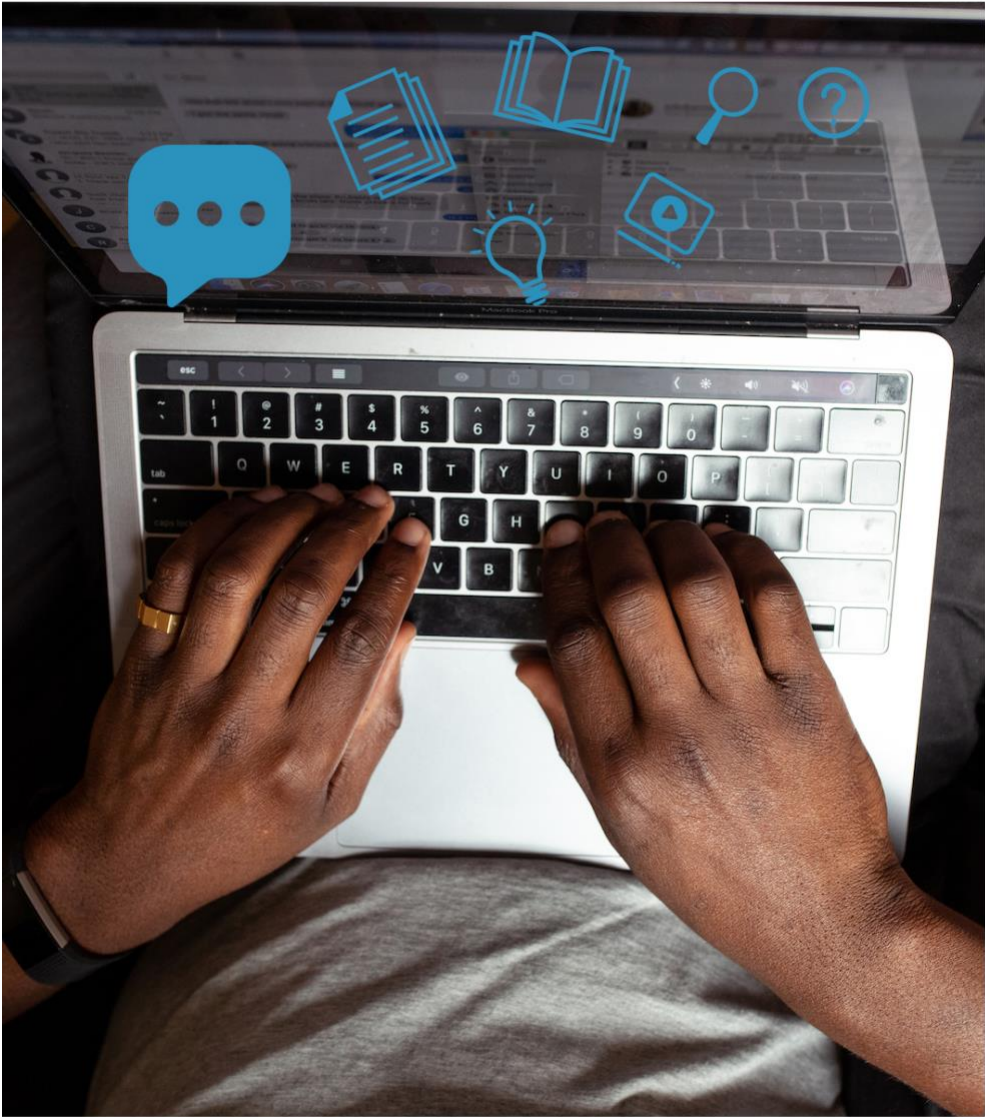


AskAway Actions and Achievements 2021

Annual report for the AskAway chat reference service.



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.

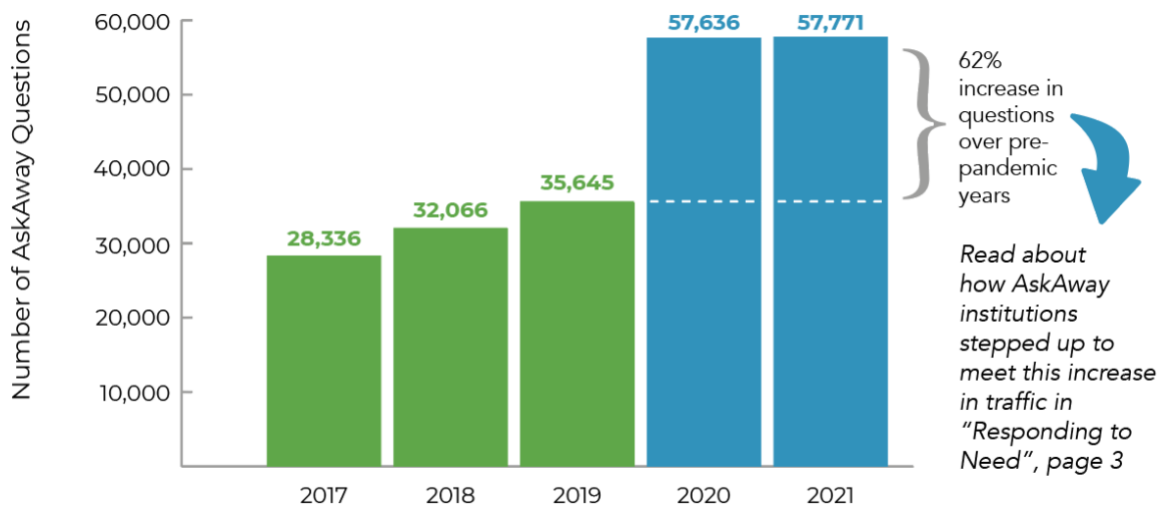
- Suzanne Rackover, University Librarian, Emily Carr University of Art + Design,
AskAway Advisory Committee Chair



Photo 1: Suzanne Rackover

AskAway Traffic

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



2021 Achievements

AskAway progress in 2021 towards meeting its action plan goals.

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).

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 (see the [Best Practices: Minimum Visibility Standards webpage](#)) 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

Quote from University Canada West Library Staff: "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."

Supporting Information Literacy

AskAway interactions provide opportunities for students to learn how to search for and evaluate appropriate sources. Students report (Based on AskAway users that completed an exit survey) learning:

- How to evaluate information (11%)
- How to cite sources (22%)
- 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 (49%)

Note that respondents could select more than one outcome.

What Kinds of Questions do AskAway Visitors Ask?

From asking for help finding articles on a topic, to asking how to cite in MLA style, AskAway visitors bring many different research and library-related questions to the service.

The following breakdown shows the types of questions service providers answer:

- 31% research
- 22% citation
- 14% how to access an electronic resource
- 12% ready reference
- 9% circulation
- 6% directional
- 2% technical
- 2% about interlibrary loans

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.

Revenue	2020/21 Actual	2021/22 Projected
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 Revenue	\$108,721	\$111,706

Expenditure	2020/21 Actual	2021/22 Projected
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

AskAway Revenue over Expenditure (Carryforward):

- 2020/21 Actual Carryforward: \$3,828
- 2021/22 Projected Carryforward: \$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.

Quotes from AskAway Users

“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

About AskAway

AskAway is 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 website](#)) manages the AskAway Administrative Centre on behalf of participants.

If you have comments or feedback about this accessible PDF, please email leahh@bceln.ca. Your suggestions are welcome.