

September 30, 2009

To the Editor:

I read “Developing a Model for Reference Research Statistics” by Harry C. Meserve, et al., (volume 48, number 3) with interest. The article dealt with the Warner model of classifying reference questions, and using it to develop triaged reference service.

My criticism of the article’s conclusions is that it misses the issue of the general decline in reference questions that followed adoption of the policy. Looking at the data provided in the article, in the eight months that followed the practice of paraprofessionals being the first point of patron contact, the library experienced a drop of 20 percent in the number of questions received. (Compared to the same months in the previous year.) The next year, 2006, saw another 7 percent drop. This drop occurred across the board, as the number of higher level questions fell by 32 percent. The fact that the professional librarians spent less time answering directional and skill-based questions does not justify a policy that leads to a dramatic drop in the number of people who choose to come to the reference desk.

Why the drop? I think there may be two reasons. First, professional librarians no longer conducted the reference interview, so that in many cases, patrons real questions were not answered. For example, recently I had a reader ask for books on Da Vinci. It turned out she wanted material on how to paint with oils. Without a reference interview, someone would have showed her the biography section.

The second reason is an affective one: simple questions, answered gracefully and elegantly, build a relationship of trust and care. If we ignore those human needs in the name of efficiency, patrons will not return to ask another.

This observation is supported by “Paraprofessionals at the Reference Desk” by Murfin and Bunge, (*Journal of Academic Librarianship*, March 1988). Murfin and Bunge studied patron satisfaction with paraprofessional reference in twenty different libraries, and found that in all twenty patrons reported “significantly less” overall satisfaction. Patrons specifically named trouble in communicating with the employee, dissatisfaction with the explanations and help they received, and being guided to inappropriate materials.

Quality of service cannot be measured by statistics, nor by the number and level of questions answered. Still, a drop of such size is a sure sign that something is amiss. Even though I disagree with their conclusion, I thank Mr. Meserve and the staff of the MLK Library for publishing this article and including their data, and for their efforts to improve our profession.

Sincerely,

Tony Greiner, Portland Oregon.

October 25, 2009

Mr. Meserve’s Reply:

Thanks to Tony Greiner for commenting (above) on our *RUSQ* article, which detailed the use of the Warner Model in developing a tiered reference service in our library.

Mr. Greiner comments that our article “misses” the issue of the “general decline in reference questions” fielded by our reference service and how these numbers might (or might not) be affected by the ways in which we adapted our service over time.

He is certainly correct in noting a decline in the overall number of reference questions over the time period that our study covers (August 2003 to May 2006). This is certainly an item of concern; we feel that reference service is crucial to both the university and the public communities.

The question Mr. Greiner raises—whether the use of paraprofessionals at the reference desk leads to a disinclination of patrons to use the service—is a good one. Unfortunately, the statistics that he cites are not adequate to prove his main point.

First, the King Library is a large and complex operation, with nine floors and multiple service desks providing information to patrons. As we all know, patrons will seek out information wherever they think they will find it. They don’t make a fine distinction between paraprofessionals and librarians. Consequently, the statistics gathered at the Reference Desk (second floor) are only a partial reflection of the effectiveness of the whole of reference service at the King Library. We used the data specifically to organize our service model and staffing pattern at the main Reference Desk.

Second, through training and close attention to the dynamics of the desk, we have worked to create a team approach to answering reference questions. Paraprofessionals and librarians work side by side, exchange information, and rely on each other’s strengths to provide effective service to desk patrons and to others by phone, e-mail, and chat. Reference services are also taking place at other desks and in the offices of both academic and public librarians—patrons are referred to subject librarians when their questions require further consideration.

We do not think that it makes sense to ascribe the drop in the numbers of reference questions (counted in the one venue) to the use of paraprofessionals working actively with librarians. In fact, the statistics show that the decline in questions answered (overall) was already well under way before February of 2005, when paraprofessionals were first used on the Reference Desk.

We agree with much of what Mr. Greiner says about the need for an effective reference interview and an intelligent and sensitive hearing of what patrons want and need. That is why we pay attention to training and to bringing all our skills and strengths together at the desk and throughout the library to deliver quality reference services.

We also think there is need to find out more about the decline in reference questions in our changing, technology-dominated environment. That was not the focus of our article.

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