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IM Online! R U? Virtual Reference in the Age of Instant Messaging

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IM Online! R U?*

Virtual Reference in the Age of Instant Messaging

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Kearney, NE
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UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

Introduction

*Title Credit:

Instant Messaging: IM Online RU? Farmer, Educause Review
Dec 2005

Presentation

- Small Survey of Nebraska libraries
- What does the literature say?
- UNL's *Ask a Question 24/7*
- Taking advantage of an available service



Chat

Definition:

A feature of the internet that allows users to "talk" to one another in virtual real time, typically completed when library staff are logged into a fee based commercial software monitoring questions submitted by users via a link on the library's website. Does not require users to have an account.



Chat & Nebraska Libraries

- **4 Libraries:**
public, community college, independent college, UNL
- **Software:**
Volusion (free), Docutek (\$2,000), QuestionPoint (\$14,000)
- **Services Offered:** Reference, ILL, Circulation
- **Hours:** 3 staff all hours that the library is open, One is 24/7
- **Staffing:**
3 schedule specific chat shifts
One monitors while staffing a service point
- **Open to Anyone**
- **Policies on Questions / Response Times**



Chat – Advantages

From Survey:

- Real time at point of need
- Breaks down language barriers
- Personalizes distance services
- Co-Browse / Escort features allow for visual communication
- Students prefer this technology

Also:

- Transcripts of sessions
- Easy follow-up if necessary
- With collaborative staffing, 24/7 is possible



Discontinued Chat Services

One Nebraska college library

Reasons Chat Services are discontinued:

- Cost
- Staffing
- Technological problems
- Perceived low traffic
- Lack of perceived need



Literature on Discontinued Services

- *“Burnout is nothing compared to boredom”* (Radford & Kern, 2006)
- **Low volume** from library’s primary clientele
 - Marketing (fear of being overwhelmed)
 - Hours of availability
 - Time to build service (avg 19 months)
- **Questions outside the scope** of the library’s service
- **Perceived lack of value** of chat



Instant Messaging (IM)

Definition

A text-based computer conference over the Internet between two people who must be online at the same time using the same (usually) free service from AOL, Yahoo, MSN, etc. Users must have an account on the same service as the library for the communication to take place.



IM and Nebraska Libraries

- **One Library:** college library
- **Software:** Meebo (free)
- **Generic IM address**
- **Services Offered:** Reference, ILL, Circulation
- **Hours:** specific limited hours
- **Staffing:**
Monitored while staffing a service point
- **Open to Anyone**
- **Policies on Questions / Response Times**



Advantages of IM

- Same as Chat

PLUS:

- Free Software
- Familiar, convenient format for many users
- Enticing to young patrons
- Easy, less time-consuming to learn, administer
- Added format for users
- Good for ready reference / quick information questions
- Feedback – note that users are typing



Disadvantages of IM

- Usually Limited service hours
- Users usually need to have accounts on the same service as the library
- Monitor multiple accounts or have additional software to monitor multiple accounts
- No co-browse feature
- Encourages computer use for personal reasons instead of educational use



Perceived Barriers to Chat & IM

- Staffing Issues
- Lack of expertise w/ technology
- Lack of perceived user interest or need
- Low traffic
- Technological difficulties
- Time needed to learn, administer, trouble shoot
- Cost
- Privacy and/or Security concerns



Perceived Barriers to Chat & IM

- Lack of administrative support, administrative policies against chat
- Parent's prohibitions
- IT resistance
- Perceived undesirability of chat
- Staff resistance
- Limited number of computers
- Instant Answers
- Lacks the "human touch"
- Not good for research or lengthy questions



Other Issues

- **Quality of Answers (cooperative staffing)** (Kwon, 2007)

Questions Asked:

Circ, subject based, factual, access, local issues

Answered most completely:

Factual, subject based, access, & circ

Completeness of answers related to user satisfaction

- *Same Questions, Different Venue* (Fennewald, 2006)

Reference Questions as a percent of each service mode:

In Person = 38% (66% ready reference)

Email = 60% (85% search strategy)

VRS = 72% (84% search strategy)



Other Issues

- Nilsen & Ross, 2006
 - **Accuracy of Answers**
55% rule (Nilsen & Ross, 2006)
 - **Reference Interviews** (Hyde & Tucker-Raymond, 2006)
 - **Input forms too simple** “be detailed”
- **Time** it takes to answer questions in chat
- **Lack of non-verbal queues**



IF you were to add a Service

- Instant Messaging (9)
- Why?
 - Cost
 - Familiarity – librarian and patrons
 - Commonly available software
 - Feature is built into software already in use
 - Students would prefer it



IF you were to add a Service

- Chat (2)
- Why?
 - Chat Might attract patrons that wouldn't use other services
 - Need to reach out to our patrons in every way possible
 - Could establish times to staff the service
- Other technologies:
 - Text Messaging (2)
 - VOIP
 - Resurgence in Phone services



Trends in the Literature

- Chat / IM services still controversial
(To Chat or Not to Chat, Coffman & Arret, 2004)
- *“It’s not either/or, it’s and”* (Thomas, 2005)
- *“I wouldn’t have asked for help if I had to go to the library”*
(Lee, 2004) Good summary in Ruppel & Fagen (2002)
- In general:
 - Large libraries joining chat consortia – 24/7 services
 - Others offering IM during hours the library is open
 - Suite of Services: IM and chat services
 - Chat services successful when integrated



What does the Literature Say?

- What defines a “successful service”?
- Evaluations of User Satisfaction
 - Immediate surveys vs. later contact
 - Willingness to recommend
 - Unsolicited thank yous
- **Interpersonal Interactions** (“*yo dude, y r u typin so slow?*”
Radford & Thompson, 2004)
- Perceptions of user expectations – the instant answer, sense of urgency – is this true from the users’ perspective?



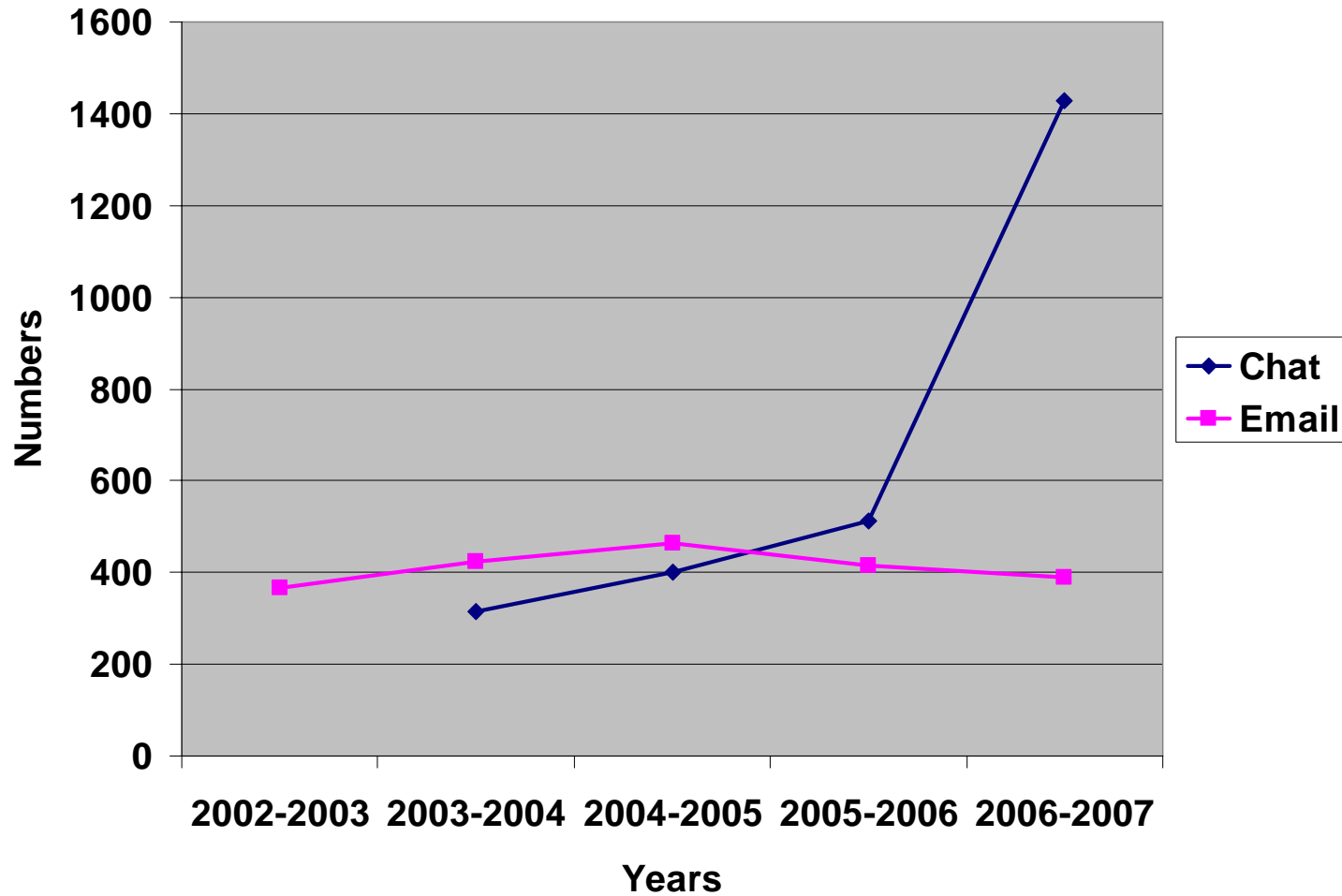
UNL's Ask a Question Service

- QuestionPoint
- Available 24/7
- Can't assume questions are coming from outside the library
- Changing culture – incoming students
- What is “cost-effective”?
- What is the value of goodwill?
- Land Grant Mission
- Potential Role of cooperative involvement in recruitment
- Potential Impact on the image of UNL outside of Nebraska

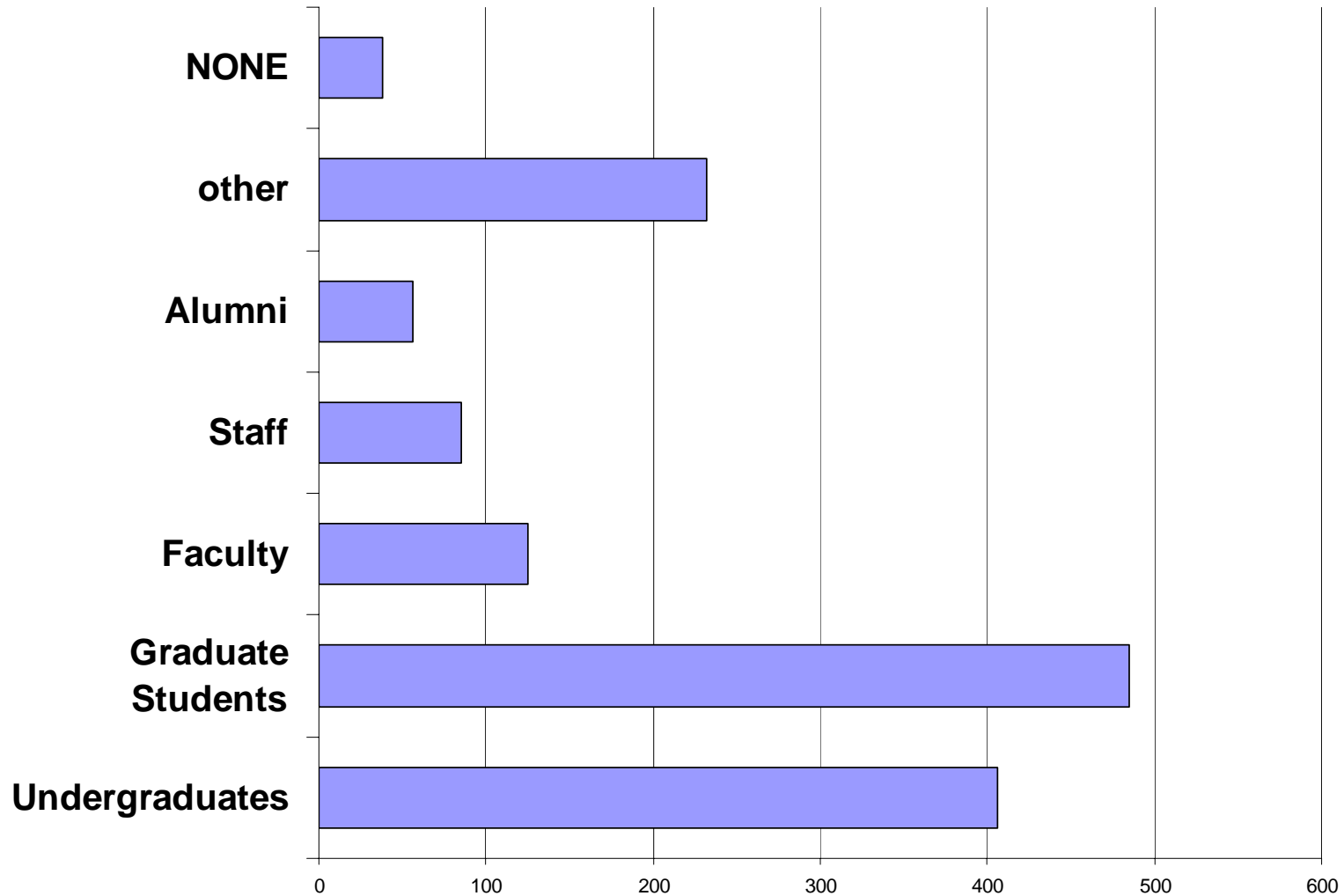


Chat Traffic

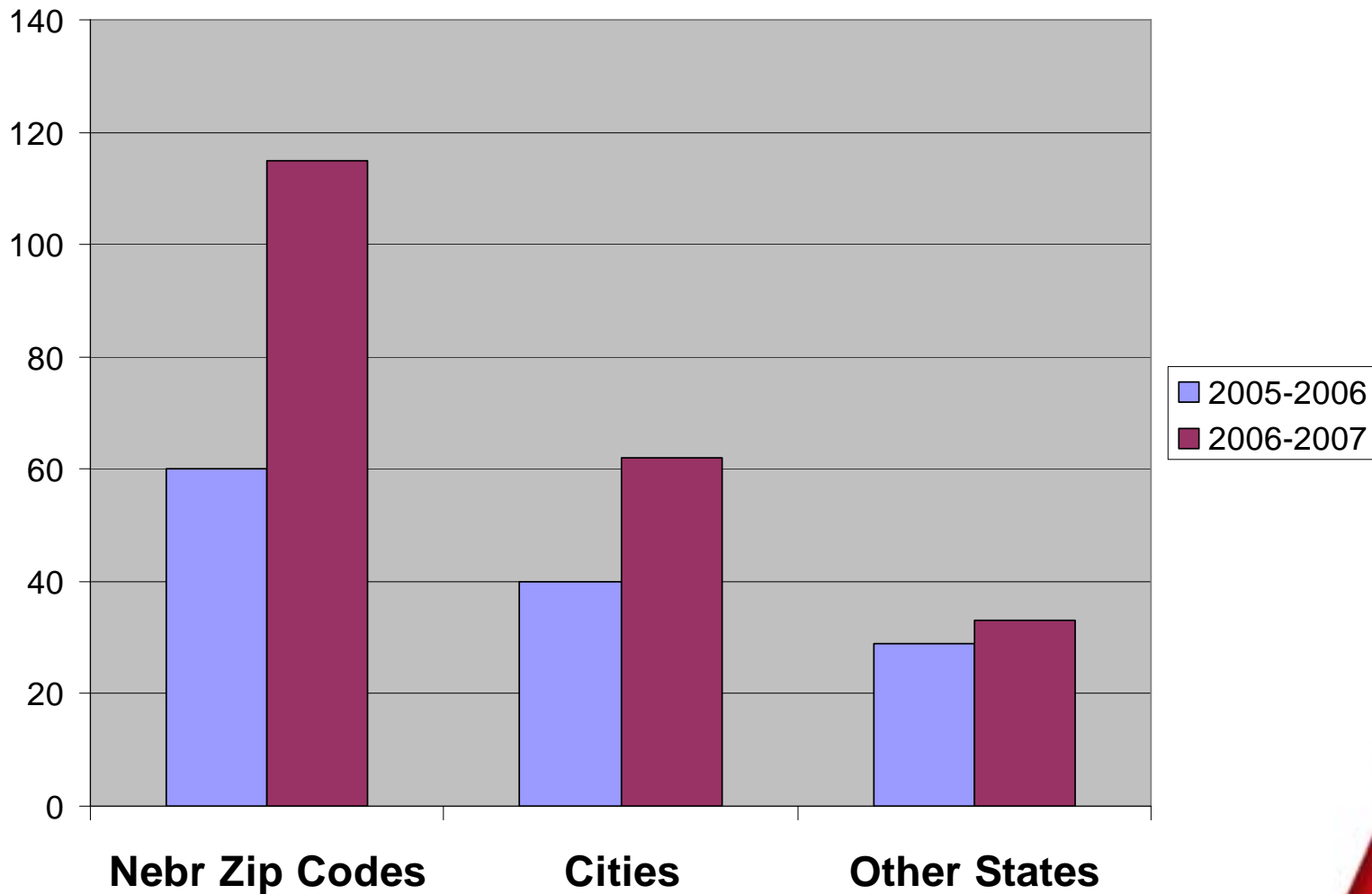
Ask a Ques Email & Chat



Chat Users

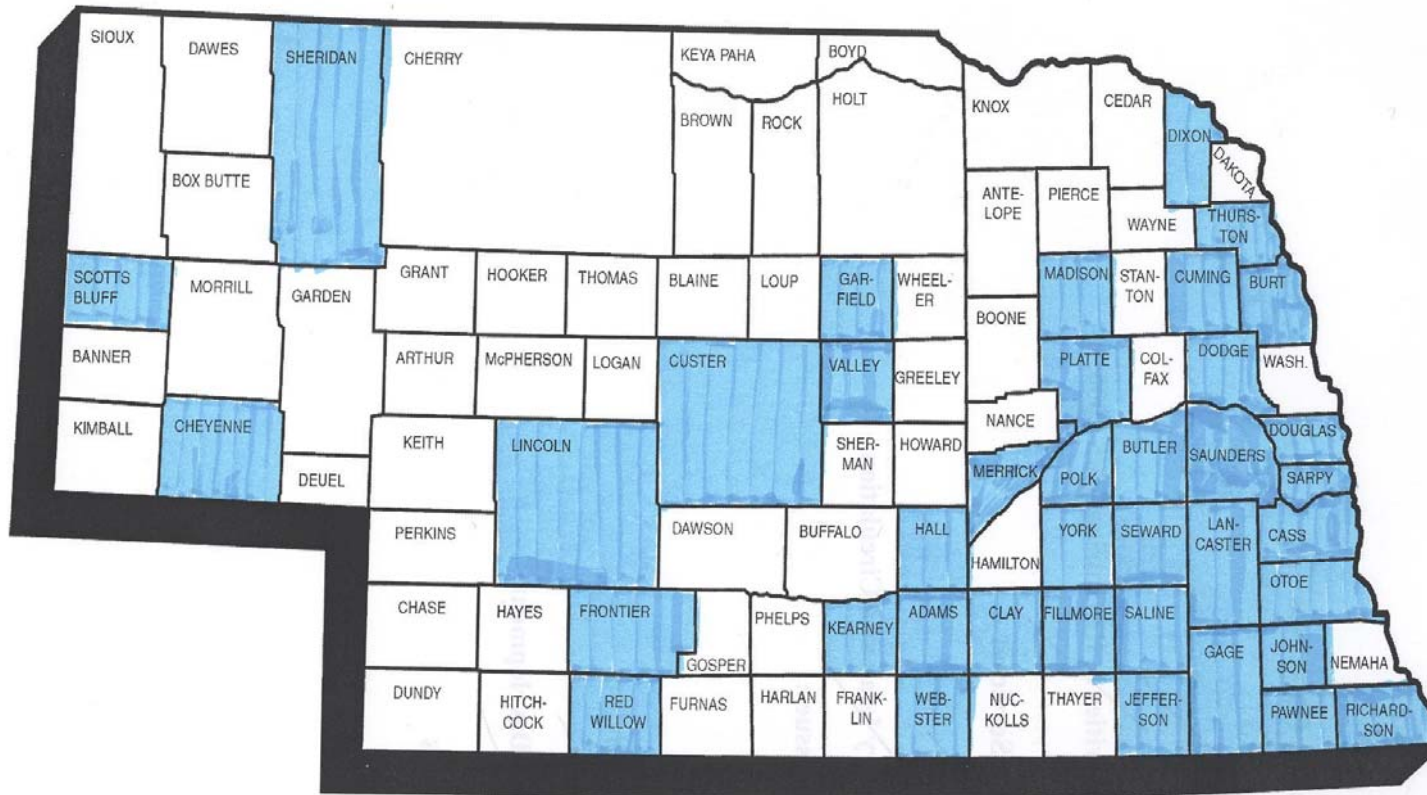


One Year Makes a Difference



Where are they From?

Nebraska Map
showing county outlines and names

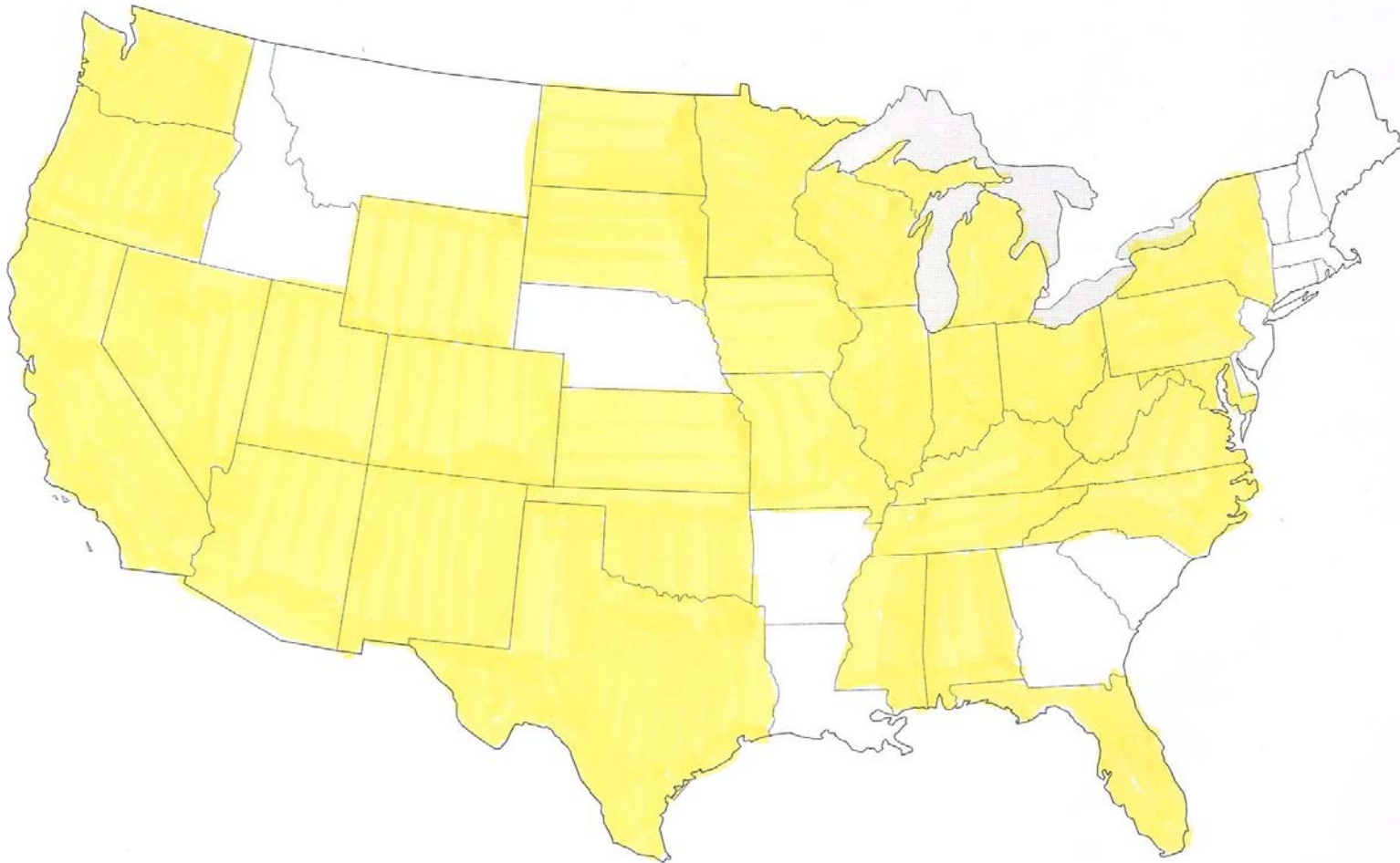


Map dimensions have been skewed to fit on this page with maximum readability



Where are they From?

United States



Let's Take a Look!

**Demonstration of
UNL's *Ask a Question* Service**



Why New Technologies?

A look back – telephones for reference

“The user is not remote, it is the library that is remote from the user” (Lipow, 1999)

“Although it’s laudable that librarians built these digital libraries for their users, libraries now need to be thinking about staffing them with actual human beings and providing live, interactive services for their users” (Francoeur, 2001)



An Invitation

Can't staff a chat or im service yourself?

Refer your patrons to UNL's

Ask a Question

service!



Thank you!

Presentation Slides and Bibliography
will be available at:

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/library_talks/



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