Redefining Reference

Is the Reference Desk a Thing of the Past?

by Barbara Gontrum

Reference librarians have traditionally viewed themselves (and been viewed by others) as service providers. Visibility and availability have been the hallmarks of reference service. Today's librarians, however, are expected to perform many other duties besides answering basic reference questions. Librarians maintain Web sites, teach formal courses, and serve as the experts in an increasingly complex research environment. A typical approach to this situation is simply to add new duties on top of the old. While this may work for a while, eventually adjustments must be made and structural changes must take place to accommodate new expectations. One possibility for structural change is to eliminate the reference desk as a physical location. Before considering this major step, it is important to take a serious look at the research needs of the various library constituencies to make sure that there are viable alternatives to the existing service. Reference service must continue; it is the location of that service that could change. In fact, the goal should be to provide better service.

Impact on Faculty

In an academic library, faculty are key constituents and assisting faculty members with their research needs involves far more than in the past. The emphasis in academic libraries has always been on providing information and letting the user evaluate the material and make decisions on relevancy. Today, the line between providing information and making decisions has become much harder to draw, especially with the need for evaluating Internet sites as an added step in the process. Massive amounts of information and limited faculty time lead to more filtering of information than in the past. Concentrated time to work on faculty projects is the key to successful relations with faculty. The truth is that faculty in most libraries are not heavy reference desk users. They have their favorite librarians (either as a result of a liaison program or just natural tendencies) and many are e-mail users. Eliminating a reference desk should have little impact on this group except to give the librarians more time to work on faculty projects. A positive, not a negative!

Impact on Students, Student Publications

In terms of an academic library's primary mission, therefore, the law students are the key constituency for whom alternatives must be found. If the traffic volume from law students is heavy and consistent enough to warrant existence of a reference desk, then it is not feasible to consider abandoning the concept. Let's face it though, in most academic law libraries the traffic level from primary users is not even close to the level found in many public libraries. Even on busy days, patterns are unpredictable, with stretches of quiet time punctuated by flurries of activity. What happens to the students who arrive during that flurry of activity? Are they really getting the help they need?

Partly as a result of teaching activities, students increasingly (or if they don't, should) view librarians as individuals who can provide far more than answers to quick questions. Librarians are advisers who can discuss the big picture involved in a research project, giving recommendations on research strategies, discussing approaches to complex research problems, and, of course, offering the one-on-one instruction on particular sources that librarians have historically provided. An office setting can be far more conducive to providing this type of research assistance to students than a reference desk. Therefore, a key concern is how to make sure that students are aware of the availability of such assistance if the reference desk disappears.
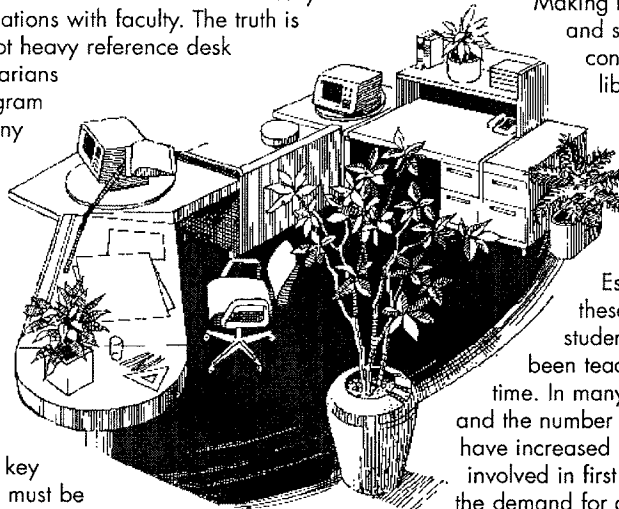
One of the first steps in a transition of this nature is to identify the various student groups that use reference services. The needs of student publications are obvious ones to address since source check teams tend to be heavy reference desk patrons. It is possible that more efficient ways of dealing with student publications than over a desk can be found. Library liaisons to particular journals can work with student editors to make sure that needs are met. In fact, there are benefits to working up front with the editors. Librarian involvement at the beginning stages of article editing as opposed to the end can save time and aggravation on everyone's part. Changing the role of the librarian from quick reference provider to research adviser has long-term benefits. Overall, time spent with journal students may not decrease, but the relationship changes to a more collegial effort and there are rewards that can be realized from dealing with these students in a more intense and organized fashion. Other student groups can be identified and their research needs dealt with in similar ways. Making research presentations to student groups and seminars can be a good way to establish contacts for targeted students with particular librarians.

Librarians as Teachers

Increasing the teaching responsibilities of librarians can be a very positive development. It is a great way to establish links with students. Especially if such contacts are with 1Ls, these relationships often continue through the student's law school career. Librarians have been teaching, if only one-on-one, for a long time. In many schools, however, the teaching roles and the number of formal courses taught by librarians have increased in recent years. Even if librarians are not involved in first year research and writing programs, the demand for advanced legal research courses is high. An emphasis on research strategy and process has taken these courses a long way from bibliographic presentations. The nature of the subject matter has always required constant change in teaching materials. Teaching research on the Internet requires almost daily change! What better way is there to establish librarians as the experts in the world of research than teaching?

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Other Considerations

Once attention has been given to how students will find the reference staff without a reference desk, there are other practical considerations. Ideally, offices of reference librarians should be grouped together, if possible with a reception area. There has been a lot written lately about the image of librarians and there is no doubt that everyone's goal is to promote professionalism. In view of this, it doesn't seem outrageous to ask, what's wrong with making an appointment to see a reference librarian? Every other profession requires that persons seeking service adjust their schedules to obtain the help they need. Why should it be any different with librarians? Why shouldn't a librarian's time be viewed as a scarce and valuable commodity? In fact, isn't it possible that better service can be provided to a student in an individualized half hour session during which a research project can be discussed in detail? Isn't an office setting better than a public airing of the student's problems amid the risk of being interrupted? Teachable moments are good things; why shouldn't we be encouraging these to happen without worrying that the phone is ringing while the reference librarian is out in the stacks?

In addition to law students and faculty, many academic libraries serve local attorneys and members of the general public. In fact, those groups often are some of the heaviest users at an academic reference desk. Clearly their needs must be met, but how essential is it that their first contacts be with a professional librarian? Having para-professional staff provide reference triage can be a successful tactic. A certain percentage of questions asked at reference desks clearly do not require professional assistance and, as with faculty research questions, there is a continuum on which responses to these questions can be placed. The drawing of these lines may require an adjustment phase, but in the long run, the benefits gained all around can be well worth the effort. Questions that do require the assistance of a professional librarian can be handled by a system where librarians are assigned to cover particular times and are paged when needed. As with law students, the object should not be to decrease service. A paging system also provides a safety net for law students with quick questions or for those who are not familiar with the reference librarians.

At the University of Maryland School of Law Library, the reference desk has been missing for approximately ten years. Student satisfaction with library research services is high as evidenced by a recent quality of life survey where the library appeared frequently in the "things most liked about the school" category. Faculty make heavy use of research services and librarians teach research courses that are always over-subscribed. The level of respect for the librarians within the user community is very high.

The information world continues to change dramatically and it is critical that librarians forge ahead to establish new roles. Taking on these roles may require taking hard looks at traditional reference services and at least asking whether there are alternatives that might work just as well or better. Simply adding duties to existing job descriptions can work on a temporary basis but, over the long term, structural change may be necessary. Abandoning the reference desk could be one of those changes.

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