



Reference Universe

Profile in Reference Service

*“The desire to bring resources together in one place gave rise to the library’s reference portal. **Reference Universe** is the gateway to reference books so we made it front and center on the portal page.”*

Mary Snyder
Instructional Services
Librarian/Coordinator of
Reference and Assessment



Name of Library: Lycoming College

Name of College: Snowden Library

Location: Williamsport, Pennsylvania

Population Served: 1,450 students; 85 full-time professors

Paratext Product: Reference Universe

About Lycoming College

Lycoming is a private, four-year, liberal arts college offering over 700 courses in 34 majors. The 35-acre campus sits less than two miles from the Susquehanna River, in the center of Williamsport, Pa. Founded in 1812, it is one of the fifty oldest colleges in the United States. Lycoming serves undergraduates exclusively and confers only baccalaureate degrees.

The Snowden Library has a collection of close to 188,000 books and access to over 20,000 print and electronic periodical titles through subscriptions, aggregators, and publisher packages. Although Lycoming is a small college, the library has a strong instruction program with 150 formal instruction sessions conducted per year.

Reference Challenge

Snowden Library has three primary reference librarians. Their reference collection is heavily vested in print materials rather than specialized electronic resources. Mary Snyder, Instructional Services Librarian and Coordinator of Reference and Assessment, acknowledges that keeping up with what’s in the collection isn’t easy.

“Librarians and students look at reference resources differently,” said Mary. “As librarians, we tend to think about print and electronic resources together whereas students think about these resources separately. This can make it difficult to get students to utilize the print reference collection.”

Helping students understand the full range of resources available to them through the library is one of the primary goals of the active library instruction program. In these sessions reference librarians stress the importance of starting research at the library. But Mary admits that getting students to come to the reference desk poses an ongoing challenge.

The Paratext Solution

With a collection that is primarily print, librarians at Lycoming College need a way to engage students and show them the value of what’s in the print collection. “In a Google™ world, students want to start their research with an online search,” said Mary. “They don’t want to start with print. *Reference Universe* bridges the gap and lets students start their search online, where they are most comfortable.”

To make it easy for students to see the scope of library resources available to them, the library has designed a Reference Portal with *Reference Universe* prominently featured on the portal page. “The desire to bring resources together in one place gave rise to the library’s reference portal. *Reference Universe* is the gateway to reference books so we made it front and center on the portal page.”

According to Mary, the Reference Portal is one of the library’s most-viewed web pages. Librarians show the portal in their library instruction classes and any time they are pointing to the reference collection. Students also find the portal page themselves from the library’s home page.

Why Libraries Need Reference Universe

Mary sees *Reference Universe* as the key to unlocking their print collection. “We want people to use what we have. We spend all this money to have these great resources but up until now we haven’t had an effective tool to access the information. If we’re spending money on it, we want it to be used.”

In talking with the other Lycoming reference librarians, Mary identified several other reasons why small colleges like Lycoming benefit from *Reference Universe*.

- **Demonstrating an interdisciplinary approach.** “The concept of taking an interdisciplinary approach to a topic can be difficult for undergraduates to grasp. With *Reference Universe*, you can type in a topic like Domestic Violence and retrieve results in a variety of specialized encyclopedias. *Reference Universe* lets us show how many different aspects can feed into one topic to enrich the research.”
- **Guiding students to higher quality research.** “Students are quick to use Google to see what’s out there. But the best way to get started on a research topic is to get a scholarly overview of a topic. This is what reference books do the best and the Internet does the worst. *Reference Universe* helps guide students in the direction we want them to go.”
- **Simplifying research for undergraduates.** When students are beginning their research on a topic, the reference librarians start them off by showing them *Reference Universe*. The students can immediately see what print resources are available to them with very little time investment on their part. “The ability to automatically limit searches to just our library makes all the difference when you’re dealing with undergraduates. Since we’re a small college library, we’re limited in what we can buy. If students click on a bunch of things we don’t own it’s frustrating for them.”

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- **Supporting the curriculum.** FZe flip side of limiting results to only those things the library owns is the ability for librarians to search a topic and limit to only those items the library doesn’t own. In this way, Mary said, the library can use *Reference Universe* as a collection development tool to ensure they have the best reference books available to support additions and changes in the curriculum. “If a faculty member plans to add a new topic to the curriculum, we can search *Reference Universe* to see what the standard works are in that area and make sure we own them.”

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What’s Next for Lycoming

The goal for Snowden Library is to “get library resources on students’ radar,” said Mary. She is excited about using new technology to do this. For example, she is encouraging students and faculty to set up iGoogle pages to create their own web home pages populated with the information they use most often. She also has created two Google Gadgets, one to search the Snowden catalog and the other to search *Reference Universe*. She plans to experiment further with this to increase visibility of the library’s resources and encourage students to search *Reference Universe* from their own iGoogle home pages.

“Google is comfortable and familiar for students. iGoogle lets us put our library resources where they are most likely to be used. We need to do everything we can to make the technology work for us.”

About *Reference Universe*

Reference Universe is a unique service providing the only cumulative index to reference works in existence.

Paratext began compilation of the *Reference Universe* database in 2003 and now works with over 250 imprints, spanning more than 12,000 reference works in English. New content is added each quarter, with the goal of providing complete coverage of all reviewed reference works published from 1985-forward.

Reference Universe works interactively with each library's OPAC, allowing staff and patrons to query the detailed indexes and article titles in specialized encyclopedias, handbooks and compendia which are matched against each library's holdings.

The result is an exhaustive discovery tool, maximizing every library's electronic and printed reference collection and guiding patrons more precisely to authoritative works to begin or expand research.

Additional information can be found at www.paratext.com.

"By starting our search with Reference Universe we can immediately see if we have resources to help the student. This is an enormous time-saver for our librarians as well as for students."

