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Much has been written about the importance of graduate assistants at the academic library reference desk yet little has been done to gauge how effective training programs are in comparison with the kinds of questions students are likely to receive. This study analyzes the training program at one academic library to determine if the approach used adequately prepares students for the most common questions they are likely to encounter. Using a sample of actual questions asked at the reference desk, the training program graduate assistants receive was assessed to determine how well the type of training offered matched the most common types of questions asked. The study finds that the training program does a good job of preparing students for certain kinds of questions but overlooks other important areas.

Headings:

Reference services -- North Carolina

Reference services -- training -- evaluation

Reference services -- usage

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Student assistants -- training

ASSESSING THE TRAINING PROGRAM FOR NEW GRADUATE ASSISTANTS:
ONE INSTITUTION'S EXPERIENCE

by
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Introduction

A common joke that library students hear from those who have little knowledge about the profession asks: “So....have you taken the class on how to say ‘shhhhh’ yet?” If only it were that easy. For those who work in an academic library while attending school it quickly becomes obvious that something more than producing sibilant silent sounds is necessary to becoming both comfortable and proficient while working a reference desk. Something more than “shhhh” is required but what that is isn’t always clear. This thesis looks at one institution, the Davis Library Reference Desk at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, and investigates what graduate students who staff that desk are receiving for training and how well this prepares them for what library patrons are most likely to ask.

The Walter Royal Davis Library is one of the centerpiece libraries on the UNC – Chapel Hill campus. Eight stories tall, it houses the majority of the humanities and social science collections as well as federal, state, local, and international government documents, geographic information systems (GIS) data and services, microform collections, and much, much more. In tandem with many of the other campus libraries, Davis Library provides access to an ever expanding array of both print and electronic resources and given this complex information environment, it is expected that at some point patrons will require assistance finding the information they need. The reference desk remains one of the key public service points where these needs are expressed.

UNC - Chapel Hill is also home to one of the most highly ranked schools of library science in North America. It is from the ranks of the graduate students enrolled in the School of Information and Library Sciences (SILS) that the majority of graduate assistants who staff the Davis Library Reference Desk are drawn. For some of these students it is their first opportunity to work in reference at an academic library and it can provide an invaluable real-world experience to accompany their class work. It is also a chance to test the waters of their chosen profession.

This paper was born out of the desire to take a closer look at how graduate assistants are introduced to an academic library reference job. While there is much in the literature on reference desk staffing, the important role graduates and paraprofessionals play in staffing, and even the kind of training they receive, there is scant information on the kinds of questions that patrons are really asking and how training programs are preparing tomorrow's librarians. The question has important ramifications for those who provide and receive assistance from the reference desk. A more targeted training program would allow graduate assistants to more or less know what to expect when working the reference desk. It could also give them an edge in answering common questions more effectively in less time. It also has the potential to make a reference transaction more satisfying for both the patron with an information need and the graduate assistant with a desire to provide the best service possible.

Literature Review

Much of the literature on reference desk staffing cites the importance of student assistants (both undergraduate and graduate) and paraprofessionals to academic libraries and there is reason to believe that many library services would be severely reduced or eliminated were it not for their efforts. There are a host of reasons why student assistants and paraprofessionals are utilized in academic libraries. Among the more common justifications are 1) the cost-savings realized from lower wages and the concurrent ability to staff services and projects, 2) the mix of experience and backgrounds that student assistants and paraprofessionals bring, 3) the ability of students and paraprofessionals to better understand and assist members of their own community, and 4) (particularly for graduate assistants) the opportunity to work in a professional setting. In virtually all areas of the academic library student assistants and paraprofessionals play a vital role.

While at first glance this role might be obvious for public service points like circulation where student labor is ubiquitous it also has its place at the academic library reference desk. In McCarthy's 1984 article on the topic she notes:

“In 1975, it was reported that 69 percent of medium sized academic libraries had non librarians working at their reference desks. In 1981, when the topic was discussed by representatives of large academic reference departments at ALA, someone asked what libraries do not use paraprofessionals at their reference desk, only one hand was raised.”

More recently, Womack and Rupp-Serrano (2000) surveyed reference departments at academic institutions that conferred ALA-accredited MLIS degrees and found that 6

percent of reference departments employed graduate assistants. “75 percent of undergraduate library reference departments and 62.5 percent of the main library reference departments hired graduate assistants.” Increasingly student assistants are being utilized to staff the reference desk.

Not only does the literature suggest that student assistants are necessary for staffing needs but it also states that they can be effective at providing reference assistance. In 1986 Hernon and McClure added to the already growing literature on reference staff accuracy in answering patron questions. They state that, “...regardless of library type or department, reference staff tend to provide a 50-62 percent accuracy rate factual and bibliographic questions.” Later studies showed that 61 percent of questions answered by graduate assistants and paraprofessionals at the reference desk were done so either correctly (36 percent) or correctly-but-incomplete (25 percent) (Christensen, Benson, Butler, Hall, & Howard, 1989). This is not far from the “55 percent rule” stated by Hernon and McClure. Aluri and St. Clair (1978) in their study of reference work at a university library found that only 13.3 percent of questions answered required professional expertise. Murfin and Bunge (1988) also found that 50.5 percent of paraprofessionals at the academic library reference desk answered patron questions successfully and satisfactorily while professional had a slightly better success rate (60.4 percent.) The study goes on to show that professionals have a definite edge when it comes to conducting the reference interview, utilizing resources, and leaving patrons satisfied with the service and answers they have received. Clearly professional experience helps in providing service and answers to patrons in an academic library but it

is also recognized that graduate assistants and paraprofessionals can make an important contribution to reference desk work.

The importance of using student assistants is not only institutional and departmental it can also be personal. While for many student assistants a job in the library may simply be a way to pay for college, graduate students studying for an MLIS often see work at the reference desk as a job in their chosen profession. Womack and Rupp-Serrano call this experience an apprenticeship and the term suggests that for graduate students pursuing degrees in information and library science that working at the reference desk carries much more significance than it might for other kinds of employees.

These two circumstances, the increasing use of student labor in academic libraries and the desire on the part of MLIS graduate assistants for an apprentice-like experience, necessitate some kind of critical examination of the kind of training that this group receives. While articles and research addressing the specific needs of MLIS graduate assistants are rare there is a relative abundance of material on the need for orientation, training, management, and evaluation of student assistants and paraprofessionals in general.

“Properly trained assistants can obviously provide better public service than those who have received little or no instruction.” (Woodard & Van Der Laan, 1987). This may seem to be stating the obvious but the interpretation of just what constitutes training for student assistants at the reference desk varies widely from institution to institution. Womack and Rupp-Serrano (2000) found that of the 57 reference departments they surveyed half provided ten hours or less of initial training while another quarter provided

more than 25 hours of training. The form of that training is broken out by percentage in the table below.

Table 1:

On-the-job-training	100%
Individual instruction	91.3%
Group orientation	82.6%
Written materials	82.6%
Observations	60.9%
Worksheets	39.1%
Role-playing	21.7%

It is important to note that training in the reference departments surveyed often included more than one method. The statistics above tell us how often a given method of training was used.

White's 2005 masters thesis titled "Public Service Training of Student Assistants at the Reference Desk in ARL Libraries," also found similar results. Of the 70 libraries surveyed student reference assistants received an average of 14.74 hours of training, with the median number of hours being 10. In ranking the top ten training methods employed by ARL libraries White found the following methods and percentages: On-the-job training (91.1%), individual instruction (97.8%), group orientation (66.7%), written materials (86.7%), observation of the desk (64.4%), and role playing (28.9%). Clearly on-the-job training and individual instruction are the preferred means of training student assistants at academic libraries.

Of particular importance to this study are how students are trained, what they are trained in and what, if any, connection training has to actual work performed while at the reference desk. While there are some answers to the first two topics the third is rarely, if ever, treated as a relevant to the discussion. Few studies have assessed how well the

information provided to student assistants and paraprofessionals for reference desk training matches the kinds of questions they are likely to encounter in their first few weeks on the job. The relevant literature on what kinds of questions reference desks deal with is often anecdotal but provides a few relevant clues.

Heinlen's 1976 article on setting up an information desk in the reference department at California State University, Fresno gives some useful, if unscientific, statistics. Eight hundred ninety six questions were tallied and of those 70 percent dealt with "the internal operation of the library." What this means is not precisely stated but the phrase apparently includes questions regarding the library facility as well as queries about where to locate specific books. "External facts" (i.e. "What is the population of Peru?") occupied 11 percent of the total (102 questions) while "research questions" accounted for 19 percent of the total (164 questions.) The study is primarily driven by one person's interest and the methods behind data collection and categorization are not provided. Libraries have also undergone substantial changes with the advent of the internet and likely both data and categories have shifted since the 1970's.

Current literature on the kinds of questions being asked at the academic library reference focuses almost exclusively on electronic formats. E-mail, chat, and instant messaging (IM) services are a popular topic among library and information science scholars. Diamond and Pease (2001) analyzed 450 reference transactions received over a two year period via e-mail at the Meriam Library, California State University, Chico. They found that "Questions answered using standard reference resources" occurred the most frequently followed by "Starting points for term papers and assignments," "Specific factual but not ready reference," "Catalog look-up and use," and "Library policies,

procedures, and referral to other departments.” Andrew’s (2004) masters thesis on usage patterns of AOL Instant Messenger at the Undergraduate Library at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, found that in the period between June 2003 and May 2004 “finding articles/subject-based research was the most frequently asked question-type (668) followed by “library information” (551), “known item/holding” (388), and “technical problems/network” (136). It is important to note that while such research is obviously important it is only one aspect of reference desk work and questions received either in-person or via phone are rarely mentioned in contemporary library science literature.

We know from the literature that an effective orientation and training program establishes a solid foundation for employees, alleviates workspace tension, and makes for a more productive workforce. Yet few studies have assessed how well the information provided in training for the reference desk matches the kinds of questions new librarians and student employees are likely to encounter in their first few weeks on the job. Existing literature treats reference desk training and the type of questions reference desk staff typically receive as separate topics that bear little correlation to each other. For example, Pedzich’s (2000) article on training paraprofessionals for work at a law library lays out recommendations for orientation and training but provides no research and no data to back up her claims. Lichtenstein’s (1999) article on a similar topic counsels that library training should be tailored to the kinds of questions that patron’s ask and while he lays out some resources that answer these common questions, the queries themselves are never defined and there is no supporting data other than the experiences of the author. Data that is collected on the kinds of questions that patrons ask at a reference desk tends

to center on a particular technology (i.e. instant messaging, chat, or e-mail) and is rarely, if ever, used to draw conclusions about how training new reference desk staff might best be approached. Without a picture of reference desk activities that includes the kinds of questions that patrons ask as well as the formats in which patrons ask those questions it seems difficult to construct a training program based on anything other than personal experiences of the trainers. The existing literature does little to refute this claim.

Methodology

The study began with a simple survey distributed via e-mail to all the reference librarians currently staffing the Davis Library Reference Desk. It was thought that if anyone had a sense of what the most frequently asked questions would be the librarians who regularly staff the desk would. The survey consisted of one question: “In your opinion, what are the ten most frequently asked questions that occur while you work the reference desk?” The results of this survey were used to devise a schema that would later be used to help codify the data collected at the Reference Desk.

After results from the survey were collected, analyzed, and a codification schema developed, a two-week data collection trial was undertaken. Questions identified from the survey of librarians were given an alphanumeric code and registered in an index to match the code with the question. New questions from the data collection trial were also assigned a value as they occurred and totals for all questions were recorded at the end of each work shift. The development of this schema was vital for several reasons, the most important of which were privacy and efficiency. No data on patrons was ever recorded at any point during the data collection process; nevertheless patron questions can often contain elements of a personal nature. Substituting a simple alphanumeric code for a particular question made it possible to record the gist of the question without keeping track of the potentially personal details involved in its asking. This code and a corresponding schema also made it easier to record data while working. When a

particular question was asked (i.e. “Where’s the bathroom?”) a simple hash mark next to the appropriate code could be made. An index of codes made it possible to keep codes straight.

This schema was used and expanded upon throughout the rest of the data collection process. The process lasted approximately four months and took place every time the investigator worked a shift at the Davis Library Reference Desk. These shifts typically occurred Tuesday from 12 – 2 p.m. and Sunday night from 5 – 10 p.m. Only questions posed to the investigator were recorded; questions posed to other staff members were not a part of this study. All questions asked were recorded as was the format in which the question was asked (i.e. in person, phone, instant messaging (IM), and chat.) No question or transaction was deemed to insignificant to record. Thus, questions like, “Where’s the bathroom?” and transactions as simple as handing out interlibrary loan material or transferring a call to a librarian were recorded. Given the purpose of the study – to assess the training program by means of finding out what patrons use the reference desk for – any analysis would be incomplete without a full representation of the questions that are typically asked.

As questions were gathered and assigned the appropriate code they were also divided into specific categories. These categories were: research, ready reference, bibliographic, procedural/directional/instructional, library facility, library policy/services, phone, ILL. These categories were partly derived from Woodard (1989) assessment of an information desk staffed by graduate students and nonprofessionals at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. Assigning questions to an appropriate category allowed a quick, general assessment of what kinds of questions patrons ask the reference

desk and gave an indication as to what the training program should initially focus on.

Briefly, here's a description of the kinds of questions assigned to each category:

- Research – Questions that either required a level of investigation beyond simple factual queries ready reference or that involved the provision of an advanced search strategy.
- Ready reference – Questions that require relatively quick, factual answers that could be answered with the collection at hand. Also included here were direct patron requests for materials contained behind the reference desk.
- Bibliographic – Queries about whether or not a particular item was in the library's collection or where such an item could be found. Tracking down citations, finding conference proceedings, or researching the publication history of a particular title are also examples of the kinds of questions tallied here.
- Procedural/instructional – Questions that began with the statement "How do I...?" were recorded here. "How do I find a book after I have call number?" is a common example. Also tracked here were requests on how to utilize specific databases or the process involved in printing items from the computers in the information commons.
- Library facility – Questions dealing with various aspects of the library facility itself (restrooms, pencil sharpeners, copiers, staplers, elevators, location of other campus libraries, etc.)
- Library policy/services – Questions regarding the policies and services offered by any of the campus library were listed in this category. These questions often dealt

with either circulation or interlibrary loan issues (renewals, overdue fines, etc.)

but also include study room reservation policies and reference desk policies.

- Technology issues – Questions regarding Geographic Information Systems (GIS), scanners, wireless connectivity and similar computing issues.
- Phone – Incoming calls that require the transfer to a specific member of the reference staff.
- ILL – Patron requests to pick up or drop off of interlibrary loans. (The reference desk at Davis Library serves as the pick-up and return point for nearly all Interlibrary Loan materials. These transactions make up a small but consistent portion of desk work.)

At the end of the data collection period totals were calculated for each question type category and for each question and the occurrence of each question type for a specific format (i.e. chat, IM, in person, phone). This allowed an assessment of both what patrons are specifically asking, the question types that are most common asked at the reference desk, and in what formats questions are posed. The results were then compared against the kind of training that new graduate student assistants receive before they work at the reference desk.

Results

After the end of the data collection period questions regarding library facilities and library policies occurred with the most frequency. The following table provides a more detailed summary:

Table 2:

Question Type	# of Questions	% of Total
Total	412	100%
library facility w/phone (request for librarian)	93	23%
library policy/service w/ILL	87	21%
library facility	67	16%
Research	57	14%
library policy/service	52	13%
procedural/directional/instructional	51	13%
bibliographic	41	10%
ready reference	43	10%
technology issue	37	9%
ILL	35	9%
phone (request for librarian)	26	6%
other	3	1%

The following questions were found to occur with the most frequency. The 23 most frequently asked are listed in Table 3 with the number of times they occurred as well as its categorization.

Table 3:

Question	Question Type	Number of Times Asked
How do I find something with this call number? What floor is this on?	procedural/ instructional/ informational	30
Can I borrow this item from the ready reference collection?	ready reference	24
Can you help me with research in [humanities]?	research	17
Can you help me find access to/information about this serial?	bibliographic	14
Can you help me with research in [social science]?	research	12
Can you help me with research in [outside category]?	research	12
Where are the bathrooms?	library facility	12
Can you help me find access to/information about this monograph (book, conference proceeding, etc.)?	bibliographic	11
Where is this item (e.g. encyclopedias, videos, dissertations, microform)?	procedural/ instructional/ informational	11
Can you help me with research in [general]?	research	10
Can you tell me about government documents?	library policy/service	9
Can you help me with the printers/photocopiers?	technology issue	8
Can you help me find access to/information about this article?	bibliographic	7
Can you tell me about reference policies?	library policy/service	7
Can you help me with the scanners?	technology issue	6
Where can I find a stapler?	library facility	6
Can you help me with wireless connectivity?	technology issue	5
Can you help save/manipulate my files?	technology issue	5
Can you help me with research in business?	research	5
Can you help me find information/map on a particular location (city, state, country)?	ready reference	5
Can you tell me about the circulation status of a book?	library policy/service	5
Can you tell me about renewals?	library policy/service	5
How do I find this book? How do I find these citations?	procedural/ instructional/ informational	5

The following data on the formats used were tabulated and the results are shown in Table 4. Questions asked in-person were the overwhelming format of transactions at the reference desk.

Table 4:

Question Format	Total #	% of Total
Total	412	100%
In person	318	85%
Phone	61	16%
IM	29	8%
Chat	4	1%

The tables below describe the most frequently asked questions for each question type (i.e. bibliographic, research, ready reference, etc.) and the number of occurrences.

Questions regarding serials were the most common bibliographic question followed closely by queries on monographs.

Table 5:

Questions (bibliographic)	# of Occurences
Total	41
Can you help me find access to/information about this serial?	14
Can you help me find access to/information about this monograph (book, conference proceeding, etc.)?	11
Can you help me find access to/information about this article?	7
Can you help me find access to/information about this database?	3
Other	3
Can you help me find access to/information about this government document?	2
Can you help me find access to/information about this thesis/dissertation?	1

Bathrooms, staplers, other library facilities – these were the most frequently asked questions in the library facility category. Results are shown in Table 6:

Table 6:

Questions (library facility)		# of Occurrences
Total		67
Can I borrow...		
	a stapler?	6
	a pair of headphones?	4
	a pen?	4
	a three-hole punch?	2
	a calculator?	2
	a floppy disk?	1
	a pair of scissors?	1
	a ZIP drive?	1
	a USB cable?	1
Where is/are the...		
	bathrooms?	12
	Other library facilities	6
	Southern Historical Collection?	2
	Health Sciences Library?	1
	North Carolina Collection?	1
	Rare Book Collection?	1
	Art Library?	1
	In-building facilities	5
	reference room?	2
	microfiche?	1
	browsing collection?	1
	circulation desk?	1
	photocopiers?	3
	lost & found?	2
	pencil sharpener?	2
	Vending machines?	2
	elevators?	1
	other entrances/exits?	1

	government documents?	1
	color printers?	1
	water fountains?	1
	a particular staff member?	1
	ILL book drop?	1
Do you have any....		
	light bulbs?	3
	lost & found?	2
	pencil sharpener?	2
	plastic bags?	1
	typewriters?	1
	other entrances/exits?	1
Can we get access to/reserve a study room?		2

Questions regarding the library policies and services were broken out into circulation and reference based areas depending on their applicability. Overdue fines, renewals, and circulation status were common circulation questions asked at the reference desk. Government documents, reference policies, and interlibrary loans were common reference questions. A complete listing follows below:

Table 7:

Questions (library policy/service)	# of Occurrences
Total	52
Can you tell me about...	
circulation	22
the circulation status of a book?	5
renewals?	5
overdue fines?	4
borrowing privileges?	2
making change for a \$10?	2
library cards?	2

storage?	1
study rooms?	1
Reference	29
government documents?	9
reference policies?	7
interlibrary loan?	4
printing from the computers?	3
GIS?	3
access to online materials?	2
disabled services?	1
library hours	3

Help in using and deciphering call numbers was the most frequently asked question in the procedural/directional/instructional category. Directions to other resources (encyclopedia, film, etc.) and instructions on how to use the catalog were also common questions. Results are listed below:

Table 8:

Questions (procedural/directional/instructional)	# of Occurrences
Total	51
How do I find something with this call number? What floor is this on?	30
Where is this item (e.g. encyclopedias, videos, dissertations, microform)?	11
How do I find this book? How do I find these citations?	5
How do I use this catalog/database?	4
Other	1

The overwhelming majority of ready reference questions dealt with patrons asking for items they knew to be kept behind the desk in the ready reference area.

Information on particular geographic areas and their peoples were the next most common question for this question type.

Table 9:

Questions (ready reference)	# of Occurrences
Total	43
Can I borrow this item from the ready reference collection?	24
Can you help me find information/map on a particular location (city, state, country)?	5
Do you have tax forms?	4
Other	4
Can you help me find these statistics?	3
Can you help me find these sports statistics?	1
What genealogical resources does the library have?	1
What is the phone number for....?	1

Requests for help with humanities research occurred most frequently followed by social science, and “outside category.” “Outside category” refers to subject areas that the Davis Library does not collect for. “General” refers to research questions about which specific subject information was not able to be recorded.

Table 10:

Questions (research)	# of Occurrences
Total	57
Humanities	17
Literature	7
Film	5
Other	3
Drama	2
Social Science	12
Sociology	7
Political Science	2

	Statistics on a population	2
	Anthropology	1
Outside Category		12
	Law	5
	Other (non-library, non-academic)	3
	Health Sciences	1
	Forensics	1
	Art	1
	Physical Science	1
General		10
Business		5
GIS		1

Technology issues occurred with similar frequencies with questions on printers and photocopiers being the most common. Results are listed below:

Table 11:

Questions (technology issue)	# of Occurrences
Total	37
Can you help me with the printers/photocopiers?	8
Can you help me with the scanners?	6
Can you help me with wireless connectivity?	5
Can you help save/manipulate my files?	5
Can you help me with a GIS question?	4
Can you help me with this software?	3
Can you help me with getting access to this database?	3
Other	3

The tables that follow list the frequency that question types occur for a particular format (i.e. chat, IM, in person, phone). Each format seems to support certain kinds of questions more than others and it may be useful when approaching a chat or in person request to have some expectation as to what kinds of questions are likely to be posed.

These can also have an influence on when students should be trained to respond in particular formats.

As the table below shows, of the few chat reference questions received the majority dealt with bibliographic problems.

Table 12:

Question Type (chat)	Total #	% of Total
Total	4	100%
bibliographic	2	50%
library facility	0	0%
library policy/services	1	25%
procedural/directional/instructional	0	0%
ready reference	1	25%
research	0	0%
technology issue	0	0%
other	0	0%

Research oriented questions occurred with the greatest frequency in IM questions posed to the reference desk. Technology issues and questions on library policy and service also occurred with similar frequencies. The table below provides a more detailed summary.

Table 13:

Question Type (IM)	Total #	% of Total
Total	29	100%
bibliographic	2	7%
library facility	2	7%
library policy/services	5	17%
procedural/directional/instructional	4	14%
ready reference	1	3%

research	9	31%
technology issue	5	17%
other	1	3%

In person questions dealing with library policy and services and the library facility occurred with the greatest frequency. The table below provides a more detailed summary.

Table 14:

Question Type (in person)	Total #	% of Total
Total	316	100%
bibliographic	28	9%
library facility	64	20%
library policy/services	38	12%
library policy/services w/ILL	78	25%
procedural/directional/instructional	47	15%
ready reference	34	11%
research	39	12%
technology issue	31	10%

Questions about the library facility were the most common types of questions posed by phone. Other major categories – bibliographic, library policy, and research – generally occurred at the same frequency. The table below provides a more detailed summary:

Table 15:

Question Type (phone)	Total #	% of Total
Total	60	100%
bibliographic	9	15%
library facility	2	3%

library facility w/phone (request for librarian)	25	42%
library policy/services	9	15%
procedural/directional/instructional	1	2%
ready reference	4	7%
research	9	15%
technology issues	1	2%
phone (request for librarian)	23	38%
ILL	2	3%

Overview of the Training Program

The current practice for training reference desk staff is based on one-on-one time with subject specialist librarians, a brief overview of some of the more common reference desk facilities like staplers and floppy disks, and on-the-job training. Newly hired graduate assistants are given a tour of the reference desk area and meet staff and librarians and get an orientation to the department. Depending on schedules they later meet either one-on-one or in groups with librarian subject specialists who describe some of the more commonly used databases for areas in humanities, business, and the social sciences. An overview of government documents is also provided. After these meetings, which typically last for an hour and involve handouts for future reference, newly hired reference desk graduate assistants begin working the desk. On-the-job, learn-as-you-do-it experience is a major part of training at the Davis Library Reference Desk. Throughout this training it is impressed upon the new hires that librarians are always available to help and that no question is too small. At no point do newly hired reference desk graduate assistants feel as though they're in a "sink-or-swim" situation.

The current training program emphasizes three main areas: research, ready reference, and reference desk orientation. Reference desk orientation is stressed during a new hires initial visit to become acquainted with their new workplace and again during the government documents training session. This orientation can be considered as both training in the "library facility" and the "library policy/service" though it is specific only

to those areas and services with the reference department's domain. Subsequent visits to meet with subject specialist librarians emphasize different resources in research and ready reference. These visits usually last for an hour, cover a multitude of subject specific databases and print materials, and often include handouts for future reference. Graduate assistants typically learn how to handle chat and IM reference transactions after they have spent considerable time answering in person and phone queries. Training sessions, specifically for the scanners, are usually offered for the new hires as well.

Limitations of the Study

This study has a number of limitations. One notable limitation was that data collection was conducted by only one investigator. This has the potential to impact not only on the amount of data collected but also its quality. Although attempts were made to capture every datum, not every question was recorded. Human error and the occasional surge in traffic at the reference desk at times prevented a comprehensive capture of all questions.

Because no recording device was used, the recording of questions could have been flawed. Questions may have more than one aspect and the typical reference interview often elicits several questions which may venture far from the question originally posed. The investigator's interpretation of what a patron was really asking is in the end a subjective interpretation that may not be an accurate reflection of the true nature of a particular patron's question. Occasionally patrons ask a series of questions over an extended period of time as they conduct their research. These questions were recorded individually as separate questions. The reasoning behind this follows from the current statistics collection policies currently in place at the Reference Desk.

Another limitation of the method used for data collection was the limited variation in the days of the week and times of day questions were recorded. This has the potential to skew the results because different times of day and days of the year produce different kinds of questions. For example, patrons tend to approach the desk more during midterms

and finals as they rush to finish projects. Likewise, early morning shifts at the reference desk see fewer and different questions than afternoons and evenings. During the data collection period questions were typically recorded during two reference shifts, one during the week and one on the weekend, for a total of 7 hours per week.

Although every effort was made to record every question accurately one piece of information was not noted: time. Time is an important element in any reference transaction and it plays a critical role in determining how to structure a training program for new graduate assistants. For instance, technology issues often take a significant amount of time to address while ILL transactions are relatively brief. Although there may be fewer overall questions regarding digital scanners, the amount of training needed to answer these questions may take up far more time than for the larger number of ILL transactions. This directly relates to how training programs should be organized.

Finally, the assessment of the training program is based on the investigator's personal experience and reflection. Again, these are subjective assessments that may overlook key points and skew this projects conclusion. This study lacks the benefit that multiple pairs of eyes might have on both collecting data and on keeping data consistent and objective.

Discussion

Despite the clamor for digital reference in much of contemporary library and information science literature, the results of the study show that in person transactions clearly account for the majority of business at the Davis Library Reference Desk. Slightly less than half (46%) of all transactions at the reference desk were questions related to either the library facility or its policies and services. It is not a stretch to say that most questions posed to the reference desk are questions about how to use the physical library or where one of its many services can be found. This is no mean feat. Davis Library houses nearly 4 million volumes, is staffed by 20 full-time professional librarians and paraprofessionals, and provides a portal (along with the campus community), to over 600 online databases, and 60,000 e-journals. Its size alone guarantees that navigating its departments and services and learning its organization takes time for patrons and for new graduate assistants attempting to help those patrons.

Thus, for all the enchantment of the digital world, the physical still exerts a considerable pull and this has important ramifications for training new graduate assistants. While it is clear that navigating the physical library is often why patrons approach the reference desk it is also necessary for graduate assistants to have some background in common technology issues, conducting reference research, resolving bibliographic queries, and ready reference. The question frequencies in each of these

categories were similar and this implies that reference desk staff is expected to be a jack - of-all-trades.

There are notable areas in which the current training program does not prepare newly hired graduate assistants for work at the reference desk and these include: bibliographic searches, library facilities and library policy/services offered beyond the reference desk, technology issues, and procedural/directional/instructional queries. Each of these areas is covered in more depth below.

Bibliographic searches involve searching for information about known items (serials, monographs, etc). These were found to account for 10 percent of all transactions at the reference desk. Current training for new hires at the reference desk for handling bibliographic searches involves the admonishment by librarians to get familiar with the catalog. This is no easy task and the recent conversion from one OPAC to another and all of the attendant problems that resulted have made it difficult for even long time staff to navigate UNC – Chapel Hill’s catalog. Catalog proficiency extends not only to navigating that portion of the catalog available to the public but also to the staff mode that allows reference desk staff to see when new materials, particularly serials, have been checked in. And while it is essential that graduate assistants become intimate with how to sift through the library’s holding it is also as important for graduate assistants to be proficient in the use of WorldCat and other library OPACs as these resources are frequently employed in doing bibliographic research. At the moment current reference desk practices do not provide for this kind of training in anything other than the on-the-job format.

Linked to proficiency in using various online catalogs is the ability to find a physical resource in the library's stacks. Procedural/directional/instructional questions accounted for 13 percent of all reference transactions and of these the majority dealt with questions about how to locate a particular call number. For infrequent users stepping into a library of nearly 4 million volumes this is not intuitive knowledge. Complicating factors include different layouts for different floors and sections of the libraries, different call numbering schemes for microforms and government documents, and different locations for materials based on size (folios). These are complicating factors not only for Davis Library but also for the other libraries on campus that patron's utilize that house other kinds of collections (videotapes, rare books, manuscripts, maps, etc.). Even with previous experience in other academic libraries it takes time for newly hired graduate assistants to become familiar with how the collection occupies a physical space. The process of using a call number to find a book may be the same from academic library to academic library but every building and every library have their own quirks. It is important that newly hired graduate assistants both know what those quirks are and explain them clearly to users who may not be familiar with the library. Current training for the Davis Library Reference Desk does not take this aspect of the job's requirement into account. A potential way to train students in this aspect of the job would be to search for and physically retrieve books certain materials from both the reference room and the library stacks.

Physical knowledge of the library also becomes important in helping patrons with questions regarding the library facility. These are usually mundane and very simple to answer but they account for a significant portion of overall queries. Staplers, bathrooms,

water fountains, and the like are the little things that patrons often need and a successful reference encounter with these very basic questions can set the stage for more complex queries later on.

Related to physical knowledge of the library is knowledge regarding the policies and procedures of its various departments. It is often helpful and more satisfying for both the patron and the librarian to provide basic information about circulation policies, technical services (i.e. the time and steps involved in processing books and serials), and interlibrary loan rather than referring patron's elsewhere. Certainly detailed questions need to be referred to the appropriate department. However some review of basic policies and services of various library departments provides a deeper sense for graduate assistants of how the library functions and how it can best respond to user needs.

Technology issues are a particularly tricky set of questions that reference desk staff faces. These range from the simple, "How do I e-mail this article to myself?" to the online request for assistance in dealing with a printer jam in a nearby dormitory. By virtue of having to work with digital collections reference desk staff has to be technologically savvy. However, the range of questions and the complexity of those questions are sometimes beyond the scope of the job. The current training program for newly hired desk staff typically includes an hour learning how to use the scanners and the common problems that patrons face. Photocopiers/printers and wireless connectivity are not areas covered by the current training program. A run through of the steps involved in making copies and an overview of where wireless connections can be made (and by who) could go a long way towards making new graduate assistants feel comfortable with the majority of the technology issues that newly hired reference desk students face.

These suggestions are made only after looking at the available data and recognizing areas in which the current training program provides little or no support. Research has and will continue to have a vital role in the life of the academic library reference desk and it is important that new staff begin to acquire the skills necessary to deepen their knowledge and ability to answer these kinds of questions. On-the-job training is likely one of the most effective means of reinforcing those research methods and resources taught during meetings with subject specialist librarians. However, there are other aspects of reference desk work that, while they may appear basic, are essential to users and to new graduate assistants working to help them. Knowing the library facility – its organization, structure, policies – is a key component for success at the Davis Library Reference Desk.

Conclusion

The librarians that staff the reference desk and train new graduate assistants go a long way towards making those assistants feel supported and appreciated. This is reflected in the fact that subject specialist librarians meet for an hour at a time with students to review commonly used resources in particular academic disciplines. This goes some way towards preparing students for answering research questions at the desk. A brief orientation also serves as a means of knowing where some of the most commonly asked for resources are located and what reference policies are. However, as the results indicate, there are notable areas in which the current training program could be strengthened.

These kinds of questions – bibliographic, library facilities, technology, and procedural/directional/institutional – are often not the kinds of questions that attract scholarly attention and often, given their pedestrian qualities, can be overlooked by library staff as too common to be worth reflecting on. But it is precisely these kinds of questions that patrons ask the most frequently and that new graduate assistants struggle to answer as they continue to learn about the library's catalog, its circulation policies, and the quirks of how the library's collection is laid out. Laying a good foundation in these areas may provide graduate assistants with increased confidence and better skills in navigating user needs.

In an ideal world librarians could provide this kind of training to new graduate assistants as well as opportunities for a continual updating of skills. In the real world librarians and students must deal with multiple competing pressures that limit their time. One solution might be to devise a workbook for graduate assistants to move through as they learn their new job. Such a workbook might involve using several OPACs to answer bibliographic questions, finding answers to common library policy questions, and physically retrieving resources from various portions of the library building. While the initial investment in librarian energy to create such a workbook would be considerable it would relieve them of having to explain these things in a piecemeal fashion and provide a basic foundation in how the library works. According to Womack and Rupp-Serrano, worksheets account for slightly less than 40% of training methods employed at academic library reference desks but they may be a way to provide training in aspects of reference work that currently get overlooked.

Given trends in library budgets and recent surge in librarianship as a career choice it seems likely that graduate assistants will continue to staff reference desks for some time. This study goes some way towards exploring what kinds of questions graduate assistants can expect to face as well as how the current training program at Davis Library both satisfies some demands of the job but could be improved in others. Hopefully, more resources will be devoted to this topic. It can only help to foster more informed and confident librarians and more satisfied users.

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