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

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R U Online?

Virtual Reference in the Age of Instant Messaging

Tracy
Bicknell-Holmes

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UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

Introduction

Overview

- What's going on in MPLA member state libraries?
- What does the literature say?*
- University of Nebraska-Lincoln's *Ask a Question* 24/7
- Brief demo
- Why new technologies?
- What can you do?

*See:

Chat & Instant Messaging for Reference Services: a Selected Bibliography, NLAQ, vol 38, no. 4, Winter 2007. pp. 3-8

Definitions

“Instant messaging (IM) is a form of real-time communication between two or more people based on typed text. The text is conveyed via computers connected over a network such as the Internet.”
Source: Wikipedia

“Chat”

- Fee based commercial software used to monitor questions.
- Does not require users to have an account.

“Instant Messaging (IM)”

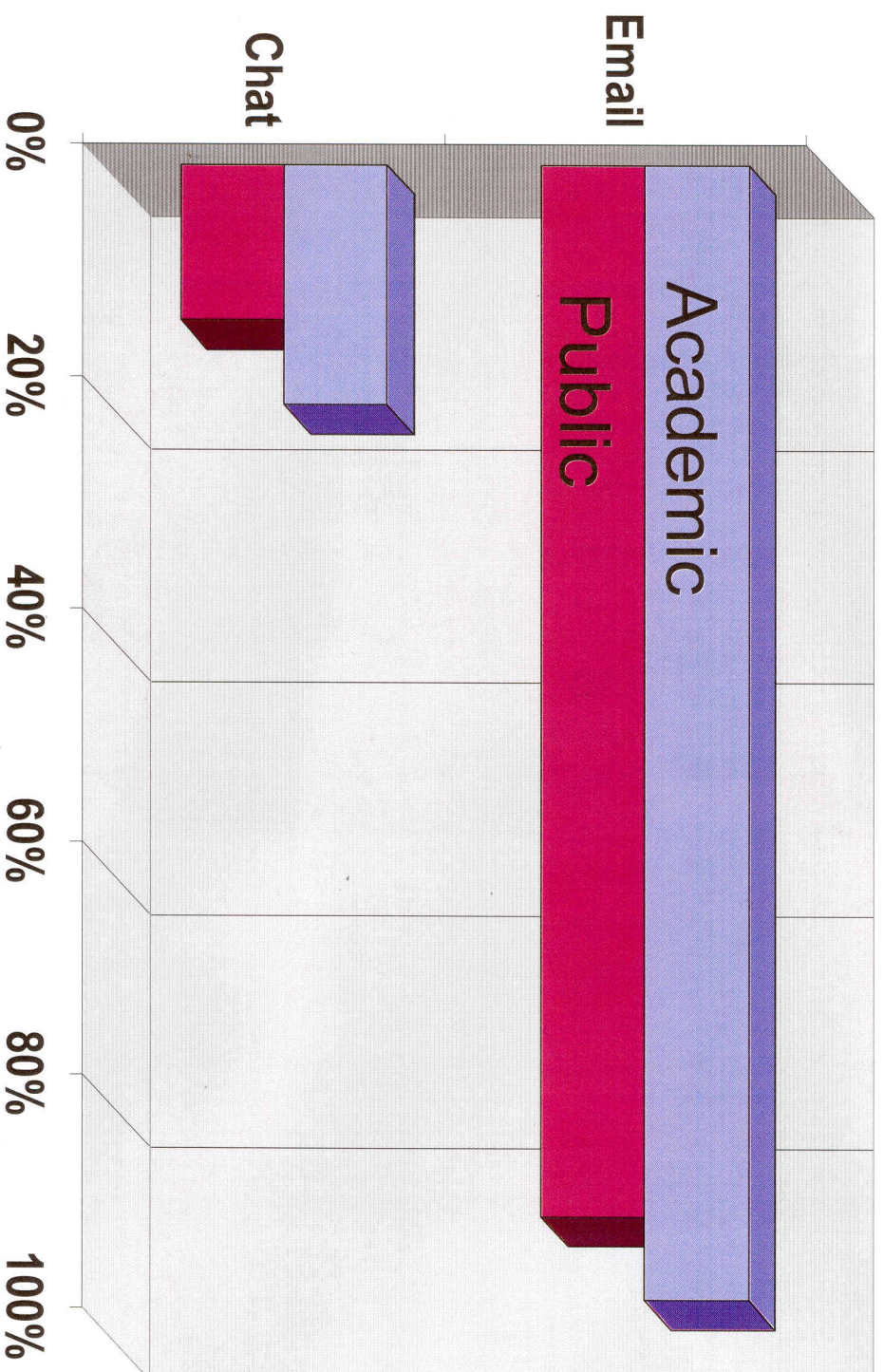
- Answer questions via AIM, Yahoo, GTalk, MSN, etc.
- May require users to have a personal im account.

MPLA Region Libraries

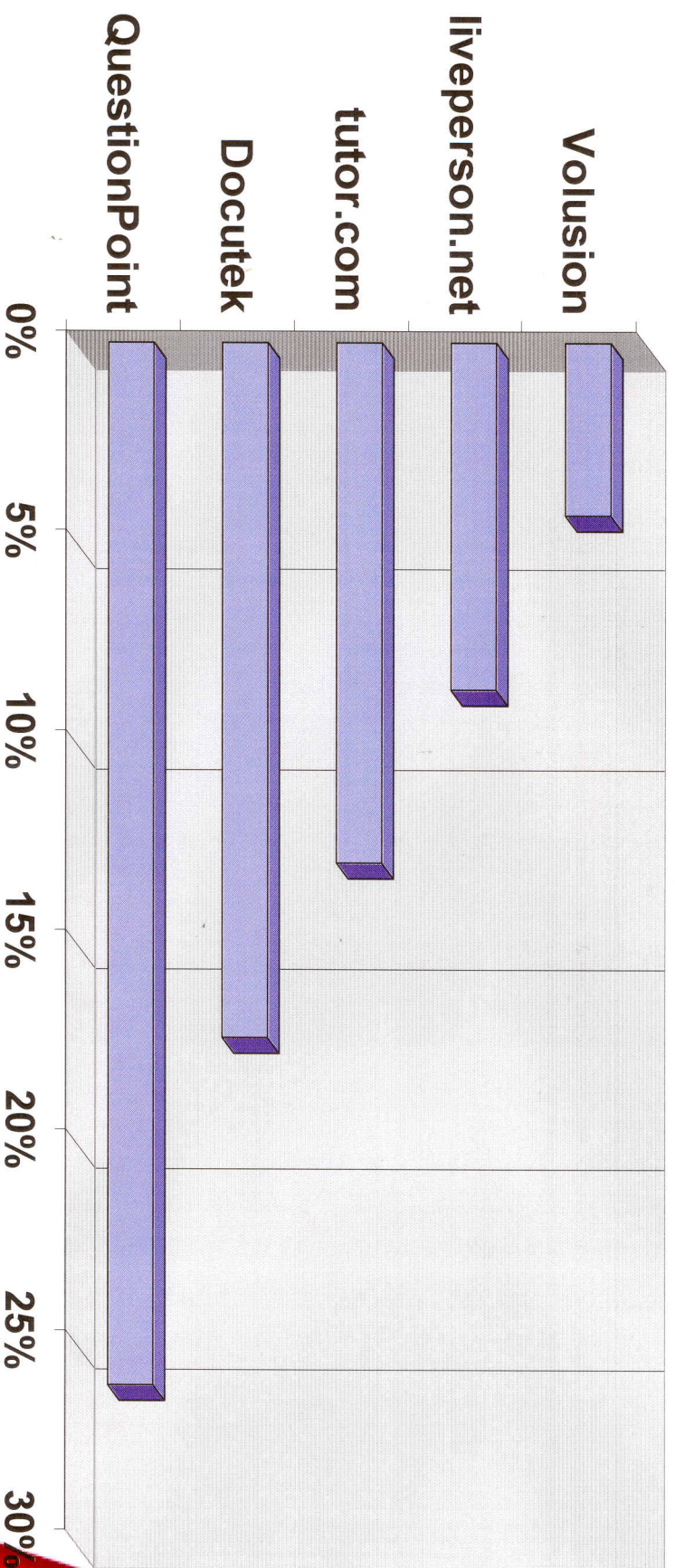
- MPLA member states
- Academic and Public Libraries
- Libweb: Library Servers via WWW
<http://lists.webjunction.org/libweb/>
- Reviewed 434 library websites
- Contact, Help and Ask A... links
- Chat, im, email and other technologies



Chat in the MPLA region



Software used for Chat



24/7 Chat Services in MPLA region



Tutor.com

79% of academic libraries

63% of public libraries



QuestionPoint

41% of academic

50% of public



QuestionPoint

54% of academic

Chat – Advantages

- Real time at point of need
- Breaks down language barriers
- Personalizes distance services
- Co-Browse / Escort features allow for visual communication
- Some users prefer this technology
- Transcripts of sessions
- Easy follow-up if necessary
- With collaborative staffing, 24/7 is possible



Chat - Disadvantages

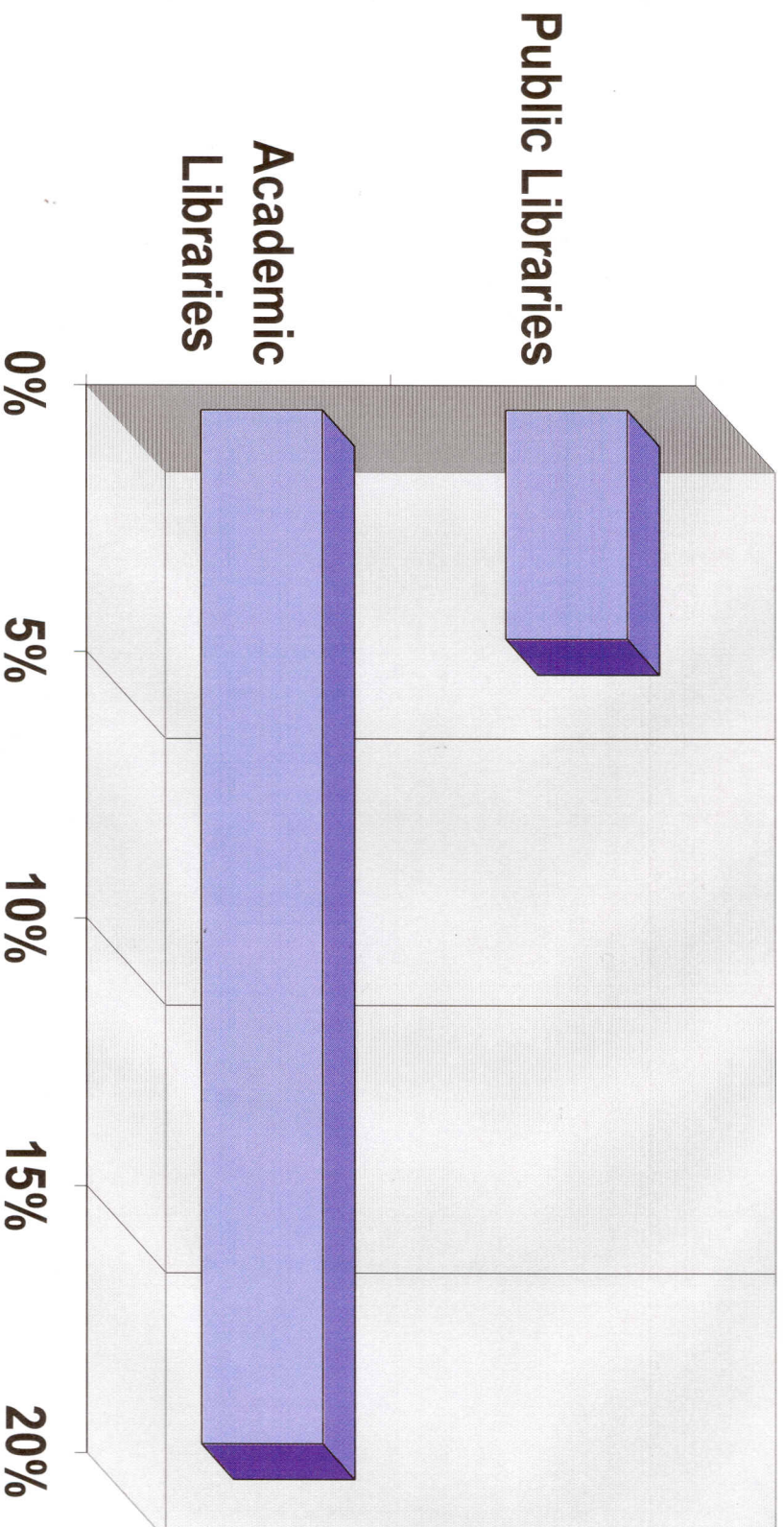
- Cost
- Staffing
- Technological problems
- Perceived low traffic
- Lack of perceived need

Some libraries have discontinued Chat Services

Literature on Discontinued Services

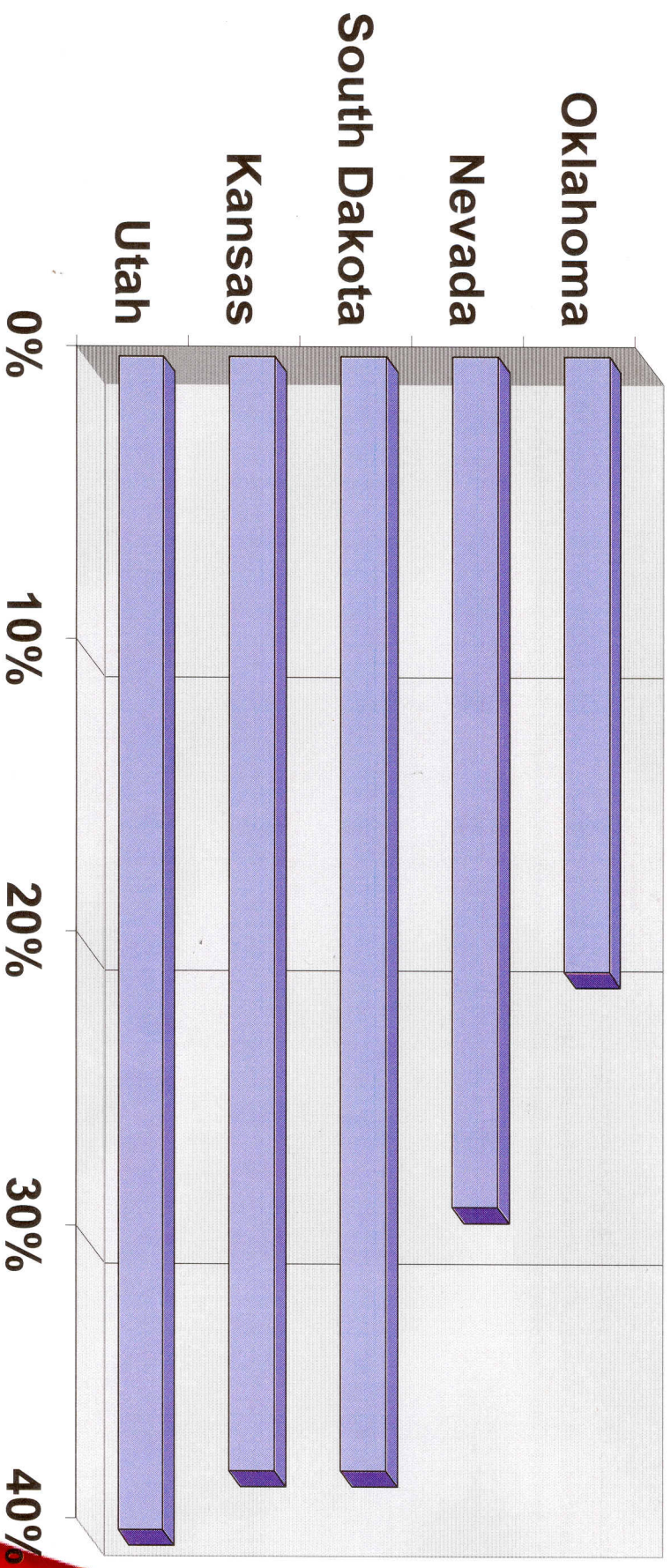
- “*Burnout is nothing compared to boredom*” (Radford & Kern, 2006)
- **Low volume** from library’s primary clientele
Marketing (fear of being overwhelmed)
Hours of availability
Time to build service (avg 19 months)
- **Questions outside the scope** of the library’s service
- **Perceived lack of value**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

IM in the MPLA Region



30% using Meebo

IM Services by State



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 can tell when you're online)
- Users sometimes need to have accounts on the same service as the library
(exception: Meebo)
- May need to monitor multiple im accounts
- No co-browse feature
- Perception - encourages computer use for personal reasons (academic environment)

Perceived Barriers to Chat & IM

- Staffing Issues
- Lack of expertise, support (admin, IT)
- Lack of perceived user interest or need / low traffic
- Technological difficulties
- Time needed to learn, administer, trouble shoot
- Cost
- Privacy and/or Security concerns
- Resistance – Parents, IT, staff
- Perceived undesirability of chat
- Limited number of computers
- Intimidation of the “Instant Answer”

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)

Issues in the Literature

- 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**

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 offer IM during hours the library is open
 - Offering a Suite of 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?

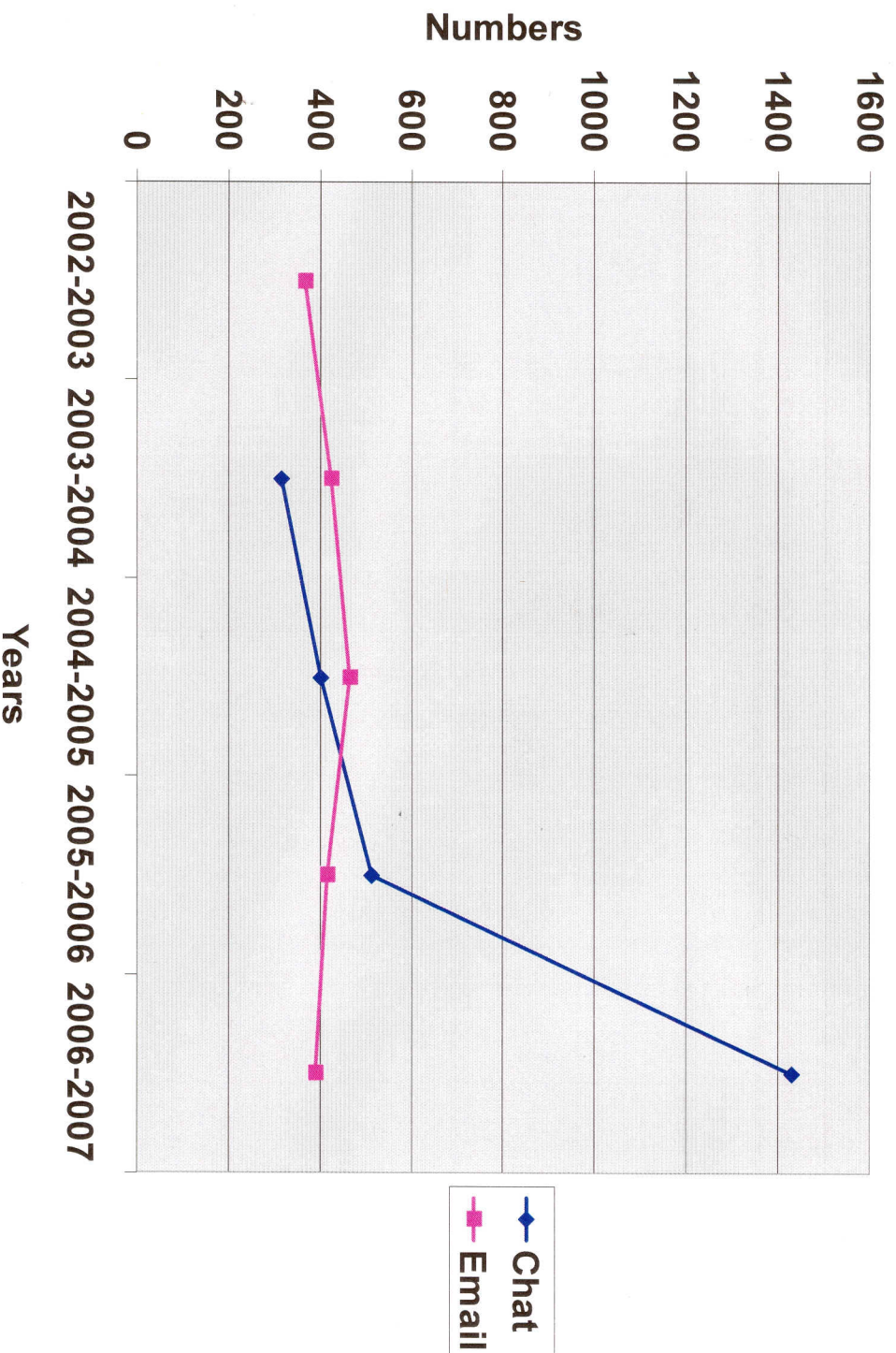
UNL's Ask a Question Service

- 24/7, QuestionPoint
- 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

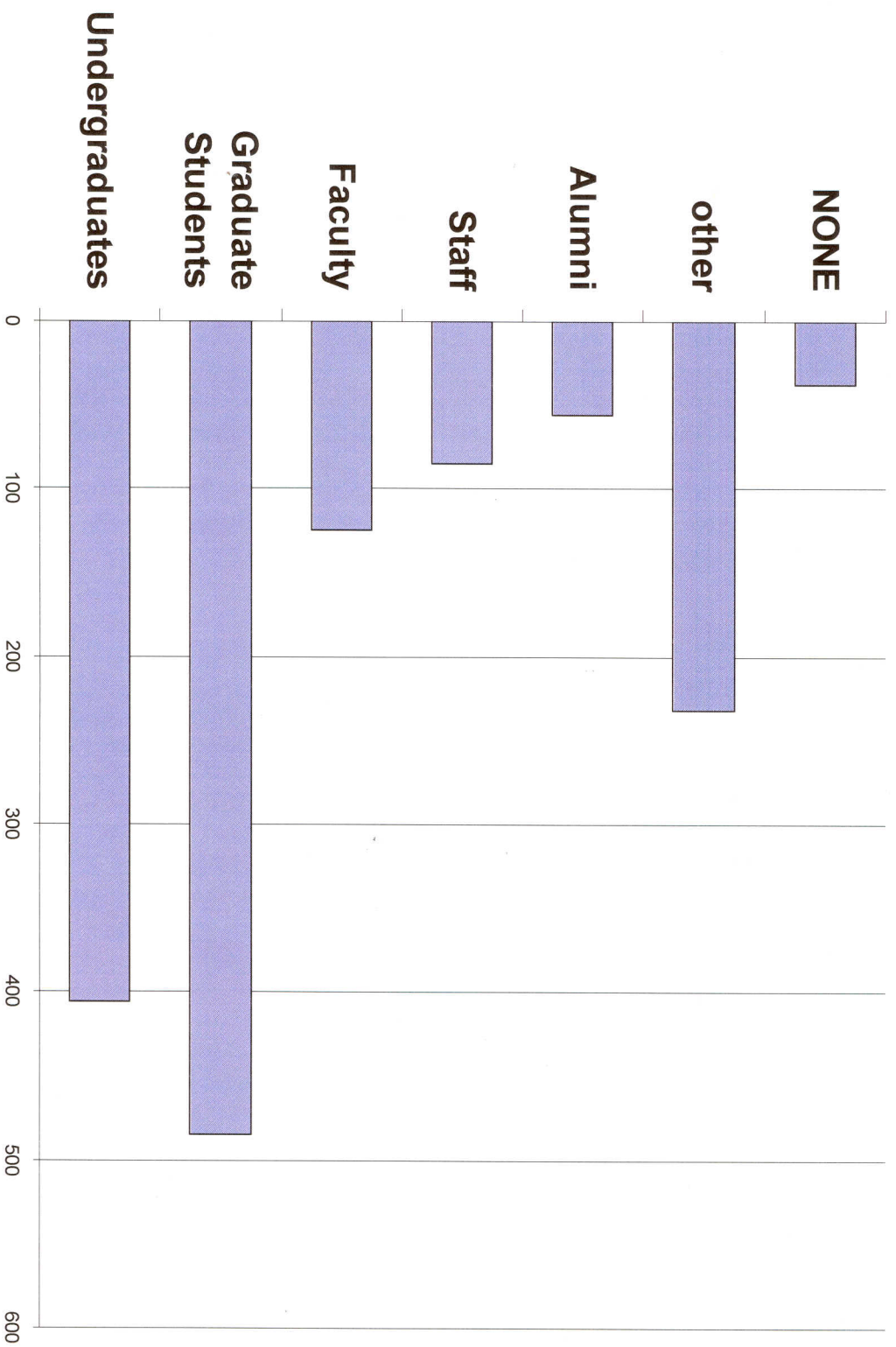


Chat Traffic

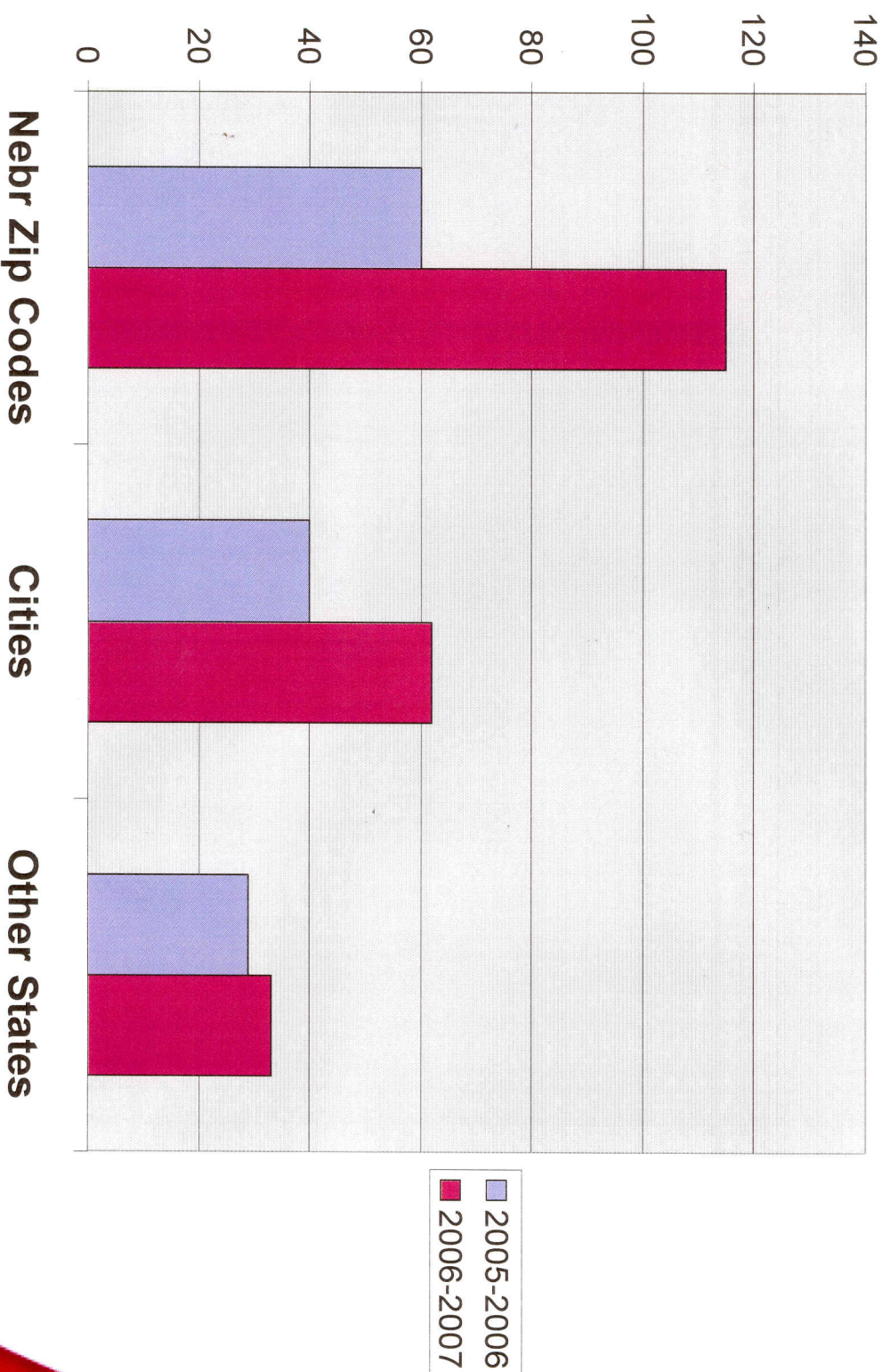
Ask a Ques Email & Chat



Chat Users

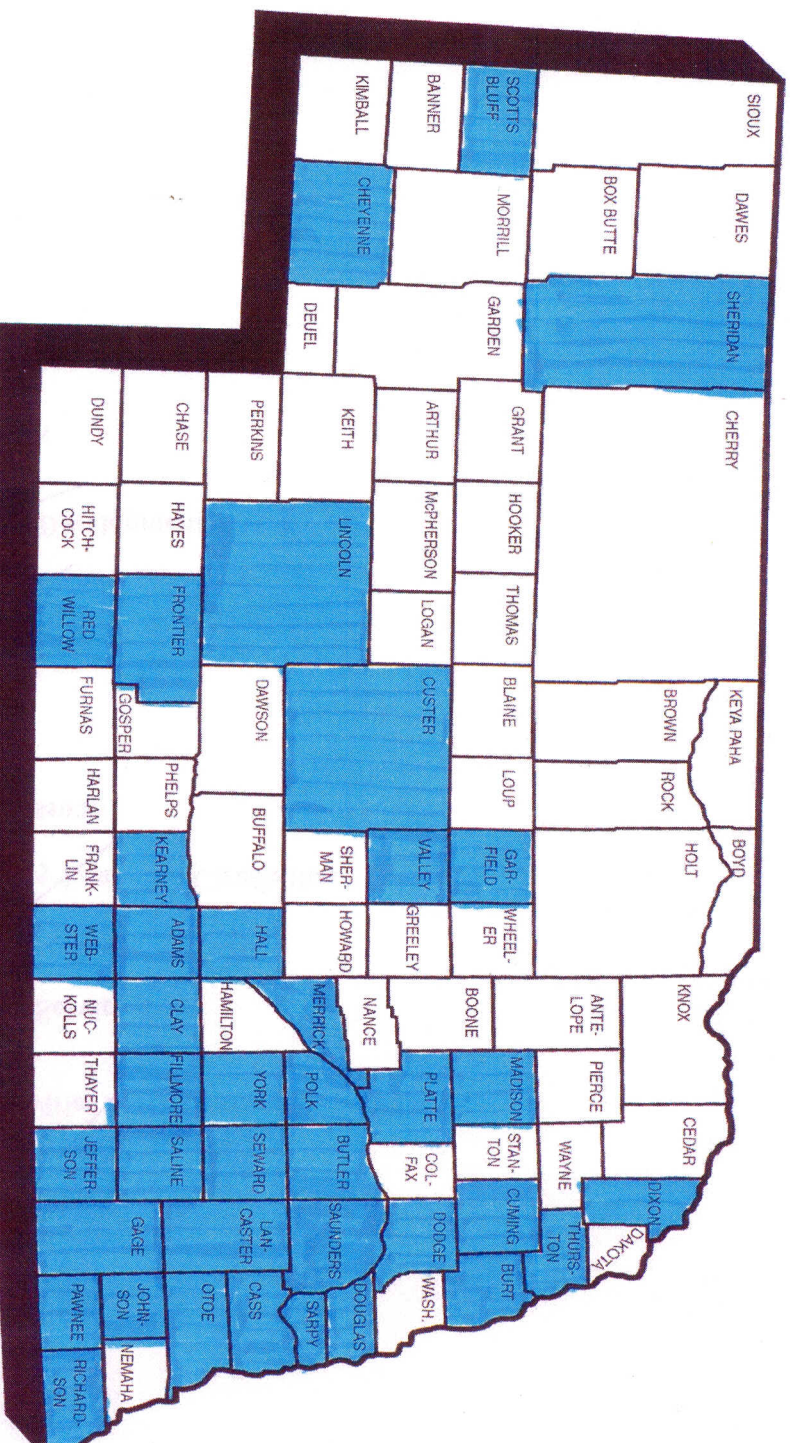


One Year Makes a Difference



Where are they From?

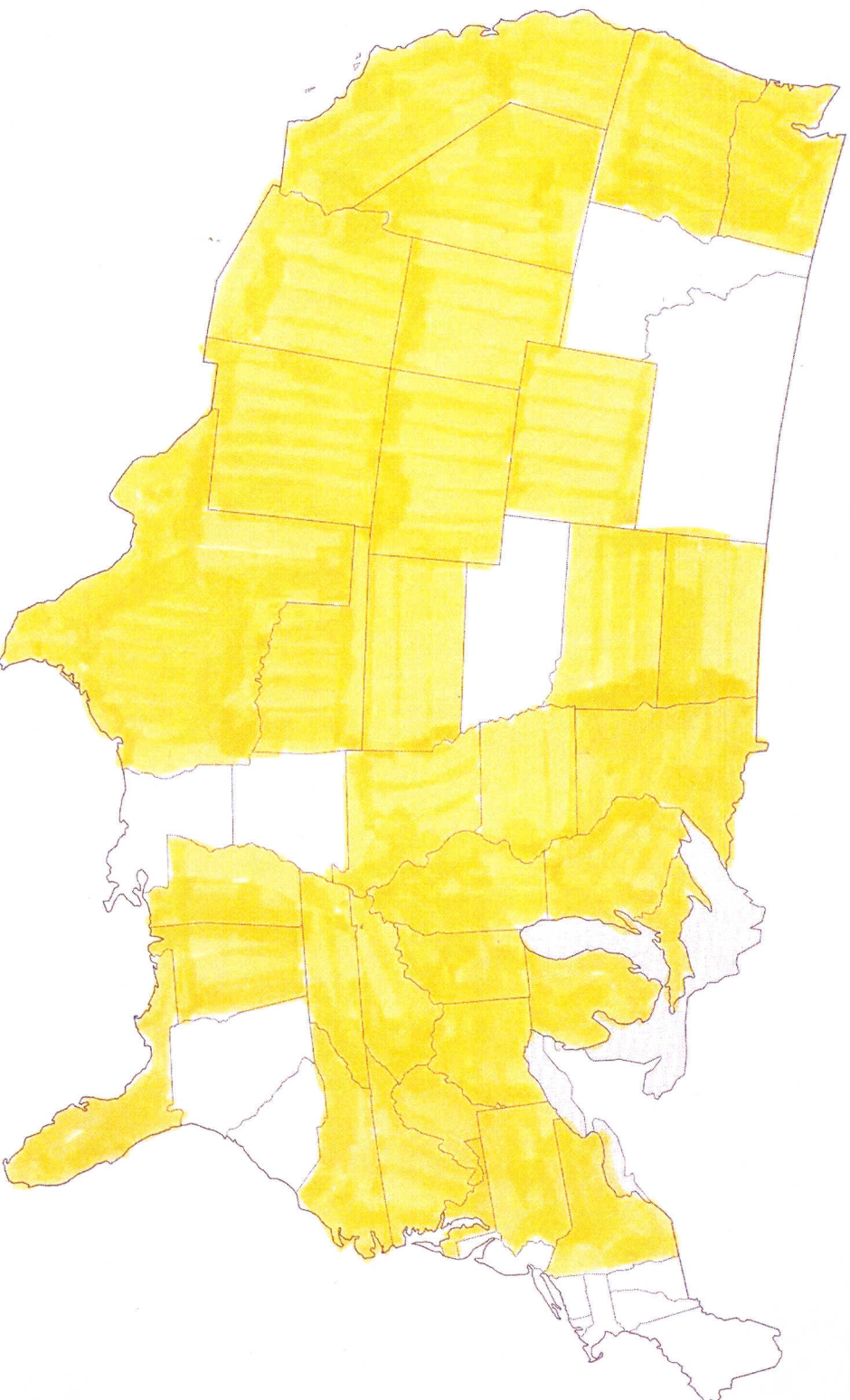
Nebraska Map
showing county outlines and names



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
University of Nebraska-Lincoln's
*Ask a Question Service***



Other Technologies

Other Technologies

- Voice Over IP (Skype) – 2 academics
- Text Messaging
- Encourages IM via cell phone

Why New Technologies?

“Whether a library shall encourage this service and make the necessary increase in staff... will depend on the budget and the fundamental policy of the library. Some librarians feel that they are justified in any expense that extends library service; others think that patrons who come to the library deserve more attention, and _____ should be used only... for information that can be secured without much searching.”

Why New Technologies?

“Whether a library shall encourage this service and make the necessary increase in staff... will depend on the budget and the fundamental policy of the library. Some librarians feel that they are justified in any expense that extends library service; others think that patrons who come to the library deserve more attention, and *the telephone* should be used only... for information that can be secured without much searching.”

Reference Service by Telephone, by Emily Garnet, The
Library Journal, December 1, 1936



Users of IM

Adults:

- 42% of adult Internet users use IM (53 million)
- 36% used IM every day
- 63% at least several times a week

Teens:

- 75% of online teens – or about two-thirds of all teenagers
- 78% of teens who use IM use it to talk about homework, tests, or school work.

Sources: Pew Reports *How Americans use instant messaging* (2004) and *Teens and Technology* (2005)



IM Use by Age

Age Range	%
18-27	62%
28-39	37%
40-49	33%
50-58	29%
59-68	25%
69+	29%

Source:

Pew Internet & American Life
Project Tracking Survey
(2004)

Our Future

*“Email is something you use
to talk to old people.”*

Source: Pew Report: *Teens and Technology* (2005)



What Can You Do

- Find partners
- Experiment
- Land grant libraries
- State library or library commission?
- Are there 24/7 services in your state?
- Are neighboring libraries using im?
- Recruit your teens / student assistants!

Thank you!

Presentation Slides and Bibliography
will be available at:

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/>



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