TEACHING AND LEARNING

Zooming to Video: Rapidly Converting a Large-Scale Research Consultation Program from Face-to-Face to Online

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A cornerstone of the Penn State University (PSU) Schreyer Business Library's relationship with the Smeal College of Business is the library's robust collaboration with a faculty member to introduce students to core business information literacy skills. Management 301 (MGMT 301), Basic Management Concepts, is one of the foundational classes required for students seeking acceptance to Smeal. In this course, each student is individually assigned a Fortune 500 company and completes an assignment in which they are asked to research the company and the industry in which it operates. Students are required to meet in small groups with one of the library's "research consultants," a group that consists of business librarians, staff, and part-time student peer educators (Reiter & Cole, 2019).

Over 1800 students take MGMT 301 over the course of an academic year, with a majority taking the course during the spring semester of their first year at the university. An iterative process undertaken by library staff and the faculty member has shaped the development of the format and logistics of the research consultations over several years (Reiter & Huffman, 2016; Reiter & Cole, 2019).

On Wednesday, March 11, 2020, PSU joined institutions across the United States in announcing the suspension of in-person instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. PSU was on spring break when the news was announced; the MGMT 301 team had until the following Monday to determine how to continue providing research consultations for the approximately 500 students who had yet to attend a session.

One librarian on the team had experience conducting instruction sessions and research consultations using the Zoom videoconferencing platform and took the lead in scheduling and then conducting all MGMT 301 research consultations via Zoom over the next five weeks. The remaining research consultants helped in answering student queries via email and one-on-one Zoom calls. In total, 456 students attended one of 16 sessions. An outcomes-based assessment of a sample of 40 student projects, split evenly between students who attended in-person and via Zoom, revealed little meaningful difference in student performance, suggesting that the quality of the research consultations was maintained during this transition.

Converting the research consultations from a face-to-face to a virtual environment required flexibility. Prior to the suspension of face-to-face instruction, students were asked to sign up for specific consultation sessions that were capped at eight attendees; for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester, students were able to select and attend any session that fit their schedule with no cap on the number of participants. While removing the cap made scheduling much easier, the librarian observed that fewer students asked questions in the course of their virtual session.

The librarian also recorded a video of a research consultation. At first, the recording link was only available to students who had technical or scheduling difficulties, but access was expanded in response to multiple students asking if a recording of their session was available. Students were still required to attend a live session to receive full credit on the assignment, but the recorded session provided another opportunity for students to review material. Over the remaining five weeks of the project, the recording was viewed more than 350 times.

In fall 2020, all research consultations were again offered via Zoom with changes made based on the experience of conducting virtual consultations in the spring. As they had been prior to the pandemic, consultations were again distributed among the full team of research consultants, whose comfort with Zoom had increased over the previous six months. The biggest change was the return of sign-ups for specific consultation sessions, through which the library team hoped to reintroduce the small group format and its positive impact on student perceptions of the consultations (Reiter & Cole, 2019). Improvements are ongoing in advance of future all-virtual semesters, including the spring 2021 semester.

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