
Using Peers to Shed Light on Service Hours for Librarians

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Purpose

Public service hours for many academic librarians have changed within the last decade. As reference statistics have declined, so, too, have job descriptions changed for the typical reference librarian.

The academic library community hears terms more commonly such as outreach, liaison work, embedded librarianship, consulting hours, scheduled appointments, etc., for what used to be normal service desk hours. With a changing service model comes accountability. How do institutions account for these new forms of work and duties that have replaced traditional service desk hours? How does this feed into performance or merit review?

While it may be common to hear about other service models from colleagues at other institutions, taking a deeper look into the granularity of service hours and reallocation of hours was never done from our academic peer network. We knew anecdotally that other libraries may have reduced hours, but we did not know how a service model translated to fill in hours formally worked by librarians at a traditional reference desk.

With a phased library renovation taking place over the next two years, the University of Dayton's Roesch Library wanted to explore other reference department service models. The willingness and desire to explore other models was based on steady in-person levels of support that had flattened over a two-year period. The library also wanted to see what its peer groups of institutions were doing for librarians who previously worked reference desk hours but may have changed their service models recently.

Design/Methodology/Approach

A total of 25 peer institutions was identified by the provost office institutional researcher. This list consisted of both in-state and out-of-state institutions that were similar in either student population size or demographics based on a private, faith-based institution. These institutions are common in campus discussions centering on academic programs, campus services, and faculty salaries.

With the help of an undergraduate honors student intern and a member of the library's assessment team, a process was developed to construct a survey centered on gathering more information on reference service models. Reference service model literature was given to the student intern to gain a better perspective of current service models. With supervision, the intern worked to identify the contact information for individuals identified as head of reference services or similarly titled department head positions.

Next came the survey design. The goal of the survey was to gain a better perspective on the current state of an institution's reference service model, department composition and size, reallocation of service hours previously worked by librarians, and what, if any, efforts were being identified to account for equality among public service librarians.

Following the survey design, a Google form was developed to capture responses. The survey was sent to all 25 peer institutions. Follow up e-mails and calls were sent by the intern to institutions who had not responded to the initial survey. In all, 17 institutions responded and their survey results compiled for presentation at the 2016 Library Assessment Conference.

Peer institutions who responded to the reference survey

American University	Miami University
Baylor University	Ohio University

DePaul University	Saint Louis University
Drexel University	Santa Clara University
Duquesne University	University of Cincinnati
Fordham University	University of Denver
Hofstra University	Villanova University
Lehigh University	Xavier University
Marquette University	

Findings

Our overall findings supported some initial anecdotal thoughts believed to exist at our peer institutions with their reference service operations. While reference staff and service desks varied from institution to institution, the clear majority indicated that reference librarians have reduced or will be reducing their public service hours.

In terms of a service model, responses indicated a wide variety of existing service models and staffing approaches. Of the 17 responses, six indicated a combined service desk model, five had traditional reference desks, two were consultation only, and five noted as “other.”

A combined service desk was defined as a desk that provided other services in addition to traditional reference support, such as circulation or information technology support. Traditional reference desks were defined as a service desk that is primarily responsible for providing reference support. A desk that was consultation-based only was defined as an area where librarians provided assistance either behind a desk or in an area that was not viewed as a traditional service desk. The term “other” was used to capture arrangements that did not fit the other service definitions, such as office visits or perhaps satellite hours.

In terms of librarians staffing a service desk that provides reference, only four institutions indicated a librarian staffed solely. The rest indicated a mix service approach, with some institutions having librarians staffing alongside other non-librarian personnel or librarians being on-call or librarians that came out to specific areas to engage their clients. The survey analysis painted one overall clear picture. The traditional reference desk is a minority in terms of a service operation.

The next question for us was to examine what public service librarians are doing, if they are not working behind a traditional service desk or if they have seen their hours reduced over time. Overall, we saw trends that indicated a mixed amount of other activities. For example, one institution indicated that their public service librarians are now seeing increased library instruction loads, others saw more hours spent hosting chat reference, or had more hours allocated for liaison responsibilities.

These trends may have a tie into the overall decrease of in-person reference questions we continue to see in national trends. For example, if an institution sees fewer drop-in complex questions, some possible reasons could be related to the accessibility of more library resources via discovery layers or with students being exposed to more library instruction. If the goal of library instruction is to increase information literacy and to enable our students, with more instruction comes the possibility of lower in-person reference statistics.

The same reasoning goes for other modes or functionality for reference support. Another example would be librarians seeing more hours supporting instant message or chat. This may be attributed to increased chat locations. Chat windows that traditionally live on “Ask a Librarian” pages are now seeing widgets incorporated into discovery layers or other products like LibGuides or local course management systems.

Another reason or trend noticed for reduced reference desk hours was attributed to growing liaison responsibilities. While we did not drill down to the level of what those responsibilities were, the assumptions would be a mixed approach of research or reference support for academic departments. While liaison duties were noted, we believe this could be an area of greater exploration.

For example, what would be the core set of liaison duties that everyone does and is accounting for? We traditionally look at fulfilling liaison responsibilities by looking at our collection budgets and how many classes we may have taught for a department. Could there be more to benchmarking liaison duties?

The trend for reducing librarian service hours continued when we asked the question, “Have reference hours for librarians declined and are you planning to change your service approach?” From the 17 institutions that responded, only five indicated they do not plan to change their service approach. The remaining 12 indicated they will or already have made a change to the service approach for reference support from librarians. This, we believe, answers our main question whether or not reference or research departments are adapting to the needs of their local environment. To notice that this change includes 70% of our respondents is a clear indication that our peer network is working to address the needs of their users in a more effective way.

Following this section of questions, we focused on finding out what was filling the previous void of prior or future reduction reference service hours. We labeled this section of questions as reassigned time. The top five survey results indicated: 31 percent of institutions were looking at librarians hosting more library instruction sessions; 23 percent indicated librarians were attending more meetings internal to library operations; and 11 percent indicated more collection development, followed by satellite hours (11 percent), chat coverage (5 percent) and other (17 percent).

The last focus of our survey dealt with equity of reassigned time. This was by far the most diverse in terms of responses. The question that comes to mind is, if you have a librarian who hosted five or six hours a week and now only works two hours of service hours, what are they now doing with their time and how does that compare to fellow colleagues within a department or unit in the library? Another situational analogy would be if you had two librarians who liaised to an equal number of departments, but one saw higher institution loads and reference appointments because of their ability to engage faculty. How does that compare to the other librarian supporting a similar department size, but sees less instruction or reference activity?

Some open-ended responses included:

- “Working on a workload policy.”
- “We have no formal way to do this. The campus plans to do a workload study for faculty.”
- “There isn’t an issue with equity or fairness. All developing their own customized liaison plans that takes into consideration their academic unit assignment(s) and are planned considering the unique cultures of departments or schools with which they work. They also have other areas of expertise or focus (digital scholarship, govt docs, e-learning, undergraduate learning, etc.”
- “Because individual librarians are very different, and needs of the departments they liaise to are very different, and the librarian job descriptions are different, equity is not always relevant.”
- “Working on an assessment of that right now but will never be equitable.”

Practical Implications

We went into this survey project to help address three needs of our service environment: investigate the current state, impact on a renovation, and future planning. By surveying our peers we were able to gain a better perspective of the current environment of reference support services. Reference department sizes varied, but we were able to see those institutions that have already transitioned to reducing librarian public service hours or were planning to in the near future. This current state of change for reference departments illustrates the current needs and demands of the clients they serve.

The University of Dayton will be undergoing a phased renovation of its library. The renovation is expected to reduce its service footprint temporarily for at least one semester while this renovation takes place. Since service space will be reduced, it will allow us to explore models of service that do not necessarily rely on a service desk. For example, we could revisit institutions who operated higher appointment-based operations and see how scheduling was handled or how office hours were promoted across campus.

We are fortunate that our library culture has a general acceptance of change and that our service models vary based on demand and what our data analysis has showed. Because of this we generally make changes to our reference support model that fits both the needs of our students and the abilities of our reference librarians. We do anticipate taking bits and pieces from what we saw from our survey

results and seeing what works and what does not work for us.

The larger and future question for us, as it seems for a number of institutions we surveyed, ties back to question of equity and merit. We believe librarians, for the most part, will have to showcase their value-added services to the departments they liaise with to illustrate their impact and benefit on campus. While collections migrate to more digital and on-demand content, and libraries increase for space, librarians can no longer assume a passive role in thinking that students will always seek their assistance. This is clearly evident with reference statistics declining nationally. How do you ensure you have everyone onboard and accounting for an equal amount of work? While it is easy to measure the amount of hours worked at a desk, when those hours are

decreased or removed entirely, librarians have responsibility in showing their benefit to the library.

In conclusion, institutions have either had long histories of either providing public service or limiting service hours. For institutions that have migrated away from a standard reference desk model, we hope that our survey results shed light on other factors including staff performance, service outreach effectiveness, and task distribution for librarians who are no longer responsible for hosting service hours. While each institution will vary and have different dynamics that influence supporting services, we hope the survey will highlight factors to consider for institutions considering changing to a different service model to meet new library demands.

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