

January 2007

Reference and Research Desk Study

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Beth W. Lang and Elizabeth Fitzpatrick. "Reference and Research Desk Study" ALA Annual Conference Poster Session. Washington, D.C.. June 2007. Available at: http://works.bepress.com/beth_lang/2

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Reference and Research Assistance Model Compared to Tiered Reference Model

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ALA Annual 2007, Washington, D.C.

Introduction

The role of the Reference Desk and of reference librarians are changing. To remain vital to today's library users, we need to become a value-added resource to solve their research dilemmas.

Information-seeking has become complex and people value expert assistance to navigate and find quality information efficiently.

Today's college students expect expert assistance when and where they need it: online or in the Learning Commons where they congregate to socialize and study.

Technology and directional questions can be handled at other desks to allow specialist reference librarians to provide customized research assistance.

A focus group, reference question recording, comparison with previous data, and a survey provide insight into how today's students want to obtain research assistance and their satisfaction with a new reference model in a Learning Commons.

Problem Statement

The Reference & Research Assistance Desk (RRAD) is one of a spectrum of mechanisms provided by the W.E.B. Du Bois Library Research and Instructional Services for research assistance. It is characterized by high visibility, immediate human contact with friendly experts (librarians), and proximity to other service desks that provide expert help with technology, writing, advising, tutoring, career services, and more. While many studies have investigated tiered reference models, no study to date in the LIS literature has measured the effectiveness of the specialist-staffed reference desk as part of a suite of expert services provided in a Learning Commons. This study was undertaken to discover the extent to which users and reference librarians at the W.E.B. Du Bois Library embrace and are satisfied with the RRAD model of reference, particularly in contrast to the previous tiered reference model. The library's larger response to undergraduate needs was to bring technical support and other campus academic support services into the Library to work as a collaborative team with library services. The Learning Commons environment enables reference librarians to concentrate on their core mission of supporting the research process.

Two models of Reference Service (1 of 2)

- Tiered Reference Model at Reference Desk
 - Librarians could not give thorough answers to reference questions because of competing demand to answer technology and printing questions
 - Student assistant training was cumbersome; incorrect or incomplete answers were a concern
 - Course registration and other activities on library PCs were outside librarian expertise

Learning Commons opened September 2005...

- Reference & Research Assistance Desk
 - Staffed exclusively by reference, liaison, instruction, selection librarians
 - Genuine reference
 - High satisfaction from users and librarians
 - Multiple modes of service provision and consistent traffic
 - Reference librarians available where all the students congregate

Two Models of Reference Services (2 of 2)

- Reference & Research Assistance Desk (RRAD) (Sept. 2005-)
 - Conveniently located in the Learning Commons adjacent to Reference collection and consultation room
 - Phone, Email, Chat, IM also available
 - Staffed by Reference librarians
 - 8:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday
 - 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday
 - 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday
 - 1 p.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday
- Tiered Reference Model (TRM) (2000-Sept. 2005)
 - Staffed by a combination of librarians, paraprofessionals, and students

Data Collection Methods

- Gate counts (2001; 2005-2006)
- Library Entrant Survey (March 14, 2006) [n=717]
 - Spaces used, service preferences, demographics
- Reference Question Recording at RRAD (April 10-12 2006, from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m.) [n=??]
 - Time of day, topic, purpose, category of questioner, length of encounter
 - Compared to April 11-13, 2005 recording
- RRAD User Focus Group (May 9, 2006) [n=10]
 - Satisfaction, preference mode for reference assistance

Research Questions

1. Does this model of reference desk service – specialized, face-to-face, on-demand research assistance from experts, with referrals to nearby service points for technology, writing, advising, career, tutoring and other help - meet the needs of today's users?
2. What are the characteristics of the questions received at the desk?
3. Are students likely to seek out the Reference desk when they need help with research?
4. Are they satisfied with this model?

Summary of Findings (2006)

- Users strongly prefer face-to-face research assistance (82% ranked #1), prefer to go to the desk to get assistance (95%), want to learn the research process (67%) rather than getting a quick answer (30%)
- Reference questions as a percentage increased from 59% to 82% from 2005 to 2006 at RRAD
- Most people who approached the RRAD desk for assistance were writing a paper or looking for a book and expected to be at the RRAD desk 5-15 minutes
- While visiting the Library, 42% asked a question at the RRAD desk and 39% asked a question at Tech Help desk
- Users found the staff at the RRAD desk more patient and knowledgeable than those at the technology desk
- Nearly 100% of users of the RRAD desk received a satisfactory answer, successfully completed their research after help from the librarian, and would return to the desk for additional assistance.

Conclusion

- Visitors to the Learning Commons easily found the RRAD desk for research assistance and were extremely satisfied with the quality of service
- They expect face-to-face assistance from highly-qualified staff while collaborating with their friends in the LC
- The RRAD model of service is as satisfying to librarians as it is to students.
- Additional research should investigate how to extend the reach of librarians to other concentrations of students as in dorms, dining halls, academic buildings, student unions, etc.

What are they saying?
