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Reaching Distance and Online Learners through Virtual Consultations

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Reaching Distance and Online Learners through Virtual Consultations

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Background

In June 2016, I took over as the liaison to the Education program at Northeastern University. The Education program is comprised entirely of graduate students, at both the Master's and Doctoral level, and the students are predominantly online and distance learners.

In the past, distance and online learners could contact librarians through email and phone calls. Looking for a way to better approximate the consult experience of on-campus students, I decided to try offering web conference consults for the Fall quarter.

LibCal

Just before the Fall quarter, Snell Library acquired LibCal, an online booking and calendar system. LibCal offered the opportunity for students to book one-on-one research appointments directly through LibGuides.

This new software allowed librarians to set up a customized booking form, where they could provide students with options for how they wanted their consult to take place: in person, over the phone, or through a web conference.

Results

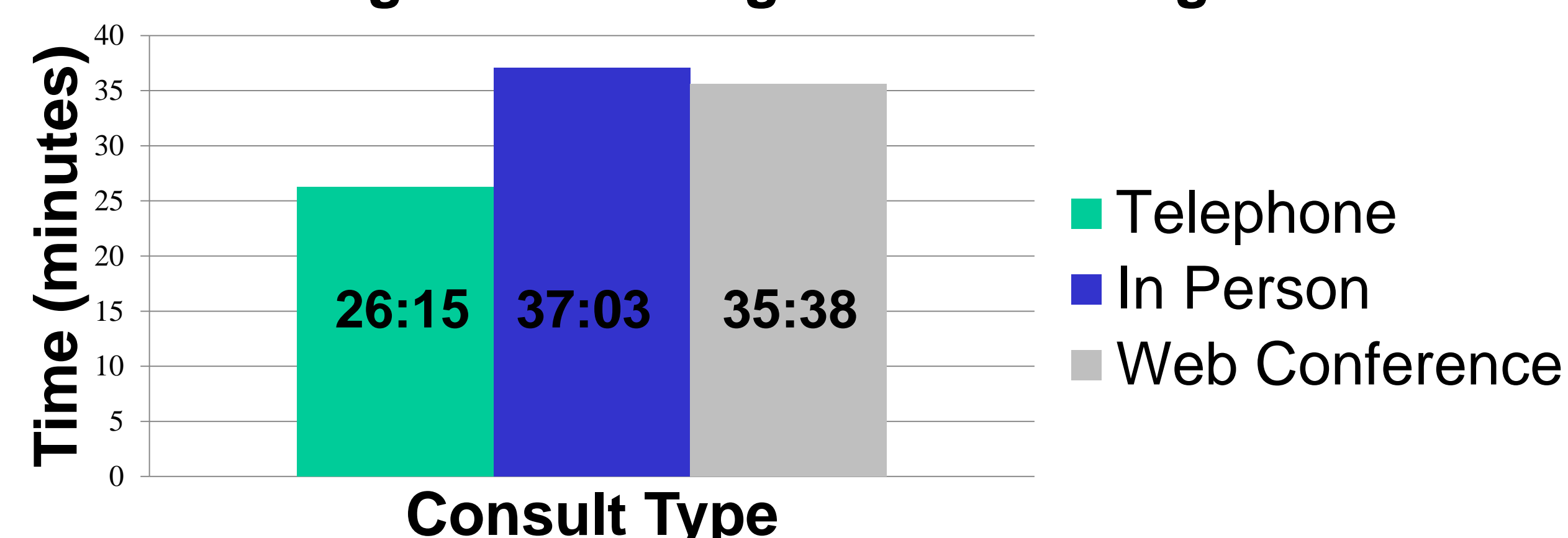
In the first month of web conference consults being offered, September 2016, web conference consults represented over 50 percent of the scheduled consults booked. In the following months, web conferences continued to be a popular booking option, comprising about a third (31%) of all scheduled consults (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Scheduled Consults by Type September 2016-March 2017



When the average length of each type of consult was calculated, web conference consults averaged 36 minutes long, in-person consults were an average of 37 minutes long, and telephone consults were 26 minutes long (Figure 2). After running an analysis of variance, the length of in-person and web conference consults varied enough from telephone consults to be statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This is one indication that web conference consults more closely approximate the in-person research appointment experience than do telephone consults.

Figure 2: Average Consult Length



Software Options

Go to MeetingΔ (<https://www.gotomeeting.com>)

Cost: Free-\$29/month

Features: Screen sharing, chat, personal meeting room*; recording*; keyboard and mouse sharing*; drawing tools*; dial in with phone or computer*

Google Hangouts↑ (<https://hangouts.google.com/>)

Cost: Free

Features: Screen sharing; recording; chat

Join.me (<https://www.join.me>)

Cost: Free-\$20/month

Features: Screen sharing; personal meeting room*; recording*; chat*

Skype↑Δ (<https://www.skype.com/en/>)

Cost: Free

Features: Screen sharing; chat

ZoomΔ (<https://zoom.us/>)

Cost: Free-\$14.99/month

Features: Screen sharing; dial in with phone or computer; personal meeting room; recording; chat; keyboard & mouse sharing; whiteboard

*Requires a paid account

↑Requires student to create an account to use

ΔRequires student to download software to use

Considerations

- **Culture of academic program:** Some students may not feel comfortable web conferencing with a librarian; Consider starting with adult learners or graduate students
- **Promotion:** Think through how you will make students aware of this offering; they can only take advantage of a service if they know it exists
- **Technology:** Make the experience as easy as possible for students—try to minimize the software they will need to download or accounts they will have to create

Benefits

- **Screen sharing:** teaching capabilities can be improved by student viewing librarian's screen as searches and software are demonstrated
- **Flexibility:** Consults can be delivered from anywhere with an Internet connection, making it easier to schedule off-hours consults if necessary
- **Connection to library:** Allowing librarian and student to see each other as they discuss research strategies can foster a more personal connection and link to the library
- **Low cost:** Free or low-cost videoconferencing software options allow librarians to experiment with offering virtual consults without a large financial investment

Students schedule consults directly through LibGuide

Students choose preferred consult method