

BEYOND THE REFERENCE DESK

**USING PASSIVE PROGRAMMING TO
ENGAGE STUDENTS IN THE POST-
PANDEMIC LIBRARY**

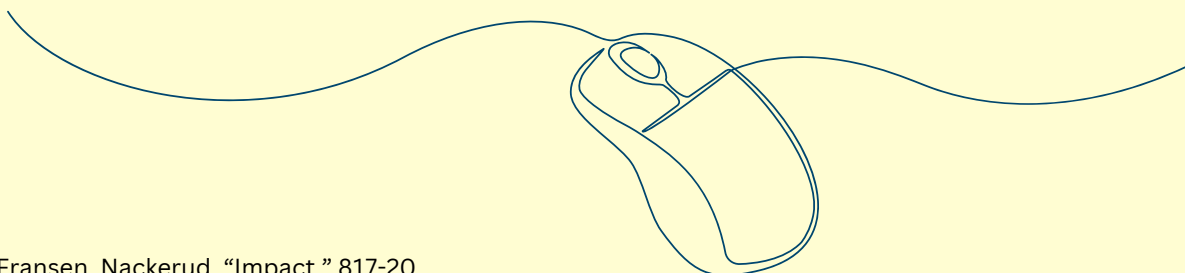
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The shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered student behaviors, including how they engage with academic support services. As institutions transitioned back to in-person instruction, many academic libraries observed a decline in face-to-face reference interactions. This decline raises concerns regarding students' familiarity with and willingness to utilize library resources, particularly among those who began their academic careers in a virtual setting.

Previous research suggests that students who actively engage with library services experience higher levels of academic success and retention. A study by Soria, Fransen, and Nackerud found that first-year students who used library resources at least once during their first year of enrollment were 1.441 times more likely to graduate in four years or remain enrolled after four years compared to those who never used the library.¹ Similarly, Stemmer and Mahan found a statistically significant correlation between library usage and student learning outcomes, including retention, graduation, and grade point average (GPA). Their research demonstrated that students who frequently used library resources, services, and study spaces were more likely to persist in their academic programs, supporting the broader argument that library engagement is an essential factor in student success.² Given these findings, increasing student engagement with library services remains a critical goal.

As Florida's community colleges and universities continue adapting to changing student needs, exploring new engagement strategies is essential. One strategy that has gained traction in academic libraries is passive programming, which involves activities that encourage engagement without requiring direct librarian facilitation. These programs aim to create opportunities for students to interact with library resources in a low-stakes, self-directed manner, fostering a sense of comfort with the library space. This article examines the implementation of passive programming at Valencia College's Osceola Campus Library, analyzing its effectiveness in increasing student-librarian interactions and its potential long-term impact on library engagement.



1. Soria, Fransen, Nackerud, "Impact," 817-20.
2. Stemmer and Mahan, "Investigating," 365-372.

Beyond the Reference Desk: Using Passive Programming to Engage Students in the Post-Pandemic Library

Passive Programming as a Library Engagement Strategy

Defining Passive Programming

Passive programming refers to a set of interactive, self-paced activities strategically placed in library spaces to encourage student engagement without requiring structured events or direct librarian facilitation. Unlike workshops or instructional sessions, passive programming allows students to engage with the library on their own terms, reducing potential barriers to participation.³

At Valencia College, this initiative included:

- **Interactive displays** (e.g., book spine poetry, caption contests, and themed question boards).
- **Creative stations** (e.g., DIY thank-you cards, blackout poetry, and origami).
- **Community-driven projects** (e.g., student-created exhibits such as a collaborative Black History Month “quilt”).

By positioning these activities in high-traffic areas—such as near the reference desk or library entrance—institutions seek to encourage informal student-librarian interactions, ultimately increasing student comfort in utilizing reference services.

Theoretical Framework and Research Basis

The implementation of passive programming is informed by several theoretical perspectives on student engagement and academic success. The engagement theory of learning posits that student involvement in their learning environment significantly enhances their academic performance.⁴ Libraries, as part of this ecosystem, can play a crucial role in fostering engagement through innovative programming. Furthermore, the sense of belonging theory suggests that students who feel connected to their academic institutions are more likely to persist in their studies.⁵ Academic libraries, as hubs of information and community, contribute to this sense of belonging by creating welcoming spaces that support both academic and personal development. Passive programming aligns with these frameworks by providing students with low-risk opportunities to engage with library services and staff, helping to bridge the gap between initial curiosity and active participation in research assistance.

Findings and Challenges in Passive Programming Implementation

Quantitative Outcomes: No Increase in Reference Transactions

Despite the theoretical promise of passive programming, empirical data from the implementation at Valencia College yielded no measurable increase in reference desk interactions. Comparing two consecutive semesters, reference transactions declined by 18 percent, dropping from 463 in fall to 380 in spring. While semester-to-semester fluctuations in enrollment likely contributed to this decline, the data did not immediately indicate a direct correlation between passive programming and increased student engagement with reference services.

These findings are consistent with studies that suggest engagement strategies do not always yield immediate measurable results. One study on library outreach found that while interactive programming increased student presence in library spaces, it did not directly translate into greater use of reference services.⁶

3. Stoness, “Nothing Passive,” 12.

4. Kearsley, Greg, and Shneiderman, “Engagement Theory,” 20-23.

5. Pedler, Willis, and Nieuwoudt, “A Sense of Belonging,” 400-405.

6. Beene et al., “Reach Out,” 44-47.

Beyond the Reference Desk: Using Passive Programming to Engage Students in the Post-Pandemic Library

Qualitative Observations: Changes in Interaction Depth and Nature

Although the total number of reference questions declined, there was a notable change in the nature of student interaction. Analysis of reference transaction data revealed that the average length of interactions increased by thirty seconds, indicating that students engaged in more in-depth, multi-part research questions rather than quick directional inquiries. Additionally, the proportion of research-based questions increased from 61 percent in fall to 70 percent in spring.

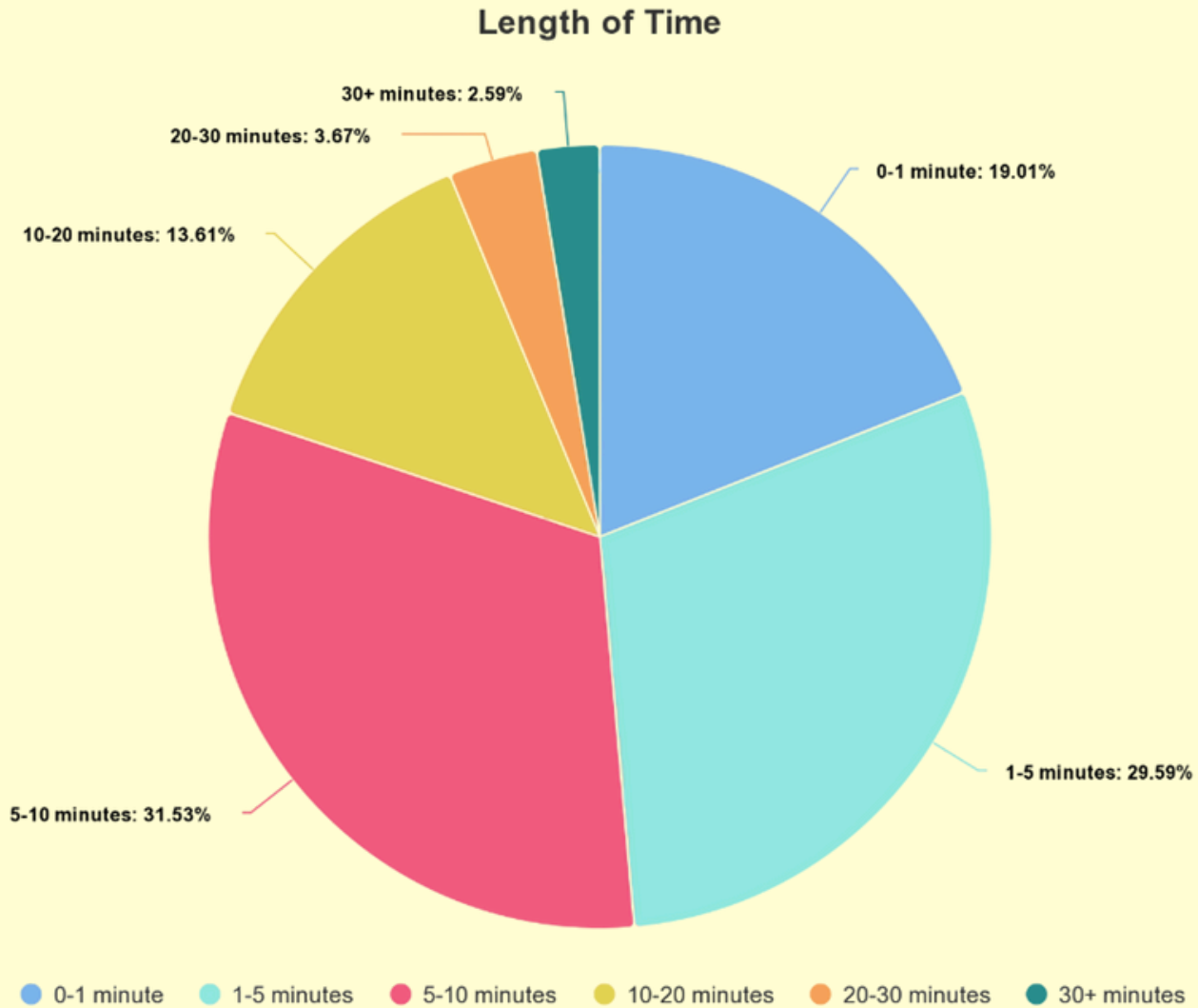


Figure 1: Length of reference interactions in Fall 2022



Beyond the Reference Desk: Using Passive Programming to Engage Students in the Post-Pandemic Library

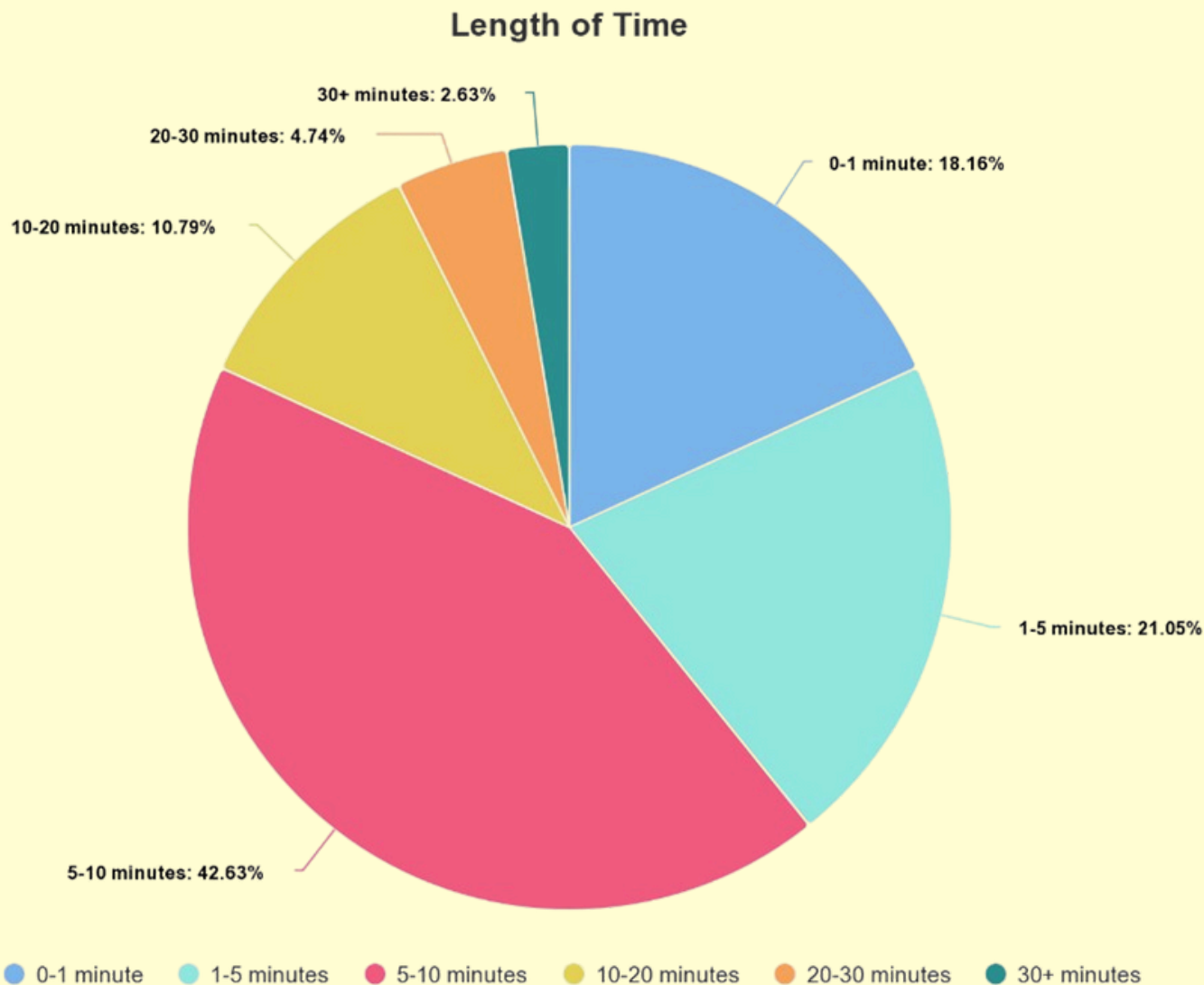


Figure 2: Length of Reference Interactions in Spring 2023

This shift suggests that passive programming may contribute to a more comfortable and engaged student body even if the impact is not immediately visible in transaction metrics. Other institutions have reported similar findings where engagement initiatives altered the nature rather than the frequency of student interactions.⁷

Student Feedback and Informal Engagement

Anecdotal evidence gathered through librarian observations and informal student feedback indicated that:

- Students appreciated the activities as a break from coursework and a form of stress relief.
- Participants often returned to the library for subsequent activities, demonstrating an emerging pattern of engagement.
- Some students reported that they had never visited the library before participating in the activities, suggesting that passive programming may serve as an initial entry point for library engagement.

7. McCabe and MacDonald, “Roaming Reference,” 2-3.

Beyond the Reference Desk: Using Passive Programming to Engage Students in the Post-Pandemic Library

Expanding Outreach Strategies

Since passive programming did not significantly increase reference transactions, alternative strategies should be explored. One potential approach is the roaming reference model where librarians set up mobile reference desks in high-traffic areas outside the library, such as near student services, dining areas, or campus centers.⁷ This model has been successfully implemented at other institutions to reach students who may not actively seek out library services.

Future engagement strategies may also incorporate faculty collaborations such as integrating passive programming elements into courses or assignments to further strengthen the library's role in student learning.

Conclusion

Passive programming presents a promising but complex engagement strategy for academic libraries. While it did not result in a direct increase in reference transactions, it contributed to longer and more in-depth student interactions and helped foster a welcoming library environment. The findings suggest that student-librarian engagement should be measured beyond traditional reference metrics, incorporating qualitative indicators such as interaction depth, student comfort, and long-term engagement patterns. As libraries continue to evolve, a multi-faceted approach that combines passive programming, mobile reference services, and faculty collaborations may provide a more holistic strategy for increasing student engagement. Future research should explore the long-term effects of these initiatives on academic success and retention.

Endnotes

1. Krista M. Soria, Jan Fransen, and Shane Nackerud, "The Impact of Academic Library Resources on Undergraduates' Degree Completion," *College & Research Libraries* 78, no. 6 (2017): 817–20.
2. John K. Stemmer and David M. Mahan, "Investigating the Relationship of Library Usage to Student Outcomes," *College & Research Libraries* 77, no. 3 (2016): 365–372.
3. Stoness, Heather. 2021. "There's Nothing Passive About It!" *Canadian School Libraries Journal* 5 (1): 12. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=aa9f4b0b-9f9a-3242-917d-989fe4d7c3a6>. Kahu, E. "Framing Student Engagement in Higher Education." *Studies in Higher Education* 38, no. 5 (2013): 759–760.
4. Kearsley, Greg, and Ben Shneiderman. "Engagement Theory: A Framework for Technology-Based Teaching and Learning." *Educational Technology* 38, no. 5 (1998): 20–23.
5. Pedler, Megan Louise, Royce Willis, and Johanna Elizabeth Nieuwoudt. 2021. "A Sense of Belonging at University: Student Retention, Motivation and Enjoyment." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 46 (3): 400–405.
6. Stephanie Beene, Amy S. Jackson, Sarah Kostelecky, and Todd Quinn, "Reach Out! Highlighting Collections and Expanding Outreach to Non-Traditional Communities across Academia," *The Reference Librarian* 60, no. 1 (2019): 44–47.
7. Kealin M. McCabe and James R.W. MacDonald, "Roaming Reference: Reinvigorating Reference through Point of Need Service," *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library & Information Practice & Research* 6, no. 2 (2011): 2–3.

