

Evolving Models of Reference Staffing at the University of Kansas Libraries

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The proliferation of digital resources and technologies, coupled with a general decline in reference questions asked in research libraries, have brought new dimensions to librarianship and traditional reference services at ARL libraries. At the University of Kansas (KU) Libraries, reference services have evolved and been reconfigured several times over the past decade. Modifications to the service model have been made in response to changing user behaviors and technologically enhanced access to scholarly resources, and to focus on better utilization of library faculty time. In recent years, for example, librarians have assumed greater responsibilities while facing increased demands on their time, with expanded leadership roles in areas such as open access publishing, copyright consultancy, data services management, and classroom teaching. Given these changes in emphases, KU Libraries' reference services have evolved to include formerly non-reference staff (i.e., paraprofessionals) who did not normally work in public service areas, but who nonetheless expressed a desire to work at the desk as a way to enhance their own skills. Over time, this staffing model has proven successful and, through a series of changes to the overall reference model, has been retained as an innovative and effective way to expand reference services and tap into expertise offered by library paraprofessionals.

Early Changes

Prior to 2002, KU Libraries had a traditional reference staffing model in Watson and Anschutz Libraries, which together contain the bulk of the collections for the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. Each library had its own reference desk and department, staffed by subject librarians housed in those locations. Due to anticipated budget cuts in 2002, the library administration implemented a pilot project integrating the functional units of reference and access services across the Anschutz and Watson Libraries. Following the departure of the head of Anschutz Library in 2002, it was decided that the position would not be filled. Instead, the library administration merged these separate reference departments, and the new combined unit was led by two co-coordinators. While it took some time for librarians and departmental staff to become used to the new arrangement and to working at both reference desks, eventually all made the transition. It was also during this same period that chat and instant messaging modes of communication were introduced as part of reference services, staffed separately away from the desks by librarians.

In 2004, within two years of the merged approach, the library administration introduced another new reference staffing model, which was christened the "peer and tier" model and was based on the Brandeis Reference Model. This new model's central feature was to place students and paraprofessionals at the Watson and Anschutz reference desks, backed up by librarians in their offices. Librarians, it was presumed, would concentrate on other duties, including outreach to academic departments, basic and

advanced instruction, and staff training for desk services. In addition, librarians would be “on call” to assist desk staff with complex research questions. It should be noted that most of the students hired to work in the peer and tier structure were undergraduates, not graduate students.

At this juncture, since librarians were working fewer hours at the reference desks, overtures were made to paraprofessional staff from other areas of the libraries—interlibrary loan, cataloging, and other library branches—to consider volunteering to perform reference desk service to augment other reference paraprofessional staff still performing this work. Many staff responded to that call and their presence helped maintain the reference desk schedule to meet user demand. Training was largely handled by librarians who provided overviews of their subject areas, and focused most especially on databases and other resources to answer questions that were posed at the desks. The volunteer paraprofessionals were trained in a variety of subject areas and became important service providers at the reference desks.

In 2005, reference services were reorganized again by the library administration in an effort to become a more user-centered library and the merged reference department was entirely dissolved. The peer and tier reference model was retained, along with the service of the staff volunteers. Librarians, for their part, became part of discipline-based Subject Councils. Reference activities were overseen at that time by a new position called the “head of outreach.” In addition, circulation and reference services were combined behind one central service desk in Anschutz and Watson Libraries, and student IT workers were assigned to work at the combined service desk to handle increasing amounts of technical-related questions.

Feedback from Faculty and Students

It can be seen, then, that between 2002 and 2005, the reference model at KU Libraries had changed from a traditional one, to one in a near constant state of evolution. These changes, despite the intentions behind them, ultimately proved not to meet the information needs of library users who expressed their concerns about service quality via a LibQUAL+® survey administered in 2006. As it turned out, faculty in particular desired the librarians to return to the reference desks to provide the specialized level of research assistance they and their students were so sorely missing. Comments by faculty were noteworthy in their support of a return to a more “traditional” reference model where staff, as opposed to students, served as the first point of contact at the public service desks. The 2006 LibQUAL+® survey also coincided with a nearly complete turnover in library administration and the arrival of a new dean of libraries.

Thus, in January 2007, under the direction of a new administration and a new reference coordinator, the peer and tier model was abandoned and KU librarians returned to staffing the desks in Anschutz and Watson Libraries. While undergraduate students no longer played a role at the reference desk, the reference volunteer staff was most definitely retained. In fact, a more formalized research specialists program was initiated that summer, based on the volunteers from other library units who had already been a part of the service since 2004. New recruits for the research specialists program were solicited as well. In addition, the previous practice of hiring graduate student assistants to work over the evening and weekend hours was resumed. Undergraduate student workers previously employed for reference services were refocused to serve the circulation department.

Current State

Since 2007, even with no established “reference department” within the KU Libraries, reference services has come to rely on a core group of librarians, library staff from other units, and graduate student assistants to provide reference services at the combined reference and circulation desks. The cohort of staff who provide these services are housed in several library departments, including Research Services, Instructional Services, Collections, Preservation, Acquisitions, and Cataloging. In addition, the number of graduate students working evening and weekend hours in both Watson and Anschutz Libraries has been doubled. While the Watson reference and circulation services are still offered from one central service point, Anschutz Library was converted in 2009 to a “learning studio” environment, designed to accommodate student needs in a more comprehensive and holistic way. Part of that reconfiguration resulted in the establishment of a service island—a shared information desk—where staff from IT, reference, and Student Success now work in concert to identify and respond to a variety of student questions and make appropriate referrals.

Due to its past success, the research specialists program was reinforced and formalized as a way to continue to address staffing needs for the desks. Each volunteer was required to have supervisory permission and agree to a list of expectations for working at the desks, including the following:

- Commit to 4 hours of desk time each week.
- Attend all training sessions as scheduled.
- Attend the monthly reference/instruction meetings.

The table below depicts the total numbers of various staff and the hours worked per week at Anschutz and Watson Libraries from 2006 thru 2012. On average, the number of librarians has remained consistent at about 16 staff, as has the number of research specialists. However, the number of graduate student assistants has increased dramatically over the years as a result of staff reassignments and shifting schedule needs. In 2006, librarians generally worked at the reference desk six hours per week, and by 2012, averaged between two and four hours per week. Essentially librarians’ time commitment for reference desk duties has been reduced by approximately 50% (i.e., decreased from 80 hours to 42 hours per week between the two desks.)

Table. Reference Staffing Levels at Anschutz and Watson Desks, 2006–2012

	2006		2008		2010		2012	
Staff Level	No.	Weekly Hr.	No.	Weekly Hr.	No.	Weekly Hr.	No.	Weekly Hr.
Librarian	15	80	18	80	16	52	15	42
Research Specialist	14	102	17	96	16	84	15	56
Graduate Student	5	35	4	33	5	40	9	60
Total	34	217	39	209	37	176	39	158

Results from the LibQUAL+® survey in 2009 verified that library users saw an improvement in all services, including reference, since the previous 2006 LibQUAL+® survey. The research specialists program has proven to be very successful and the libraries' service desks could not have been staffed without them during the past few years. These staff members have become an integral part of the reference team and bring a strong set of skills and knowledge from their areas. They enjoy serving the public and using their own specialized skills (developed in cataloging or in interlibrary loan, for example), augmented by training, as a framework with which to answer questions. They also benefit from the diversity of responsibilities they gain as a result of volunteering, meet new staff, and learn about the various ways a complex organization aids faculty and students in the research and learning process. In addition, many of these staff have earned or are working on their graduate library degrees in the interest of furthering their library careers. This experience has aided several in attaining professional appointments at other institutions or libraries around the country.

Conclusion

The roles of academic librarians will continue to evolve, as will the staffing models to provide reference services. As practitioners and lifelong learners, librarians are accustomed to acquiring new skills on the job and accept that change is constant in their environment. For the last six years, the reference staffing model at KU Libraries has proved to be successful and relatively stable. The contributions of the paraprofessional research specialists have played an important role in achieving that success. As noted in the discussion above, the reference staffing model using paraprofessionals has been retained throughout a period of consistent change at KU Libraries. It has allowed the libraries to tap into expertise of non-reference staff and has aided in the development and implementation of other services, including chat and IM. Further, librarians have been able to use time formerly spent at the reference desk for other professional activities.

As users' modes of inquiry continue to evolve, the KU Libraries' model will adjust to accommodate them in a changing technological milieu. Several questions have arisen of late within the KU environment that will require further attention. For example, is it necessary to have librarians with very specialized skills working at a general reference and information desk? Furthermore, is it cost-effective to have librarians provide only in-depth research consultations from their offices, meeting with users who drop in or by appointments? Will online or virtual modes of communication supplant the notion of a physical "service desk" entirely in the near future? The bottom line is that reference services in academic libraries and at the University of Kansas Libraries will continue to evolve, but will only remain vital as long as libraries continue to adapt to users' changing research needs and learning styles.

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To cite this report: Frances Devlin and John Stratton. "Evolving Models of Reference Staffing at the University of Kansas Libraries." *Research Library Issues: A Report from ARL, CNI, and SPARC*, no. 282 (2013). <http://publications.arl.org/rli282/>.