

Reference Desk Staffing Trends

A Survey

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Because of the current changes in reference desk activity—e.g., a decreased number of questions being asked at the reference desk and a focus on electronic resources along with the Internet—it is reasonable to consider whether reference desk staffing, especially in the use of personnel without an ALA-accredited MLS, has been affected. The investigators have observed these changes at their mid-sized university library and wondered if similar trends were occurring elsewhere. To answer this, they developed a twenty-question survey and, after a pilot study, sent it by e-mail to a random sample of 191 academic librarians in the United States who work in universities that enroll between five thousand and fifteen thousand students. This paper reports the findings to the survey questions. For example, 60 percent of the 101 returned surveys indicate that the number of reference desk staff has remained the same in the last three years despite 44 percent acknowledging a drop in the number of reference questions asked at their institutions; 62 percent use non-degreed personnel at the reference desk, and a large number of librarians do not know how important reference librarians will be in the next twenty years.

When James Rettig was president of the Reference and Adult Services Division of ALA in the early 1990s, he wrote that a lot of what we think is new in reference has been tried in the past, e.g., eliminating the reference desk and merging service points.¹ Today we see many examples of this in reference, such as an emphasis on teaching library instruction and information literacy, but we are also seeing some true changes. These include a decreased number of questions being asked at reference desks, a focus on the Internet, and more emphasis on the development of Web-based services and online databases that transfer much of the reference activity to the end user. This crescendo of change prompts one to question whether there is a concomitant alteration in staffing patterns in the form of hiring and using more non-ALA accredited MLS personnel, including student assistants, at the reference desk. To ascertain the current state of reference-desk staffing, the investigators developed a twenty-question survey, pilot tested it, identified a random sample of 191 librarians

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who work in universities that enroll between five thousand and fifteen thousand students, and sent the survey over the Internet. The 53 percent that returned their surveys provided a window into reference service, current staffing patterns, and the future of librarianship in academic libraries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1975, Boyer and Theimer Jr. introduced their research findings on the use and training of nonprofessional personnel at the reference desk by quoting a Canadian academic head librarian, who said that 85 percent of the questions asked at the reference desk could be answered by nonprofessionals.² Their own survey research found that 69 percent of the responding libraries did use nonprofessionals, “defined as any person who did not have a master’s degree in librarianship or the fifth-year BLS degree,” to provide reference service for an average 33 percent of the total time that the desk was staffed.³ The nonprofessional staff did receive some on-the-job training, but the majority did not have any formal in-service training.⁴

Picking up on Boyer and Theimer Jr.’s survey research, Courtois and Goetsch in 1983 set the stage for reporting their project by discussing several previous studies by Halldorsson and Murfin, Aluri and St. Clair, and Kok and Pierce.⁵ They concluded that well-trained nonprofessionals could answer most questions, and that nonprofessionals were regularly used at reference desks because of financial considerations. But times were changing, and Courtois and Goetsch wanted to reexamine the variables considered by Boyer and Theimer Jr. and to add new ones, including length of employment, off-desk responsibilities, and staffing patterns. The researchers sent an introductory survey, asking sixty-nine four-year academic libraries in Illinois if they used nonprofessionals at the reference desk and if they were willing to participate in a survey. Sixty-four responded. Of those, thirty-nine libraries used nonprofessionals at their reference/information desks. Of those, thirty-three libraries agreed to be interviewed. The conclusions gathered from the study were that nonprofessionals were often used to staff the reference desk. However, sometimes the nonprofessionals were not able to answer the questions and needed to decide if they should consult a professional. To remedy this problem, the authors suggested a “team” approach, where nonprofessionals and professionals worked together at the desk. They also recommended additional training and a look at how other professions dealt with this problem.⁶

A vast array of research and opinion papers about non-professional workers has been published since these landmark surveys. Though they do not address current staffing trends per se, they do set the stage for considering this topic by presenting studies on a variety of variables, ranging from the effectiveness of nonprofessionals serving at the desk, to training, to differences between library science (LS) students and non-LS students. Most of these papers focus on student assistants who, according to White, have continuously been

a part of the academic reference scene since the nineteenth century.⁷ For example, Christensen, Benson, and Butler reported that student assistants at Brigham Young University answered only 36 percent of the unobtrusive test questions correctly.⁸ In a similar study, Woodard found that graduate student assistants and nonprofessionals at the University of Illinois correctly answered 62 percent of their test questions. She reported that service would be improved by restructuring staffing. She also concluded that the staff answered questions more successfully when a reference librarian was present, when two people were at the desk, or when the staff member clarified a question if needed.⁹ Nahl and others discussed LS students and how their reference skills improved by working at the reference desk, resulting in a win-win situation for LS students and library patrons.¹⁰ As can be seen from this literature review, various factors have influenced the hiring and use of nonprofessionals at the reference desk. The question remains, however, how widespread the practice currently is in academic libraries.

METHOD

The investigators developed a twenty-question survey and conducted a pilot study. Because the authors work in a mid-sized academic library in the Midwest, and because they have observed changes in staffing patterns in their institution, they wanted to focus on this size of institution to consider what was happening at other libraries of similar size. Academic libraries in the United States that serve between five thousand and fifteen thousand students were identified through CollegeSource Online (www.collegesource.org). There were 371 libraries that met this qualification, with an appropriate random sample equaling 191 libraries. The researchers then gathered e-mail addresses for the random sample, using the americanlibrarydirectory.com or individual library webpages. If identifiable, heads of reference were selected. Otherwise, someone else from the reference department was chosen. In some cases, the reference desk had to be used because no individual could be pinpointed.

The survey was distributed over the Internet, using U-Test. U-Test was selected for several reasons: (1) participants were allowed to take the survey only one time unless the restriction was lifted by the investigators, (2) individuals who had not taken the survey were easily identified so that reminders could be sent, and (3) statistics on responses could be easily retrieved and used for statistical purposes. The survey took most individuals approximately five minutes to complete.

Thirty-five librarians responded to the survey within the first forty-eight hours. Twenty-five additional librarians replied after the first reminder, which was sent three days after the initial distribution of the survey. Thirty-five more librarians submitted the survey after the second reminder, which was sent seven days after the initial query. Six additional surveys came in over time. Three surveys were undeliverable for various reasons. The respondents did not always respond to

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each question, but 101 surveys were returned for a return rate of 54 percent. This included seven returned surveys that were left blank. When four librarians were asked if they wanted another opportunity to fill out the survey, only one responded without filling in the answers. After reviewing the completed surveys, the researchers wanted more information on why so many libraries were using non-ALA accredited MLS personnel. A follow-up e-mail was sent to those librarians who specified that their libraries used nonprofessionals.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The first two survey questions were general in nature in order to set the stage for understanding staffing patterns. To identify the library's configuration, one asked whether there was one reference desk in the building. Eighty-six percent answered yes. Of those that answered no, two of them did not have any reference desk at all. One respondent did not answer the question. Thus, having a single reference desk is popular and reflects common operating procedure. This staffing pattern also lessens the spread of reference staff across several locations, necessitating fewer staff.

The second question dealt with the number of questions asked at the reference desk over the last three years. Table 1 shows the breakdown of responses. These answers clearly indicate that one of the most basic, traditional reference activities has fallen in usage for almost one-half of the respondents. This parallels published literature and word of mouth from many librarians indicating that reference usage is down. However, it is interesting that the number of questions is up for almost one-quarter of the respondents. Perhaps this increase reflects the information literacy upswing and its resulting increase in reference desk activity that has been noted in library literature, or perhaps it is the growing size of the institutions. It would be interesting, however, to verify just why there has been this increase so that other libraries can emulate the actions used by those libraries, if possible, to serve patrons in the best way possible.

Beginning with question 3, the focus of the survey shifted to total reference desk staffing and any changes that had occurred in the last three years. Table 2 shows the breakdown for each of the four categories. The staff level remained the same for more than one-half of the reference departments but increased for almost one-fourth. This was true for all the universities in the study, both those that enrolled between five thousand and ten thousand students and those

that enrolled between ten thousand and fifteen thousand. Though the number of questions asked at the desk decreased at 44 percent of the responding libraries, the percent of staff increased at 22 percent of the libraries. For those libraries that did identify an increase in the number of questions asked, 43 percent (ten libraries) also saw a rise in staff level. However, three libraries saw an increase in question activity but experienced a decrease in staffing. On the other hand, three libraries experienced a decrease in questions but an increase in staff. Therefore it would appear that there is no strong correlation between question activity at the desk and changes in staff level. Indeed, there are many other variables that potentially could affect staffing levels, including hours of operation, number of information literacy classes presented, the Internet, additional responsibilities such as service on committees, and increases in student enrollment.

The survey next inquired about the use of non-degreed personnel. Sixty-two percent of the respondents use them at the reference desk; 38 percent do not. Of those that use nonprofessionals, 38 percent began this practice less than five years ago, while 24 percent began from five to ten years ago, 29 percent from eleven to twenty years ago, and 9 percent began more than twenty years ago. Thus, 62 percent of those who employ nonprofessionals have been using them only for the last ten years or less, which is surprising in light of Boyer and Theimer Jr.'s research that reported a 69 percent use of nonprofessionals at reference desks more than thirty years ago.¹¹ Many surveyed librarians stated that they used non-MLS personnel because they were more cost effective and freed up MLS personnel for other responsibilities. Though this does not answer why a majority of the libraries began this in the last ten years, it is reasonable that financial pressures and changes in academic library environments, discussed for several years in the library literature, have propelled a re-evaluation of staffing patterns in reference.¹²

There was also a range of time during the week when the non-degreed personnel worked, but the majority worked "anytime," as shown in table 3. If nights and weekends are

Table 1. Change in Number of Questions Asked at the Reference Desk (%)

| | |
|-----------------------|----|
| Increased | 24 |
| Decreased | 44 |
| Stayed About the Same | 26 |
| Don't Know | 5 |

Table 2. Reference Desk Staffing Changes (%)

| | |
|-------------------------|----|
| Increased | 22 |
| Decreased | 15 |
| Remained About the Same | 61 |
| Not Sure | 2 |

Table 3. Times When Non-degreed Personnel Work (%)

| | |
|-----------------|----|
| Weekends | 10 |
| Evenings | 3 |
| During Meetings | 12 |
| Anytime | 75 |

added to “anytime,” then it is very likely that non-MLS personnel are at the reference desk when most patrons are likely to need help. This survey did not address whether nonprofessionals can answer questions effectively because that information was not possible to ascertain using this survey. But the literature does reflect that often this group of staff is effective, depending on training and backup. However, if nonprofessionals do at least an adequate job, then Herb White’s lamentation about why one should get an MLS if nonprofessionals do the same things librarians do is something the profession should consider.¹³

The next four questions provided an even broader understanding of the utilization of nonprofessionals in academic libraries. One question asked about total reference desk coverage staffed by nonprofessionals. Figure 1 shows that the majority of reference desk coverage by non-degreed personnel ranges from less than 10 percent all the way up to 75 percent. Another question dealt with the number of hours non-degreed personnel worked. Figure 2 identifies that there is a wide distribution in the number of hours nonprofessionals work, with the largest group serving from sixteen to twenty-five hours per week.

Figure 1. What Percentage of the Total Reference Desk Coverage is Staffed by Non-Degreed Personnel?

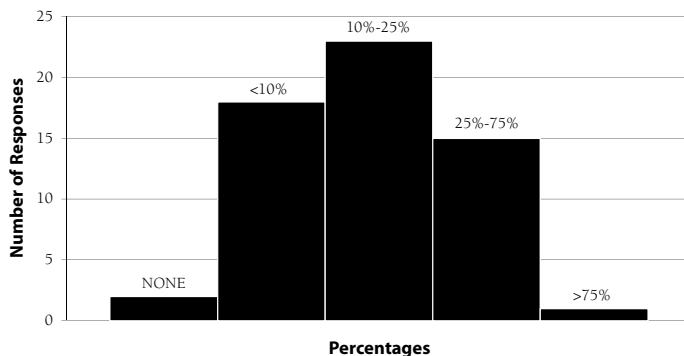
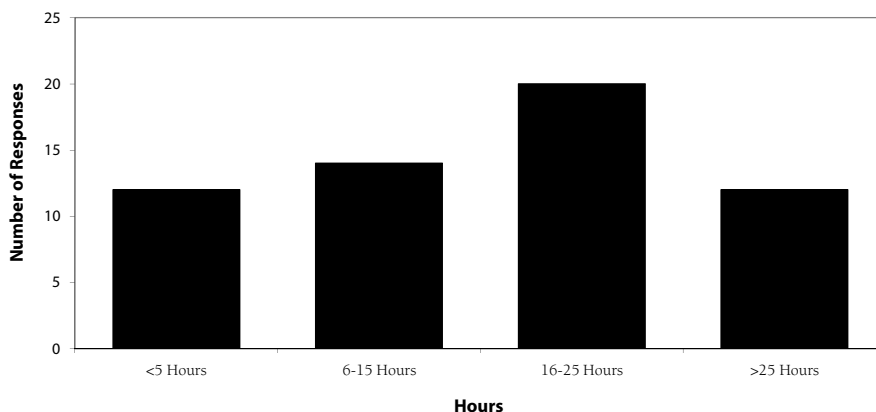


Figure 2. How Many Hours do Non-Degreed Personnel Work Per Week at the Reference Desk as a Group?



The next two questions dealt with whether non-degreed personnel were ever left alone at the reference desk, and if so, whether there was a reference librarian in the building to provide backup. Ninety-two percent answered that nonprofessionals were left alone at the desk. Of those, only 64 percent indicated there was a reference librarian available somewhere in the building to answer questions if needed; 36 percent stated that there was no backup for non-MLS personnel who might not be able to answer questions. No specific strategy was identified to ensure that the patron received adequate and appropriate help. The respondents were asked to write how they felt about non-degreed personnel working alone without a reference librarian for referrals. The answers spanned the spectrum from the fact that it was unavoidable because of staffing pressures, to nonprofessionals knowing the basic resources as well as librarians, to staff working during slow times. Many were not satisfied with the arrangement but felt stretched and frustrated. The bottom line from this part of the survey was that it is definitely standard practice to use nonprofessionals at the reference desk even when no backup is available. It is hard to picture this changing.

Does the background of these nonprofessionals also provide some rationale for the popularity of hiring them? Two survey questions spoke to this. One asked whether the employed nonprofessionals were part of an LS program, which would teach basic reference skills and fundamentals to those workers. Only 12 percent of the answers showed that the libraries were part of such a program. The next question dealt with the minimum requirements needed to work at the desk. Figure 3 clearly shows the variety of reasons a person was found suitable for work. The most interesting point to be taken from this question is that 50 percent of the respondents indicated that something other than reference course work, information literacy course work, experience at the desk, or graduation was the most important factor in hiring. Though no space was allotted for written comments, indicating

what “Other” meant, the large number of times this option was chosen as an answer suggests that there is no single factor that identifies why people get hired. Instead, there must be a wide spectrum of choices and reasons. Once hired, 92 percent of the individuals received training at the surveyed campuses. The investigators requested a description of the training. Once again, the training ranged from simple orientations, to shadowing librarians, to very extensive training programs, including tests. Nothing, however, was said about those 8 percent who do not receive training. It would be interesting to discuss with those workers

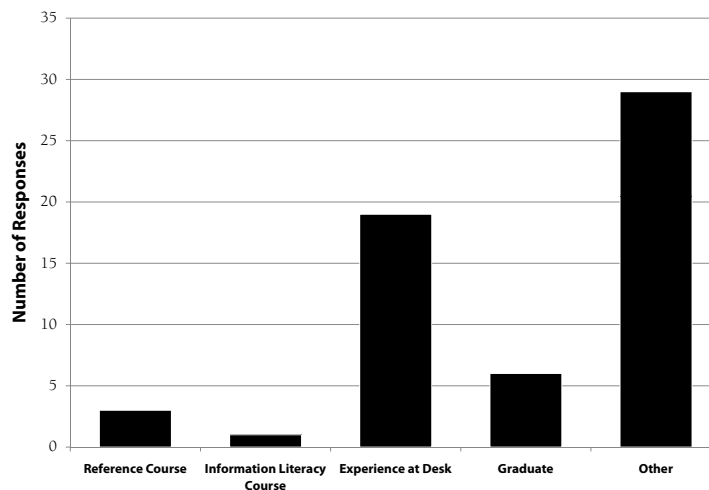
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how they learned their jobs.

The survey turned from asking about the use of non-MLS degreed personnel to asking about the respondents. The first of these questions identified the length of time the responding librarians had been working. Table 4 shows the breakdown of answers, and the results clearly suggest that there is some “graying” of the library profession, as has been reported in the literature. Another factor in this equation is that, if possible, the head of reference was identified so that the survey could be sent through e-mail to him or her. That person would most likely be someone in mid-career. It was also of interest to determine if the librarians who answered the survey had ALA-accredited MLS degrees. Almost 94 percent did, with 5 percent having non-ALA accredited graduate library degrees, and 1 percent having some other degree. Thus it appears that most of the people in charge of reference departments currently have degrees that fall within the mainstream of the library profession.

Written space was provided in the survey for the last three questions, which asked about the effect of the Internet on reference desk responsibilities, on any changes in librarians’ duties in the last five years, and on the importance of reference librarians in twenty years. Once again, there was a broad spectrum of answers to the three questions, and they paralleled sentiments reported in library literature. For the first of these questions, the main response dealt with the fact that the Internet had transformed reference because of its vast reach and information, reducing questions at the desk. Indeed, many students think they know how to search effectively and often do that searching outside the library. They are often unaware that better resources are available in the library. Librarians felt strongly that the word needed to get out that library databases offered better information than Google. Others responded that (1) there were more complex, fascinating, and demanding questions currently being asked at the reference desk; (2) there has been an increase in the need to teach the navigation of various databases because of the differences in database construction and the increase in the number of databases; and (3) there is a need for organizing information more efficiently for the public. For the question about changes in librarians’ duties, the main themes centered on spending more time on instruction, spending less time sitting at the reference desk to answer questions, and doing what was needed to keep up with the explosion of webpages, nontraditional types of reference like virtual reference and e-mail reference, computer software programs, and online databases. However, one respondent said that duties had not changed because “we still meet the information needs of our patrons.” When asked about the importance of refer-

Figure 3. What are the Minimum Requirements for the Non-degreed Personnel to Staff the Reference Desk?



ence librarians in twenty years, many answered that they did not know. Other answers ranged from saying that reference librarians would be very important to saying that they would not be of much value.

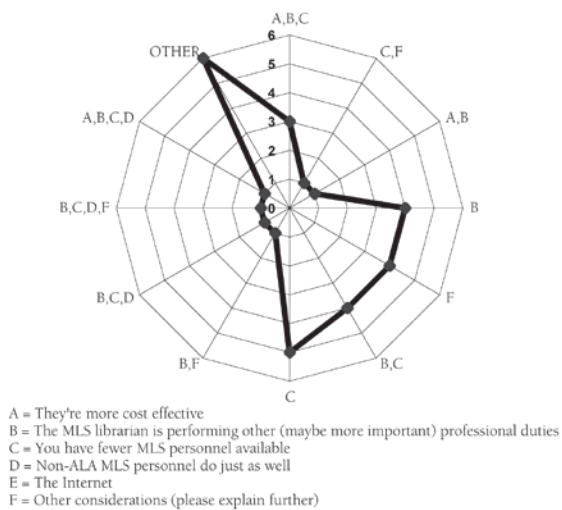
After reviewing the survey responses, the investigators decided that it was important to clarify why non-ALA accredited MLS personnel were used. A follow-up question was thus sent to those librarians who had responded that they did use this group of staff. Thirty-two answered this second query. Figure 4 depicts the reasons provided and shows that most use non-MLS personnel for a combination of factors. Many said that there were “other considerations” for why they use nonprofessionals, including having them work late evenings and weekends and during times when the librarians were attending committee meetings, being cost effective, and freeing up the librarian. Another important factor was that there were fewer MLS personnel available. It is interesting to note that none answered that the Internet was the sole reason nonprofessionals were used. This ties into the question asked on the survey about the effect of the Internet on reference

Table 4. Length of Service* (%)

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| Less than 5 years | 5 |
| 5–10 years | 11 |
| 11–20 years | 24 |
| 21–30 years | 35 |
| More than 30 years | 25 |

*The decimal positions have been dropped. Therefore the total may not exactly sum to 100%.

Figure 4. E-mail Follow-Up: Why Non-ALA Accredited Personnel Are Used



desk responsibilities and the written responses that generally suggested that the Internet had not only changed the types of questions asked but had also changed where individuals search for answers. Thus the Internet may only have a tangential effect on the use of non-MLS personnel and may not be a primary factor in their employment.

This project highlights the fact that non-MLS personnel continue to be an integral part of the reference desk staffing practice in a large number of academic libraries. Because each of the surveyed libraries is different from one another, it is not surprising that there are some differences in the use and training of this group of workers. The overall view is that they are here to stay, at least for now. One wonders what role they will play in the future, especially with such statements as those put forward by the Taiga Forum Steering Committee in their "Taiga Forum Provocative Statements, March 10, 2006," that within the next five years "reference and catalog librarians as we know them today will no longer exist." Also, they assert that "the majority of reference questions will be answered through Google Answer or something like it. There

will no longer be reference desks or reference offices in the library."¹⁴ However, based on the findings of this study and others, it is reasonable to conclude that as long as there is reference activity in a library building, non-ALA accredited personnel will be a part of it and in the future may play an even greater role.

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