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Information Literacy Instruction During COVID-19

La formation à la maîtrise de l'information durant la COVID-19

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Abstract / Résumé

The quick shift to online instruction taken by most post-secondary institutions in spring 2020 continued into fall 2020 and, in most cases, spring 2021. A survey was conducted to discover how this online shift might have affected the number of instruction requests academic librarians received compared to a typical year. Results were somewhat mixed, but overall, information literacy instruction requests seem to have decreased as a result of the pandemic.

Le passage rapide à l'enseignement en ligne effectué par la plupart des établissements postsecondaires au printemps 2020 s'est poursuivi à l'automne 2020 et, dans la plupart des cas, au printemps 2021. Un sondage a été mené pour découvrir comment ce virage vers l'enseignement en ligne a pu affecter le nombre de demandes d'enseignement reçues par les bibliothécaires universitaires par rapport à une année normale. Les résultats est quelque peu mixtes, mais, dans l'ensemble, les demandes de formation à la maîtrise de l'information semblent avoir diminué en raison de la pandémie.

Keywords / Mots-clés

COVID-19, information literacy, academic libraries, library instruction

COVID-19, maîtrise de l'information, bibliothèques universitaires, formation documentaire



Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought many changes to the world, which affected individuals both personally and professionally. For those working in post-secondary institutions, an incredible and rapid effort to move everything online occurred within days in March; fortunately, it was nearer to the end of term than the beginning, and most people were able to manage. In academic libraries, many of the “one-shot” classes had already been completed, so for librarians not teaching credit courses, the move to online instruction may not have had a big impact on their teaching practice. However, most Canadian (and many international) institutions remained largely, or only, online for the fall 2020 term, so even those who had not been affected significantly in the spring had to grapple with creating fully online classes for an entire semester.

The concept of teaching information literacy sessions online is not new. Those on satellite campuses without libraries, or at institutions that were already primarily online, had been experimenting with various means of reaching their distance users (Barnhart & Stanfield, 2011; Nicholson & Eva, 2011). In 2020, librarians accustomed to in-person classes quickly began using both pre-recorded and “live” online information literacy sessions for everything from one-shots to complete courses as they transitioned to the “new normal” introduced by COVID-19 (Walsh & Rana, 2020; Weeks et al., 2020).

Academic librarians’ teaching practice often takes the form of one or more guest lectures in others’ classes, usually to teach specific library-related skills or concepts. Often, requests for these guest sessions are unpredictable, sporadic, and last minute. As September 2020 drew closer, many librarians wondered what their instructional request load would look like for the fall term. Would it be higher than normal, with course instructors looking for help filling class time? Would it be lower, given that online teaching can take longer and instructors might have less time to dedicate to library instruction? Would they want synchronous virtual sessions, or pre-recorded lectures for students to watch on their own time? As these questions loomed, I decided to create a survey to discover what the result would be.

Methodology

At the end of November 2020, a survey was sent to Canadian library-related listservs (CAPAL, CAUT Librarians, and Jerome [Alberta libraries]), ALA’s international information literacy listserv, and personal contacts on Twitter. The eight-question survey inquired about the volume and nature of instructional requests received by academic librarians in fall 2020 compared to a typical term, such as fall 2019 (see Appendix for the survey questions). Ninety-five completed surveys were received, and 94 (99%) responses were from Canada. The greatest number of respondents (32%) came from large (more than 20,000 Full-Time Equivalent [FTE] students) institutions; 27% came from institutions with an FTE between 5,000 and 10,000; 22% were from institutions with an FTE between 10,000 and 20,000; and 19% were from institutions with less than 5,000 FTE (see Figure 1).

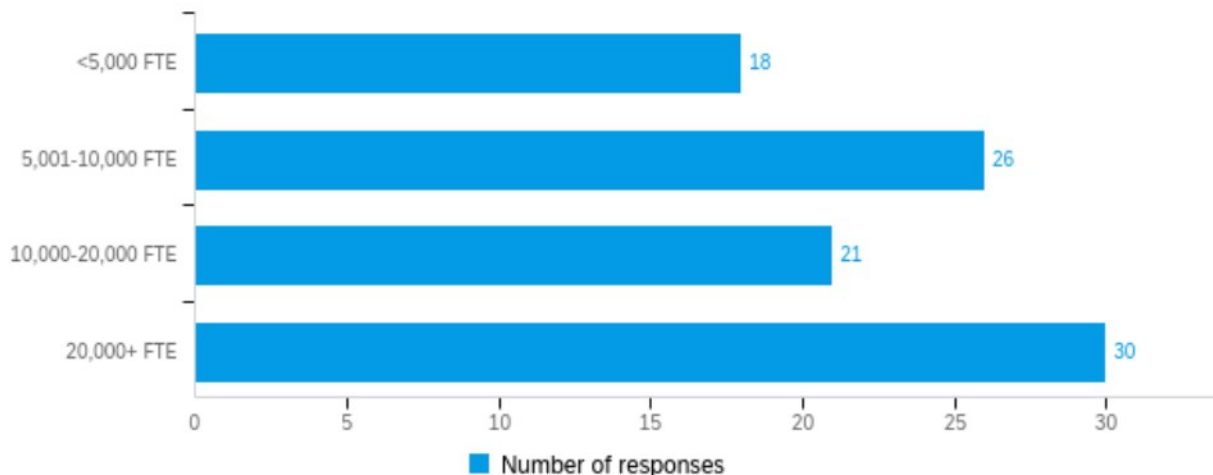


Figure 1. Institution size of respondents

Results

When asked about instructional modes during the pandemic, 88% of respondents indicated that instruction at their institutions was primarily or fully online for fall 2020; only one respondent indicated that instruction was fully in-person, while 11% indicated their classes were “blended” (see Figure 2).

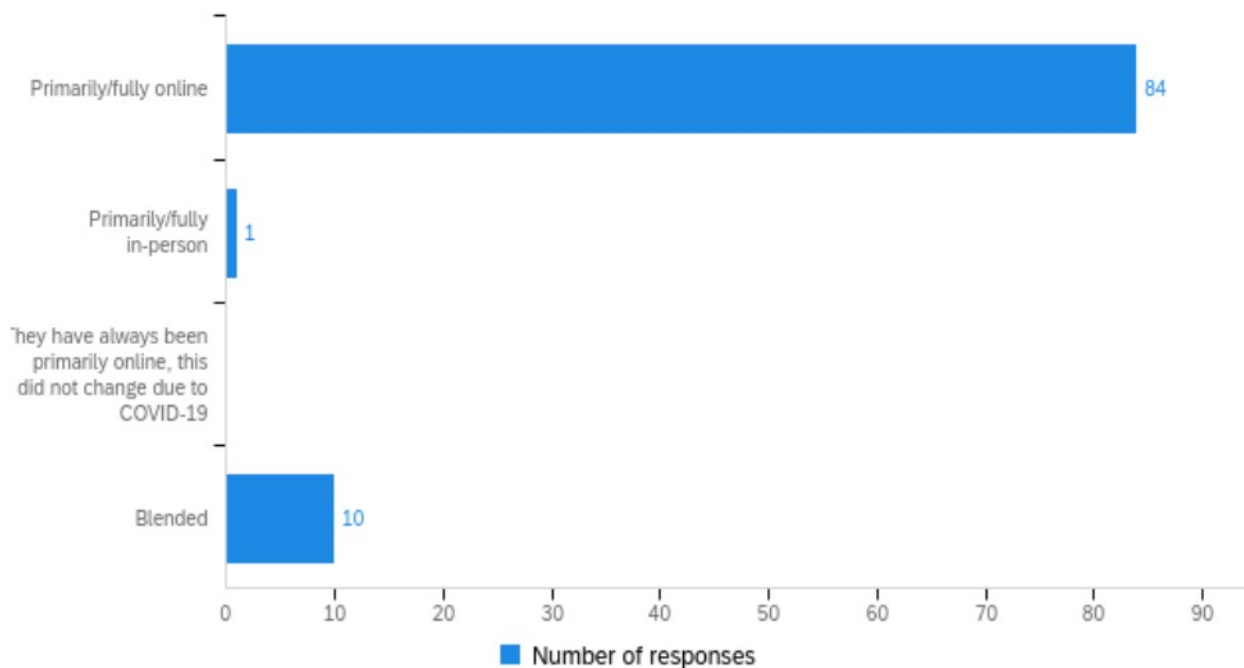


Figure 2. Primary instructional mode used at respondents' institutions in fall 2020 (online vs. in-person)

When asked about their one-shot instruction for fall 2019 (or a typical year), the number of sessions ranged from zero to more than 25, but the most common response was 10-15 sessions (22%), followed closely by 6-10 sessions (21%), then 0-5 sessions (17%), 15-20 sessions (16%), 25 or more sessions (13%), and 20-25 sessions (12%). Clearly, even in a “typical” year, the number of one-shots taught by each librarian has wide variation (see Figure 3).

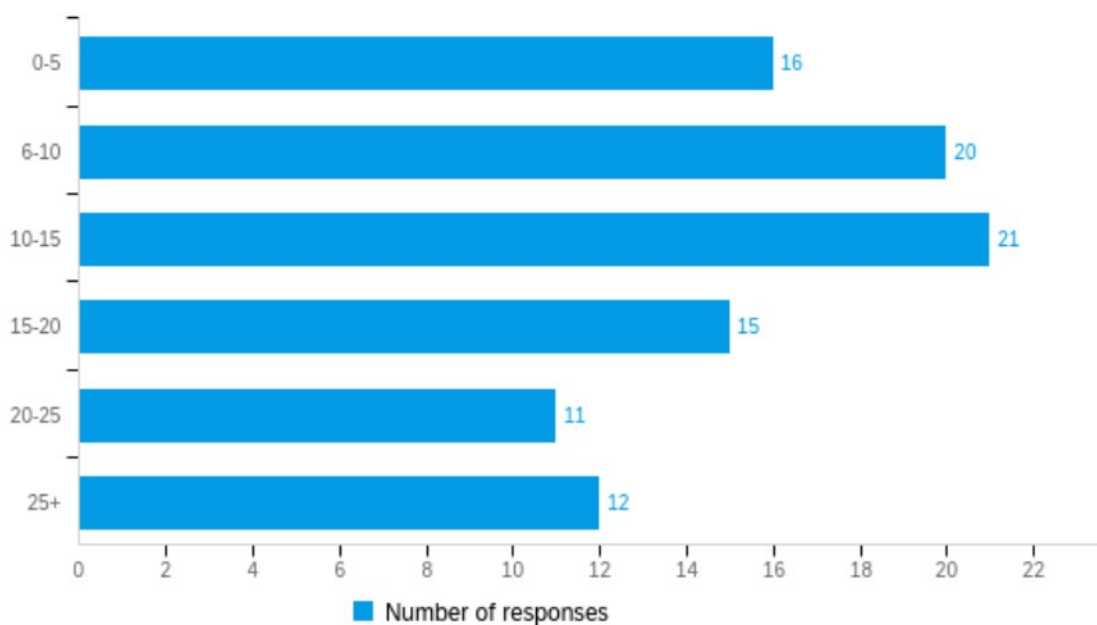


Figure 3. Fall 2019 instructional sessions

However, for fall 2020 the pattern was much more evident. Thirty-four percent of respondents had 0-5 session requests, 27% had 6-10 requests, only 15% had 10-15 requests, 8% taught 15-20 or 20-25 sessions respectively, and 7% of respondents had more than 25 sessions (see Figure 4). The move to online classes had a marked impact on in-class instructional requests. It is important to note that institution size did not appear to affect either the typical or the fall 2020 instructional load. There was no discernible pattern of more or fewer classes at any institutional size level; decreases were reported at all institution sizes, and any increases were also dispersed across institution sizes. The one respondent who taught primarily in-person reported no change in the number of instructional sessions requested.

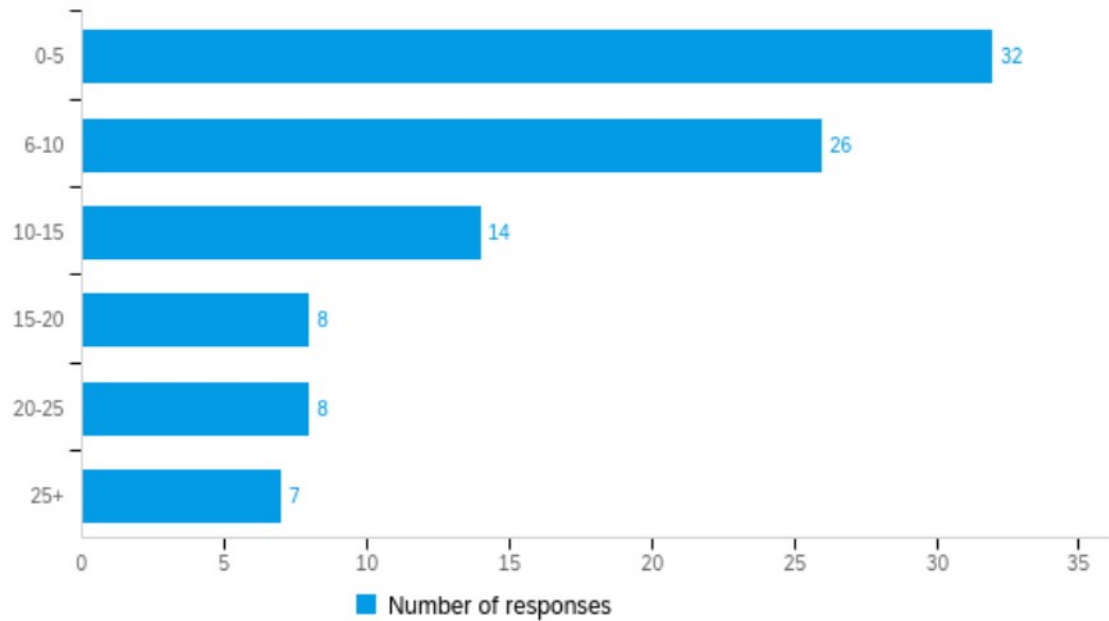


Figure 4. Fall 2020 instructional sessions

Most of the sessions (61%) taught by respondents were synchronous, while only 9% were asynchronous or pre-recorded, and 29% were an equal mix of both (see Figure 5).

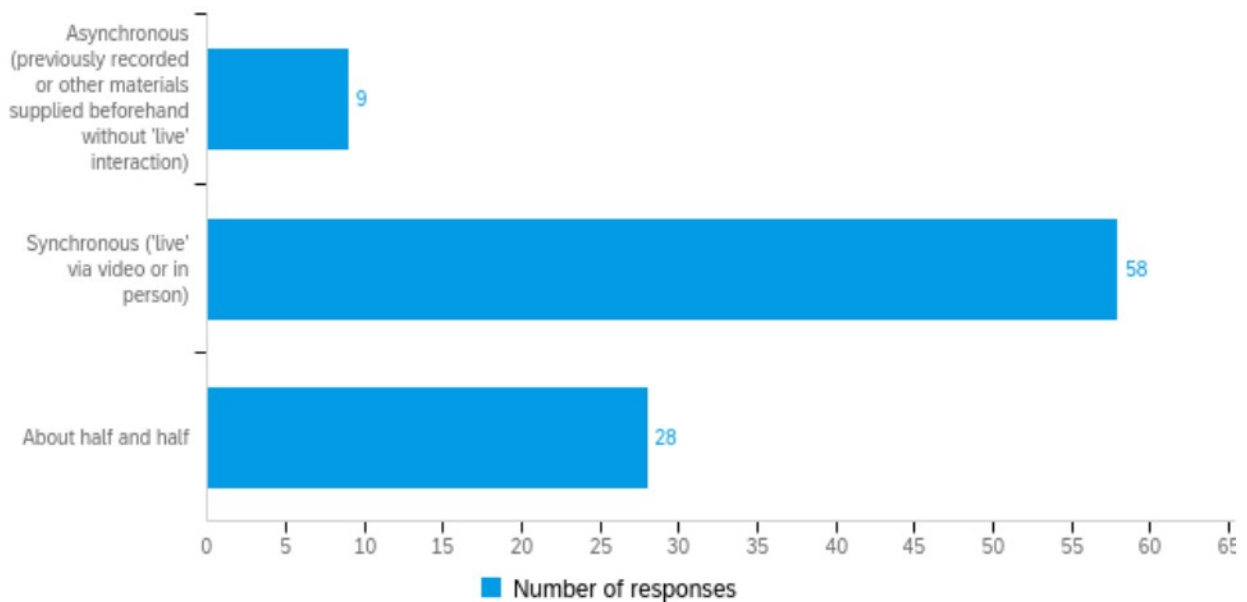


Figure 5. Instructional mode of library sessions (asynchronous vs. synchronous)

It is possible that some of the time formerly put into one-shots was replaced by different types of content requests. In response to the question, "For the Fall 2020 semester, did you have an increased request for any of the following," 42% of respondents reported more personal contact from students than they normally would expect. 29% of respondents had more involvement with their institution's Learning Management

System (LMS), 27% reported more requests for LibGuides, and 18% reported increased demand for office hours. Twenty-four percent of respondents reported no change to these requests, while 25% reported other types of requests, including instructors or faculty members asking for alternative (electronic) classroom resources or open educational resources, pre-recorded or asynchronous learning objects, and even help using tools like Zoom or their LMS (see Figure 6).

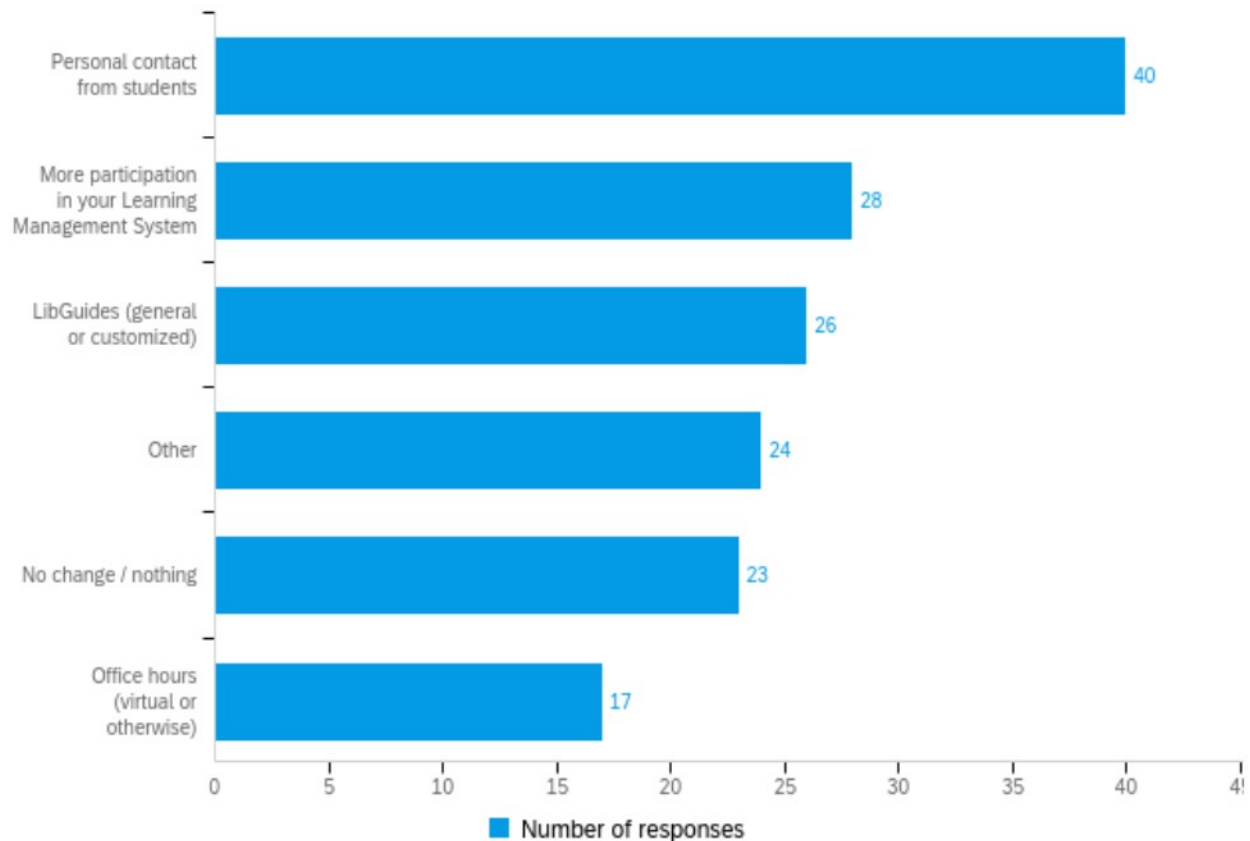


Figure 6. Additional content requests

When asked for additional comments, many respondents reflected on a change in the nature of assignments due to the move online, which may have impacted the type and number of information literacy instruction sessions. Some librarians were given tasks outside their usual duties, which impacted the work they were able to do. Some instructional requests were for a combination of live and pre-recorded material; some formerly mandatory sessions became voluntary for students to attend, which decreased participation rates. One respondent mentioned that due to the scale used in the survey, their responses would not show a decrease, but their instruction dropped from approximately 60 synchronous sessions in fall 2019 for 12 courses, down to 32 one-shots (a mix of synchronous and asynchronous) for five courses in fall 2020; this is almost a 50% decrease. One library offered fewer sessions purposely because some library instructional staff did not have the stable internet connections required for live sessions; instead, they were encouraged to use asynchronous library tutorials and videos. Respondents noted the overall exhaustion of both faculty and librarians.

Not all news was bad; one respondent noted that their usual one-shots did not decrease, and they saw a marked increase in presentations for faculty members via the teaching and learning centre, from 12 presentations in a typical year to 30 in fall 2020. Others noted the move to online forced them to become more efficient and innovative in their teaching, incorporating new tools and techniques. Several respondents noted that while the overall number of sessions had decreased, they were more usefully embedded in the classes that remained. Some librarians managed to maintain their instructional sessions by directly contacting faculty before the semester started, and some even increased their instruction sessions in 2020 compared with 2019.

Time spent on pre-recorded tutorials was seen as both a negative and a positive; by nature, these tutorials are not guaranteed to be viewed by all students in quite the same way as a live class visit, and at some institutions, they are not counted as contact hours. Some respondents noted that having pre-recorded videos available prior to a live session was helpful for alleviating student questions because students could return to the video after the class; however, others wondered if having students passively watch videos was as effective as in-person instruction. Some individuals' time investment in videos, additional LibGuides, and other static learning objects was significant; respondents expressed hope that at least some of the learning objects could be reused for several semesters. One person noted that though their number of sessions was the same as before, the time invested in asynchronous videos was at least threefold. Some participants expressed gratitude that they had already developed some online modules before the pandemic and were able to put these to good use.

Despite the number of librarians reporting an increase in student contact in fall 2020 (see Figure 6), others noted a decrease from a typical year. This may relate to the lack of instructional sessions, through which many students learn that librarians are available to help; it could also be due to the lack of drop-in visitors to the library, who would typically find or be referred to subject librarians. However, respondents noted both an increase in chat reference questions and the utility of screen-sharing within video conferencing software for teaching and reference consultations.

Conclusion

The survey results show that overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a detrimental effect on the number of one-shot instructional sessions taught by librarians, especially synchronous sessions. While it is possible that some of the newly developed asynchronous learning objects may live on for posterity (or at least as long as interfaces remain the same!), it remains to be seen whether in-class sessions will rebound to their pre-pandemic levels.

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Appendix

Survey Questionnaire

Information Literacy Instruction during COVID-19

Q1 In which country do you currently reside?

▼ Canada ... Zimbabwe

Q2 What is your institution size?

- <5,000 FTE
- 5,001-10,000 FTE
- 10,000-20,000 FTE
- 20,000+ FTE

Q3 Were classes at your institution in Fall 2020:

- Primarily/fully online
 - Primarily/fully in-person
 - Blended
 - They have always been primarily online, this did not change due to COVID-19
-



Q4

How many "one-shots" (invited lecturer into another instructor's classroom) did you teach in the Fall 2019 semester (or a typical semester, if Fall 2019 was atypical for some other reason). Note: if you do more than one session for the same class for which you are NOT the instructor of record, please record these as separate sessions / one-shots for the purpose of this question.

- 0-5
- 6-10
- 10-15
- 15-20
- 20-25
- 25+

Q5 How many "one-shots" (invited lecturer into another instructor's classroom) did you teach in the Fall 2020 semester? Note: if you do more than one session for the same class for which you are NOT the instructor of record, please record these as separate sessions / one-shots for the purpose of this question.

- 0-5
- 6-10
- 10-15
- 15-20
- 20-25
- 25+



Q6 Were most of your one-shots:

- Asynchronous (previously recorded or other materials supplied beforehand without 'live' interaction)
- Synchronous ('live' via video or in person)
- About half and half

Q7 For the Fall 2020 semester, did you have an increased request for any of the following:

- LibGuides (general or customized)
- Office hours (virtual or otherwise)
- More participation in your Learning Management System
- Personal contact from students
- Other _____
- No change / nothing

Q8 Do you have anything to add?
