Chat Reference: To Schedule or Not to Schedule?

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Introduction
Despite the wide acceptance of chat reference in academic libraries, there is no agreed-upon best practice for scheduling chat coverage. Some libraries opt to schedule chat like reference desk coverage, with librarians covering specific timeslots. Others, including JMU, opt to make librarians collectively responsible for incoming queries, with librarians claiming chat questions as their availability allows.

In recent years, JMU’s librarians have researched and explored both systems and have learned lessons about each that other libraries should consider.

Unscheduled System
Pros:
• Less time blocked off on calendars
• No librarians specifically responsible for busiest chat times
• Wider subject coverage on average
• Easier to handle simultaneous chats

Cons:
• Low staffing levels during meetings
• Some librarians answer many more chats than others
• Posted hours may not match available hours
• Diffusion of responsibility

Scheduled System
Pros:
• No confusion about who should answer chat questions and when
• Each librarian spends less total time monitoring chat
• Assured coverage during posted hours

Cons:
• Inflexible scheduling blocks off time on already busy calendars
• Some librarians could be assigned much busier chat days than others
• Hard to handle simultaneous chats

Conclusion
Each system has potential pros and cons. Libraries must individually consider these to decide on the best system based on schedules, chat usage and responder buy-in and input (see above). In JMU’s case, the data suggest there is cause to re-explore a more structured system.