



Ask

Chat with a librarian

Chat by the Numbers

Learning from Virtual Reference Usage Data

Ask a Librarian is a virtual reference service that connects students, faculty and researchers from participating Ontario university libraries with real-time research assistance through chat. This collaborative initiative is managed by Scholars Portal, a service of the Ontario Council of University Libraries.

Ask a Librarian is staffed by librarians and library staff from participating universities, along with interns who are current students or recent graduates of Masters level programs in Information Studies. Using LivePerson's chat software, operators engage with users to answer library and research related questions. During their shifts, Ask a Librarian operators also use an interactive staff space to communicate with each other to coordinate chat transfers and share knowledge when answering questions. When the service is closed questions are automatically routed to the user's library reference email inbox.

During the fall and winter, Ask a Librarian operates:

Monday to Thursday 11am - 10pm
Friday to Sunday 11am - 5pm

This poster summarizes data collected and analyzed during Fall-Winter 2011-2012, the first academic year of Ask a Librarian's operation. It includes data on patterns of service use, question types, and user demographics in an attempt to highlight implications for library service planning, staffing, and delivery.

Participating Libraries:

- University of Guelph
- University of Guelph-Humber
- Lakehead University
- Ryerson University
- York University
- University of Toronto - St. George
- University of Toronto - Mississauga
- University of Toronto - Scarborough
- University of Windsor

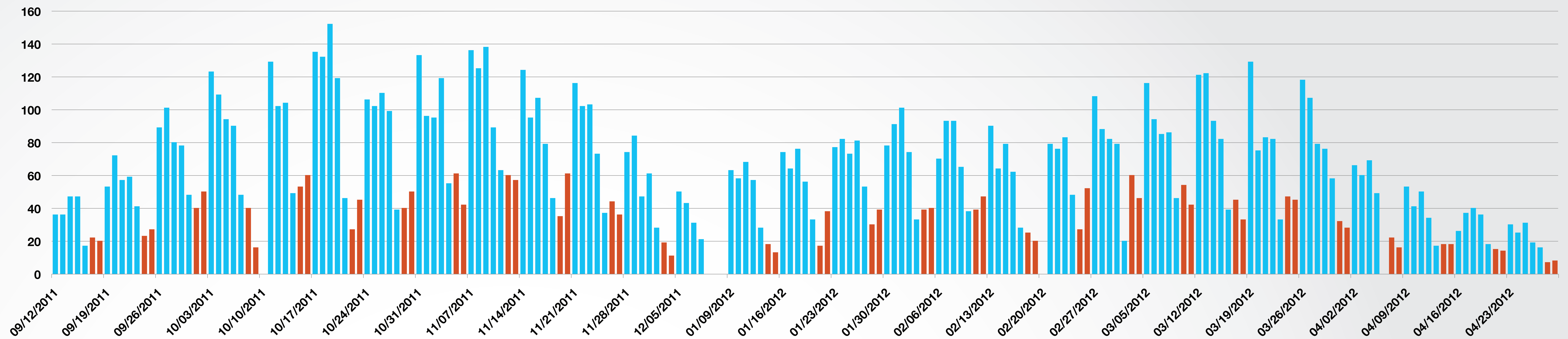
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Contact us at: chat@scholarsportal.info or <http://scholarsportal.info>

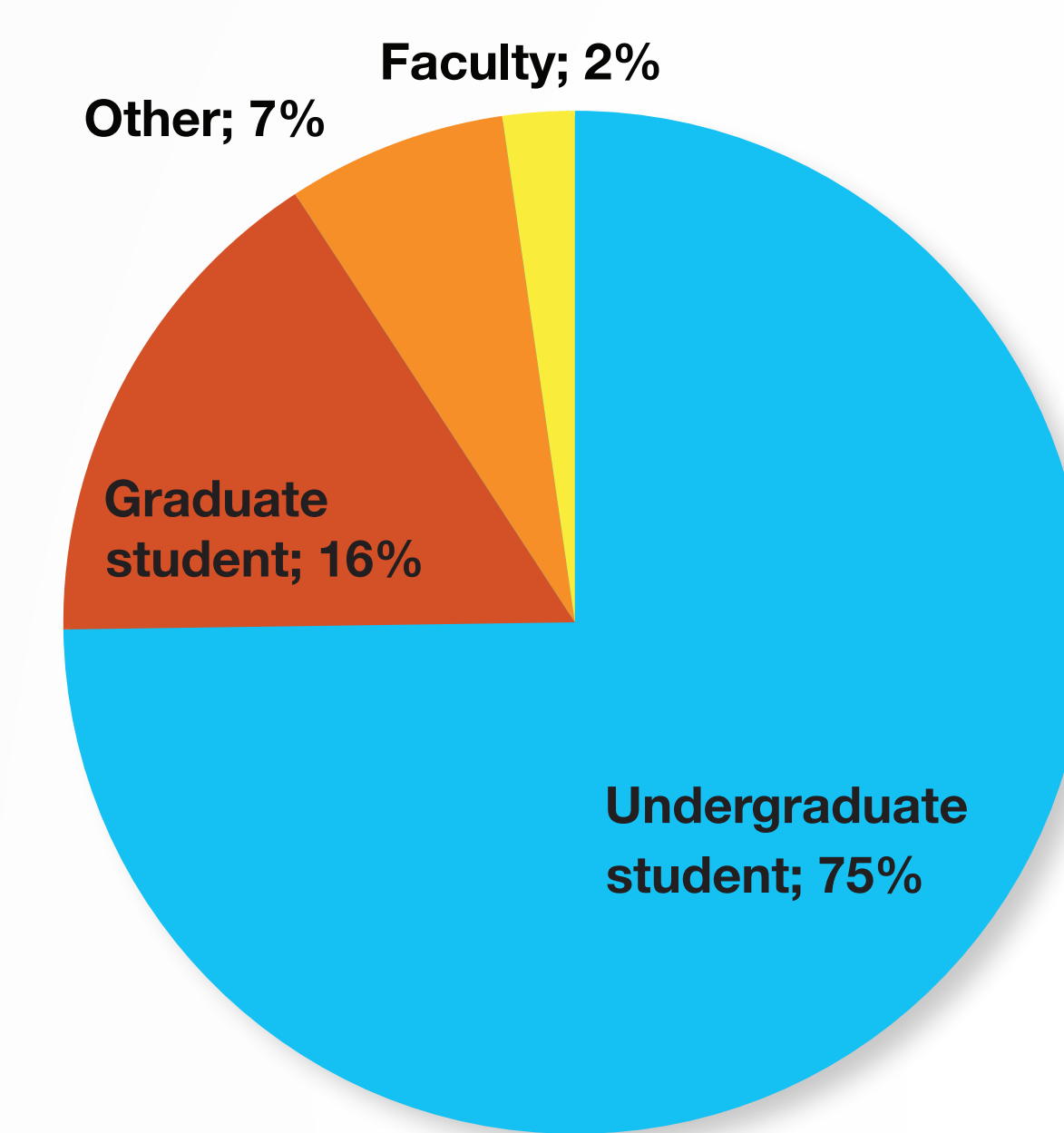


Chats per day

September 2011 - April 2012

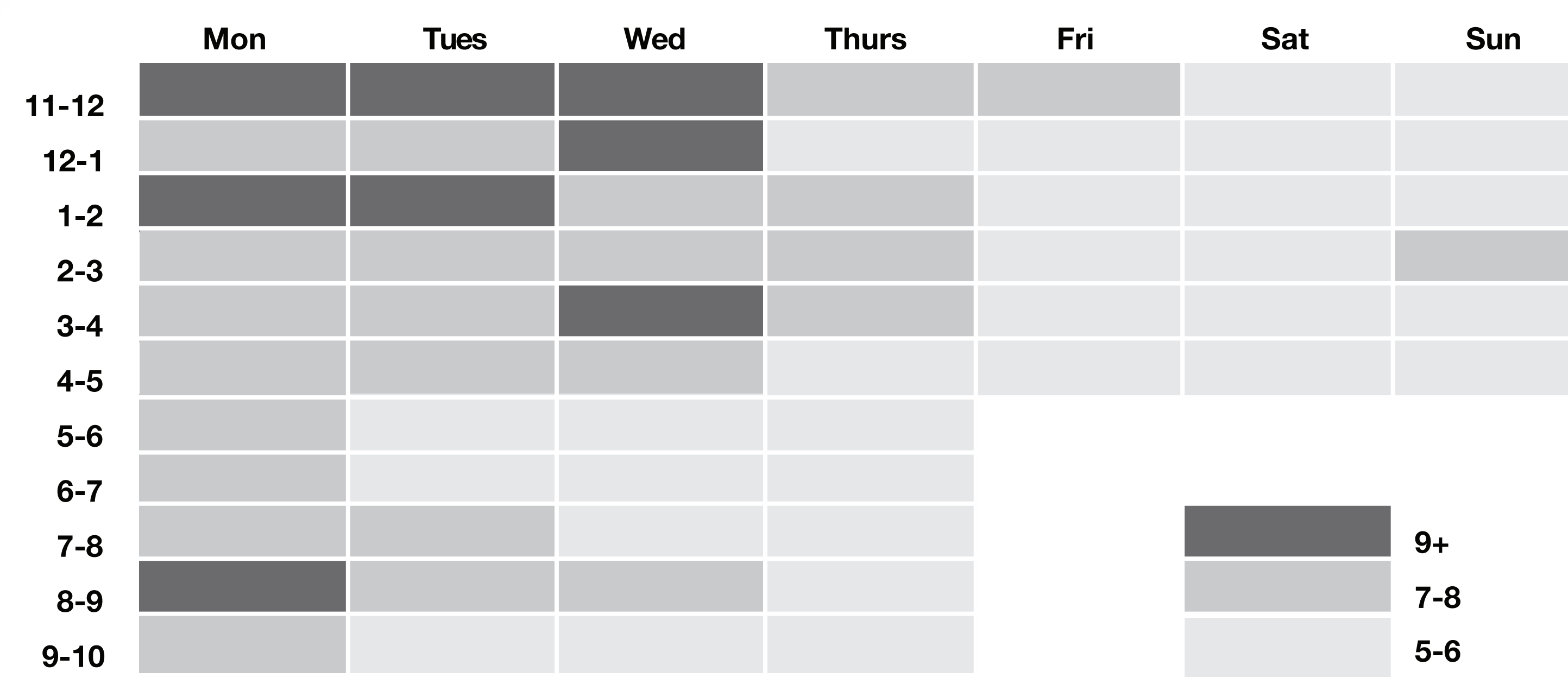


Users by academic status



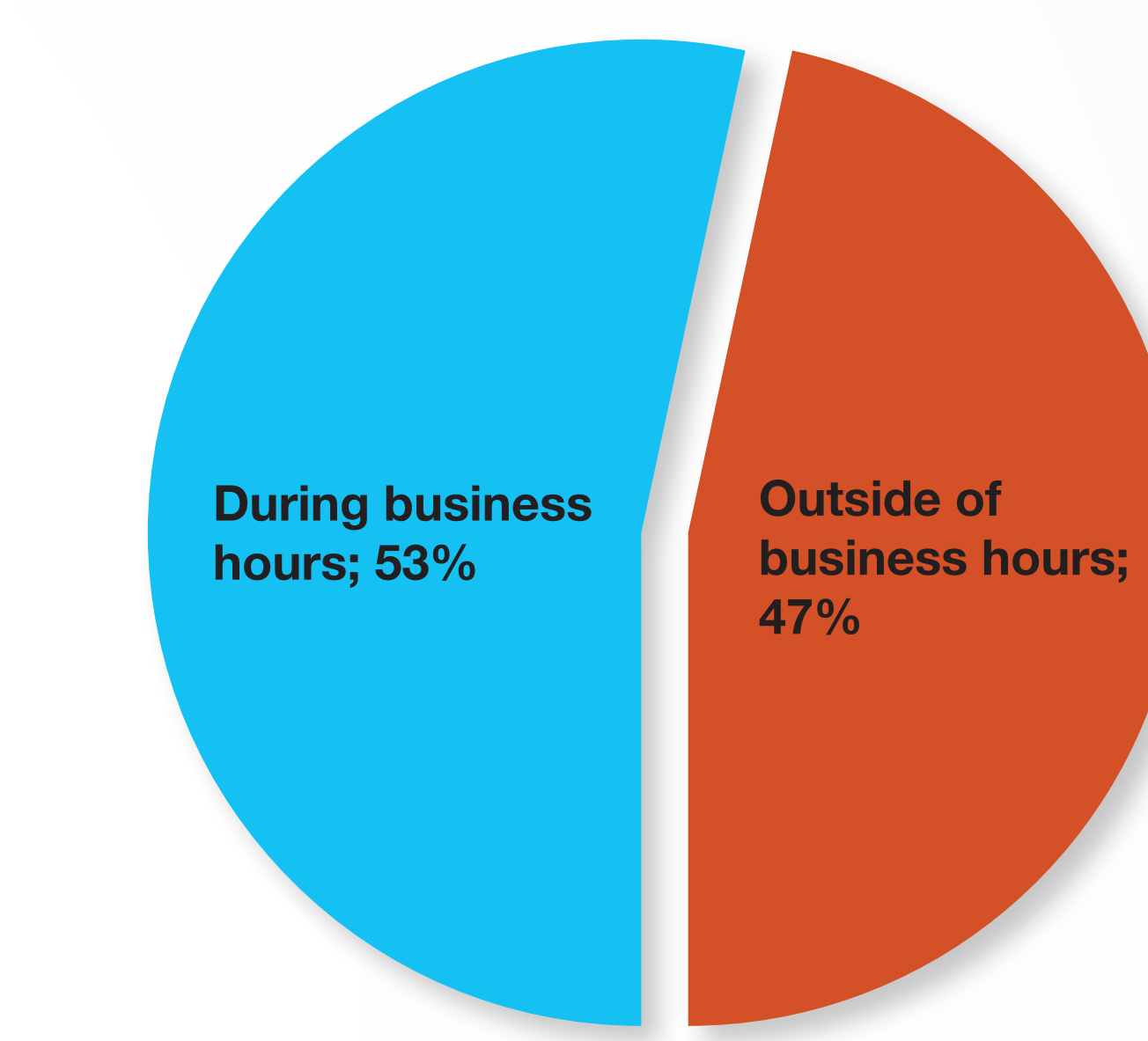
Average chats per hour

September 2011 - April 2012



Chat volume by time of day

Business hours are defined as weekdays before 5pm



Potential implications of this data:

Daily and weekly traffic reflects the ebb and flow of students' research activities. These patterns have implications for decisions around staffing of service points (reference desk, circulation, etc.), vacation blackout periods, and the hiring of temporary staff.

Frequently recurring questions in the pre-chat survey may highlight areas of the library website that need improvement, and information literacy skills to include in instruction sessions.

Nearly half of all traffic to Ask a Librarian occurs outside of business hours, suggesting that key public services such as reference should be offered in evenings and on weekends whenever possible.

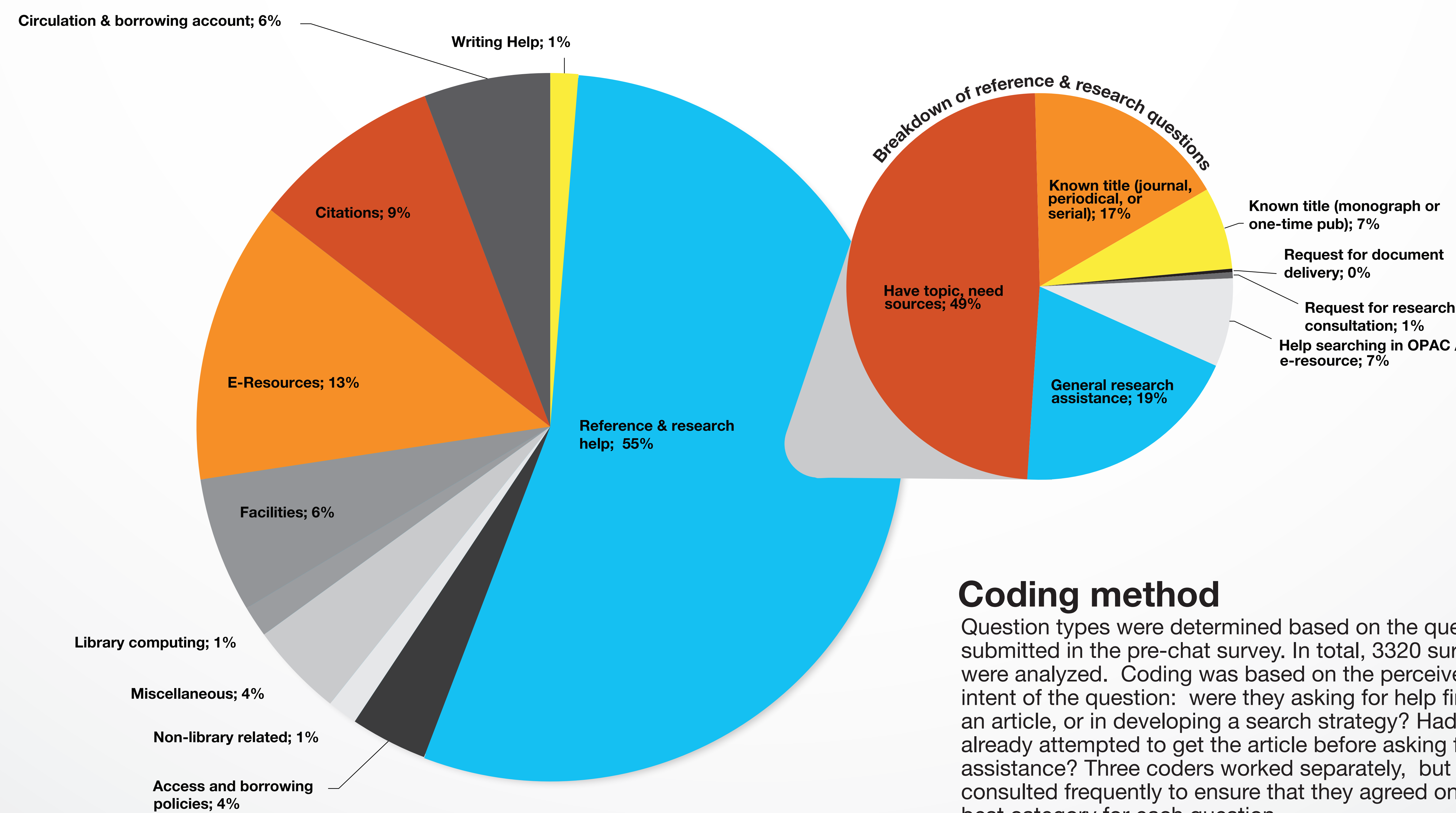
87% of users said that they received "just the right amount of assistance" from Ask a Librarian operators. This suggests that library staff are correctly assessing and meeting users' information needs and service expectation most of the time.

46% of users called Ask their "preferred way of getting library help" suggesting strong support for online reference services in participating libraries.

Students are using chat services for more than quick questions: over half of chats initiated were research-related. All staff working on a virtual reference service should be comfortable conducting a reference interview and running complex searches in library databases. Knowledge of citation practices and comfort with the institution's citation management tools are also highly desirable.

Questions by type

Sampled questions November 2011 - April 2012



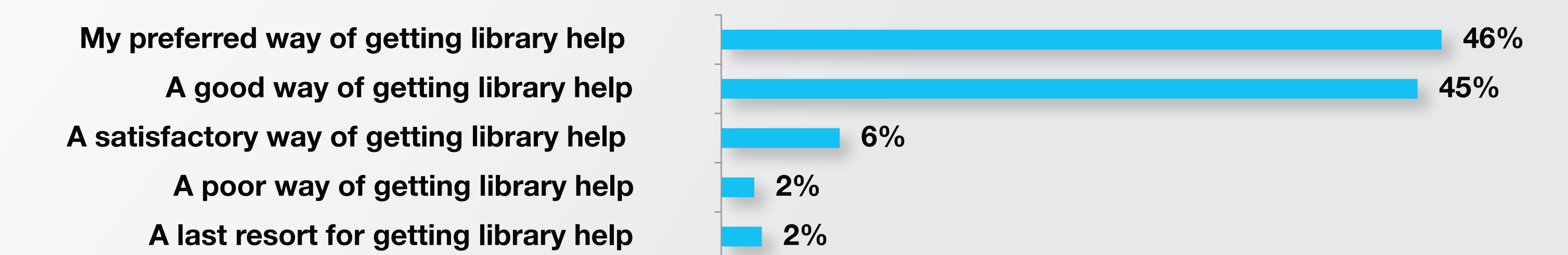
Coding method

Question types were determined based on the question submitted in the pre-chat survey. In total, 3320 surveys were analyzed. Coding was based on the perceived intent of the question: were they asking for help finding an article, or in developing a search strategy? Had they already attempted to get the article before asking for assistance? Three coders worked separately, but consulted frequently to ensure that they agreed on the best category for each question.

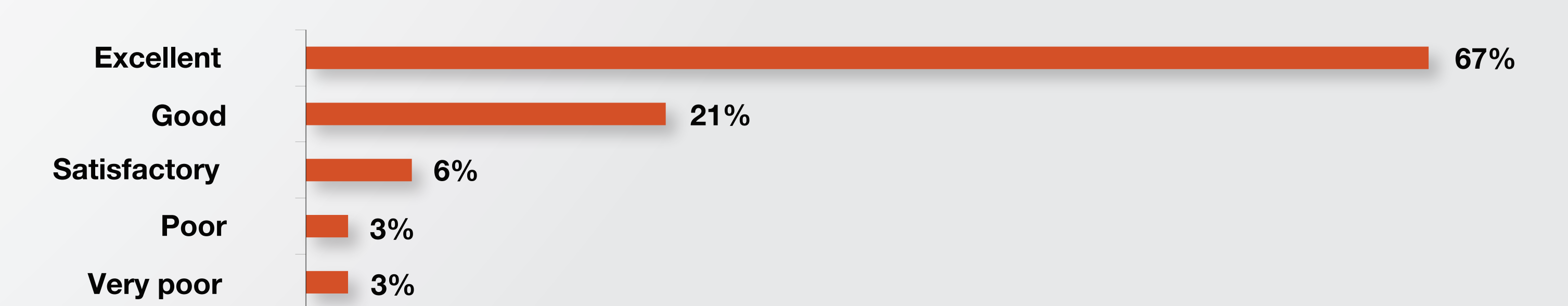
User feedback

A voluntary exit survey is presented to every user at the end of an Ask a Librarian chat session. The following charts are based on the responses to this survey collected between Sept. 12, 2011 and Apr. 29, 2012. The survey response rate was approximately 11%.

This chat service is...



The service provided by the librarian was...



The librarian provided me with...

