Reference Services and Instruction
Rebecca Graff, Col. Ed.

Tracking Instructional Themes at the Reference Desk

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Introduction

Academic libraries play a vital role in supporting student learning by offering both structured instruction and point-of-need research assistance. While formal library instruction sessions are often planned well in advance, reference services provide a more spontaneous and personalized way for students to develop essential research skills. These interactions, whether brief or in-depth, can contribute to student learning outcomes (SLOs) related to information literacy. As libraries increasingly seek to demonstrate their impact on student success, assessing the instructional value of reference services is an opportunity to do so. This case study describes one library's approach to reference service assessment by aligning data collection with SLOs, offering a model for how academic libraries can better capture and communicate the instructional value of their reference services.

Literature Review

In 2003, librarians at the University of Illinois-Springfield published an experiment assessing reference interactions as a teaching and learning activity. They observed, "the context of reference transactions usually differs from classroom library or bibliographic instruction."[1] They also described differences between planned instruction sessions and point-of-need instruction at the desk. Classroom instruction is planned with specific outcomes in mind, but reference questions are more unpredictable, and a librarian typically does not have a prepared response. While the preparation may be different, the skills being addressed are remarkably similar across both modes of instruction.

In 2019, VanScoy introduced a pedagogical framework for analyzing point-of-need information literacy instruction, distinguishing among conceptual knowledge, understanding principles, procedural knowledge, and knowing how to perform tasks. Her analysis of reference transcripts shows that most instruction focuses on procedural knowledge, such as search strategies or citation formatting.[2] These procedures and skillsets are covered extensively in classroom instruction sessions. If what students are learning in a reference interaction is so similar to what is covered in an instruction lesson, we should be tracking it as part of our overall instructional program and including these data in assessment.

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Stoddart and Hendrix (2017) offer a potential solution by redesigning intake forms to capture learning-related activities at the reference desk.[3] Current (2023) extends this conversation by presenting a systematic approach to tracking SLOs during reference interactions at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse. Using a tagging system, librarians associated each interaction with one or more of ten departmental SLOs.[4] The study reveals consistent patterns in which learning outcomes are addressed and correlations between interaction length and instructional depth. Together, these studies underscore the evolving role of the reference desk in academic libraries as a site of meaningful learning. By aligning with departmental and institutional outcomes, employing pedagogical frameworks, and embracing assessment, libraries can more effectively demonstrate their value and enhance student success.

Case Study

Georgia Gwinnett College (GGC) is a four-year, public college located in Lawrenceville, Georgia. In fall 2024, GGC enrolled more than 12,000 students, about 76% of whom were from Gwinnett County. Established in 2005, and initially accredited in 2009, the college now offers more than twenty majors with flexible scheduling and an average class size of eighteen students. GGC has also been recognized as one of the most ethnically diverse Southern regional colleges.[5] Kaufman Library is located at the center of campus, and the reference desk is directly adjacent to our circulation desk on the first floor of the building. During the library's regular schedule, the reference desk is staffed by a librarian from 9:30 am to 8:30 pm, except on Fridays, when we close at 6:00 pm. Our reference desk is consistently utilized by our students.

Kaufman Library onboarded their first Assessment Librarian in the summer of 2024, along with a new Head of Research Services, with the clear goal of working together to improve the assessment of library instruction and reference services. At that time, the existing tracking system was working relatively well to count the number and length (in minutes) of reference interactions. We track more than 500 reference interactions per semester, which averages out to approximately twenty-five interactions per week. Most of the interactions were what we call "Quick Reference Questions," meaning the interaction lasted five or fewer minutes. We wanted to revise the tracking form to include a way for librarians to capture the instructional topics and SLOs being addressed during each reference interaction. One goal was to enhance our assessment methodology by moving away from simple tallies and counting minutes spent on a transaction. The larger goal was to capture more substantive data to give us insight into the learning experiences of students at our reference desk.

Our library uses LibInsight, a Springshare product, to track and analyze data on interactions at our circulation and reference desks. This allows us to edit the tracking form at any time. The form already allowed librarians to record the length of each interaction and the method (e.g., walk-up, phone, online chat). There was also a section for librarians to record general information about the type of interaction. After discussing it with all the librarians who work at the reference desk, we revised this section of the tracking form to include instructional topics as shown in Figure 1. The left column shows the options already in use, and the right column shows the specific instructional topics that we added. This list was formulated by brainstorming the topics that commonly come up at the desk for point-of-need instruction and consulting our library's SLOs. We mapped each instructional topic onto our library SLOs to show that students are engaged in relevant learning experiences while asking questions at the reference desk. The library's SLOs are:

- Students will use library resources to find and select appropriate information sources.
- Students will identify information needs relevant to an assignment or research topic.

- Students will identify effective keywords for searching.
- Students will evaluate source types, including scholarly sources, popular sources, and AI-generated content.
- Students will demonstrate an effective search strategy.

As shown in Figure 1, both columns were retained as part of the form. The idea was for librarians to be able to capture as many distinct types of interactions as possible.

Figure 1. Reference transactions section of the LibInsight tracking form.

This form is open to further revisions as we continue to enhance our assessment methods. Training was provided to all librarians who work at the reference desk to establish consensus about how to categorize different types of reference interactions. For example, some reference interactions may include multiple questions on multiple topics. So, we decided to use the "select all that apply" method. This makes the data analysis more complex, but we feel that it is important to capture all the learning outcomes being addressed in each interaction.

After collecting data with the revised tracking form, we can see which topics and SLOs are most prevalent in reference interactions. LibInsight provides data exports as an Excel spreadsheet, which allows for various calculations and analysis. For spring semester 2025, the most common topics were known item searching, suggesting keywords, developing research strategy, and database searching. Each of these topics are mapped to one or more of the library SLOs. This data allows us to quantify the learning experience that we provide to our students at the reference desk, which helps us tell the story of how reference services contribute to our library instruction program and overall student success.

Conclusion

The implementation of this new and improved tracking system at Kaufman Library has provided valuable insights into the instructional impact of reference desk interactions. By mapping common reference topics to established SLOs, the library has created a framework for assessing and communicating the educational value of reference services. The data collected during spring 2025 highlights the prevalence of key research skills being addressed, reinforcing the library's role as an active contributor to student learning. Moving forward, continued data collection and analysis will support ongoing improvements, ensuring that reference services remain a vital component of the academic library. Future research should explore how these approaches can be scaled, standardized, and integrated across diverse library contexts.

References

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