REAL TIME VIRTUAL REFERENCE: FROM PILOT PROJECT TO REALITY?

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Reference librarians at Kansas State University have recognized over the last couple of years that desk-based reference questions are declining. Yet, we know from statistics that we have many remote/distance users accessing our catalog, proprietary databases, and electronic journals. These users, no matter how comfortable they are with computers, have questions concerning how to find the information they need, how to conduct research, and how to evaluate sources on the web. In an effort to reach out to these users and help meet their needs, a decision was made to write a proposal for a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant to fund a pilot project implementing a live virtual reference service during the spring semester of 2002. Grant funds in the amount of $2400 were subsequently awarded and planning for the service was begun.

Primary issues in planning and implementing this service included: What software to use - commercial or free product; how will the service be staffed; who will train reference librarians to do chat reference; how many hours will the service be available; how will the service be marketed; what types of questions and what volume of use can be expected; how will the service be evaluated; who will determine policies and finally, how will the pilot be assessed and what are the future directions of this service.

The poster session will cover the planning and implementation of the pilot project over a 4-month period and discuss initial findings and recommendations.