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## Chat Services and COVID-19: Trends in Ask a Librarian

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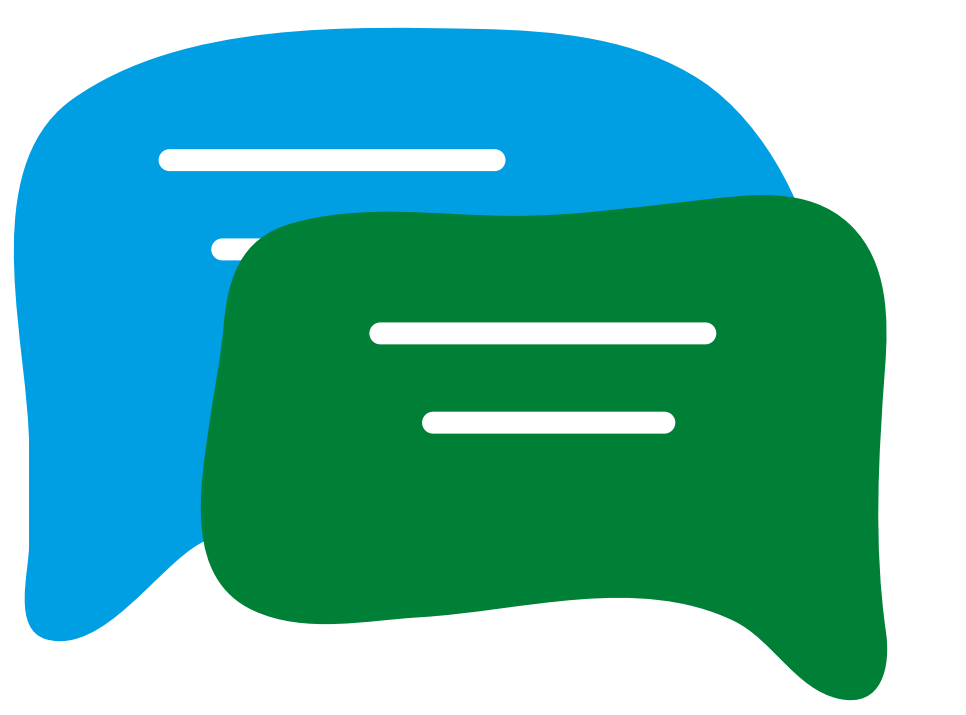
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# Chat Services and COVID19: Trends in Ask a Librarian



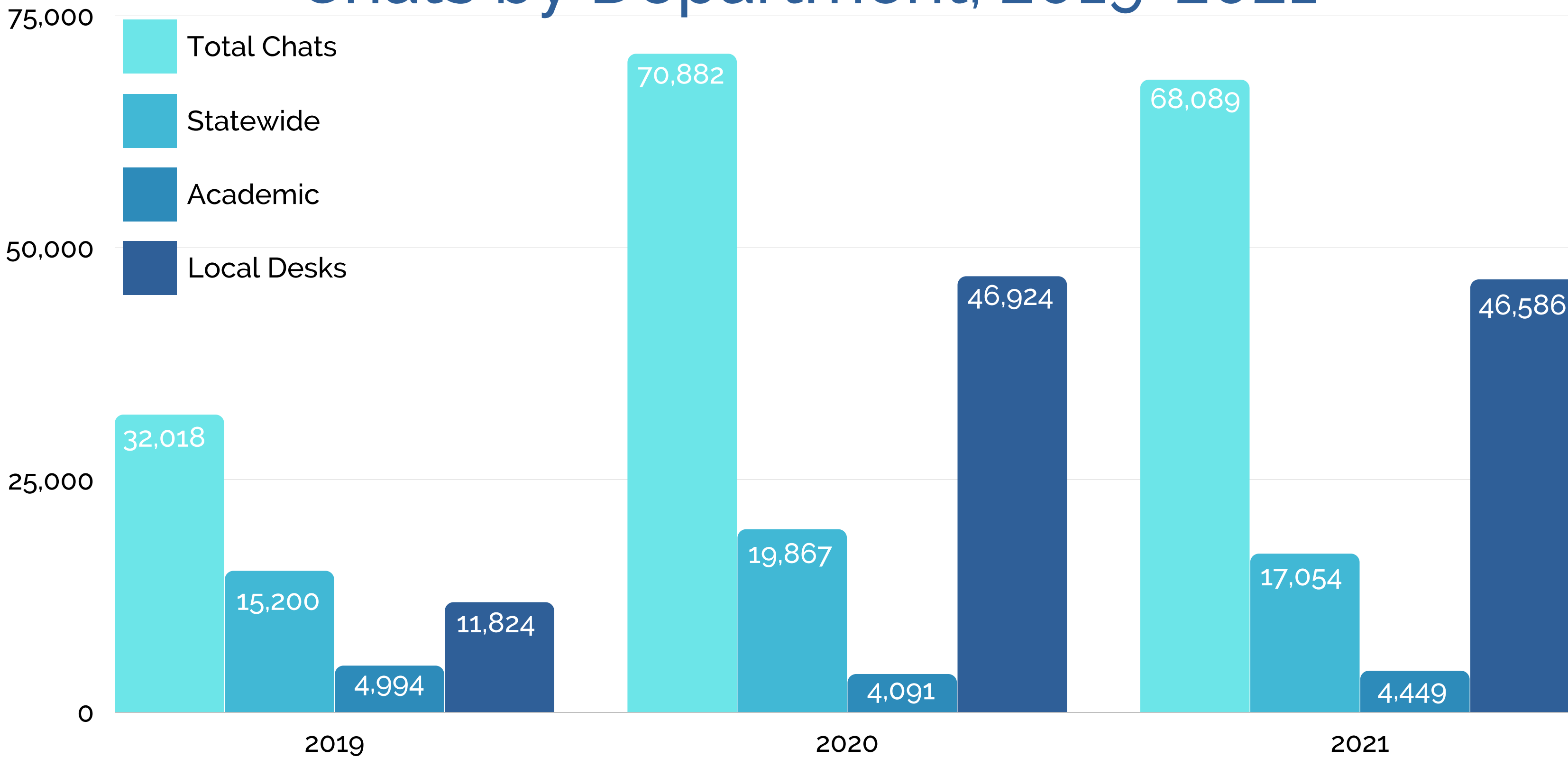
## Background

As a result of COVID-19, libraries across Florida temporarily closed and/or adapted their services. Staff responded quickly to pandemic needs, and communication with library patrons was key. While libraries across Florida were closed to the public, the Ask a Librarian chat service served as a vital tool for public and academic library patrons to reach library staff and have questions answered. Members of the AAL Quality Assurance Workgroup, consisting of librarians who read chat transcripts to recognize exemplary chat service, analyzed Ask a Librarian activity during the period of March 2019-December 2021 (before, during, and 'after' COVID-19) to identify emerging trends. This will allow libraries to better adapt in the face of future mass closure events.

## Trends in Usage

In analyzing the total number of chats answered each year, overall chats increased 121.38% from 2019 to 2020. The number of chats slightly decreased 3.94%, in 2021, but the number of total chats remained 112.66% higher in 2021 compared to 2019.

### Chats by Department, 2019-2021



### Patron Feedback

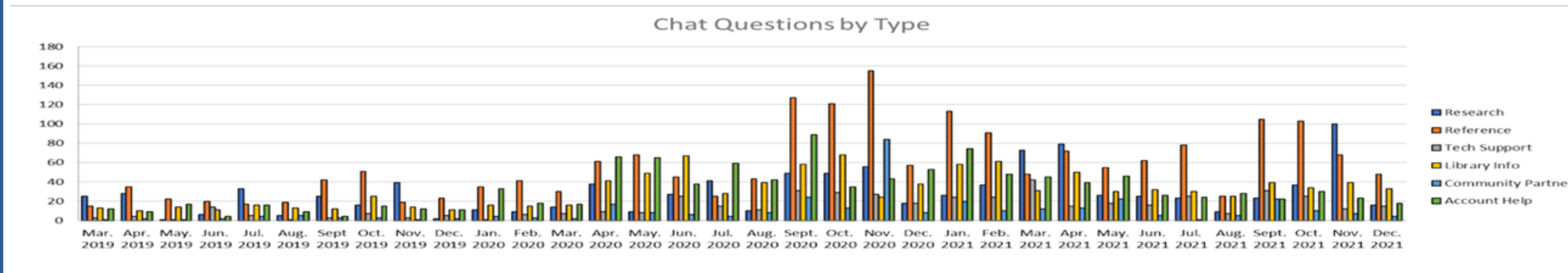
From the Ask a Librarian exit survey, August 25-September 26, 2020

"It's very helpful to have librarians to help find articles since we can't go to campus and get help from them in person. I wouldn't have been able to find the articles for my group project otherwise."

"So thankful to have the option to chat with a librarian on a Saturday while working on a paper. I am so appreciative of the help you guys give!"

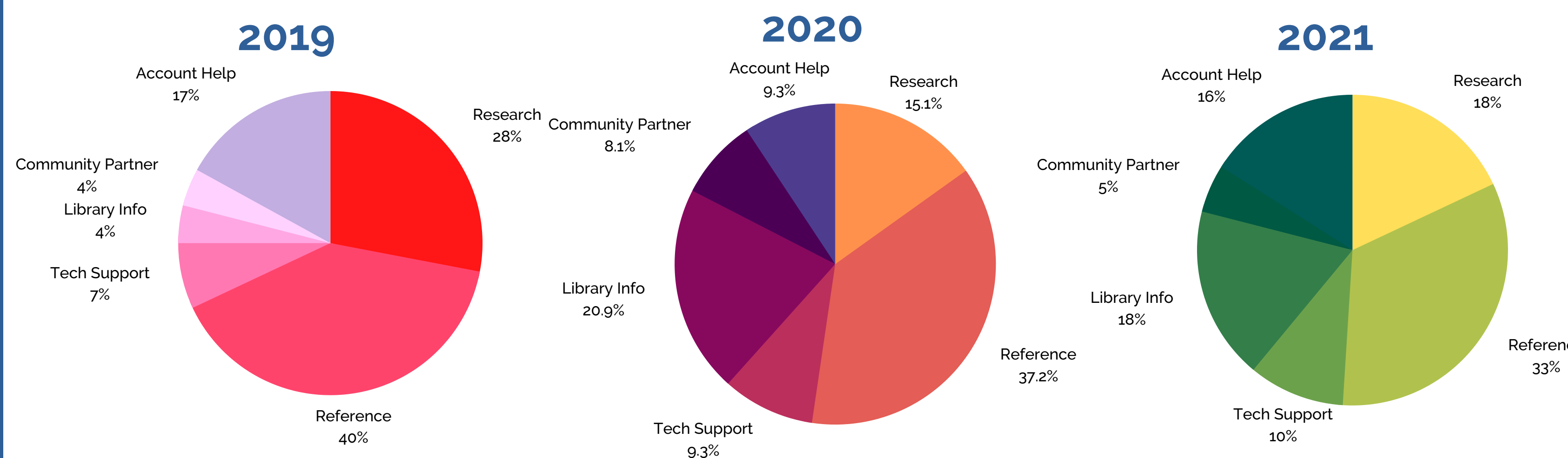
"Wow!!! I really appreciated this service. I was stuck and really needed help right at that moment and in popped a wonderful librarian to help me. Thank you for making this service available to students and faculty. I really appreciate it."

## Trends in Questions



To track changes in the types of questions asked, over 5,000 chats were analyzed on the second Wednesday of each month from March 2019 through December 2021. This allowed for tracking of questions before and during the pandemic. The graph above shows the number of chat questions in each category by month during that time period. In order to calculate the types of questions asked, each chat transaction was categorized into the following categories:

- Research:** a detailed search likely using more than one e-resource
- Tech Support:** how to use a technology resource
- Library Info:** information about the physical library (hours, directions, etc.)
- Community Partner:** community or campus resources outside the library
- Account Help:** logging in, PIN/password, renewals, fines

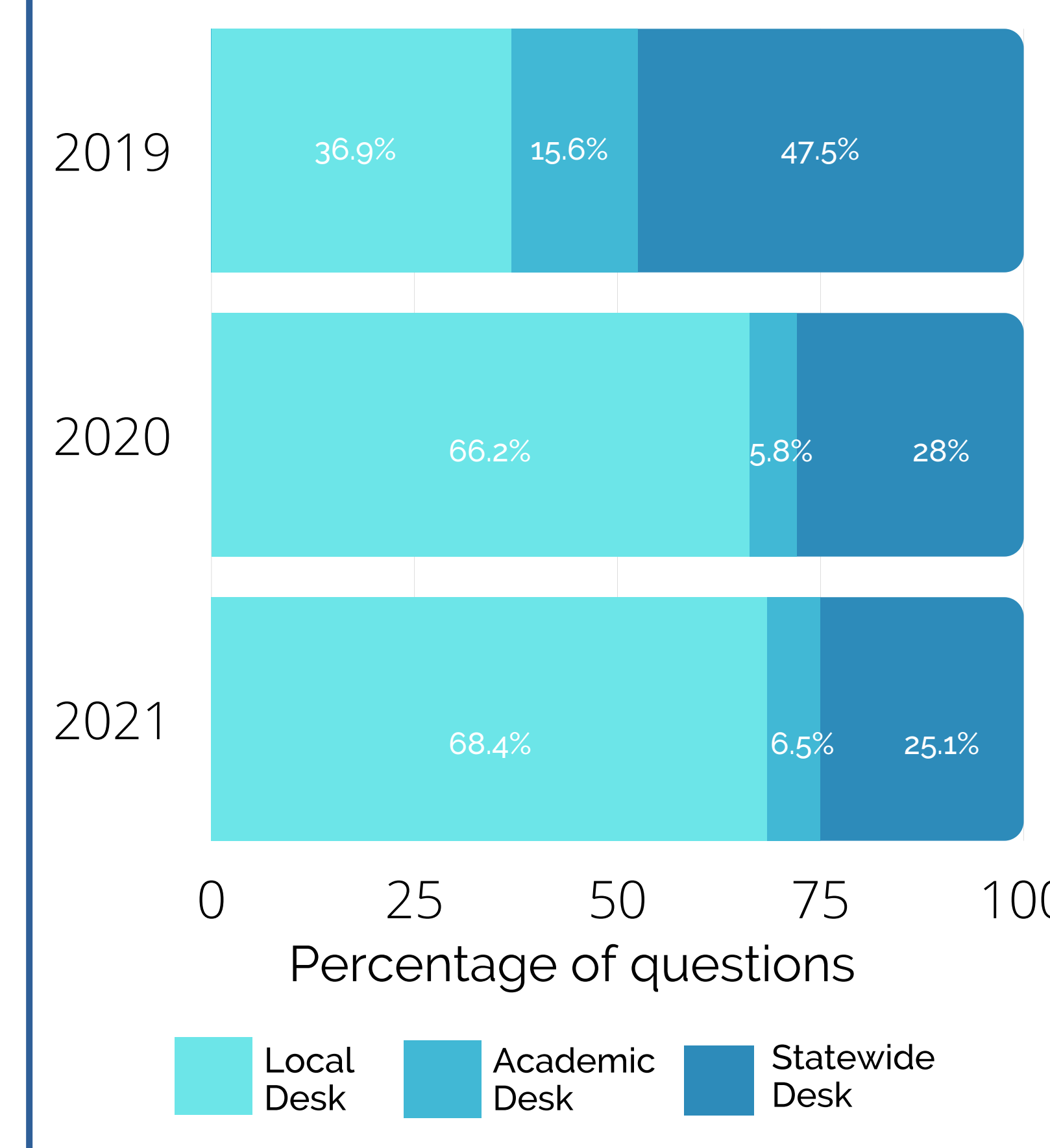


### Takeaways

- Reference questions dominate most months
- Account help questions increased in 2020 and continued to trend upward in 2021. Patrons found the service during shutdowns and continued to use it afterward
- Account help questions from April 2020 comprised of questions about new & expired accounts, login help, overdue items
- Library Info questions from April 2020-Feb 2021 primarily were: is the library open? what are the hours? can I print? are study rooms available?

## Trends in Staffing

### Annual Chats by Desk Type, 2019-2021



Looking at annual statistics from 2019 through 2021 (left) provides some insight into how libraries have changed how they staff the Ask a Librarian desk. In 2019, nearly 37% of patron chats were answered on the library's local desk. Most libraries do not have a dedicated virtual reference staff, thus local desk hours are usually limited. You can see the shift made in 2020, as local desk questions nearly doubled due to the pandemic. With many libraries closed to patrons, the local desk became a simple way to serve patrons with limited turnaround time. While not surprising, the most interesting insight comes from the questions answered in 2021. One would think that library reopenings would affect local desk hours, but the questions answered at local desks actually increased slightly from 66% to 68%.

**"Ask a Librarian was wonderful during the COVID lockdown and continues to be wonderful."**

**"We used AAL heavily during the COVID closure. It became the main form of communication with our patrons during that time."**

- Ask a Librarian Site Admin Survey Respondents

To gain additional insight into staffing changes, 28 Ask a Librarian site administrators responded to a survey regarding experiences serving patrons at their libraries since the start of the pandemic in March of 2020. Several outcomes emerged from these survey results:

- Of the responding libraries, 75% reported COVID closures of 1-6 months. While physical services ceased, demand did not. Ask a Librarian provided an avenue of service for libraries that had little or no staff presence during closures. As one respondent noted, "Ask A Librarian became a lifeline to our patrons during the shutdown, and has continued to be an important reference tool since we have reopened".
- 39.3% of responding libraries reported using Ask a Librarian more since returning from COVID-19 closures in early 2020
- Pre-COVID, only 18.5% of responding libraries covered their local Ask a Librarian desk the same hours the library was open in-person. Today, 33.3% of responding libraries are staffing their local desks during operating hours. Additionally, 11.1% of responding libraries reported increasing hours on the local desk, though not to the same extent as their in-person hours.

## Summary

Data from Ask a Librarian chats shows a variety of trends resulting from the pandemic. Overall, the use of Ask a Librarian virtual reference increased in 2020 as the pandemic began. While use decreased slightly in 2021, today it remains higher than pre-pandemic use. Reference questions were (and remain) the dominant type of question for each year studied. However, questions regarding account help, technical support, and library information have skyrocketed. The pandemic precipitated the rise of the local desk. Many libraries increased staffing at the local desk and as a result fielded many more questions from patrons at their institutions. All in all, the Ask a Librarian chat service has shown itself as a vital way to reach library patrons when physical access is not possible.

## Future Considerations

- Will higher usage of virtual chat continue, even as the pandemic wanes?
- Is local desk staffing sustainable as in-person usage increases and staff are pulled back to the physical library space?
- As non-research questions rise, should non-reference staff work Ask a Librarian?
- Is there a potential for libraries to hire virtual reference staff?
- Could virtual reference hires working remotely be a solution for libraries without a pool of local MLIS graduates?
- How can libraries better address the needs of homebound patrons proactively?
- How can the Ask a Librarian service adapt to meet patron needs as trends change?

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