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Bernadette Johnson

Francis Marion University, bjjohnson@fmarion.edu

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The Decline of the Traditional Reference Desk: How Library Reference at Francis Marion University is Adjusting to the Shifting Trend Compared to Other Academic Libraries

Bernadette Johnson^a (bjjohnson@fmarion.edu)

^aFrancis Marion University, Florence, South Carolina, USA

ABSTRACT

In a world of advanced technology, traditional reference faces the ever-increasing challenge to maintain its relevance and significance. Statistics show a drastic decline in reference desk transactions in academic libraries nationwide over the last few decades. As academic libraries around the nation are now transforming their services to adjust to the changing needs of today's library users, how does the Reference department at Francis Marion University compare to its peers in keeping pace with this trend?

KEYWORDS

traditional reference, academic libraries, reference librarians, reference desk, reference transactions, library instruction

INTRODUCTION

In this highly advanced technological age where information is available at the click of a button, traditional library reference struggles to maintain its relevance and not fade into obsolescence. Is the existence of traditional reference even necessary in academic libraries in this postmodern society?

The Association of College and Research Libraries statistics for libraries in doctorate-granting schools, show that nationwide, reference transactions have decreased from 21.3 million in 2001 to 9 million in 2012, which is a 57% decline (Bunnett et al., 2016). Much has been written about the decreasing utilization of reference services over the past thirty years. In 2008, the American Library Association reported a 50% decrease in reference transactions in academic libraries during the previous years. In 1994, there were 111,649,668 transactions compared to 56,148,040 in 2008 (Buss, 2016).

With the increased popularity of Google, Google Scholar, and numerous other search engines so readily available, the demand for traditional reference services has decreased significantly (Bandyopadhyay & Boyd-Byrnes, 2016). The time of the continuous stream of students coming to the reference desk for assistance has long passed.

After reviewing seven reference transaction studies published between 1977 and 2012, K. Maloney and J.H. Kemp found that between 62-78% of questions asked were simple, directional, technical, or policy-related, and they could be answered by nonprofessionals including paraprofessionals and student workers. They also found that 16-30% percent of the questions asked were basic reference that could be answered by highly trained paraprofessionals and librarians, whereas only 2-11% needed to be answered by librarians with advanced subject knowledge or research expertise (Bandyopadhyay & Boyd-Byrnes, 2016).

Charles A. Bunge describes reference service in these terms:

Reference service...has been defined as personal assistance provided to users in pursuit of information. Reference service has three major aspects...(1) information service, which consists of finding needed information for the user or assisting the user in finding such information; (2) instruction in library use, consisting of helping users learn the skills they need to find and use library materials; and (3) guidance, in which users are assisted in choosing library materials appropriate to their educational, informational, or recreational needs (p.185).

There's no formal definition for traditional reference; however, it can be defined on the grounds of what it provides. Traditional reference services are provided in person or via telephone by reference librarians (Shakeri et al., 2012). Reference service can also include other tasks such as collection development, developing research guides, tutorials, catalogs, databases, websites, etc. for researchers (Stevens, 2013).

REFERENCE DESK TRANSACTIONS

Reference Transactions at James A. Rogers Library

The Reference Desk statistics at the James A. Rogers Library (JARL) of Francis Marion University (FMU) in Florence, SC, reflect the nationwide trend where the majority of questions asked can easily be answered by a nonprofessional. The data for these statistics was collected from Gimlet, a software used by JARL to record and track daily service transactions within the Reference and Systems departments.

JARL serves a four-year public university of approximately 4,000 undergraduate and graduate students. With 17 staff members of which nine are librarians, this library houses over 400,000 print volumes, offers access to over 340,000 eBooks, and over 100 databases (Francis Marion University, 2020).

The Rogers Library Reference Desk is staffed primarily by a librarian over 40 hours a week and staffed by student assistants during the evening hours where a librarian is on call. The Rogers Library Reference Desk is open over 60 hours per week, seven days a week during the fall and spring semesters. The library building is open 85 hours, seven days a week during the fall and spring semesters.

From March 1, 2019, to March 1, 2020, Rogers Library statistics show that a total of 4,184 questions were asked at the Reference Desk and of those, 503 or 12% were reference questions. Of the 503 reference questions asked, only 192 or 38% were questions that needed to be answered by a professional librarian.

Questions recorded in Gimlet were carefully examined in order to determine whether a reference librarian should have answered them. This determination was based on the complexity of the question and whether it required in-depth research. Examples of questions recorded in Gimlet include:

1. A student writing a sociology paper was looking for a database for sociology articles only. Such a question could've been answered by a reference librarian, a paraprofessional, or even a trained student assistant.

2. A student needed an article on a behavior intervention plan dealing with elopement psychology. For this question, only a reference librarian was qualified to answer due to its complexity. A question such as this requires advanced and possibly time-consuming research.

3. Can I use a computer to print? This question could certainly be answered by any of the library staff.

As stated before, statistics show that the majority of questions asked by patrons can be answered by nonprofessional library staff. Due to the declining trend of reference transactions and low percentage of advanced reference questions, the Rogers Library Reference Desk reduced its hours of operation by one hour on evenings during the fall and spring semesters and is altogether closed on evenings and weekends during the summer.

Reference Transactions at Kimbel Library

Approximately 50 miles east of FMU, Kimbel Library of Coastal Carolina University in Conway, SC, serves both residential and commuting students where about 4,600 of said students live on campus. Kimbel Library has two main service desks on the first floor, the Information Commons Help Desk and the Circulation Desk both staffed by Access Services staff and student assistants. Librarians from the research and scholarship department are on-call from their offices to provide reference assistance during the times they are most likely to be needed. The questions are referred to the librarians by the service desk staff either in person or via library chat (Faix, 2023).

Like JARL and other academic libraries nationwide, Kimbel Library experienced a drastic decline in the demand for reference assistance. The questions asked on library chat were generally direc-

tional, technological, or very basic. Student assistants who were part of a peer research assistants program offered by Kimbel Library, were disappointed that their research assistance was not in greater demand. A decade back, Kimbel's reference librarians expressed this same frustration at spending so much time giving general and basic assistance and not the research assistance they were trained to provide (Faix, 2023).

Why the Steady Decline in Reference Transactions?

One might wonder why is there such a steady and consistent decline in reference transactions? The obvious answer is that it is due to the explosion of technology and the internet. To keep pace and maintain relevance in a technological age that revolves around the internet, reference had to become a part of the virtual world. The Rogers Library Reference Department has increased its presence and accessibility online, adopting a chat service and making sure the chat and "Ask-a-Librarian" icons are highly visible on the library's webpage. Rogers Library Reference also creates library video tutorials on how to use its online reference resources and has created a frequently asked questions (FAQs) section on its library website. Rogers Library Reference utilizes social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to keep students and faculty abreast of library events, reference services, resources, and to share library video tutorials.

It is quite apparent that a significant portion of communication is taking place online; therefore, reference services are meeting users where they are, whether it is via chat, text message, email, social media, or other forms of web-based communication. But could there also be other reasons for this decline besides technological advancement?

Reference Desk Survey by the Felix G. Woodward Library

In a 2018 survey given by the Felix G. Woodward Library at Austin Peay State University, 55 of the 74 responders never used the reference desk. Sixteen of those 55 said that they never used the reference desk because they were given no assignments that required library resources, and the remaining never used the reference desk for either of the following reasons:

1. They were unaware that reference assistance was available. **2.** The library's resources were easy to use and therefore, they needed no assistance. **3.** They never used the reference desk for other reasons not specified (Bowron & Weber, 2019).

Academic librarian and teaching faculty relationships

Although this is a rather small pool of responders from the Woodard Library survey, it reflects problems that are common in academic libraries nationwide. The fact that 16 responders said that they were given no assignments that required library resources could possibly be an indication of a lack of collaboration between academic librarians and teaching faculty (Bowron & Weber, 2019). Studies and library literature report deficiencies in the collaboration between academic librarians and teaching faculty because teaching faculty fail to initiate partnerships with academic librarians when designing their courses (Alwan et al., 2018). Research shows a connection between library use and encouragement from professors (Nunes, 2016). Studies have shown that relationship building between faculty and liaison librarians has become more important than ever for success. Some faculty members believe that relationships are strengthened when librarians go above and beyond expectations by asking probing questions and adding new insights. Librarians who established successful relationships with teaching faculty created meaningful interactions and asked for feedback to make improvements (Díaz & Mandernach, 2017).

At JARL, efforts and considerable strides have been taken to strengthen relationships between librarians and teaching faculty. JARL provides a faculty/staff toolkit on its homepage where teaching faculty can suggest book titles, submit library instruction requests, find their library liaison, and much more. The Instruction Librarian also presented information to faculty to raise awareness of Open Education Resources (OER) and interviewed several teaching professors regarding data management assistance. She also interviewed several teaching professors regarding data management and how JARL

could assist with this effort.

Library Jargon

Studies show that library users are often confused about the different functions of the library departments and that most do not know what services the library offers. Terms such as “reference,” “circulation,” and “periodical” did not have much meaning to library users, especially to those who were not from North America; therefore, more simplified language should be used instead of library jargon (O’Neill & Guilfoyle, 2015). The United States population is becoming increasingly diverse, which means library users are of an increasingly diverse ethnic and language background.

The Reference Department at Regis University Library conducted a survey to gauge their patrons’ perception of reference service. In response to the question that asked, ‘what words come to mind when you hear or see the word “Reference,”’ the top three words the survey responders used to define reference were “research,” “help,” and “books” (O’Neill & Guilfoyle, 2015). This justifies the call for more clarified terminology in library signage. Oberlin College in Ohio redesigned their reference area by changing signs, equipment, etc. Their reference desk signs now read “Research Help” and “Information.” They have seen an increase in usage since the signage changes (O’Neill & Guilfoyle, 2015). Like Oberlin College, Rogers Library’s Reference Desk signage also reads “Information.”

Penn State Abington’s Research Party

Penn State Abington, the library of Pennsylvania State University, holds a Research Party to combine the social nature of their library with the research assistance provided at the reference desk. The hope is for an increasing trend toward collaborative working styles where students are brought together, and professional academic colleagues can consult with each other and exchange ideas. The Research Party is held in the library classroom with food, decorations, music, party favors, and research supplies. The party provides a more relaxed and stress-free student-librarian interaction where many students can be served at once instead of the restricted one-patron-at-a-time reference desk model (Hunter & Riehman-Murphy, 2017). The Research Party is a highly creative endeavor to increase awareness of reference services.

Penn State Abington’s Research Party was expected to be more party-like, but instead, it took on an academic air because students had a real need for research assistance. Even though the students came for research help and not to party, they interacted as a community of scholars in their sharing of ideas and challenges. The party likewise provided faculty with another way to relay library services and resources to their students (Hunter & Riehman-Murphy, 2017).

Information Literacy Instruction

The Woodward Library responders who deemed the library resources easy to use and needed no assistance, correspond with studies showing that students are becoming more confident in their ability to use library resources due to an increase in information literacy instruction sessions (Weber & Bowron, 2019).

There is an adage that says, *give a man a fish; you feed him for a day, teach him how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime*. Reference librarians, especially in the academic setting, have promoted self-sufficiency and self-help, teaching that the more one learns to do for oneself, the less assistance they will need. This promotion of self-help comes in the form of information literacy instruction. Studies show that librarians have increasingly provided information literacy instruction for decades, which helps students better understand how to use library resources (Weber & Bowron, 2019). However, librarians have found that some younger college students are overconfident and overestimate their research ability. This is especially true for first-year students (Nunes, 2016).

Stevens (2013) states that:

Basic academic research has gotten easier...Most students today do not need to learn what a pa-

per index is, where it is located, and how to use it to begin finding articles on their topics. They do not have to learn about controlled vocabulary when inputting a few keywords will generally suffice, nor do most even have to come to the library building, let alone navigate its physical space in search of the locations of mysterious objects such as “bound periodicals” and “microfiche. When library materials went online for public use, reference desks still received many questions from students conducting academic research because the systems were unfamiliar and not particularly user friendly. However, vendors and library webmasters have made databases and library websites increasingly intuitive and easier to use, decreasing the amount of user queries (p.203).

At JARL, one of the reasons for the low traditional reference desk transactions is because many students are learning remotely, which has become more prevalent since the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the COVID-19 lockdown is long over, there are students who are still opting for distance learning.

Lingering Demand for Traditional Reference Transactions

With studies showing the steady decline in traditional reference transactions, is there still a reason to have a service point exclusively for traditional reference in academic libraries, and should it be primarily staffed by professional reference librarians? In this current technologically advanced age, is the traditional reference desk fading into antiquity?

The most factual questions can be answered with a simple Google search or a database search; but not all research questions fall into this category. Many information needs require the assistance of a professional librarian, for example, developing a research strategy or selecting the appropriate databases to use. Many users do not understand the more advanced features of Google Scholar and other search engines; therefore, reference is as significant as it ever was in previous generations (Buss, 2016). Even though information is so readily available, it takes training to properly access and assess this information.

Despite the declining trend in the demand for traditional reference assistance, statistics show that there still is a persistent need for person-to-person interaction and assistance. Some librarians see the great value of person-to-person interaction and professional assistance at the reference desk, which to them, justifies the staffing of librarians at the reference desk. Their stance is supported by a study done by Amy Gratz and Julie Gilbert, who found that two-thirds of the student responders reported that they go to the reference desk or a reference librarian for assistance while less than one quarter asked for assistance at another service desk (McClure & Bravedner, 2013).

In a study at Auraria Library at the University of Colorado-Denver, it found that 69% of first-year college students preferred face-to-face reference services over virtual. The value of human contact is the main reason for retaining the reference desk (Miles, 2013).

Buss (2016) discusses a survey of academic librarians at small to medium-sized institutions to see if their experiences reflected the declining trend in reference transactions. In his study, he found that 66.4% of respondents retained traditional services with reference desks and of those, 77.46% deemed that the number of reference transactions had been stable or had risen over the previous two years, thus, contradicting the general trend of reference transaction decline.

Service Desk Models

However, it cannot be ignored that the advancement of technology and the accessibility of information online has created a shift in the need for traditional reference assistance as a whole. In adaptation to this shift, many academic libraries have developed more innovative ways of providing reference services.

After conducting a study that found only 7.4% of transactions at the reference desk required the assistance of a professional librarian, Stetson University began staffing paraprofessionals at the reference desk. In 2008, J. Banks and C. Pracht surveyed 191 academic librarians at mid-sized academic in-

stitutions and discovered that 62% were using non-degreed staff at their desks. Also, in 2008, S. Ryan analyzed reference transaction data collected in 2002, 2003, and 2006 and found that nearly 90% of reference desk transactions could be performed by a non-librarian. In response to this decline in reference transactions, many institutions have adopted the tiered reference desk model, eliminating the traditional reference desk. One of the reasons for shifting professional librarians from the reference desk is to free them up for other responsibilities that are expected of them such as research assistance, library instruction, collection development, and liaison responsibilities (Peters, 2015).

A tiered reference desk model, also called an on-call service desk model, is where trained paraprofessionals and students are staffed at the service desk to answer basic reference and directional questions while professional librarians are called upon to answer the more advanced reference questions.

Due to the continuing decrease in reference transactions and after reading articles that discussed the on-call desk model, Woodward Library adopted this model in Fall 2015. The primary reason for doing so was to increase librarians' productivity by making better use of their time (Bowron & Weber, 2019).

For reference questions that paraprofessionals at service points are not trained to answer, many academic libraries provide reference consultation where patrons can schedule an appointment with a professional librarian if they need advanced research assistance.

Unlike the institutions that have adopted the tiered reference desk model, some academic libraries have combined the reference desk with other service desks to make services more free flowing. Many libraries are also providing roving service where reference librarians walk around the library or even outside of the library to see if there are any patrons in need of reference assistance. Roving reference can reach and serve more library patrons within and outside the libraries (Bandyopadhyay & Boyd-Byrnes, 2016).

Some libraries go as far as to provide in-person reference assistance in locations outside of library spaces such as coffee shops, student unions, computer labs, academic buildings, and residence halls (Coleman & Mallon, 2015). Many scholarly articles show librarians adopting new models of reference services such as roving, consultation, outreach reference, and the combining of service points (Miles, 2013). Roving reference, virtual reference, outreach and marketing services, digital archives, online resources such as databases, e-Books, online tutorials, LibGuides, etc. are becoming more commonplace in academic libraries (Bandyopadhyay & Boyd-Byrnes, 2016).

A 2008 case study shows that 80% of the librarians who responded to the study reported that the on-call service model worked for them personally. Of the library users who responded, 66% reported that the model worked well for them, while only 7% thought that it did not work. 27% of library users were uncertain of its effect on service (Bowron & Weber, 2019). A 2015 study shows several benefits of roving reference services in how such services reach patrons who do not know that they can ask the reference desk for help. It shows how roving reference changes a patron's perception of librarians and delivers point-of-need assistance (Bowron & Weber, 2015).

JARL however, has adopted neither the tiered-reference desk model nor has it combined the reference desk with other service desks. Unlike many academic libraries nationwide, JARL retains its traditional reference service point which is primarily staffed by librarians. But seeing the shift from traditional reference around the country, JARL is now starting to schedule student assistants to staff the reference desk more during the day instead of just evenings. Therefore, its reference librarians benefit by having more time to engage with research, instruction, workshops/conference planning, and outreach activities that require interacting with students and faculty beyond the confines of a reference desk.

JARL's Reference Professional Development and Outreach

Like other academic libraries nationwide, JARL's reference librarians are taking strides to keep pace with the shifting trend and demand by attending workshops, seminars, and taking courses to learn more creative ways to engage its student patrons. The purpose of these workshops, seminars, and cours-

es is to introduce effective librarian instruction strategies, improve reference services, introduce new databases, and to keep academic librarians abreast of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology such as ChatGPT.

In the fall of 2019, JARL's Reference department, with the help of the other library departments, hosted an event called 'Latte with Librarians'. This was an event for students interested in the library and information science profession to come and chat with the librarians of JARL and librarians from public and academic libraries in the surrounding areas. The purpose of this event wasn't about providing reference assistance; nevertheless, it was still a great way for students and librarians to interact in a more relaxed and nontraditional setting. Even though the attendance wasn't large, the students who attended showed keen interest in the library and information science profession.

In 2022, at the start of the fall semester, JARL took part in the campus-wide Open House event for freshmen students. It was one of the places students had to visit to get their mock passports stamped as proof they visited the library. During this event, we introduced students to library services and resources and handed out promotional items.

Inspired by the Open House campus event of 2022, the following year, JARL carried out a similar event where they made mock passports for students to have stamped at each library service desk they visited. Provided the passports were fully stamped, the students could then enter their passports into a drawing for a chance to win prizes. The winners were then recognized on the library's social media.

CONCLUSION

Academic libraries are taking tremendous strides in transforming their traditional practices into ones that are more aligned with the current needs and expectations of their users, and many of their innovations are effective. Although the needs of academic library patrons have changed over time, statistics show that there is still a considerable need for reference assistance. Even in an era of highly advanced technology where information, both good and bad, is at one's fingertips, humanity still values face-to-face transactions. Therefore, traditional reference is not necessarily going away, but instead, it is evolving. Reference librarians and reference departments are now revising and repurposing themselves to offer services that are more congruent with the needs and demands of today's users.

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