

Facilitating Research Consultations Using Cloud Services: Experiences, Preferences, and Best Practices

Rebecca Zuege Kuglitsch,
Natalia Tingle, and
Alexander Watkins

ABSTRACT

The increasing complexity of the information ecosystem means that research consultations are increasingly important to meeting library users' needs. Yet librarians struggle to balance escalating demands on their time. How can we embrace this expanded role and maintain accessibility to users while balancing competing demands on our time? One tool that allows us to better navigate this balance is Google Appointment Calendar, part of Google Apps for Education. It makes it easier than ever for students to book a consultation with a librarian, while at the same time allowing the librarian to better control their schedule. Our experience suggests that both students and librarians felt it was a useful, efficient system.

INTRODUCTION

The growing complexity of the information ecosystem means that research consultations are increasingly important to meeting library users' needs. Although reference interactions in academic libraries have declined overall, in-depth research consultations have not followed that trend.¹ These research consultations represent an increasingly large proportion of academic librarians' reference interactions, and offer important opportunities to follow up on information literacy instruction, support student academic success, and relieve library anxiety. The library literature has demonstrated a need for and appreciation of these services.² Moreover, students value face to face consultations because they provide an opportunity to talk through complex problems and questions while providing affective benefits such as relationship building and reassurance.³ It is evident that students seek out and value these services. But even as these services become increasingly important, librarians struggle to balance escalating demands on their time. How can we embrace this expanded role and maintain accessibility to users while managing competing priorities? We found little guidance in the literature to identify the most efficient technological tools to offer these services to undergraduates, so we began to explore options.

One tool that allows us to better navigate this shifting landscape is Google Appointment Calendar, part of Google Apps for Education. It makes it easier for students to book a consultation with a librarian, while at the same time allowing the librarian to better control their schedule;

Rebecca Zuege Kuglitsch (rebecca.kuglitsch@colorado.edu) is Head, Gemmill Library of Engineering, Mathematics & Physics, University of Colorado Boulder. **Natalia Tingle** (natalia.tingle@colorado.edu) is Business Collections & Reference Librarian, University of Colorado Boulder. **Alexander Watkins** (alexander.watkins@colorado.edu) is Art & Architecture Librarian, University of Colorado Boulder.



consequently, it is being adopted by many librarians at the University of Colorado Boulder. There are several other options available for librarians interested in calendar applications, such as YouCanBook.me.⁴

However, on campuses using Google Apps for Education, it may be easier to use a tool students are already familiar with and commonly use as part of their daily academic routines. Moreover, the integration with Apps for Education solves some of the problems Hess noted in the public version of Google Calendar Appointments (which is also no longer available), such as appointments booked without identifying information, and the extra step of logging in just for an appointment. Because students are often already logged in due to using Google Apps for word processing, group work, and more, there is no extra step to log in for a simple appointment.⁵

Our exploration of this tool suggests that it is helpful to librarians, but that it can also be of benefit to students, too. Research has proposed that students may hesitate to ask questions due to library anxiety. Would scheduling an appointment using a calendaring system be less intimidating than emailing a librarian directly, for example? We set out apply this technology in an environment of changing student preferences and expectations, explore how students received it, and establish effective practices for using it in an academic setting. Since we are liaisons to science, social science, and humanities subject areas, we were able to work with a wide spread of undergraduate students in our exploration to see what might be most effective for us, and also for students from a variety of backgrounds.

Why Google Calendar

We selected appointment booking via Google Calendar because of its ease of use and because the University of Colorado Boulder has Google Apps for Education. This means that every student will have a Google ID and the option of using Google Calendar as part of their normal routine. In December 2012, Google discontinued appointment calendars for general users, and limited claimable appointment slots to Google Apps for Education. For institutions which do not subscribe, it may be worth investigating third-party Google Calendar apps, some of which are free or freemium, such as Calendly (<https://calendly.com/>), or SpringShare's similar subscription service, LibCal (<https://www.springshare.com/libcal/>).

Setting up Google Calendar

One of the benefits of Google Calendar is its ease of use. Starting to set up the calendar for appointment slots is as simple as creating a new Google Calendar event and selecting appointment slots as the type of event. Next, you can give your appointment slots a name that correspond with the language your institution uses for research consultations, and schedule them for the desired length of time. It is possible to schedule blocks of appointments that Google will automatically break into shorter appointments of predetermined amounts of time. The authors created appointments lasting 30 minutes, 60 minutes, or a mix of both, depending on the expectations of our disciplines. It is also possible to create several simultaneous appointment slots, if you would like to accommodate small groups. As well as indicating time, each appointment also has a space to indicate location, particularly useful for librarians who might work in several branches or combine office hours in academic buildings with in-library office consultations. Once the events are named and saved, the calendar can be shared.

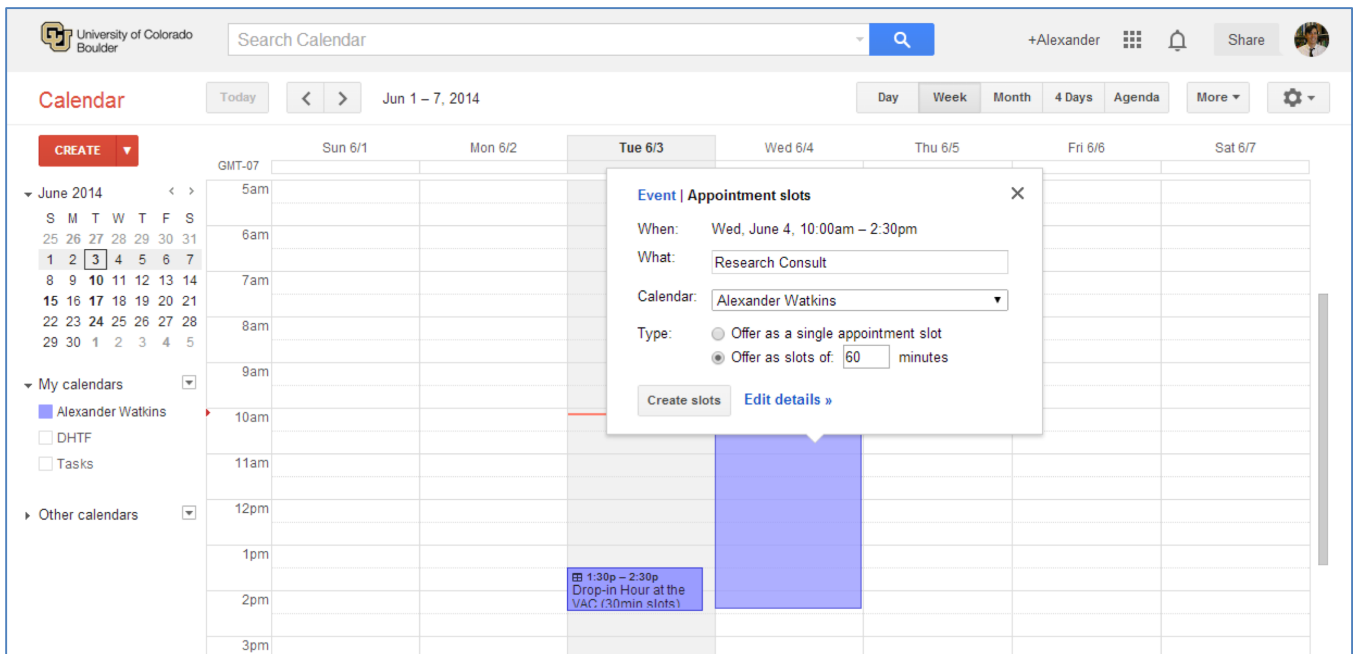


Figure 1. Create a new event, selecting ‘Appointment slots’.

Appointment calendars are given a unique shareable URL to direct users to available appointments; however, these URLs are necessarily long and complicated, so we recommend using a link shortener. To obtain the very long URL for an appointment calendar, click on ‘edit details’ in an appointment event. From there, it is possible to copy the link and use a link shortener to make a brief, understandable link.

How does this work? [Learn more about appointment slots](#) [Hide instructions](#)

<p>1. Create appointment slots</p> <p>Pick a block of time you want to offer to others, and choose how many slots to split it up into; don't worry, you can always change it later.</p>	<p>2. Share your appointment page</p> <p>This is the link to your public appointment page. Anyone who has this link can book an appointment slot.</p>	<p>3. Guests book appointment slots</p> <p>Booked appointment slots appear right on your calendar as regular events.</p>
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Create appointment slots on calendar: Alexander Watkins

This calendar's appointment page: <https://www.google.com/calendar/selfsched?sstoken=UVBKR0xfeDFBZ1qtGRIZmF1bHR8YWQ0ZDI5ZDc4ODdmNjY3MWNmMDIxYjAzNTZhYjI4MDc>

Figure 2. Obtain the shareable link

When a student uses the link to make an appointment, both the librarian and the student receive an email with the student’s login name, email, appointment time, and other details. The slot immediately appears as taken on the calendar, so it is no longer available for other students, reducing confusion and double booking. Receiving the student’s email allows the librarian to initiate the reference interview and establish expectations.



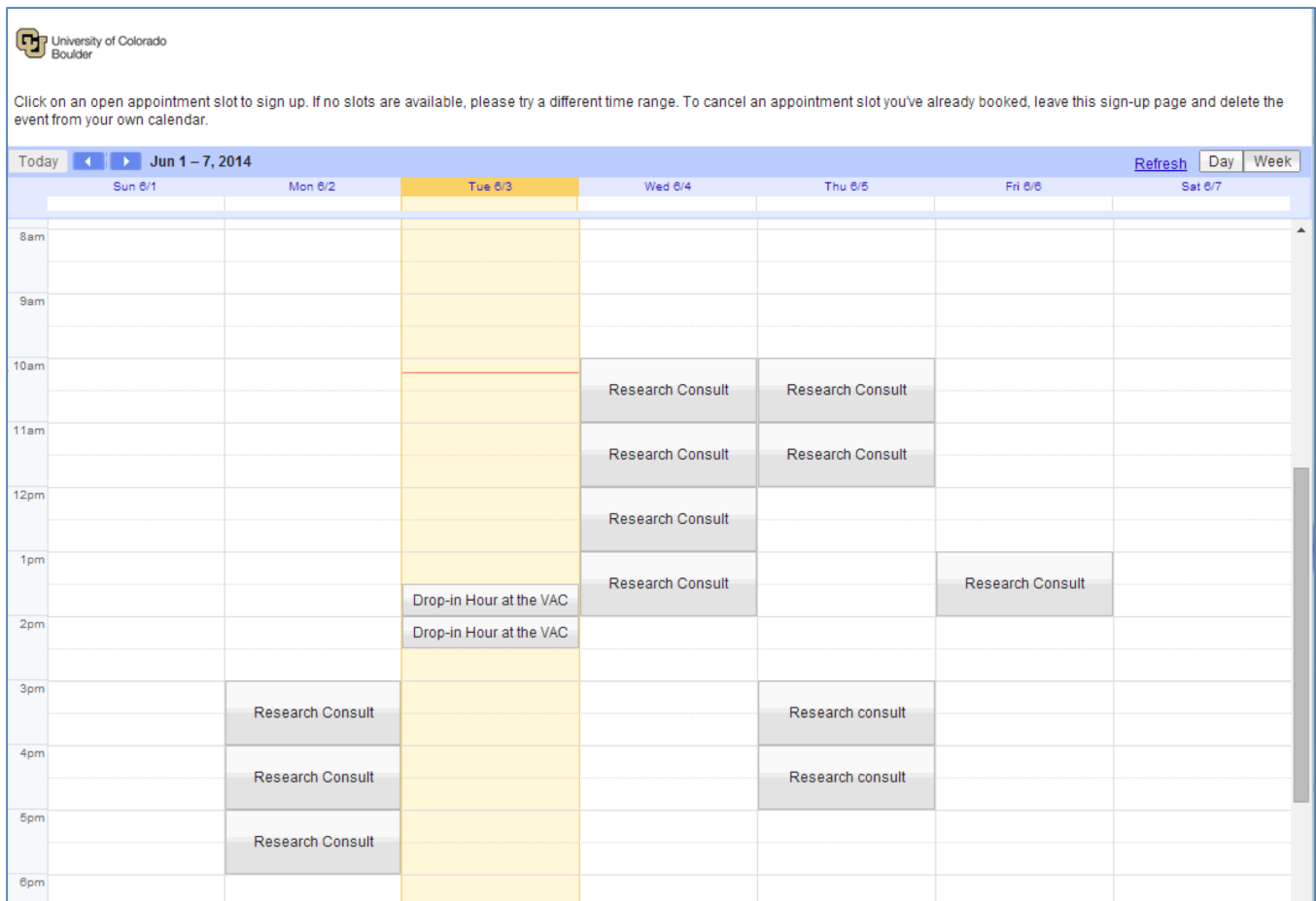


Figure 3. Google calendar showing a variety of available appointments.

Student Impressions

We received positive feedback about the appointment calendars from students. Students commented:

- “I like the ability to see all of the possible openings,”
- “I already bookmarked that bit.ly, so you’ll probably hear from me” (which we did, shortly thereafter).
- “I like to be able to ‘schedule’ a consultation, not request one. It seems more useful and immediate.”

We kept track of how many students who made calendar appointments over two semesters kept them, and sent a short, informal survey to students who made appointments. No students who made a calendar appointment failed to attend their consultation. Though our survey does not permit large-scale generalizations due to a very low response rate (4) and a small sample size (15), all of the students who responded and used the calendar found the experience of booking an appointment that way to be easy, convenient, and unthreatening. Everyone who used the calendar indicated that they would prefer to use it again, and about half of the respondents who set up their appointments via email told us that they would prefer to book a consultation through

an appointment calendar in the future. Our anecdotal evidence in succeeding semesters aligns with this perception.

We found that using appointment calendars can have many benefits for students:

- They can reduce student anxiety from having to compose and send an email.
- Booking appointments can take less of their time. They book immediately without back and forth emailing. This also means there's no time to rethink the appointment and either never send the email or back out later.
- The appointment is placed on their calendar, meaning they automatically have a built-in reminder and don't need to search through their email to find the date and time of their appointment.
- Since the appointment calendars eliminate back and forth scheduling and reduce email fatigue, students may be more willing to use email to discuss their topic and/or question with the librarian.

Librarian Impressions

Our experience has been equally positive. We found that using the calendars radically streamlines the typical back and forth email exchanges for setting appointments. We emailed each student to confirm the appointment, but this single email is still a significant reduction of claim on the librarian's attention from a minimum of three emails to schedule an appointment (which often realistically becomes five or more when negotiating a time) to two. Additionally, librarians can put appointment slots in between meetings and other times when they might only have a spare hour, which are often too tedious to list when emailing. Using appointment calendars lets librarians efficiently use their time even when it is fragmented.

As well as facilitating efficient use of small amounts of time, appointment calendars also allow librarians to gently create boundaries. Rather than having to deny appointments requested for late nights or weekends, students are guided to viable times. While the use of Google Calendar is entirely voluntary at the University of Colorado Boulder we presented the tool at several reference librarian meetings with success and several other librarians have happily adopted the tool. One librarian who adopted the tool said: "Sending a student a calendar that they can use to request a meeting eliminates the twelve messages back and forth on when to schedule a meeting. I also like that it puts the meeting on both our calendars, reducing the number of no-shows."

BEST PRACTICES

Our experiences and verbal feedback from students and librarians provided a foundation to develop best practices to minimize both librarian and student confusion. For students, confusion often centered around accessing the calendar, identifying which time slots were available, and identifying acceptable locations for appointments. The following best practices can help solve these difficulties.

Use a link shortener and a consistent naming convention so the links are similar for multiple librarians. Using a link shortener makes it easy for students to jot down the calendar URL, either to manually enter into a browser later or to quickly get to the link and bookmark it. This makes it easy for students to file the link and return to it at point of need. Using a consistent naming

convention makes it intuitive for students to transfer the appointment method over to other librarians' cases for future research needs.

If your link shortener is case-sensitive, create capitalized and lowercase versions of the link. Many link shorteners are case-sensitive, unlike most URLs, which can confuse students and lead to frustration when they try to access a link later. While this could be solved to some extent by using only lowercase letters for the shortened link, that solution can create a cumbersome and difficult to read short URL. Simply creating two forms of the link efficiently solves this.

Develop a naming convention so available appointment slots are obvious. We found that when naming time slots simply "Consultation" students sometimes assumed that all appointments were booked when, in fact, every appointment was open. Using a term like "Available consultation" made it clear to students that the appointments were not already booked. Google Calendar automatically makes booked appointments unavailable, eliminating the opposite frustration.

Carefully consider the location in the bookable appointment form. Google Calendar allows librarians to enter or leave empty the location. If the field is left empty, users can specify a location, and students often filled in a location when none was indicated. If a librarian is not mobile, or is available in certain places only at certain times, it is key to identify a location. For example, in our study, one librarian held weekly office hours in two academic buildings; it was particularly important to identify which times the librarian was available in the library versus the academic buildings. On the other hand, it may also make sense not to designate a location. Another of the authors, serving a population that used the main library, one branch library, and research area of the campus with no onsite library services, chose not to enter any location in order to accommodate the extremely dispersed population. Users frequently indicated in which location they would be willing to meet, an option the librarian wanted to support in order to underscore the availability of services wherever users were located on campus.

Schedule two weeks of availability. We found that students could almost always find a time that worked for them with two weeks of available appointments. Moreover, other than recurring office hours, it was difficult for librarians to predict their schedule further into the future than a few weeks.

Librarian concerns centered around keeping calendars synchronized, providing enough lead time for users to book appointments, and publicizing the service. We found several best practices that eased these concerns.

Designate a day each week to update hours and clear conflicts on the calendar. If Google Calendar is not the primary calendaring software for the library, it can be challenging to synchronize calendars. Google Calendar sends a calendar invitation to the librarian when an appointment is claimed, which they can accept on their primary calendaring system, but conflicts that arise on the primary calendaring system are not automatically sent to Google Calendar. By selecting a day and habitually updating the Google Calendar and quickly checking for conflicts that have arisen with unclaimed slots, librarians can avoid forgetting to add slots or remove those that conflict with other late-arising obligations.

Advertise the link on the library web site, give out the calendar link during class sessions and give it to professors to embed in course management systems. While appointment calendars still

benefit librarian workflows without advertising, students need easy access to the calendar. For maximum user uptake, it is important to put the calendar link anywhere a librarian's contact information can be found. We found it helpful to promote the link in classes, and that it was particularly effective when professors agreed to place the link in the class web site. This positions library research assistance next to assignments when they are given out and drafts when they are returned--hopefully reminding students that the library is available for assistance at moments in which they are most likely to seek it.

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Our experiences support the idea that online appointment calendars are appreciated by students, streamline work for librarians, and are easily adopted by both parties. More use of this technology, whether via Google Apps for Education or another service, can be mutually beneficial to librarians and students. Students using the calendar indicated that it was not more intimidating than emailing a librarian, and by removing the waiting period for a response, a calendar can prevent student distraction or students persuading themselves that they actually do not need help in the interim. By providing a calendar where students can quickly and simply book an appointment with a librarian for research assistance, librarians can support students seeking assistance, and thus ultimately bolster student success and increase the library's relevance.

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