



Shared Services Request  
2010/2011

AskAway, March 2010  
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# I. Message from Our Advisory Committee Chair and Project Coordinator

2009 has been another year of successful activity for AskAway, BC's post-secondary virtual reference service. In the following pages you will find an outline of 2009 achievements and a 2010/2011 BCcampus Shared Services support request.

*Part II* of this report defines AskAway and its governance structure and introduces members of the AskAway Advisory Committee. *Essential Partners* outlines the role each of our three key partners play in supporting AskAway. A 140% rise in usage, among other accomplishments this year, are highlighted in *Achievements*. *Measuring Value Added* provides a closer look at how AskAway adds value for users, institutions and the BC post-secondary system. *Shared Services Benefits* focuses on the rationale for AskAway as a BCcampus Shared Service, and presents a request for 2010/2011 Shared Services support. Forthcoming developments in mobile accessibility and service provider tools are highlighted in the *Path Forward*.

Finally, a Shared Services Summary for AskAway is included in the *Appendices*, along with 2009 usage statistics broken down by institution, detailed operational Progress Report excerpts and an outline of where BCcampus support has been promoted.

Mary Anne Guenther  
Library Director, North Island College, &  
Chair, AskAway Advisory Committee

Sunni Nishimura  
AskAway Coordinator

## AskAway Values:

- » Equitable access to library services.
- » Collaboration and trust-building among post-secondary libraries, and with other types of libraries in BC.
- » Universal service with options for local branding.
- » Flexible models for participation at different levels.
- » Creativity, originality, and openness to innovative approaches and new ideas.

askaway...  
Real people. Real help. 



## AskAway By The Numbers in 2009

*I just wanted to say thank you to whoever was helping me... The person was very professional and extremely helpful... I am honestly impressed with my experience and will be recommending the AskAway option to my students.*  
Douglas College faculty

### Who benefits?

- Over 186,000 learners
- Over 14,000 researchers and educators
- 28 partner libraries

### AskAway – Online Help at Point of Need

- 18,468 questions answered
- 140% increase in traffic over 2008

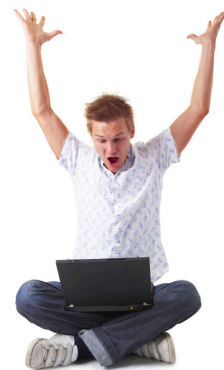
### Cost Savings

- \$5.55 cost per transaction for AskAway, a 60% reduction from 2008
- Avoided system costs of approximately \$3 million, the estimated additional cost to re-create the AskAway service on a non-collaborative basis

### AskAway Users

- 96% of users would use AskAway again
- 32% of users chose to use AskAway because they were searching for online resources
- 30% of users chose AskAway because of their distance from the library
- 13% of users self-identified as distance learners
- 7% of users had never used library services before
- 67% of users had not used AskAway before

*Oh my god, this service is amazing. The librarian was very kind and very thorough on all aspects of the question I asked. I am glad that we have this type of online library service available. Our government should come up with more services like this.*  
SFU learner



## II. AskAway - Core Service for BC Post-secondary Learners

AskAway enables real-time, chat-based communication for learners when they need it. With a single click, students can connect with a librarian and receive expert research assistance. Staff from 28 post-secondary libraries across BC and the Yukon chat online with learners, providing convenient, timely access to province-wide reference resources beyond the limitations of library building and opening hours.

Through collaboration, cost-sharing, and coordination of existing infrastructure and resources, AskAway creates a service far beyond what any individual institution could provide on its own and with the potential to benefit over 180,000 BC and Yukon post-secondary learners. AskAway is a collaborative partnership between BCcampus and the BC Electronic Library Network consortium of BC post-secondary libraries.

### Governance

The BC ELN AskAway Advisory Committee oversees AskAway policy development, planning, and operations. The Advisory Committee reports to the BC ELN Steering Committee. The Advisory Committee reflects the diversity of BC post-secondary libraries, representing a cross-section of BC ELN partner libraries based on type and geographic location. BCcampus has a permanent seat on the Advisory Committee, along with the BC ELN Executive Director. This governance structure ensures that the service remains attuned to the needs of BC learners and libraries.

- » 28 participating libraries
- » 67 hours of reference service per week for BC learners, researchers and educators
- » Answered 18,648 questions in 2009, with over 50% of users logging in from home

- AskAway Advisory Committee:*
- » advises on policy issues
  - » represents the interests & concerns of regions and institutions
  - » carries out research to support service and brings forward recommendations
  - » communicates internally and externally on the AskAway service
  - » oversees the work of the AskAway Coordinator

### AskAway Advisory Committee members (as of December 2009)

Gohar Ashougian, University of Northern BC <i>(Small Universities)</i>	Sybil Harrison, Camosun College <i>(Urban Colleges)</i>
Jennifer Brownlow, Vancouver Island University <i>(Member-at-large)</i>	Leva Lee, BCcampus
Christina de Castell, Vancouver Public Library <i>(Public Library AskAway)</i>	Ophelia Ma, University of Victoria
Anita Cocchia, BC Electronic Library Network	Cathy MacDonald, Kwantlen Polytechnic University <i>(Regional Universities and Institutes with 4 year Programs)</i>
Carole Compton-Smith, Douglas College <i>(CPSLD President)</i>	Sunni Nishimura, AskAway Coordinator
Debra Flewelling, Douglas College <i>(Member-at-large)</i>	Todd Mundle, Simon Fraser University
Mary Anne Guenther, North Island College <i>(Chair, Rural Colleges)</i>	Sally Taylor, University of British Columbia

*As we move forward in 2010, bringing systemic value to the British Columbia higher education community remains our primary goal.*

David Porter,  
BCcampus

*The mission of the BC Electronic Library Network is to provide superior and equitable information access for all learners, educators, and researchers by extending the expertise and resources of BC post-secondary libraries.*

BC ELN Strategic Plan  
2009-2011

*Encourage innovation and flexible education options to promote diversity among students, including life-long learners, Aboriginal people, new immigrants and international students.*

ALMD Service Plan  
Strategy

### III. Essential Partners

A primary goal of BCcampus is to support institutional collaborations that leverage knowledge, generate benefits for students, and reduce costs. AskAway is the epitome of a collaborative that does just these things.

BCcampus has supported AskAway through its Shared Services program since AskAway's inception in 2006, reflecting BCcampus' commitment to provide flexible, adaptable options that address the diversity of BC life-long learners. As a Shared Service, AskAway creates equity across the province, giving students at even the smallest institutions access to 67 hours of reference service a week, learning support that those students would not otherwise have.



The BC Electronic Library Network (BC ELN) provides essential infrastructure for AskAway through its partner libraries and the BC ELN Office. BC ELN partner libraries provide over 200 staff hours per week to the AskAway service, making available 67 hours of reference service per week to AskAway users. The BC ELN Office provides critical support and expertise for coordination of the service. Through its partnership with BC ELN, AskAway leverages BC ELN expertise, maximizing the efficiency, benefits and cost-effectiveness of the service.



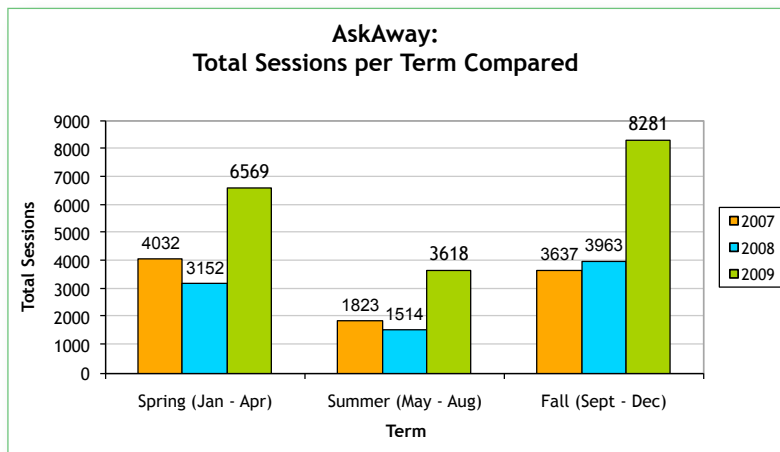
As part of its commitment to expanding library access and services to British Columbians across the province, the Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development (ALMD) provided seed funding for AskAway in the 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 fiscals.

This seed funding was critical to ensuring AskAway's success as part of a larger cradle-to-grave continuum of library services for British Columbians. Access to innovative library services such as AskAway delivers on the BC Government's promise to make BC "the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent."



## IV. Achievements This Year

- **Moved AskAway to a sustainable, partner-supported funding model**, fully integrated into the post-secondary library system
- **Expanded service in response to the 140% usage increase in 2009** through staffing reallocation and improved training and communication
- **Successfully negotiated stable 3-year pricing** for AskAway's underlying software, ensuring that AskAway software costs are kept as low as possible
- **Provided both in-person and virtual training** for AskAway service providers around the province
- **Hosted 2009 BC Library Conference session** in collaboration with public library AskAway, featuring an internationally renowned virtual reference researcher
- **Supported installation of Qwidget chat widget on 20 library websites**, which was responsible for a significant proportion of the 2009 increase in traffic



*Askaway was very helpful and useful. I was having troubles finding what I needed and didnt even know where to start then I saw the askaway icon and in a matter of minutes I had exactly what I needed!*

University of the Fraser Valley learner

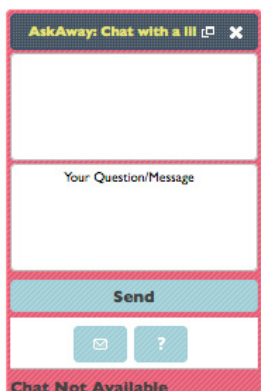
### The AskAway Qwidget

Expert help at point-of-need doesn't get any better than this! The AskAway Qwidget can be placed on any webpage, including within licensed electronic resources or course management software, allowing users to chat directly with a librarian from wherever they are on the library website.

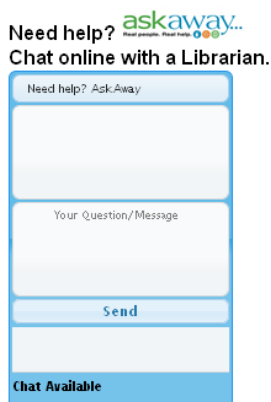
- 61% of all 2009 AskAway questions came in via the Qwidget
- First pilot integration of Qwidget into Moodle course management system
- Customised Qwidget skins to suit any webpage design

*This is a wonderful service for when you are home in your p.j's. Thanks so much!!*

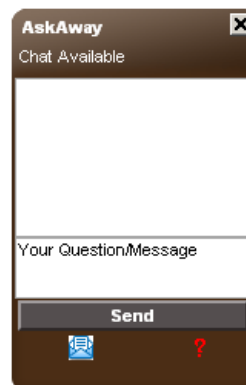
University of Northern BC learner



Popsicle Skin Option



UBC Qwidget



UFV Qwidget



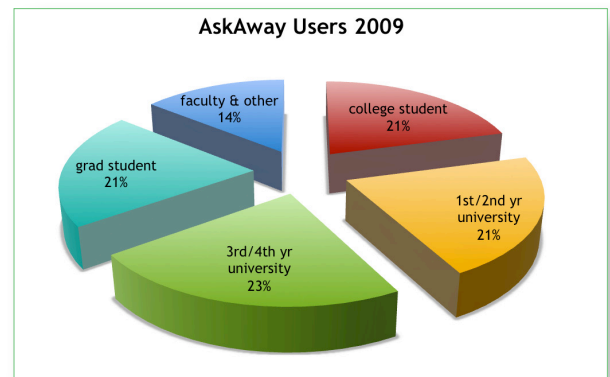
## V. Measuring Value Added

In 2009, AskAway achieved a cost per transaction of \$5.55, a 60% reduction from 2008. As a centrally coordinated service, AskAway achieves avoided system costs of approximately \$3 million, the estimated additional cost to re-create the AskAway service on a non-collaborative basis. As the AskAway service continues to mature and achieve greater efficiencies, costs savings will increase.

### Value for Users

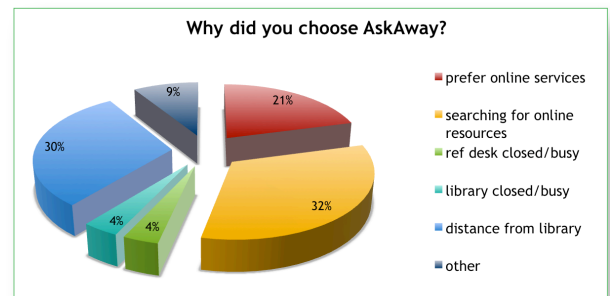
Evidence of the value AskAway users receive from the service comes from the exit survey users fill out upon completion of their AskAway session. What we've learned from the survey is:

- 96% of users are **highly satisfied** with the service they received and say they would use AskAway again
- AskAway is being used by a **broad demographic of users**, from graduate students to college students



AskAway users tell us they choose AskAway because it meets their needs for convenience and their preference for online resources:

- 32% chose AskAway because they were **searching for online resources**
- 30% chose AskAway because of their **distance from the library**
- 13% self-identified as **distance learners**



Most of the anecdotal comments from users indicate that convenience is one of their primary reasons for choosing AskAway:

- “also studying at home--have young family--difficult to get to library”
- “I needed help right away, and didn’t want to have to leave my office to talk with someone in person.”
- “asking an expert saved a bunch of time, thank you”

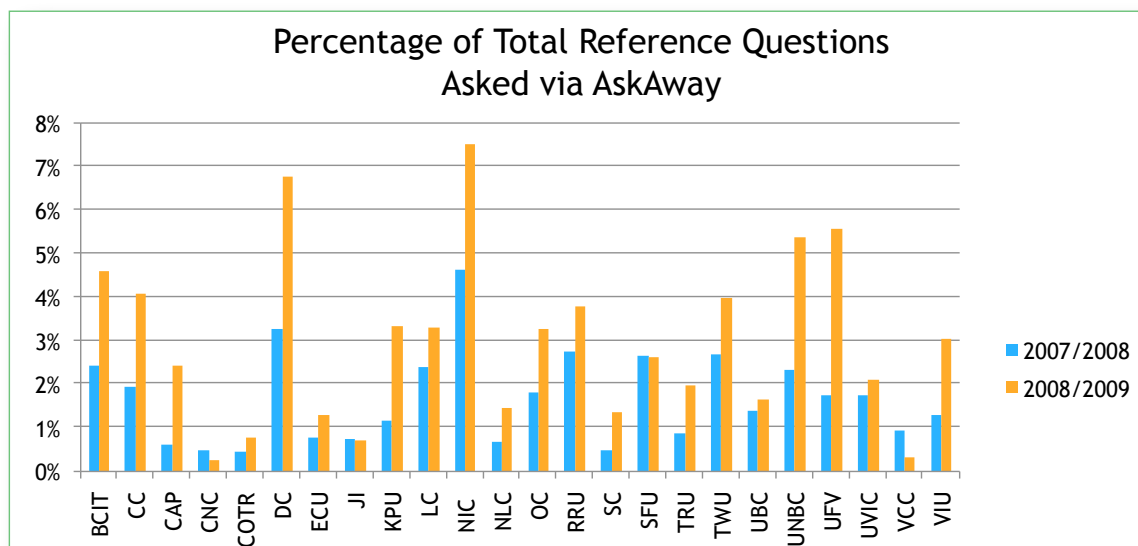
*I think ask away is a wonderful service for students. It's a neat way to get help without actually heading out to the library or giving the library a call. It's fast and easy and very accurate. I love this service!!!*  
Kwantlen Polytechnic University learner

*Excellent service and surprised it was available on weekends. One that accommodates my own schedule. 5 Stars from Student.*  
Vancouver Island University learner

## Value for Institutions

AskAway's library participation rate has remained 100% since its inception in 2006, demonstrating the confidence BC ELN partner libraries have in AskAway. Participants benefit from AskAway in many ways, including:

- **Reaching new library users:** 7% of AskAway users indicated they had never used library services before, and 67% had not used AskAway before. By reaching out to new users and referring them to other service points, AskAway service providers increase the visibility and accessibility of other learner services.
- **Building expertise:** AskAway builds expertise and the knowledge base within post-secondary libraries



- **Productive partnerships:** Collaborating on AskAway builds productive partnerships and connections among post-secondary libraries and their institutions
- **Meeting changing user needs:** Usage trends indicate that virtual reference has taken its place as a core learner service, alongside telephone, email or in-person reference. There has been a 50% overall increase in the proportion of reference questions users chose to ask via AskAway (as opposed to those asked in-person, via email or telephone).

*As a relatively new librarian, I find it's really instructive experience. I feel very fortunate to have had the chance to do as much AskAway as I have. It's also quite rewarding since AskAway patrons are so often grateful for the point-of-need assistance.*

AskAway service provider

*It is easy to see how AskAway will have indirect benefits for reference and information literacy services across the province. As we learn to help the learners of so many different institutions, we are constantly looking at the websites, subject guides, and policies of other libraries. Sometimes, no doubt, we are saying to ourselves "What a good idea! I should try this at my library"... In the long run, this kind of ad hoc sharing of best practices may turn out to be one of the secret successes AskAway will bring to the province's library services.*

AskAway service provider

## VI. Shared Services Benefits & Request

For 2010/2011, BC ELN is requesting \$66,000 through the BCcampus Shared Services program to support AskAway service coordination and technical infrastructure.

BCcampus supported AskAway, in 2009/2010, with \$62,500 through the Shared Services program. This year's request has increased 5% to offset salary and inflationary increases.

Benefits of the Shared Services approach for AskAway include:

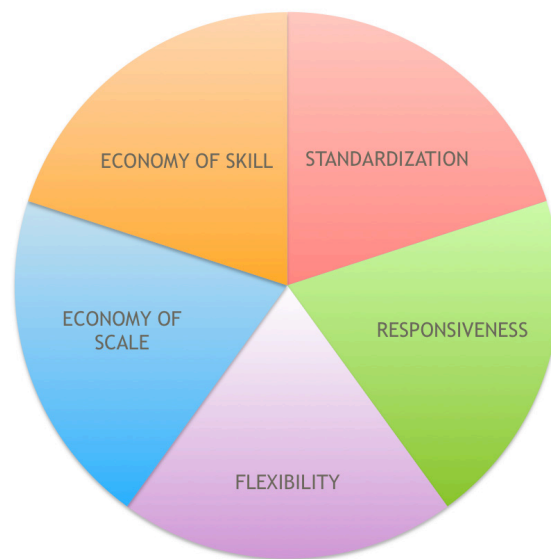
**Economy of Scale:** Centralized coordination, software licensing, training and marketing eliminates redundancies, maximizes benefits and minimizes costs.

**Economy of Skill:** AskAway enables specialized skill sets that can be leveraged across the entire post-secondary education system.

**Standardization:** Common software, policies, training and marketing facilitate a unified experience for BC learners, educators, and researchers.

**Responsiveness:** Centralized coordination ensures that library needs and issues are supported quickly and efficiently.

**Flexibility:** AskAway infrastructure enables post-secondary libraries to address system-wide needs and move forward with emerging new opportunities.



*Great service.  
A valuable tool in  
the fight against  
distance-based  
educational  
restraints. Keep up  
the good work!*  
Okanagan College  
learner

*When I clicked on  
"Start New Session",  
I honestly didn't  
think that someone  
would be respond-  
ing to my Q in "real  
time". Was blown  
away when someone  
replied immediately!  
Great resource! Wish  
I had known about  
it earlier; would've  
saved me a lot of  
wasted time look-  
ing for the answer  
myself.*  
Royal Roads  
University learner

The Shared Services Benefit Summary Request can be found in Appendix A.



## VII. The Path Forward

Today's post-secondary learners, educators and researchers increasingly rely on online resources that they can use remotely, and that they expect more flexibility, connectivity and convenience from learner services.

- **Growing with user demand for online services:** The AskAway Advisory Committee will continue to work with participating libraries to ensure AskAway meets user demand for the service. Strategies may include expansion of service hours and adjusting staffing levels to meet peak user demand.
- **Evolving technology:** 2010 will see the implementation of a mobile accessible version of the AskAway Qwidget, allowing users to ask questions from their mobile devices. The AskAway team will also be exploring the feasibility of SMS/text reference for the BC post-secondary context.
- **Improved service provider experience:** Up-coming is the launch of a new group chat tool which will sharpen service provider's abilities to manage user traffic and share expertise.



Qwidget Mobile

BCcampus support is essential to the continued growth and development of AskAway. The ability to expand the service to meet user needs is dependent on stable support from our partners. The AskAway team looks forward to working with BCcampus as we nourish and grow this core service for BC post-secondary learners, educators and researchers.

**askaway...**  
Real people. Real help. 



*Both times I have used AskAway I leave speechless with the amount of dedication into answering my questions they put. I am made to feel as if answering my question is a joy to them (whether or not it actually is I'm sure it can't be fun!) but AskAway has redeemed my faith of the future of libraries in an increasingly technological age. Truly a wonderful feature.*

UBC learner

## Appendix A 2010/2011 Shared Services Benefit Summary

### *What is it?*

AskAway, BC's provincial virtual reference service, allows BC learners, educators and researchers to chat with librarians and get research help from wherever they are. OCLC's QuestionPoint software connects end users with AskAway librarians from 28 post-secondary institutions across BC, while allowing staff to collect statistics and user feedback, run reports, and share expertise.

### *Why should BCcampus consider this service?*

**Creates Equitable Access for BC Learners:** The software and staffing costs required to run a virtual reference service puts it beyond the reach of all but the largest institutions. As a Shared Service this project creates equity across the province, giving students at even the smallest institutions access to 67 hours of reference service a week. Learning support that those students would not have otherwise.

**Fosters and supports Collaborations:** AskAway Virtual Reference Service allows the formation of collaborations and partnerships among institutions that leverage knowledge, reduce costs and generate benefits for learners.

### *What data, research or trend would BCcampus be addressing in initiating this project?*

In the trend towards learner-centered higher education, institutions and government are responding to learner preferences for increasingly flexible, adaptable learning options such as weekend learning, asynchronous 24/7 instruction, and "just in time" teaching. Providing flexible, online access to library services supports a learner-centered approach to higher education.

### *What will the project accomplish?*

#### **Benefits for Post-secondary Institutions**

- Leverages existing infrastructure and resources e.g. libraries contribute 3-34 staff hours in return for 67 hours per week of virtual reference service for their learners.
- More cost-effective than a single institution implementation:
  - » As a **collaborative** service, virtual reference costs the system **\$105,000/yr**
  - » For a single institution, providing an equivalent number of service hours and including staffing costs, support, and infrastructure would cost \$192,000/yr, with a resulting **system cost** of close to **\$3.5 million** for 18 institutions
- Encourages innovation in addressing the diverse needs of life-long learners within a supported environment.
- Builds expertise and knowledge base within the post-secondary system in terms of system support and professional development.
- Builds productive partnerships and collaborations among post-secondary institutions.

## **Benefits for Post-secondary Users**

- Learners, educators and researchers can access help anytime, anywhere.
- Increases capacity and enhances access at BC post-secondary institutions.
- Helps to provide a high-quality learning environment for BC learners.

*What are the objectives and are they measurable?*

### **Objectives:**

- Cost-sharing and leveraging of existing infrastructure.
- Facilitate institutional collaboration and building of productive partnerships.
- Provide an opportunity to promote the positive and productive partnership between BC ELN, its partner institutions and BCcampus.
- Provide BCcampus with another method of supporting institutions in their development of innovative online learner services and instructional technologies.

### **Measures:**

- Demonstrate cost-effectiveness over a single institutional implementation
- Quantify the use of AskAway service with number of user sessions over time
- Positive feedback from end users and institutions
- Quantify interest in and uptake of other Shared Services e.g. Adobe Connect

*Specific reference to service plan goal and strategy:*

This project will:

- Facilitate efficient, affordable access to integrated online instructional technologies for BC post-secondary institutions
- Facilitate cross-sector collaboration through online communities and shared resources
- Make cost-effective use of existing technical infrastructure
- Provide enhanced access to highly qualified educators to support self-learning and learner satisfaction

Deliverable:

A provincial virtual reference service for BC's post-secondary learners.

*Will a zero-complexity baseline product or service be delivered? Specify how this quality will be assured.*

Yes, a zero-complexity baseline service will be delivered. The AskAway Advisory Committee, reporting to the BC ELN Steering Committee, is responsible for setting service policies. Day to day coordination of the service is done by the BC ELN AskAway coordinator in consultation with the institutional administrators. All helpdesk and training support is provided by the coordinator and/or the software vendor.

*What is the relevance to end-users?*

AskAway provides an interface between learners and library staff, allowing learners to access library reference staff at point-of-need, 67 hours per week. AskAway provides flexible, online access to library services, supporting online learning.

*What specific value and benefit will end users derive?*

- Accessible at point-of-need
- 67 hours of reference service per week, a huge expansion of hours for smaller institutions
- Easy to use, familiar chat interface
- Support for flexible/mobile learning and research
- Sharing of subject and resource expertise

*What are the key messages?*

BCcampus support of this project sends the key messages that BCcampus fosters collaborative approaches among institutions for the benefit of learners. It leverages system expertise while reducing service costs to the system.

*How is this project related to existing work? (interdependence)*

- Creates a framework and builds expertise for building other virtual support services
- Promotes and advances the use of educational technologies

*Who will have to be consulted? (initiative issues)*

We have an existing user base of institutions who have experience with the service and are committed to its continuation.

*What other projects will this project require vetting against? (integration)*

There are no other projects that this project requires vetting against.

*What are the financial requirements?*

\$66,000 for 2010/2011. Funding supports technical infrastructure and service coordination.

*How will the project be resourced?*

Governance: AskAway Advisory Committee, reporting to the BC ELN Steering Committee  
Coordination/Project Management: BC ELN AskAway Coordinator

*What are our internal measures of success?*

- The service is operational seven days a week with minimal downtime
- Timely responses and good feedback from the institutional administrators
- Maintenance of, or increase, in user base of institutions
- Increased usage of the service

*What are the end user satisfaction measures?*

- The service is operational with minimal downtime
- Ease of use
- Quality of service & response times
- Number of repeat users, number of sessions
- Positive user feedback

*What are the potential challenges or complications?*

Software has almost unlimited capacity for end user sessions, making staffing levels a challenge.

*Who does what, when and how? Outline general areas of responsibility.*

BC ELN Office: Project Lead & licensing; coordination, promotion, training, & support  
BC ELN Partner Libraries: Governance, service staffing, peer training, and support fee  
BCcampus: Funding support and system and technical expertise



## Appendix B

## 2009 AskAway Usage by Institution

Institution Name	Our Users' Questions			Sessions With Other Institutions' Users	Total Sessions/ Institution
	Answered by Us	Answered by Others	Total		
BC Electronic Library Network	9	0	9	3042	3051
British Columbia Institute of Technology*	34	419	453	524	558
Camosun College*	70	883	953	486	556
Capilano University*	20	261	281	163	183
College of New Caledonia	0	35	35	329	329
College of the Rockies	1	57	58	82	83
Douglas College*	117	1387	1504	764	881
Emily Carr University*	9	38	47	68	77
Justice Institute of British Columbia	1	15	16	290	291
Kwantlen Polytechnic University*	132	1384	1516	617	749
Langara College*	23	358	381	487	510
Nicola Valley Institute of Technology	0	1	1	0	0
North Island College*	25	225	250	257	282
Northern Lights College	1	42	43	101	102
Northwest Community College*	5	159	164	309	314
Okanagan College*	29	516	545	334	363
Royal Roads University	6	138	144	291	297
Selkirk College	6	89	95	207	213
Simon Fraser University*	484	3547	4031	1228	1712
Thompson Rivers University*	27	440	467	489	516
Trinity Western University	5	161	166	418	423
University of British Columbia*	871	2523	3394	2554	3425
University of Northern British Columbia*	53	482	535	476	529
University of the Fraser Valley*	79	1063	1142	443	522
University of Victoria*	144	943	1087	1413	1557
Vancouver Community College*	7	88	95	365	372
Vancouver Island University*	32	669	701	432	464
Yukon College*	1	28	29	108	109
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>2191</b>	<b>15951</b>	<b>18142</b>	<b>16277</b>	<b>18468</b>

\*indicates institutions using Qwidgets.

NB: Totals differ because of the way the QuestionPoint software counts calls transferred between librarians.

## Appendix C: AskAway Progress Report Excerpt

### AskAway Post-Secondary Virtual Reference Service

Develop and coordinate the provincial post-secondary collaborative virtual reference service AskAway.

20 libraries placed Qwidgets on their websites, resulting in a 140% overall increase in traffic

Participating libraries endorsed a cost-sharing model developed by the AskAway Advisory Committee, ensuring AskAway sustainability for the 2009/2010 fiscal

Developed the AskAway Adds Value Toolkit for library administrators to use in budget consultations

Co-chaired joint public/post-secondary Software Selection Committee which oversaw an RFP process for virtual reference software selection

Signed license agreement with OCLC QuestionPoint to provide virtual reference software for the provincial virtual reference service, in cooperation with Public Library AskAway

Developed and distributed AskAway Marketing Survey, in partnership with public library AskAway

Supervised a SLAIS professional experience student who developed recommendations for updating both post-secondary and public library training materials

Released quarterly AskAway Updates

Coordinated printing and delivery of AskAway marketing materials to partner libraries

Hired two new AskAway auxiliary staff, renewed contracts for two other auxiliaries

Provided in-person and virtual training for new service providers and local AskAway administrators

## Appendix D Promotion of BCcampus Shared Services Support

Promotion of the BCcampus Shared Services support for AskAway:

- Users/Learners question form screen; this page received over 9,000 hits in 2009  
<http://www.questionpoint.org/crs/servlet/org.oclc.home.TFSRedirect?virtcategory=12362>
- AskAway Staff Portal; used daily by over 180 library staff at 28 post-secondary institutions  
<http://www.eln.bc.ca/askaway>
- AskAway About Page (Staff Portal)  
<http://www.eln.bc.ca/askaway/index.php?page=about>
- BC ELN AskAway Project Overview page  
<http://www.eln.bc.ca/view.php?id=1324>
- BC ELN Innovation & Success Reports 2008 and 2009  
<http://www.eln.bc.ca/view.php?id=1793>
- BC ELN biannual Progress Reports  
<http://www.eln.bc.ca/view.php?id=128>
- BC ELN's quarterly newsletter The BC ELN Connect  
<http://www.eln.bc.ca/view.php?id=75>

**Funding support for AskAway is provided by**



