

## **A Review of Reference Services at a Michigan Community College Library**

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### **Abstract**

An academic library at a community college in Michigan was observed to evaluate how effective its reference services are. This writer reviewed the library's facilities, reference service philosophy, reference service models, reference interview styles, staff approachability, reference collection, how the library evaluates its reference services, and the library's use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in providing reference services. This writer found that, while the library has relatively strong philosophies, its delivery of reference services is not always ideal. The location of the reference desk, an outdated reference collection, a lack of tiered reference service, and an overall lack of staff approachability seem to negatively impact this library's ability to provide effective reference service. Suggestions for changes and an analysis of the library's use of AI are provided.

## **A Review of Reference Services at a Michigan Community College Library**

Reference services vary as much as the libraries that provide them. Research institutions and academic libraries typically provide more intensive reference services than small, public libraries. Despite differences in delivery, all libraries can provide effective reference services to their users. This writer observed an academic library at a community college in Michigan to analyze the effectiveness of its reference services.

### **Facilities**

The reference desk is located in the college's Learning Commons building. The Learning Commons houses tutoring services on the first and second floors, and the library on the second and third floors. Combining the library with a learning center is a good design choice, as it "enables students to have more collaborative learning space" (Robinson et al., 2011, p. 61). Having a Learning Commons, as opposed to a standalone reference area and a separate study area, allows for skilled staff from various departments to provide different levels of information service to patrons (Kennedy, 2011). Having overlapping floors for the library and tutoring indicates how the two services are intertwined with one another. The shared floor allows students who may have been engaging with one service to access more resources, which can help them achieve greater academic success.

### **Reference Desk Location**

The physical reference desk is small, nondescript, and tucked into a corner. The desk looks very similar to the other tables on the floor that students use for reading and studying. There is a relatively small sign that says 'Research Help' hanging from the ceiling above the reference desk, but it is not immediately noticeable. The reference desk may appear similar to the desks and tables used by students as an attempt to lessen the barriers between librarians and

students, however it does not seem effective in encouraging students to approach the desk.

There are differing opinions on the most effective presentation of a reference desk. Some librarians believe the reference desk should serve as the main focus point of the library, where librarians can greet and interact with patrons. Students need to know where to find the librarians (Robinson et al., 2011), and this layout leaves no room for misunderstanding on where to find help. In a traditional reference setting, the desk is fixed in a “prominent position in the library so that users can easily find it, often near the entrance...” (Tyckoson, 2020, p. 17). This academic library does not fit these characteristics, and instead utilizes a more minimalist presentation.

Other librarians’ opinions are that traditional reference desks are “remains of the old service paradigm.” They are “physical and metaphorical barrier[s]” that are uninviting and do not encourage students to take an active role in their learning (Kennedy, 2011, p. 324). This library appears to have taken steps toward being more welcoming and encouraging collaboration amongst librarians and students by removing the barrier of a large, imposing reference desk. However, the desk’s small size and similarity to the generic study tables throughout the rest of the Learning Commons make it difficult for students to locate a knowledgeable librarian who can assist them with their research questions.

## **Reference Service Philosophy**

### **Professional Guidelines**

The library utilizes the Reference and User Services Association’s (RUSA) Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians to guide librarians’ interactions with students (Herm, 2024e). The professional competencies suggested by RUSA include accessing and utilizing relevant and diverse sources, collaborating with colleagues, developing expertise in various areas, promoting library services via advocacy and marketing, assessing and responding

to diverse needs, and effectively planning the development of future services (RUSA, 2017).

Librarians also adhere to RUSA's Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers, which includes the following elements: inclusion, approachability, engagement, searching, evaluation, and closure. Two elements in particular were of note when conducting this observation: approachability and closure.

Components of the approachability element include the librarian being "easily identified as a staff member" and "maintain[ing] visibility and encourag[ing] the person to interact with them" (RUSA, 2023, p. 4). All reference librarians wear identification badges, however these are not always easily viewable by students. Reference librarians are equipped with 'Librarian on Duty' signs to be placed on the reference desk by the librarian staffing the desk. These signs have the librarians' photos and names on them in an attempt to make them feel more accessible to students (Herm, 2024c). Unfortunately some librarians do not utilize this tool to encourage students to approach the desk, which may contribute to the decreasing amount of reference transactions at this library.

The closure element "confirms with the person that their current information need has been met" (RUSA, 2023, p. 7). Both librarians who were shadowed exhibited adequate closure in their reference interviews, but the first librarian in particular did an excellent job. She assisted a student with citing sources in an English paper. Upon closing the interaction, the librarian asked the student if there was anything else she could help him with, provided him with her contact information, and invited him to return to the library when further questions arose.

## **Library-Specific Philosophy**

### ***Teaching vs. Answering Questions***

Reference librarians adhere to four core tenets when providing reference services to

students. First, they teach students how to find the answers to their questions, rather than simply answering questions for students (Herm, 2024e). The reference librarians at this institution have faculty status, and are expected to teach courses as requested by professors. This philosophy aligns well with information literacy instruction, where the librarian teaches the patron “specific skills related to finding, evaluating, and using information” (Avery, 2020, pp. 72-73). Although less students are approaching the reference desk, the questions they pose to librarians are often much more complex than questions asked in the past, and require students to complete more comprehensive research to locate an accurate answer (Robinson et al., 2011).

The first librarian shadowed did a fair job of finding “teachable moments” (Avery, 2020, pp. 75-76) when interacting with students, rather than simply answering their questions. When approached by a student for help with citations, she inquired what he had already tried. However, rather than teaching the student about the various elements of a citation, the librarian took the student’s article to be cited and located and underlined all the information needed for him. This was a prime opportunity for the librarian to explain the different parts of a citation and guide the student in locating them in the article himself. This interaction likely would have been more impactful, and the student may have learned more, if the librarian showed him how to find the information, rather than doing it for him (Avery, 2020).

### ***Get Students Actively Involved***

Next, librarians encourage students to take an active role in their learning. The librarians are there to guide students through their information needs, not complete the work for them (Herm, 2024e). When the first librarian observed helped a student with citations, she encouraged him as he developed the new skill. She had the student write out the citation himself. However, as previously stated, she underlined all the needed information for the student, without

explaining why or how she located the information.

### ***Be Proactive***

Librarians are instructed to “unobtrusively” seek out students who may need help, rather than waiting for them to come to the desk. They are also encouraged to “be aware of students hesitant about asking for help” (Herm, 2024e). This core tenet was not observed during the library visit. Neither librarian shadowed left the desk to seek out students, and instead waited for students to approach. This was discouraging to see, as the desk can be a barrier between librarian and student (Kennedy, 2011), and the librarian needs to actively remove that barrier by moving from behind it and making an effort to connect with students (Robinson et al., 2011). The lead reference librarian advised that roving reference was utilized in the past, but has since been discontinued. Roving reference is a fantastic strategy to be proactive and encourage students to interact with reference librarians.

### ***Provide Information***

Finally, librarians are to simply provide information to students. This means that they are not to provide interpretation of that information, tutoring, or advice to students (Herm, 2024d). Librarians are encouraged to keep firm boundaries in this respect. It is incredibly beneficial that the library is part of the Learning Commons, shared with the tutoring center. Should a student need assistance outside of the librarian’s scope of practice, they can easily be referred to another service provider who may better meet their needs. This also encourages collaboration amongst library and tutoring staff.

## **Reference Service Models**

### **Tiered Reference Service**

A popular method of providing reference is through tiered reference service, where staff

at various skill levels answer questions that match their level of expertise (Tyckoson, 2020). The library observed does not utilize tiered reference. Instead, *all* reference questions, no matter how seemingly trivial, must be answered by reference librarians. Help Zone staff, whose duties include checking materials in and out and booking meeting spaces, are instructed to pass any reference questions to the reference desk, even if they know the answer and can easily help. Similarly, reference librarians are instructed not to assist students with tasks assigned to Help Zone staff. They are told to pass the students to the Help Zone workers, even if the Help Zone already has a line and the reference desk does not. This method of reference seems to put the patron at a disadvantage, because they are sometimes spending more time shuffling between the Help Zone and reference desk than the time it would take to get their questions answered by the original staff person they asked.

Tiered reference is more efficient and effective than pigeonholing certain staff to specific tasks because it “broadcast[s] the user’s question to a diversity of staff... [rather than] having only one mind and one set of skills” on the question (Kennedy, 2011, pp. 322-323). The theory is that, by having a paraprofessional or student worker interact with the patron first, that worker can filter out directional and basic library questions, freeing the reference librarians to dedicate time and resources to more complex questions (Tyckoson, 2020). A danger here is that untrained staff may believe they have the skills and knowledge to answer a question that they actually do not, and they may provide the patron with inaccurate information. Additionally, patrons may “simply accept the information provided at the first level of service” or not follow through with referrals made to reference librarians (Tyckoson, 2020, p. 17). However, since most reference questions are “routine and repetitive,” such as directional or technology help questions (Luo, 2020, p. 111), this is a valid method of providing reference. During the observation at this library, a majority of



the questions posed to the reference librarians were requesting directions, or requesting help with the printer, which could have easily been answered by the student workers on staff.

## **In-Person Services**

### ***Reference Desk***

The reference desk is staffed Monday through Saturday. The lead reference librarian stated that the college has seen a significant decrease in students utilizing the reference desk, and they have considered transitioning to on-call reference services. This may be a viable solution for this library. Another academic library transitioned to on-call reference services after finding that the amount of students using the reference desk was “too low to warrant the wall-to-wall coverage” they had been utilizing. It found that constantly staffing a reference desk was “no longer practical, cost effective, or user driven” This allowed the librarians to be available for students with reference questions, while having dedicated time for other tasks and projects (Kennedy, 2011, p. 323).

Both librarians who were observed worked on other tasks on their laptops while staffing the desk, which made them appear busy to students who may have had reference questions. The librarians stated that they bring other work to occupy them while on the desk, due to the decrease in reference transactions. However, this is likely causing a self-fulfilling prophecy and an endless cycle: there is a decrease in reference transactions, so the librarians bring work to occupy themselves, therefore appearing too busy for students to approach them, assuming the librarians are too busy to help them. Revisiting how and when the reference desk is staffed would likely benefit this library.

### ***Appointments***

Students with more intensive research needs are encouraged to make appointments with

reference librarians so they can receive private research help. Most appointments occur in-person, but they are also provided via phone and videoconferencing. The goal is for appointments to last about 30 minutes, but they may run longer (Herm, 2024a). Although individual research consultations can be time-consuming, the benefits outweigh the costs and can greatly increase a student's confidence in their ability to conduct independent research (Reiter & Cole, 2019).

### ***Roving/Off-Site***

Roving reference helps remove the physical barrier of the reference desk and gives the librarian a better sense of what is occurring on the library floor. It can also assist patrons who may be hesitant to approach a reference desk receive help by being approached by the librarian (Tyckoson, 2020). Roving reference was previously offered within this library, but the practice was discontinued. However, two librarians do provide off-site reference services on the west side of campus, which is far removed from the Learning Commons. They provide reference services and materials to students who may not typically be able to access them via the downtown campus. The lead librarian advised that she has considered bringing roving reference back to the Learning Commons. If roving reference is reinstated, several factors, including service hours, technology, staffing, and more will need to be considered to ensure it is effective (Bremer, 2017).

### **Services for Remote Users**

The library provides remote services via email, phone, and chat. It participates in the Michigan Virtual Reference Collaborative Research Help Now to provide patrons with 24/7 chat services (Herm, 2024b). The college's librarians staff the chat for two hours daily from Monday through Thursday. Outside of these hours, librarians from other colleges and universities in Michigan answer research questions. This chat service can be utilized by anyone, regardless of

their student status. Those needing more intensive research help are referred to their local library.

### **Reference Interview Style**

This library views the reference interview as “a dialogue that answers a basic question: what does the patron really need?” (Herm 2024d). Librarians are encouraged to build rapport with the patron, ask open-ended questions, and develop their own techniques. New librarians are provided opportunities to shadow more experienced librarians to help build their confidence in their skills. No strict guidelines are given to librarians, which allows them to develop their own style and technique.

### **Staff Approachability**

Reference librarians, especially those who stay behind a desk and do not engage in roving reference, need to take extra steps to encourage patrons to approach the reference desk. Librarians can be seen as “unapproachable,” which can lead to patrons feeling “intimidated” and choosing to not ask them questions (McClellan & Beggan, 2019, p. 261). Due to the lack of roving reference and the physical location of the reference desk, staff at this library do not appear very approachable. As previously mentioned, one tool reference librarians use to encourage students to ask for help are ‘Librarian on Duty’ placards.

The first librarian shadowed did not use the provided placard, making her seem unapproachable. The second librarian did use the placard, and students seemed much more apt to approach her. The first librarian appeared more closed-off in general, and seemed more interested in expressing her frustrations about the library with this writer, rather than assisting students. The second librarian observed seemed much more open, warm, and invested in assisting students.

There are multiple strategies librarians can use to increase their approachability, and the librarians at this library would benefit from adopting some of them. Librarians should make extra

effort to be relatable to their patrons. They are stereotypically seen as stuffy, reserved individuals, so making jokes as appropriate can humanize librarians. Additionally, learning patrons' names, and intentionally stopping what they are doing when patrons are nearby will encourage patrons to use and return to the reference desk (McClellan & Beggan, 2019).

## **Reference Collection**

### **Budget**

With dwindling budgets, it can be challenging deciding and justifying how much money to dedicate to the reference collection. A reference collection needs to “support the curriculum and the mission” of the organization. Library staff need to be fiscally responsible by providing resources within the budget that best support student needs (Robinson, 2011, p. 59). Many libraries have evolved from using print resources for reference to relying mainly on digital resources (Kessler, 2013). That is the case for this library, as most of its budget for reference materials goes to digital resources. A good way to wisely use a limited budget is to understand how the current reference collection is being used (Kessler, 2013).

### **Collection Development and Use**

The library's goal should be to have “a dynamic, browsable collection that is balanced, supports the current curriculum and the provision of reference services, and reflects changing use patterns” (Kessler, 2013, pp. 61-62). The reference collection at this library was not easily browsable because it had not been weeded in at least five years, according to one of the librarians observed. This library would benefit from conducting a usage study on their reference collection to help with weeding it. Multiple research studies have found that only six to ten percent of academic libraries have conducted usage studies on their reference collections (Davis, 2021; Kessler, 2013), so most have no idea how or when their collections are being used. One of the

librarians observed stated she would like to do an overhaul on the reference collection, as many items on the shelves are extremely outdated. A usage study would be a fantastic starting point to understand what materials their patrons are using.

The reference collection is completely housed on the third floor of the Learning Commons, and is not easily accessible from the reference desk, which is located on the second floor. This layout is not conducive to librarians quickly and easily connecting their patrons to the information sought. One of the librarians who was observed advised that she would like to build a ready reference collection to be housed behind the reference desk. Currently, the only ready reference materials stored at the reference desk are one-page hand-outs on various citation styles. Good starting points for building this collection are style manuals for popular citation styles, such as MLA, APA, and Chicago (Kessler, 2013), and subject encyclopedias on popular subjects taught at the college (Robinson et al., 2011).

### **Evaluation of Reference Services**

Reference librarians are asked to complete an internal tracking form after each reference transaction. Those forms are reviewed twice yearly in staff meetings to find trends and popular topics and research questions. According to one of the librarians who was observed, library staff are working on a way to assess the outcomes of reference transactions. They would like to study the outcomes of students in classes who received instruction from a librarian on how to use the library, and compare them to students in classes who did not receive such instruction. If this library can successfully complete this study, they will likely find that students who did receive instruction have better outcomes. A similar study found that 84% of first- and second-year students felt more confident in their ability to complete research after receiving instruction from a librarian, compared to only about 30% feeling confident before receiving instruction (Reiter &

Cole, 2019).

### **Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

This library has adopted some use of AI in reference work. One of the librarians who was observed shared that she occasionally uses AI for help with citations and creating outlines to complete tasks. AI can be effective in assisting librarians. For example, it can improve a library's efficiency by automating certain tasks. It can also help the library reach a larger audience by improving user experience and providing ideas for new services (Faga & Yusuf, 2023). The lead reference librarian advised that some libraries participating in Research Help Now utilize AI at the beginning of a chat session with a patron, prior to a librarian taking over. The idea behind this is that AI saves both the patron's and the librarian's time by filtering out and answering less complex questions. More complex questions are passed on to a librarian to assist with. The lead librarian advised that this library has not yet adopted AI in their chat service. AI can also assist librarians when working with patrons who speak languages with which the librarian is not familiar (Adetayo, 2023). This could benefit this library, as it would save time that would be spent waiting for an interpreter to assist with patrons whose native language is not English.

Despite some advantages, AI is a relatively new and constantly changing tool, and libraries need to use it carefully. AI is a non-human tool, and it cannot replicate the "personal touch" provided by reference librarians (Adetayo, 2023, p. 143). Furthermore, it cannot always handle complex or unconventional questions, where a reference librarian can understand the nuance of questions posed by patrons (Adetayo, 2023). If this library chooses to utilize AI in their chat services, they need to take this fact into account.

AI tools may be capable of lying intentionally (Adetayo, 2023). For example, AI tools can "hallucinate and suggest sources that do not exist" (Ruark et al., 2024). One study provided

ChatGTP with real patron questions, and asked the tool to provide a list of citations for the answers it provided. Some of the articles referenced were found to be fake (Yang, 2024). Even if the tool is not intentionally lying, the way a question is asked can affect the response a patron receives. For example, when asked a question about a company one way, ChatGPT responded that the company did not exist. When asked another way, it provided correct and accurate information about the company (Yang, 2024).

AI tools can jeopardize a library's basic values, such as privacy and promoting social justice. Some AI tools are not clear about what they do with a user's data, which can potentially lead to privacy breaches. Furthermore, AI can be "manipulated for promoting bias and fake information," and possibly "turned into a racist tool" (Faga & Yusuf, 2023, p. 12). The creators of ChatGPT have admitted that their tool "may sometimes fabricate facts or provide responses that are biased or harmful" (Adetayo, 2023, p. 142). Reference librarians should use caution when utilizing AI tools themselves, and need to teach patrons how to most effectively interact with these tools. AI may be a good starting point when conducting research, but all responses provided by AI should certainly be fact-checked and verified.

### **Conclusion**

The library observed for this report presents well theoretically. Librarians are provided with multiple guides outlining the principles they should follow, including professional guidelines. Unfortunately, some librarians do not abide by these guidelines when they should. The library does a disservice to both library staff and patrons by placing restrictive guidelines on librarians and support staff and not allowing for tiered reference service. Furthermore, the physical layout of the library is not necessarily conducive to effective reference service. The reference desk does not stand out against student workspaces in the Learning Commons. There is

no ready reference collection that librarians can quickly utilize, and the reference collection is large, outdated, and on a different floor than the reference desk. While this library's intentions are good, it would certainly benefit from a review of its policies, a usage study on its reference collection, weeding its reference collection, and making the most of the physical space it occupies.



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