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No Longer the Sacred Cow – No Longer a Desk: Transforming Reference Service to Meet 21st Century User Needs

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Introduction

Twenty years have passed since Ford (1986) asked us to consider reference services without a reference desk. She challenged academic librarians to reflect on whether a reference desk was a vital service or whether it could be replaced by more effective practices. Her insights are now more relevant than ever as we witness independent student researchers shunning the reference desk and librarians needing more time to spend on instruction, faculty collaborations and other professional duties. It's unquestionably time to eliminate the reference desk and recognize that the services it originally provided have been replaced by course-integrated instruction and research assistance "on-demand."

The Reference Dilemma

Librarians' time on desk is frequently spent answering non-research questions which could be answered effectively by non-librarians or referred to a librarian as appropriate. Summerhill (1994) suggests that reference services centered on a desk is an "emergency" style service that is not cost-effective. Her studies show a more cost-effective model is to schedule appointments in the librarian's office where you have fewer interruptions, more time on task,

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and the librarian can be better prepared. LaGuardia (2006) agrees that a shift has occurred in the nature of reference questions which "tend to be more complex, more time-consuming, and larger in scope" (40). Campbell (227) suggests that our faculty and students have already decided that reference services are deficient by choosing to turn to search engines rather than enter a library and ask a question. "The search engines have already won the competition." Lipow (2003, 31) concludes that "point-of-need reference service has been an afterthought, something to be considered after the building's signage or the finding aids of the collections fail the user." While there are many reasons for this, the fact that students use Google to answer the ready-reference type of questions, and the overwhelming amount of information they have to grapple with when they start their research means that we need to have a place, apart from the traditional reference desk to provide adequate assistance to these users. "Public desks with ringing phones and users needing to know the locations of rest-rooms and pencil-sharpeners are not conducive spaces for answering this kind of question meaningfully!" (LaGuardia, 2003, 41)

Often questions require more time to answer because users must be trained on how to search electronic resources such as online databases. These in-depth answers have been referred to as "mini-instruction sessions" (Fritch and Mandernack 294) since the process often includes, "helping to develop the topic idea, lay out the structure of information (catalogs, indexes, web sites, email, usenet, etc.), explain and differentiate between types of information, provide an overview of general search strategies, demonstrate the use of a particular database, explain the interface, lead users in their search, direct them to where they can retrieve the materials found, and guide them in presenting their information clearly and appropriately" (Fritch and Mandernack 294-295).

In other words, we are conducting individualized instruction sessions. A look at the new library users' expectations and practices allows us to explore how we need to redesign our services to meet their needs.
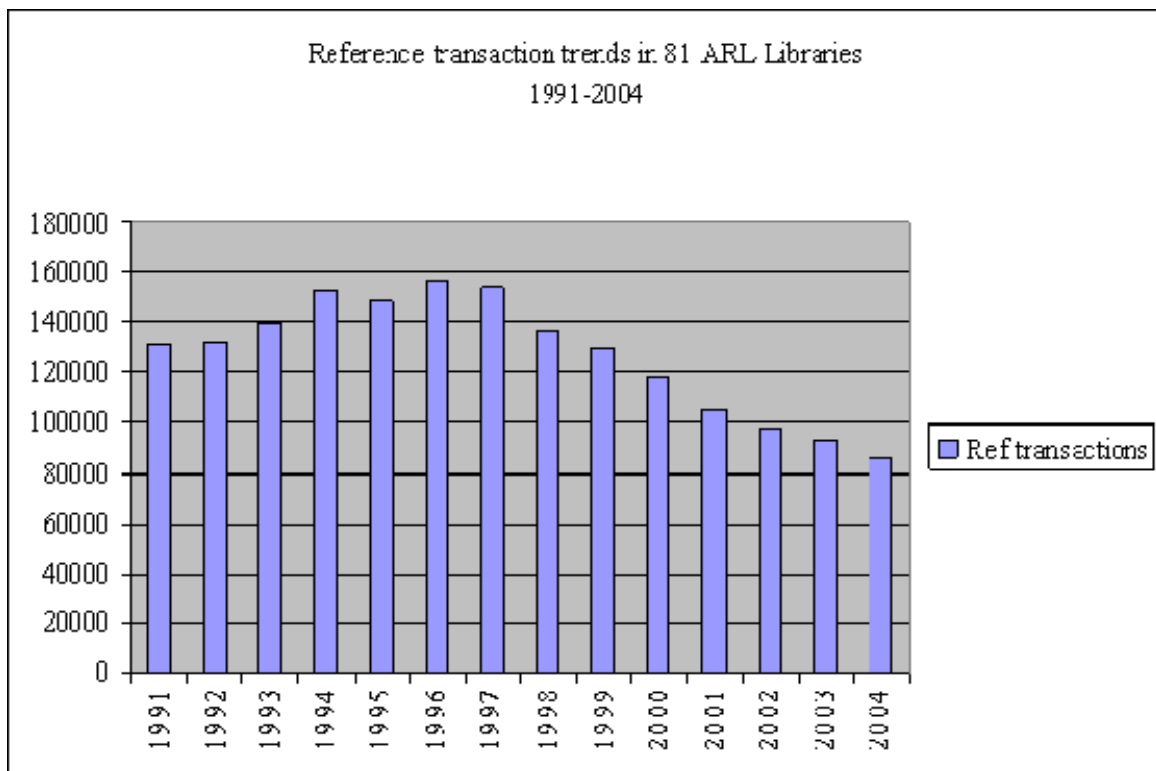
Changing User Expectations and Practices

The profession has for some time looked to the future and prophesied the demise of libraries as we know them, unless librarians quickly adapt to the needs of our future users (see Stoffle et al.; Troll, Budd, Lougee). Many difficulties noted in providing quality service arise from the fact that databases are as varied as they are numerous, there is no standardization, and their design, like that of web sites, is constantly changing. As Ezzell put it, "each vendor has its own method for designating truncation, proximity, and database fields… Exacerbating this confusion are the frequent changes in search software, search engines, and Web sites, which sometimes come without warning" (56). Software providers, library systems teams and many others have

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worked to make our interfaces more user friendly, more like Google. Because the library's web site is well designed, students may not need to come to the library to ask some questions. Having listened to the warnings that library systems were impossible to use and redesigned them accordingly, we now expect to have fewer reference questions at the desk and more independent users. In fact we have available numerous documents that associate declining reference statistics at the traditional reference desk with use of the Internet, remote access to the library, and increased ease of use of library systems, and institutionalization of formal information literacy instruction programs.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that desks are just not as busy as they once were. The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) statistical report of "Service Trends" shows a 34% drop in reference transactions from 1991 to 2004, with an average decline of 3.2% per year. Figure One below shows this graphically. What does this mean? Some believe that because of the influence of the web, most people now prefer online reference. If this is the case, then the usefulness of the reference desk is in question. Its past success may have been because it was the only option. Now that users have reference options such as email and chat, some may feel they have no need to come into the library.

Figure 1

Reference transaction trends in 81 ARL Libraries
1991-2004

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Many librarians are concerned about the consequences of closing down the reference desk, because this way of thinking assumes that library users can search for information independently. According to Fritch and Mandernack, "Technology has promoted a society characterized by independence and self reliance, convenience and immediate gratification" (292). However, the independence of library users may have originated in cultural forces other than Google. Is it not the very essence of American individualism and of our anti-elitist, democratic roots? Perhaps what we are seeing today is a resurgence of core democratic values: people do not want to appear uneducated, somewhat explaining the popularity of the "Dummies" series. When did we shift from the practice of going to an expert when help was needed? When did the idea of "Trust your car to the man who wears the star" and all that this advertising jingle implies, give way to the "Mr. Fix-it, DIY" ideas of another generation? Answers to these questions give us insight into the changes in our user population. Campbell also suggests that perhaps technology and the ease of use of our newly designed systems may not be the only reason reference statistics have declined. "causes likely have had to do with unwillingness to go to the trouble (trouble being walking to a library, finding a reference desk, waiting for a reference librarian, etc.) discomfort with interpersonal transactions, aversion to sharing one's ignorance with another, and just possibly, frustration over getting the wrong information almost half the time" (224). Clearly we provide services to students who would rather "do it themselves," students like the Millennials.

Students' Expectations and the Millennials

Considering that the service goal of reference librarians in an academic environment is all about students' needs, one may ask, how have students reacted to the wide array of services the library now provides? Students in fact have high expectations, so high that librarians are struggling to keep up. One of the terms most commonly heard at conferences lately is Millennial. This term refers to students in a certain age group, bearing distinct characteristics, who are now the primary group attending college. At the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) 2005 conference, Barefoot spoke about these students and their culture. Millennials were born after 1981, and are observed to be especially "persistent, scheduled, confident, pressured, and competitive." The technological changes in our culture have not only shaped, but perhaps even defined, the lives of students in this age group. They're accustomed to the pervasiveness of web use, having grown up with it as an ever-present phenomenon. This has an immediate impact on the expectations they have in the library: "…Exposure to rapid technological change in communications has led to students expecting similar changes in all aspects of their lives, in turn affecting their use of academic library services" (Koh 1).

Zabel, then president of the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), described the Millennials as follows: "This generation has embraced

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instant messaging, cell phones, mp3 players, and multitasking. I would venture that many Millennials view chat reference software as too stodgy" (104). Also at the ACRL Conference, Duck (qtd. in Zabel) characterized Millennials as "visually oriented, easily bored, very demanding, and used to having the best of everything" (105).

There is evidence that Millenials do not read as many books as prior generations have. According to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), in a report entitled "Reading at Risk," only 42.8% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 read literature. This is a decline of 17 percentage points from 1982. The obvious implication is that there is a tremendous gap between the cultural experience of most librarians and that of their users. Campbell noted ironically that college students "do not have our sensibilities about these matters. They did not have time to fall in love with the tactile experience of books" (226).

Aligning Our Objectives: Instructional Mission and the Reference Model

Academic librarians surely recognize that the instructional mission of our institutions drives everything we do in the library. As Budd summarizes, "Because of the universality of instruction, libraries at most institutions must exist to a great extent to facilitate teaching and learning. … It is imperative that librarians comprehend what is being taught on campus. In addition, it is extremely helpful to understand how content is being taught so that information and information services can most fully assist with education" (234).

Librarians in colleges and universities have undertaken a charge of responsibility to ensure that students' needs are best met no matter what kind of role-change this implies for them. In essence the librarian's underlying goal has not changed, but the arenas in which s/he must apply the goal have overwhelmingly expanded and continue to do so. Sitting behind a desk may no longer be the best way to provide quality service, and while we maintain the traditional goal, that doesn't mean we have to maintain the traditional methods. Rather, since librarians already work in the classroom, collaboratively with faculty, participating in online chats (IM and LIVE), responding to emails, designing online tutorials, updating the library's web guides, and so on, the best method may be to leave the old reference desk behind.

This is a description of the situation at many academic libraries, whether they have put a name on it or not. Increasingly the reference desk is no longer the center of service. In a paper presented at the ACRL 2005 Conference, Meldrem of Loras College, along with Mardis and Johnson of Northwest Missouri State University, spoke about the decision they made to "get rid" of their reference desk and replace it with a "Library Services Desk," in which circulation and reference are combined. The circulation staff does not answer reference questions, only directional questions, and actually calls a librarian

via walkie-talkie to come out to the desk and assist the student with any reference questions. Meldrem, explaining what lay behind their decision, stated that they "wanted to remain approachable." Due to an overwhelming decline in questions at the reference desk (from 20,801 in 1993–94 to a low of 1,405 in 2000–01), combined with the librarians' heavy workload and their need to make better use of their time, librarians were bringing other work to the desk and were therefore not as approachable because they always looked busy. Summerhill explains the economics of "queuing theory" stating that the librarian must be idle a certain amount of time or service will deteriorate. Using the new on-call system, librarians were able to accomplish all their work, as well as meet students' needs by being available when called upon. In fact Meldrem, et al., believe that the on-call system has actually improved their quality of reference service. Students appreciate that the librarians stop what they are doing and come out of their offices to assist them. Basically these transactions become the individualized instruction sessions discussed earlier. How has the implementation of broad-based instruction programs changed this?

One of the most proactive changes being made by librarians is to look at the nature of reference in this online environment, and how it is integrated with information literacy instruction, (ILI). This is our answer to Fritch and Mandernack who implore librarians to "foster new ways of communicating with information consumers to help them understand what they do not know, but think they know, about the structure of information" (9). Penhale argues that faculty and librarians creating well-tailored ILI assignments together minimize the need for reference. Additionally structuring the assignments at key points during the semester, so that librarians provide instruction or assistance at the moment of need makes these teaching opportunities especially successful. ILI embedded within a specific class or subject matter, with plenty of hands-on activities for students to really learn what is being taught, can eliminate many questions the students would have had while doing research for that class. This is the new form reference work is taking; only it's called instruction. Kwak describes the changing situation at a midsize academic library in Louisiana:

> "As the number of online databases...expanded simultaneously with the increase in distance education classes, the number of reference questions plummeted as did the intellectual quality of those questions. In order to help our students and faculty with these new systems, the reference faculty began an accelerated program of library instruction, created an electronic instruction lab, and developed handouts and users [sic] manuals describing how our students and faculty could access these databases from home, or from wherever they could get access to a computer. (3)"

Eliminating the reference desk has many positive effects. Librarians' time is freed up to provide in-class instruction. Demands for instruction are

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increasing as faculty see the benefits of spending class time reviewing the resources available to students as they are encouraged to use scholarly sources and challenged to do real academic work. It must be recognized that instruction is time-consuming. Beginning with the initial contact with the faculty instructor, the librarian must set learning objectives, design hands-on activities and handouts, produce relevant sample searches, and make plans for evaluating student learning to assure that objectives have been met. Additionally many times librarians provide graded assignments that form part of a student's overall grade in the class. Web guides, tutorials and other online instructional tools also provide support for the students. Time spent waiting for a question at a desk is better used designing effective instruction programs that have depth in the various majors as well as breadth across all academic programs. These programs will resonate with students as they easily connect their research assignments with the support provided.

LaGuardia (2003) argues that reference services need to evolve into research consultations. As mentioned earlier, the in-depth reference consultations become mini-instruction sessions. The librarian moves into a role of counselor or coach. Indeed the new role for the instruction librarian may be akin to "knowledge counseling" (Whitlatch). As subject liaisons they are ideally suited to coach students in need of assistance. They have close working relationships with their faculty and know the curriculum. They understand and perhaps even helped design the course assignments. Because they are responsible for collection development in these subjects, the librarians are also knowledgeable about the resources available both to faculty and students. Having the librarians so intimately involved in the academic programs of the institution may be just the solution to the 55% problem pointed out by Campbell, who cites studies that measure the success rate of reference services at between 50 and 60%.

In 1993 librarians from around the country gathered in Berkeley and then at Duke University to "rethink reference." These participants identified areas of reference services that would decline or disappear: Mediated online searching; the person with the MLS degree at the reference desk; building tours; long and customized bibliographies, guides and pathfinders; and the 'sit and wait' reference model (Lipow, 1993). At California State University, San Marcos (CSUSM) just 13 years later we confirm that this has come to pass.

Located in North San Diego County in a once rural but quickly developing suburban area, CSUSM is one of 23 campuses belonging to the State University system. A comprehensive university of almost 9000 students divided into three Colleges (Arts and Sciences, Education, and Business Administration), CSUSM is a commuter campus with a very small population living in on-campus housing.

The CSUSM Information Literacy Program came into effect in 1995 when the first wave of first-year students was admitted. Beginning with one

librarian, the instruction team is now comprised of six subject specialists and the coordinator. This tiered-approach to information literacy instruction provides depth and breadth as well as outreach to the community.

The CSUSM lower-division General Education program mandates that information literacy modules to teach and assess information competencies be included in each course. Current efforts include working with faculty to delineate and design assignments and to review competencies and ensure that either the instructor or library faculty is teaching them. Another major focus of our program is direct responsibility for the General Education Lifelong Learning course. The first-year experience course includes nine hours of information literacy instruction in a full semester three-unit course. In Fall 2006, 18 sections of GEL were offered, reaching approximately 70% of the first-year students. In addition to these courses, the librarians in the Program offer course integrated instruction averaging about 200 courses each year. These are offered at all levels but mostly upper division courses – some majors include ILI in each of their core courses. Each library faculty member has disciplinary liaison responsibilities for a specific department and collection development responsibilities for various subjects as well.

This extensive instruction program works collaboratively to support the all-University writing mandate that requires students to write 2500 words in each course. Many courses meet this requirement by having students do library-based research. The CSUSM computer competency requirement is an entry-level requirement has been enforced since the early years of our campus existence and ensures that all students have basic computer skills. The culture of CSUSM campus reinforces ILI as an integral part of numerous courses which require library-based research projects. Since teaching computer skills was never part of the ILI formula, we were able to quickly adapt to teaching critical thinking, information analysis and evaluation, thus responding to the needs of the net-generation and the Millennials.

Our ILI program guarantees that a large percentage of CSUSM students become familiar with library research. We're reaching greater numbers of students actively through the extensive ILI program, rather than passively at a reference desk, and those students who do have questions contact us directly because of this instruction. A librarian working with the core courses within a major quickly becomes a familiar face to the students as they work their way towards graduation. Our model focuses on the strengths of the subject specialist who knows the faculty, the courses and the assignments, in addition to having in-depth knowledge of the library collection and resources available for that subject. Perhaps branding it the "My Librarian" program would adequately portray the degree to which our reference service personalizes the assistance provided to students. Librarians' office statistics show high numbers of appointments, drop-ins, and emails from students who already know us, and give evidence to the popularity of our program – as seen in Figure Two below,

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and as compared to the transactions at the reference desk in Figure Three. Procedures for keeping statistics have become more robust and may explain some of the increase in numbers.
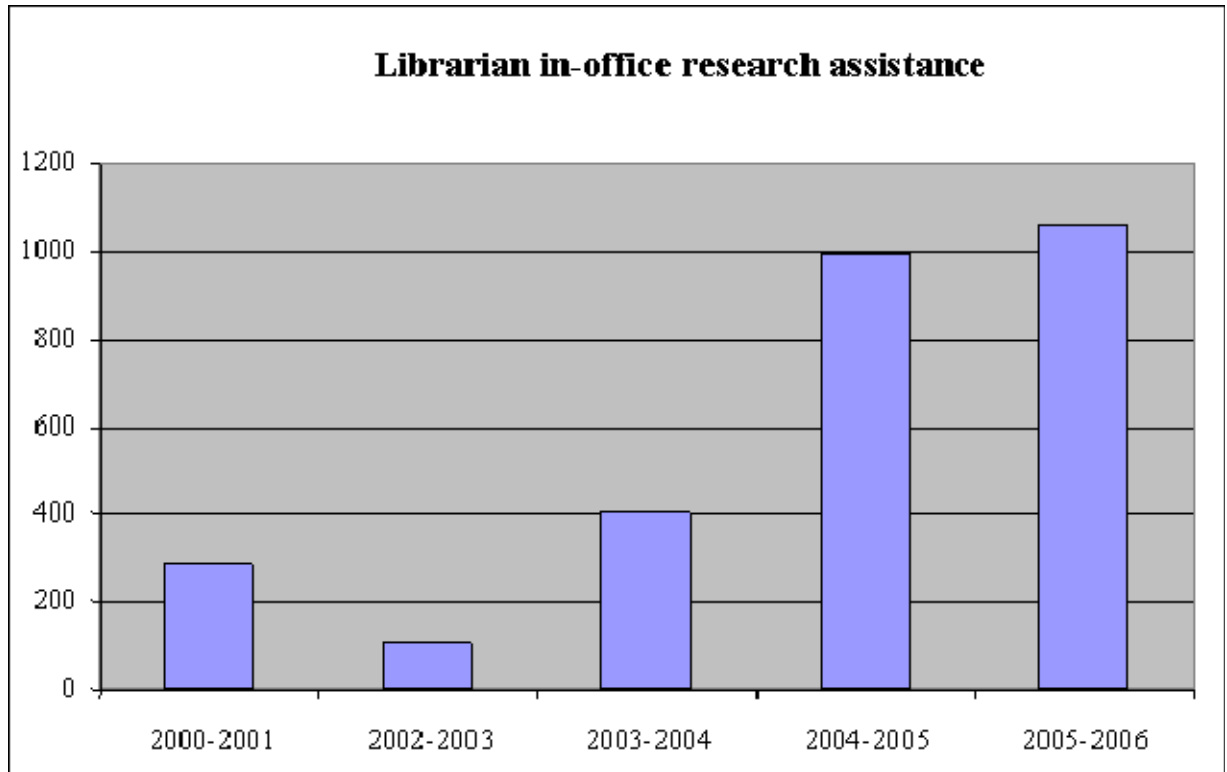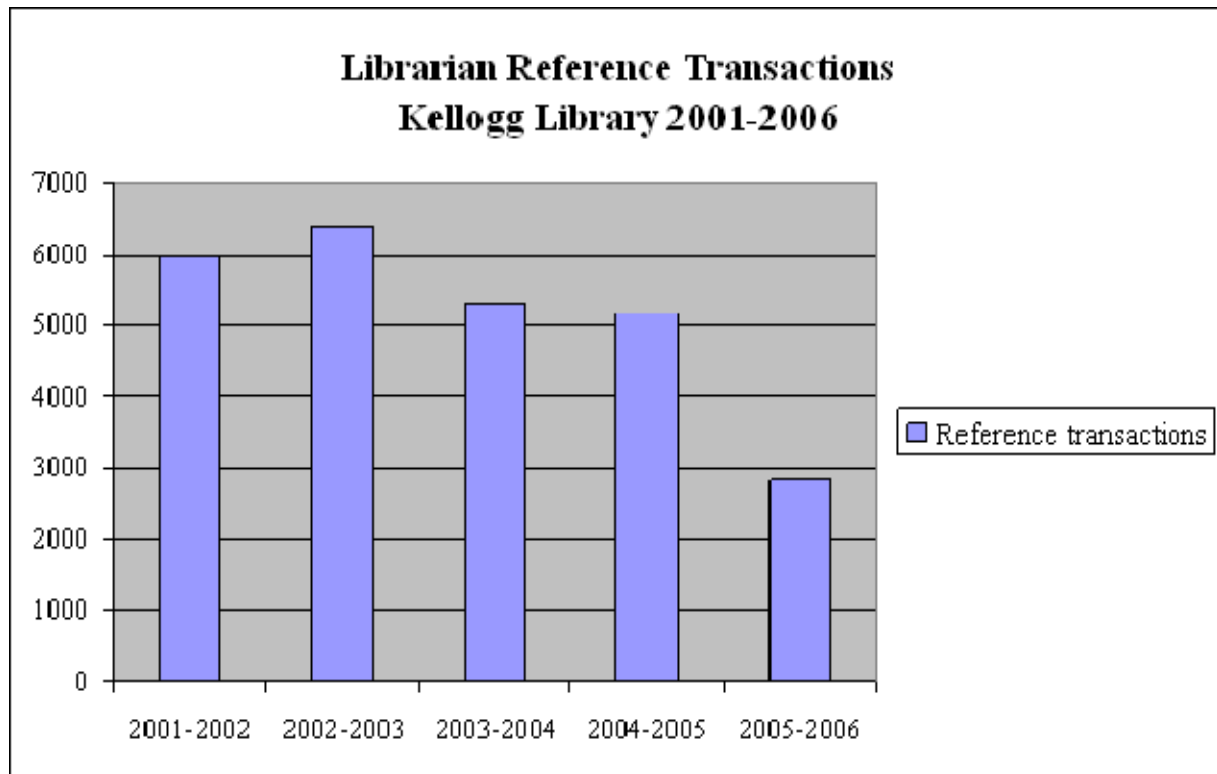
Figure 2


Librarian in-office research assistance

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Figure 3

**Librarian Reference Transactions
Kellogg Library 2001-2006**

Note that the statistic-keeping procedures were changed to a dualistic system to record ONLY those questions that were either quick-reference or research assistance. In previous years the procedures included multiple columns for indicating the type of resource used (government document, internet or research database), resulting in multiple counts for what might have been only one question. Figure Four brings all of this together, illustrating past procedure but also reflecting two significant trends. First, librarians consistently answered more research database questions than internet questions; second, most questions were the quick, "under five-minutes" type, suggesting that they were directional questions or technology troubleshooting questions.

Figure 4

RHD Reference Statistics: FALL Semester
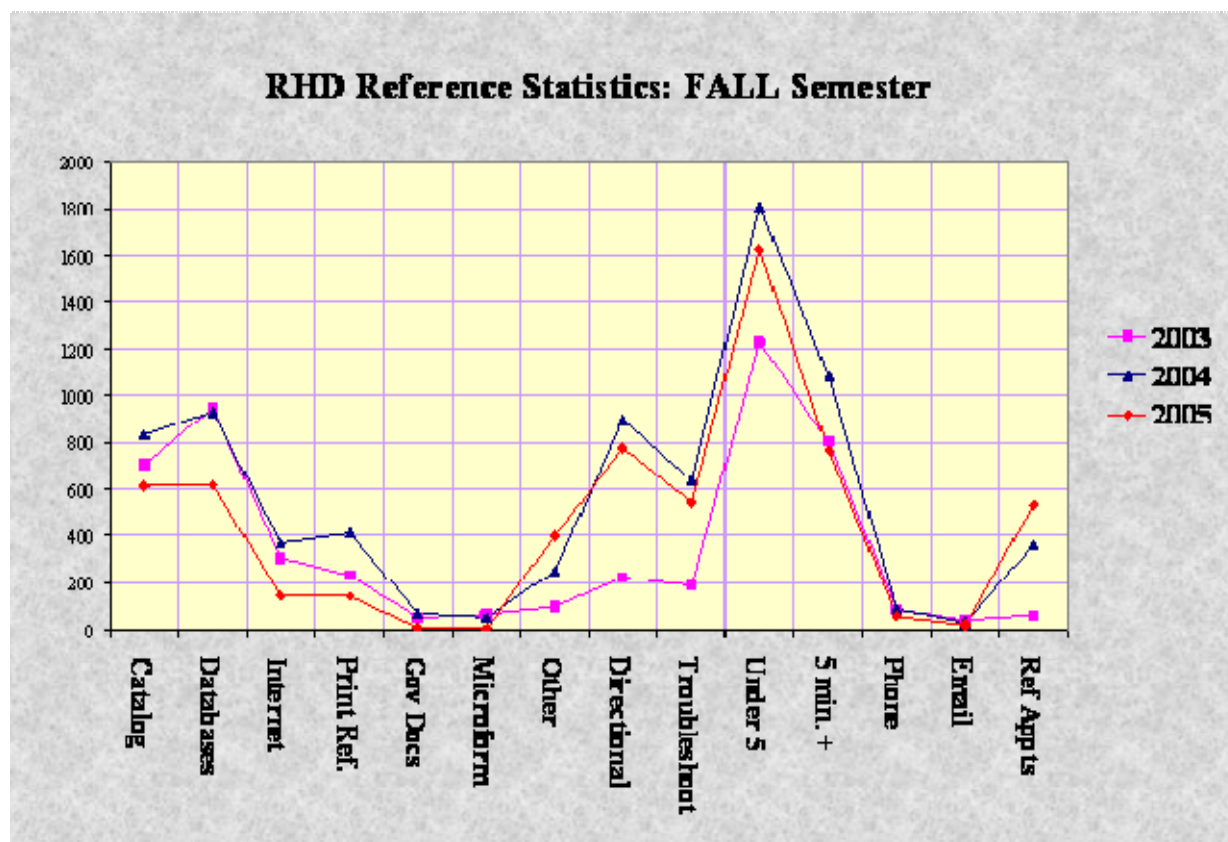
From the beginning, the CSUSM library had implemented an adaptation of the Brandeis tiered reference model. Librarians would sit in a reference office (similar to reference desk duty), rove the reference floor and meet with students by appointment. Specially trained student information assistants (IAs) provided support and also roved the floor. In January 2004 with the opening of a new library building, the service reverted to the traditional reference model with both IAs and librarians at the Research Help Desk.

Moving in Together: Reference and Instruction as One

Johnson and Fountain (2002) conducted a nationwide survey on the organizational structures for reference and instruction areas of the library. Their research focused on the advantages and disadvantages of combining services due to the overlap between these two function areas. Should these be two separate departments? Some argue that the instruction programs need "a room of their own." However, a majority of respondents report a structure that houses both functions in one department, with 79% noting that they treat both as teaching. The survey reported that 93% of the reference librarians were encouraged to teach and 82% of ILI librarians provided reference desk service. The problems with having separate departments included: the fear that it

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would cause fragmentation, lack of communication, and lack of knowledge at desk/class about desk/class activities.

Recognizing the problems with housing these ever more interwoven services in two separate departments, in September of 2005 CSUSM decided to subsume reference into our well-established Information Literacy Program, and several changes were made. First, librarians no longer staff the Research Help Desk but are on-call during 80% of the library operating hours. When the student has a reference question, the IA or the library assistant at the desk calls a librarian on the reference mobile phone, much like the model discussed earlier at Northwest Missouri State University. The use of a cellphone helps us keep track of who is on-duty and allows for transfer of this duty between librarians, keeping responsibility clear. Second, stressing the link between the student and the subject librarian, the student will frequently receive the business card of the librarian to whom s/he can direct follow-up or future questions. This confirms that while any librarian on-call can get a student started in their research and answer their basic questions, the subject specialists are better suited to provide the in-depth help students often need, hopefully addressing that 55% correct-answer problem.

Because of the changing nature of the questions at this service desk, additional training is provided for the IAs. Weekly sessions help reinforce their understanding of the difference between questions they should answer and those that must be referred no matter how simple they sound or how confident they may feel in their ability to answer them. Additional technology training is also provided for the IAs but a technology student assistant, uniquely trained by our computing services, has also been scheduled for the desk during high-traffic hours. This addresses the high number of technology questions that were being answered by the librarians.

Moreover, we have started to track all questions answered both on-call and those answered by the IAs. The on-call statistics sheet reflects information regarding the course/instructor from which the assignment that prompted the question emanates, the question itself, who was providing the assistance, and to which librarian the student was referred for follow-up. These will allow us to better understand the service we are providing, ascertain whether the students had already received ILI, and acquire information regarding those assignments that are proving troublesome. This is not to say that *all* on-call reference transactions are course-based; however, in an academic library it is not surprising to see that more than 90% of them are. The IAs are also tracking each question they answer. These are viewed weekly to ensure that they are continuing to refer questions appropriately to on-call librarians. These question sheets complement the traditional counting of reference transactions which have been expanded to systematically include all transactions regardless of where they occur, thus capturing email, chat, in-person, in-office either by

appointment or as walk-ins, phone, etc. transactions giving us a much better picture of our "My Librarian" service.

Coupled with all of these changes is a plan for increasing our participation in QuestionPoint, the virtual reference service. It provides an excellent opportunity for all of us to maintain our general reference skills; one could say, to remember "the good old days" of high activity reference desks.

Future plans for the assessment of our reference services will include analysis of the connection between course instruction and the reference questions, a review of the IA training program, revisiting the types of questions that the technology assistant is answering, and a user satisfaction survey.

Conclusion

Numerous authors have responded to Ford's original call for eliminating the desk. In fact the Brandeis model of tiered-reference services, with a first-stop information desk and in-depth consultation in a non-public area, was the first step toward eliminating the desk altogether. Of course students still expect librarian assistance. We have shown there is more than one way to do this. We meet and surpass their expectations, providing research assistance "on-demand," using all the various options for reference – email, chat, IM, even FaceBook and MySpace. These technology-based reference services coupled with a strong information literacy instruction program, do a lot more than merely meet user needs and expectations. We provide a personalized, customized service, tailored to each class, academic major, or faculty syllabus. Students come to know us well and therefore know exactly where to go for help. They know who is the expert librarian within any given discipline. This engenders not only "customer satisfaction," but also respect for the profession. Summerhill (1994) says "Librarians must be unafraid to relinquish many time-honored traditions that may no longer be competitive or even useful strategies." The reference desk is most definitely one of those.

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