

Get Help Finding a Digital Copy: A pandemic response becomes the new normal

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Get Help Finding a Digital Copy

- Connects patrons to library staff for help finding digital copies of items in the physical collection
- Began as a response to pandemic building closures
- Remained as a permanent service after re-opening
- Made possible by linking several common library technology platforms
- Has been successful in fulfilling requests and creating personal connections during a disruptive time

Our large, urban research university library serves students, faculty, staff, alums, local residents, and visitors. We are open to all. Library users, including guests, access physical materials in the building and through our borrowing programs. When our buildings closed early in the pandemic, we saw an opportunity to enhance our virtual reference services and keep the library "open." Since access to our physical materials was suddenly cut off, we established a new Get Help Finding a Digital Copy service (GHFDC) that connected users to library staff who could help them find digital copies of inaccessible physical items.

How it works

The GHFDC service helps users find digital copies of inaccessible or inconveniently accessible physical items. It is one of several access options users see on physical item records in our library catalog. If they choose GHFDC, the item record metadata and user information are sent to our email reference team through a pre-filled form (Figure 1). A team member attempts to find an accessible digital copy of the item and responds to the user. Our popular service helps users access resources they need quickly, for free, and without having to travel to the library.

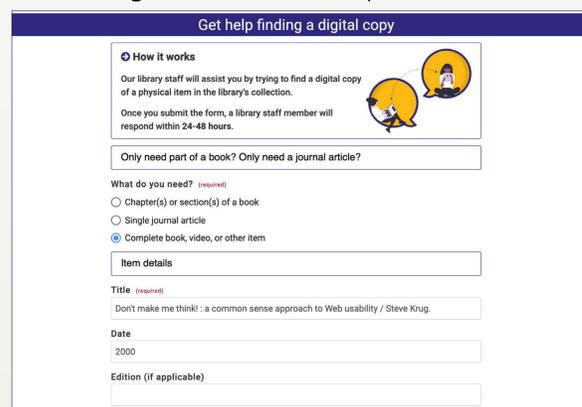


Figure 1. Get Help Finding a Digital Copy request form

Pandemic response

GHFDC began in April 2020 when our library buildings closed due to COVID-19. Users lost access to physical materials and onsite e-resources, so public services and technology staff established GHFDC, a new service that let users request help finding online versions of these materials. Rather than deactivating the request button in our library catalog, we replaced it with one that connected users to our email reference team working from home (Figure 2). Our flexible technology infrastructure and well-established virtual reference services allowed us to keep library materials accessible despite disruptions in on-campus operations.

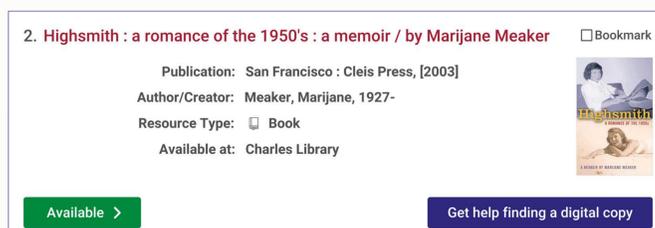


Figure 2. GHFDC request button as it appeared in April 2020

Connecting technology

Our discovery service, Library Search, is built on the open-source application Blacklight, giving us the flexibility to easily customize the interfaces for our local user populations. During the pandemic, we quickly replaced "Request" with a new "Get help finding a digital copy" button appearing on each item record and in search results. The button did not display on items that were available electronically or on archival materials.



Figure 3. Technology workflow

We linked several common library technology platforms (Blacklight, LibWizard, Alma, LibAnswers) to pass requests from Library Search to our email reference team (Figure 3). With a focus on keeping the user interface simple, we used OpenURL to pre-fill item metadata in a LibWizard form that forwarded requests to our LibAnswers email reference queue. Team members then helped find digital versions of physical items that users, including alums and community members, would have been able to access onsite.

Gauging success

Temple Libraries staff have handled over 8,400 GHFDC requests in the three years since the service began. The success rate in fulfilling requests has fluctuated over time but has remained higher than expected, even after temporary e-resource access arrangements, like HathiTrust Emergency Temporary Access, expired.

In Spring and Summer 2020 our monthly success rate for filling digital copy requests was approximately 50%-60%, depending on the month (Figure 4). In Fall 2020, when we worked with colleagues in Acquisitions to implement an ad hoc, demand-driven acquisitions system from the GHFDC requests, our typical monthly success rate rose to >70%. The top sources for finding digital copies have been the Internet Archive's Open Library and the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Beyond fulfilling digital copy requests, we offer meaningful help through personal connections with users. User feedback has been excellent (average rating: 3.8 out of 4, N=426).

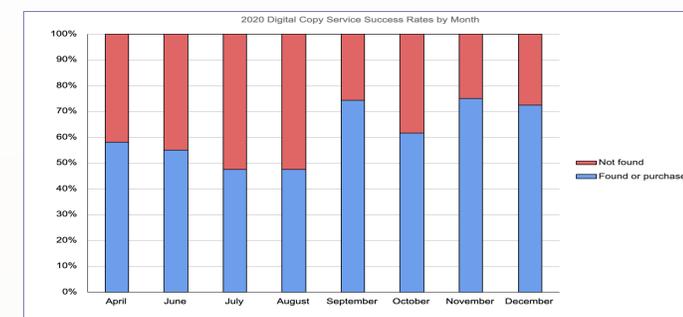


Figure 4. Fulfillment success rates in Summer and Fall 2020

Building a permanent service

Our pandemic response became part of our permanent email reference service and ultimately improved the user experience of our library catalog. After our buildings reopened, we added "Get Help Finding a Digital Copy" to the restored menu of request options (Figure 5). We improved the GHFDC form by fine-tuning several user information fields. We also designed a new workflow with colleagues in the Acquisitions department. They review all GHFDC requests, purchase access when possible, and notify the user and the reference team member.

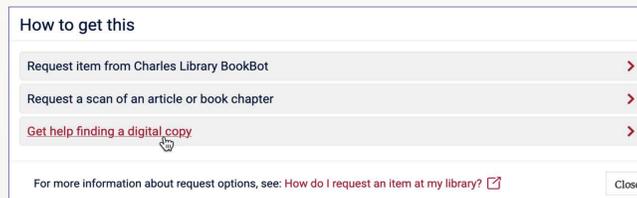


Figure 5. GHFDC request option in Temple's library catalog

The popularity of the GHFDC service greatly increased our email request volume. Our experienced reference staff has handled this well and remained responsive to user needs. GHFDC required some adjustments to their routines, and we did several things to support them. We held training sessions to help staff adapt to the increased number of requests and the new type of request, and we offer GHFDC training to all new email reference staff. We created documentation on handling GHFDC tickets, on the Acquisitions staff workflow, and on recommended places to check for digital copies. To help staff answer GHFDC requests quickly and consistently, we also maintain a curated list of reusable answers for the most common digital copy sources.

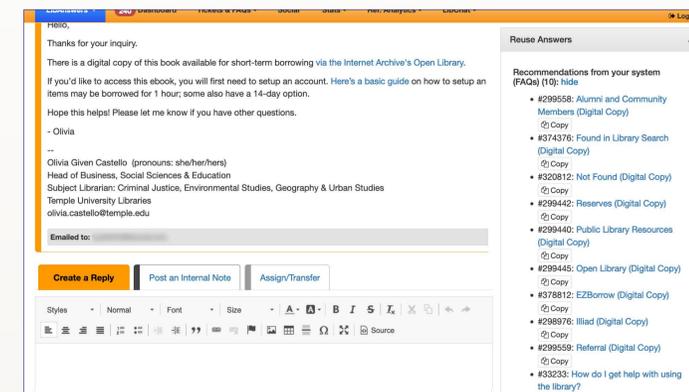


Figure 6. Curated list of reusable answers for common GHFDC scenarios

GHFDC, which began as a pandemic response attempting to keep the library "open" when our buildings were closed, has become a permanent and valued part of our service offerings.

Throughout abrupt shifts in campus operations, our new service has helped users by providing convenience, alleviating economic hardship, preventing unsafe or impractical visits to campus, and keeping library staff-user relationships engaged during times of potential disconnection.

To find out more

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