

The Modern Reference Desk

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### Abstract

This paper explores using a tiered reference service model in place of the traditionally staffed reference desk in academic libraries. Through research conducted and multiple reference desk observations through a third party titled “Library X” throughout the paper, I state why replacing reference librarians at the reference desk with staff members, student workers, or paraprofessionals is a more efficient use of human resources. By discussing the shift in roles of librarians due to the modern era to an equal instruction role as well as increased responsibilities due to faculty status, it is evident that the traditional model is no longer applicable. All names have been changed to protect the privacy of both the institution visited and the individuals shadowed.

For over 100 years, reference service remained largely unchanged. A patron would come into an academic library which was filled with thousands of books and approach the reference desk with questions in hand. A reference librarian sat waiting to consult their trusty large volumes of ready reference books, eager to help the patron. This model is outdated, and as such, has changed considerably in the last twenty-five years. The arrival of affordable technology and the boom of the internet has radically changed the face of reference service in academic libraries. In order to stay relevant and needed, libraries have had to adapt from the traditional reference desk model as the needs of patrons have shifted, and their roles and responsibilities increased. Librarians in this modern era have found themselves more concerned with instructing patrons in information literacy than locating information for them. As such, there is no longer a clearly defined one-size fits all model for librarians to use. With this expansion and evolution of reference service, librarians are expected to perform a multitude of duties that are often time-consuming and involved. In order to be successful, the traditional reference model is no longer effective. Libraries have tested out several different alternatives, and so far, there is no new standard model. Some libraries have kept the reference desk, while others have abolished it entirely. Some libraries have found success with a roving model, while others have found success shifting entirely to a virtual “chat” service. I would argue that the future of the reference desk is to have it staffed with paraprofessionals, part-time librarians, or student workers as this would enable librarians more time for the plethora of other roles and responsibilities required of them.

### **Reference and Instruction**

The need for a change in reference services gained traction as the 1990’s progressed, and internet use became a standard in most households. But how was reference changing? What

would be the needs of the patron in an internet-driven society? As early as 1995, David Lewis hypothesized that the future of reference would take place through instruction. “Instruction in the use of the electronic library must become a central part of the core curriculum of the university” (Lewis, 1995, p.12). However, he also commented that this instruction would be hindered if it was an add-on responsibility of the reference librarian. To be successful, equal attention to instruction and reference needed to be applied, and as Lewis points out, that instruction should come from librarians (1995, p.12). Afterall, librarians are the ones that are the subject-matter experts in information literacy.

The importance of information literacy helps answer the second question concerning the needs of the patron. People today, as Brian Kenney points out, “...want help doing things, rather than finding things” (2015, para. 17). With information readily available at the fingertips, nobody needs or wants to rely upon someone else to find the answers for them; however, they do want someone to show them how to find accurate sources of information. Especially in this “fake news” era that we have found ourselves in. Thus, instruction has become an equal part of the duties of a reference librarian. So much so, that libraries are shifting away from titling the position as “reference librarian” to include a more accurate job description. This was observed at Library X which titles its reference librarians as “Research and Instruction” librarians.

### **Faculty Status**

Another aspect of this shift toward instruction that is beneficial is the designation of reference librarians as faculty. This newly acquired status is highly conducive to strengthening faculty collaborations with the library; however, it also adds another involved facet to the academic librarian’s workload. As members of the faculty, reference librarians are held to the same research obligations as professors. This is beneficial as it works to change the faculty’s

perception of librarians from professional staff to academic equals (McGuinness, 2006).

However, it is not a primary focus of librarians due to the immense amount of other responsibilities they are expected to complete. This is especially true for those just stepping into the role of a reference librarian. Amanda, at Library X, is a newly hired Research and Instruction librarian who is juggling several different components while still learning aspects of her role. Research, a requirement of her faculty status, is placed on the backburner while she manages her subject-specific department, instruction classes, conferences, reference desk responsibilities, and other involved requirements. Other librarians also commented on the difficulty in finding time to pursue research obligations. This is not to say that research is never completed, it is just more difficult. Craig is currently pursuing a joint research collaboration with a faculty member from one of his subject-specific departments.

### **Other Areas of Consideration**

Instruction and personal research are not the only daily obligations a librarian is expected to complete; budgets, collections, research appointments, conferences, meetings, outreach, and extensive reports and record-keeping are necessary functions for an academic librarian. With all these responsibilities, it seems unthinkable that a librarian would be able to complete these tasks working a forty or even a sixty-hour work week. It becomes even more unfathomable to think that they also are required to sit at a reference desk for at least ten hours a week providing customer service to patrons entering the library.

### **Shifting the Model**

With the greater emphasis on instruction and added component of personal research, it has become apparent that changes need to occur in order to accommodate a librarian's busy work schedule. As Valery King and Sara Christensen-Lee note in their article "Full-time Reference

with Part-Time Librarians” (2014), it is “no longer cost-effective to have a highly-trained subject-specialist sitting at a desk waiting for the rare occasions when her expertise is actually needed, only to answer directional and technical (computer and printer) questions” (p.35). Christy Stevens (2012) also comments that having librarians sit at a desk waiting to answer simple questions “...a poor use of human resources” (para. 17). The librarian’s time could be better spent actively working on any number of tasks that demand their full attention. While waiting for patrons at the reference desk, work can still be completed; however, as Reference and User Services Association’s (RUSA) guidelines to reference service states, the librarian should not be engaged in any work that would have them seen too involved in their work. They must be ever-ready to assist any patron that approaches the desk (2013). This limits the depth of work that can be completed, and as such, limits the overall productivity of the librarian.

### **Library X**

The observations conducted at the reference desk of Library X highlights this ineffectiveness discussed by King and Christensen-Lee and Stevens. The desk is staffed by an alternating schedule of research and instruction librarians as well as one member of the professional staff, about 46 hours each week throughout the fall semester. As I was only able to shadow the desk in the evenings during the week and on Sundays, I discovered a resounding lack of highly complex questions asked of the librarian during that time. The reference desk as of a couple of years ago, was staffed by two reference librarians, and it is no wonder as to why they stepped down to one. On several days, no patron approached the desk for reference advice during the allotted time. However, at least once during the observation, a patron approached with printing or other such technical questions. Library X staffs a desk with student workers for such questions. This is not to say that no questions were observed during my observations; however,

many of them could have been answered by someone trained on simple electronic database functions.

There were a few patron's questions which benefitted from a research librarian at the desk. One Sunday shift, Katie had at least a twenty-minute session with a patron looking for help with MLA citations. Although, she had fielded an email request from the patron earlier in the week and arranged for the patron to come to the reference desk during her shift on Sunday. This day was chosen as it is known as a slow reference day. Another librarian remarked that he often received complex questions from patrons during his reference desk shifts; unfortunately, the hour I shadowed him, no one approached the desk. Another instance of a complex question came to Katie regarding IEEE citations from a patron. She asked Amanda (the Engineering subject-specific librarian) for assistance, and the two worked through the question together as they were both unfamiliar with the format.

### **Tiered Reference Service**

Although changes must occur gradually in academic libraries as the librarians and staff test out different approaches to find ones that are successful, I believe that the need for a reference librarian to staff the reference desk is unnecessary if the library offers instruction courses and reference appointments. I believe that if the library's budget would allow it, then a member of the professional staff, student workers, or paraprofessionals would be a better fit to staff the traditional desk. Such an individual would be able to answer the majority of questions posed to reference librarians at the desk. If they found themselves unable to assist in any way, then they could refer the individual to a reference librarian for further assistance.

### **Library X**

I believe Library X would benefit from substituting the traditional reference desk for a tiered service model. According to a case study performed at the Central Michigan University libraries in 2013, the successful exchange of reference librarians for student workers could possibly mirror Library X's situation. Both libraries had similar schedules, set-ups, and already staffed the desk with one non-reference librarian (Peters, 2015). At Library X, a member of the research support staff, Michelle, participates in the reference desk rotation. While she regularly is slotted for a shift, she also finds herself at the desk when the other librarians are unavailable due to meetings or conflicting schedules. Although not a librarian, she generally has no issues in finding answers for the questions that are posed to her by patrons. If there is something that she is unable to answer, she refers the patron to the subject-specific librarian that should be able to assist them further.

### **Conclusion**

As Lili Luo remarks, "...the exponential expansion of information access has reduced people's dependence on reference service" (Smith & Wong, 2016, p. 155). This has caused a shift in the roles and responsibilities of reference librarians. As they adapt to this new age of information, old models need to be replaced for ones that are more conducive to the service of the community or institution. For reference librarians, this means shifting more into an instruction role. In order to be successful, time management becomes an important component for any reference librarian. With their growing list of responsibilities, they can no longer afford to sit idly by, and wait for in-depth reference questions. Having a staff member or student worker take their place at the desk would enable reference librarians to become more efficient and productive. As seen through observing the reference desk at library X, more time would enable



more work to get done, but also, would allow time for the librarians to perform their own personal research.

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