Evaluating reference consultations in the academic library

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Why evaluate consults?

• 54,175 reference transactions
• 1,323 consults
  o 45% 30-60 minutes

(McGill Library 2014-2015)
How do you define a consult?

• Consultations, reference meetings, appointments, RSVPs, “book a librarian”

• Consults are “in-depth, personalized instructional research sessions” (Gale & Evans, 2007).

• “a reference service in which the librarian meets with a student in a scheduled session away from the reference desk” (Magi & Mardeus, 2013).
Research questions

Why do users book consults?
What occurs during a consult?
How helpful do users find consults?
To what extent do consults address and fulfill university values?
Literature review & environmental scan

• Satisfaction-style surveys
  o Faix, MacDonald, & Taxakis, 2014; Gale & Evans, 2007; Magi & Mardeusz, 2013
• Citation analysis
  o Reinsfelder, 2012
• “Not counting what counts”
  o Savage, 2015
• Scoping review
  o Fournier & Sikora, 2015
• Student interviews
  o Bielat & Arnold, 2016
• RUSA best practices, ACRL guidelines
• Environmental scan & assessment listservs
• Fact-finding interviews with liaison librarians
  o Typical consult
  o Perspective on evaluation
Creating and distributing the evaluation tool

- 7 questions + comments
- Feedback from:
  - McGill Library Assessment Advisory Committee
  - Liaison librarians
- Paper based pre-test
- Review of online survey platforms → Google forms
- Bit.ly
- Librarians provided with:
  - Custom link to evaluation tool
  - Draft email text
  - 3 reminders
Response rate

- 98 invitations sent
- 53 total responses
- Response rate: 54%
2. What was the purpose for booking your most recent consult? Select all that apply:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coursework/Assignment</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>41.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis or dissertation</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>39.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-sponsored (non-funded) scholarly research</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsored (funded) scholarly research</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other activities, including general interest</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient care</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. What did your consult help you with?
Select all that apply:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifying or locating specific information/resources</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>71.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving my skills in using one or more resources</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>69.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning how to access print or electronic materials</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving my ability to use software</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. How helpful was your consult with the above?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helpfulness</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very helpful</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not helpful</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total responses</strong></td>
<td><strong>53</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. To what extent did the library staff and the consult address the following values?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Did not address this</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Completely addressed this</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
<th>Total responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The consult facilitated excellence in teaching, learning, or research</td>
<td>1 (1.9%)</td>
<td>1 (1/9%)</td>
<td>38 (71.1%)</td>
<td>2 (3.8%)</td>
<td>42 (79.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The librarian/library staff responded to my information needs</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (1.9%)</td>
<td>46 (86.8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>47 (88.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The consult reflected a respect for my confidentiality as a library user</td>
<td>1 (1.9%)</td>
<td>2 (3.8%)</td>
<td>35 (66%)</td>
<td>14 (26.4%)</td>
<td>52 (98.1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Typical comment responses:

“I have booked many appointments with [the librarian] to get help with researching databases. [They are] **AMAZING**, very helpful, passionate, knowledgeable, patient, and friendly!”

“I’ve learned so much from these appointments that has been **crucial** to my research and course work and always **highly recommend** fellow students to use this fabulous resource!”

Recommendations & next steps

- Conducting survey on a sampling basis
- Remove or revise problematic questions
- Mandatory questions
- Change distribution process
- Incentive?
- Adapt the tool for other reference interactions
Thank you!

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References & image credits


- Reinsfelder, T. L. (2012). Citation analysis as a tool to measure the impact of individual research consultations. College & Research Libraries, 73(3), 263-277.


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