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Academic Library Literature Evaluation:
Exploring *Reference & User Services Quarterly*,
Journal of Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery & Electronic Reserve,
and *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*

Introduction

In order to learn more about an issue in academic librarianship, and to learn more about the journals that publish articles related to academic librarianship, I was asked to read and evaluate three articles from three different journals on a topic of my choosing. In addition to summarizing and analyzing the articles themselves, I was asked to go on to analyze the journals based on the articles I had read.

I wanted to look at articles that addressed the controversial topic of non-librarians staffing academic library reference desks. More specifically, I wanted to know whether academic libraries were in fact staffing more non-librarians at reference desks and whether or not they were finding that strategy successful. Considering the conversations I have heard among librarians, I thought I would find more articles on that precise topic. However, there are few recent scholarly articles on the topic. The three most relevant and current articles on the topic were found in *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, *Journal of Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery & Electronic Reserve*, and *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*.

Reference & User Services Quarterly (RUSQ)

"Reference Desk Staffing Trends: A Survey" (Banks & Pracht, 2008) best matched the topic I had hoped to explore. The researchers sought to determine what effect, if any, the widespread decrease in reference desk inquiries has had on the staffing of non-librarians at academic library reference desks. The question asked was both timely and relevant. Like many articles related to library services in the past several years, this article was likely spurred by the 2003 *OCLC Environmental Scan* that reported a marked decrease in the use of reference and other library services. If people aren't using the reference librarians like they used to, how are reference desks changing in response?

To explore the current staffing practices of academic libraries with 5,000 to 15,000 students, Banks and Pracht distributed a survey to 51% (191) of the total number of institutions of this size (371) (p. 55). After pilot testing, the twenty question online survey was sent to the Head of Reference of each randomly

selected institution. Occasionally, the Head of Reference could not be identified, so the survey was sent to a department email or to another librarian. 53% (101) of the surveys were returned (p. 56), meaning the results of the survey represent only 27% of the total academic institutions of the target size. As a result, one must be cautious about applying the conclusions formed from this survey to the entire group of mid-size academic institutions.

The survey responses revealed that 62% of the surveyed libraries used non-librarian staff at their reference desks, and 62% of those libraries began doing so within the last ten years (Banks & Pracht, p. 56). When asked why they used non-librarian staff, many said they did so because the practice was “more cost effective and freed up MLS personnel for other responsibilities” (p. 56). 75% of the libraries reported using non-librarians to staff them anytime, while another 13% percent used them for nights and weekends only. The remaining 12% used non-librarians only to cover the desk during reference meetings or similar gaps in the schedule (p. 56). Such staff worked anywhere from a couple hours a week to over 25 hours, with most working sixteen to 25 hours per week. 92% of libraries utilizing non-librarian personnel left the staff alone at the desk, and 36% left them without a degreed librarian anywhere in the building (p. 57).

In addition to questions of scalability, the survey results may also be seen as slightly out of date. The date of the survey is unknown, but presumably occurred in 2005 or early 2006, as the findings were first presented at the 2006 ALA conference. The results do not offer a truly current picture, as they were around three years old when they were published in *RUSQ* in the Fall 2008 issue nearly a year ago. It would be interesting to see if more libraries are moving toward the use of non-librarians at academic reference desks in 2009.

Despite some issues related to small sample size and perhaps currency, it does reveal how some academic libraries are utilizing non-librarian staff. In this way, the article contributes greatly to the sparse current literature on this topic.

Journal of Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery & Electronic Reserve (JILDDER)

“Reference Staffing: Common Practices of Medium-Sized Academic Libraries” (Brunsting, 2008) also presents the findings of a survey of academic library reference desk staffing practices. However, this article addresses a wide variety of staffing issues beyond those related to the use of non-librarian staff. Brunsting wanted answers to numerous questions related to common staffing practices, including who is staffing the desk, how many questions are asked, whether non-librarian staff are used, and what factors are considered

in make staffing decisions (p.153). As she states in her introduction, answers to these questions are essential for library leaders attempting to justify their own staffing practices.

Brunsting distributed her pilot-tested online survey to the directors of 404 of the 434 “medium-sized, four year, academic libraries” in the United States (p. 155). Medium-sized libraries were defined as those with 3,000 to 9,999 students. Excluded libraries included virtual campuses with no physical library, Spanish-speaking institutions, and those with invalid email addresses. Though 65% of the universities (261 from 42 states) responded to the survey, there were a number of problems related to respondents leaving the survey unfinished and misinterpreting the meaning of some questions (p. 156). However, efforts were made to state which data were affected and how the errors were corrected when attempts to correct the data were made.

Brunsting’s survey revealed the majority of libraries surveyed continue to staff desks strictly with degreed librarians. Only 37.1% of reference desks utilize “support staff or students in some way” (p. 158). It is rare for such staff to man the desk in the absence librarian: tiered models where librarians are on call rather than scheduled at the desk constitute only 4.7% of the libraries surveyed. Reasons offered for sticking with the librarians-only model included “tradition and a commitment to the highest standard of service” (p. 161). The “number of staff available” and the “number of hours the library is open” were the two most important factors in deciding what staff types would be scheduled, though a numerous other factors are considered (pp. 168-171). Readers interested in the remaining results of the survey unrelated to non-librarian staff should peruse the original article.

Conducted in spring 2006, around the same time as the Banks and Pracht survey, this survey may be considered slightly out of date to be a truly current snapshot. However, this survey is far more scalable since it had a much larger percentage of respondents. Many of the statistics in this article conflict with those in Banks and Pracht (2008). It is likely that Brunsting’s results are more accurate due to her sample size, but the differences may also be the result of the slightly different selection criteria, and the fact that they did not have identical samples or respondents. Inclusion of the text of the original survey questions at the end of the article allows the reader to see the exact wording of the questions used. That, combined with the author’s own admission of potential weaknesses of the results, instills a sense of the researcher’s full disclosure that Banks and Pracht lack.

Because of the scope of the survey, this article is even more important than the Banks and Pracht survey discussed earlier. In addition to providing much needed answers to the questions about the use of non-librarian staff, it addresses a wide variety of topics that are equally useful for library leaders responsible for making reference desk staffing decisions.

The Journal of Academic Librarianship (JAL)

“Reference Transactions Analysis: The Cost-Effectiveness of Staffing a Traditional Academic Reference Desk” (Ryan, 2008) looked at reference desk staffing from another angle altogether. This article presents a study of reference desk transactions with the goal of determining what percentage of queries can be handled by paraprofessional or student staff. The author then goes a step further to assess the cost-effectiveness of staffing the reference desk using the traditional librarians-only model. The answer to these two research questions is vital to justify the use of non-librarians versus librarians at the reference desk.

Ryan analyzed questions asked at a single academic library’s reference desk over the course of a 2 month mid-semester period during four different years (2002, 2003, and twice in 2006 -- to account for changes over time) (p. 391). The 4,331 questions were categorized by type: directional or machine related questions that were not information related (“location of the restroom, a campus building,” or “copier problems”), directional (where something is in the collection), look-up (“known item search”), technology (use of library “hardware or software”), and reference (pp. 391-392). The reference category was further divided into eight categories so that they could be analyzed for complexity in order to determine whether a reference librarian might be required to answer them.

36.3% of the questions were not information related at all. 15.4% were “collection-oriented directional inquiries,” 9% were simple known item searches, and 12.4% were related to library technology (largely related to computers and software) (Ryan, p. 394). These four categories, consisting of questions that few would argue require a degreed librarian’s assistance, make up 73.2% of the total questions asked. The analysis of the reference category and its subcategories is lengthy, and the reader should refer to the article for the details if interested. The author concludes that many of the reference questions (about 15%) fall into a gray area: most could be answered by a well-trained staff member but there is room for debate. According to Ryan, only the 11.3% of questions she categorizes as “research” are clearly best answered by a degreed librarian (p. 395).

In order to assess the cost-effectiveness of traditional librarian-only staffing, an hourly wage equivalent was calculated. Ryan then finds that the average cost to the library per question is \$7.09 when a degreed librarian staffs the desk (p. 396). She further concludes that an average of 3.6 questions requiring a librarian are asked each day. “With librarians working the desk for 12 h[ours] each weekday, the efficiency in staffing a desk for that long for less than four research queries a day must be questioned,” she asserts (p. 397). Non-librarians staffing the desk instead would result in “a cost savings of \$774 per week” (p. 397).

Ryan's research is similar to others' that concluded most questions asked at reference desks could be answered by non-librarian staff. When reading her review of the literature it was tempting to ask if her research really was all that unique. However, she did take a slightly different approach than the others and added the brief cost-effectiveness component. It also must be noted that her research is truly a case study and does not necessarily reflect the situation at other universities. Regardless, her research confirms what other studies have concluded, adding more weight to the argument for the use of non-librarian staff at reference desks. Her conclusion very clearly compares her results with the results of other similar studies, and they are remarkably similar.

Journal Comparison

Reference & User Services Quarterly, *Journal of Interlibrary Loan*, *Document Delivery & Electronic Reserve*, and *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* are largely similar, though differences do exist between them, with *JILDDER* being least like the other two. The scope of each journal is slightly different, though there is obviously some overlap since each published an article on this topic. The *RUSQ* website states the journal "includes all aspects of library service to adults, and reference service and collection development at every level and for all types of libraries" (2008, para. 1). *JAL* attempts to cover anything and everything related to academic librarianship, or as the publishers put it, *JAL* "focuses on problems and issues germane to college and university libraries" (Elsevier, 2009, para. 1). *JILDDER* has a much different focus, as the title implies, addressing the "broad spectrum of library and information functions that rely heavily on interlibrary loan, document delivery, and electronic reserve" (Taylor & Francis Group, 2009, para. 4). It seems quite odd that an article strictly about reference desk staffing would appear in a journal of this type.

Each article is written in a similar formal and academic style. It is readily apparent that each is from a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal, rather than a magazine-style publication like *Library Journal*. This fact was further confirmed by each journal's website (*RUSQ*, 2008; Elsevier, 2009; Taylor & Francis Group, 2009). Both *RUSQ* and *JAL* require submissions to use the *Chicago Manual of Style* for their citations, while *JILDDER* uses *APA Publication Manual* citation style.

All three articles present appropriately rigorous research. It is difficult to assess the relative rigor of research required by each journal by looking at just one article from each. Brunsting's article in *JILDDER* appears to be more rigorous research than Banks and Pracht's article in *RUSQ*, both in terms of the research itself and the way it is presented. However, this may reflect the individual author(s) more than the journal: Brunsting may have submitted her article that way rather than the editor's requesting that she be

more thorough in her presentation. Perhaps the Banks and Pracht article would have been accepted by *JILDDER* had they submitted it there instead of to *RUSQ*. Ryan's article in *JAL* seems similarly rigorous to Brunsting, but again, it is difficult to say whether that can be contributed entirely to the journal. All three articles present appropriately rigorous research.

RUSQ is likely to be among the most widely read journals on academic librarianship, while *JILDDER* is probably among the least read by reference librarians. Researchers should consider the breadth of readership of a journal, as well as the relevance of the topic to that journal's audience, before deciding where to submit manuscripts. Overall, I believe that any of the three would be great choices for submitting a manuscript, though I would hesitate to submit a clearly reference related article to *JILDDER*.

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