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Practice

Reference After 5 PM

A Reference Librarian's Experience Working Atypical Hours
at a Large Research Library

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Reference services continue to change and evolve in the academic library. Students need reference support outside the normal 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. business hours in an academic library. The author works these later shifts and has found success in helping students. This success is due to the author's collaboration and relationship building with not only students but also library employees and other departments to support a robust and active reference service on Sundays and after 5:00 p.m. This paper explores the author's first semester providing reference services during the fall 2016 semester.

Introduction

In 1876, Samuel Green cited four services reference provides: teaching patrons how to use the library and the library's resources, answering patron queries, recommending resources and information for the patron to access, and building community within the library (Tyckoson, 2012). While reference services have evolved over the years, Green's four services still ring true today. In an academic library, reference services are evolving and changing to meet the needs of today's students. We are redefining what a reference desk looks like and who staffs this desk. Part of this evolution also includes thinking strategically about when reference services are needed. We know students do not stop researching or using the library after 5:00 p.m. Because undergraduates fill their days with classes, extracurricular obligations, and jobs to support their education, sometimes library research does not begin until after dinner or on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

In my current position as a Reference and Instruction Librarian at the University Park Pattee and Paterno Libraries at the Pennsylvania State University, I see and meet many students who are conducting research in these off times. Because the library assumes students need evening reference support, my position was created to provide those services. My work week is Sunday through Thursday, from 1:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. After 5:00 p.m., I am the only librarian in the building. I see these hours as a way to gain a new perspective on the library and spend most of my time working closely with students and staff. During my first semester in this position (fall 2016), I see in-person reference

alive and well. Students continue to have reference questions. Therefore, we should pivot our focus from wondering if students still have questions to thinking critically about whether students feel comfortable approaching our desks to ask questions. We should also be confident that our employees at public service desks know how to ask a patron questions, find information, and when necessary, make referrals. My strategy during the first semester was to build relationships with library employees and undergraduate students. This successful strategy can be seen through the desk statistics and personal stories gathered along the way.

Literature Review

The status of reference services in academic libraries can be a hotly contested topic. Overall, academic librarians have seen a decrease in reference questions over the past several years. In a 2006 report, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) reported a 48% decline in reference transactions between 1991 and 2005 (Kyrillidou & Young, 2006). This decline is supported by librarians' personal stories and library-specific statistics. For example, Scott Carlson went as far to predict that by 2012, reference desks will no longer exist in academic libraries (2007). As the demand for reference desks declined, Christy Stevens (2013) has pointed out that online reference questions, and platforms to answer these reference questions, has been on the rise since 2005.

Due to this decrease in face-to-face reference questions and a rise in more directional questions (e.g., Where is the restroom?), the trend in academic libraries is to move away from staffing these desks with librarians and use full-time staff or student employees instead (Coleman, Mallon, & Lo, 2016). This allows librarians to focus on other job responsibilities and/or perform reference in new ways, such as through a tiered system, roving reference, or online chat services (Dempsey, 2011). With librarians not working regularly at the reference desk, some libraries have transformed their reference desk into an information or service desk staffed by student employees or full-time staff. The employees at the desk provide directions, assist with basic reference questions, and make referrals when necessary. This tiered system can create some tensions, because full-time staff and student employees require additional training to provide baseline reference support and must know how to refer questions when necessary. While some librarians fear there will be a decrease in the quality of service (Coleman, Mallon, & Lo, 2016), others feel keeping students at these information desks is a way to strengthen the students' research skills and allow librarians to focus on high-level tasks and reference questions (Brenza, Kowalsky, & Brush, 2015).

There does seem to be a gap in the literature when it comes to evaluating the success of evening or weekend reference. While some academic librarians can be assumed to work an evening or weekend reference shift once a week, there is no data to show how frequently this occurs or how many librarians work a shifted schedule similar to my own. I believe there is a difference between providing evening or weekend reference support once a week versus having a schedule based around the framework of providing that evening and weekend reference support daily. Research on reference during nonbusiness hours are often part of a study or short-term trial, such as Direct-2-U reference in residence halls at the University of Texas at San Antonio (Del Bosque & Chapman, 2007), late night online service from 9:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. at Notre Dame University (Kayongo & Jacob, 2011), or the University of Buffalo's providing onsite reference and instruction in department spaces (Wagner & Tysick, 2007). These three studies provide insight to confirm that reference services are needed both in the evening and in other non-library spaces.

Chad J. Pearson (2014) is one of the few who writes on his experiences with evening reference. He argues that the quality of evening reference is dependent on three variables: engaging with patrons in a way that builds relationships, the ability of the librarian to be interdisciplinary when seeking information, and interpersonal communication. Based on my experience with evening reference, I believe Pearson has correctly identified the three variables to ensure quality reference during nonbusiness hours. However, I would like to expand Pearson's definition of interpersonal communication and building relationships to include not only patrons but other library departments

and staff that are active during the evening hours. This collaboration between other library employees has allowed me to be successful in my position during my first semester at Penn State.

Building a Robust Evening Reference Service

Library Context

At the Pattee and Paterno Libraries at University Park, we use a tiered reference system. Patrons approach one of our 11 service desks throughout the building for help. These desks are located at the entrances, in subject libraries throughout the building, and at other high-traffic locations. Our desks are manned by full-time staff, student employees, and part-time staff. For this paper, I will use the term "library employee" or "employee" to represent our student and part-time staff. These employees are trained to answer directional questions, make room reservations for our group study rooms, take hourly count, and conduct baseline reference questions for known items (e.g., an article in a database or a book in our physical collection). Once the question becomes out of range for our student employees or part-time staff to handle, they can contact a librarian or full-time staff member who can assist the patron.

Ordinary patrons are unable to distinguish librarians from other library employees and full-time staff; to them, everyone at a desk is a librarian. Therefore, it becomes essential for our staff to know when to call for help and be confident a librarian will be around. With this framework in mind, I set out to build relationships with our library staff at our desks. Especially because my office was not in a visible place in the library, I needed the employees to know I was freely available and ready to help. My goal was to build relationships with our employees that would result in more employees referring students to me for reference help.

Building Relationships

To build relationships, my coworker (who also works a similar schedule) and I would make rounds throughout the evening and on Sundays. We stopped at each desk to check in with our employees, who were often students. Usually after this check-in, conversation moved towards the student employee's academic and personal life. These conversations became a way to get to know the students and gain valuable insight into what it was like to be both a student and a library employee. As I learned about the student, I was also able to tell them about myself and relate to their undergraduate experience. The student employees had questions about my graduate school experience and what it meant for me to be a librarian. As Pearson (2014) states, "any personal anecdote from the librarian or connection with the personal experiences of the customer can serve to enhance the bond between them" (p. 178). Once the student employees opened up, they told me more about the reference questions they had received at the desk. This allowed me to see what the employees knew and did not know about the library databases and resources and how students think about finding information.

Visibility and accessibility were two key factors in building relationships with our student employees. Because my coworker and I made rounds on a daily basis, our employees came to expect us and call on us more quickly when they needed help. I also had a work cell phone, so I could essentially roam the library and upon receiving a call, come directly to the student needing help instead of making them find me. Being so accessible was also helpful in building relationships with patrons in the library. Many were not expecting a librarian to work so late and appreciated my availability and flexibility to help them.

When I did receive a referral from one of our student workers, I made sure to return to the desk to let the employee know they made the right call. This technique strengthened our relationship and also built trust between the employee and me. In the future, the employee knew they could call on me for help. This idea is supported by others,

including Carolyn Radcliff (1998) who found at Kent State that "when the librarian responded positively to a referral or consultation, the staff member was more likely to continue making referrals" (p. 63). Additionally, we can view this relationship building as building a brand and cultivating deep customer (student employee) loyalty (Pearson, 2014). The more I developed relationships and communicated the positive results of a referral, the more likely staff were to make another referral or ask for help in the future.

Over time, I expanded my relationships beyond the service desks to library departments and employees who worked a similar afternoon and evening shift. Two of these departments were our Welcome Desks (greeters at every library entrance who received a wide range of questions, some reference) and our Lending Department (where reference questions are sometimes asked). Similar to how I built relationships with our service desks, attending staff meetings, doing regular check-ins, and having a visible presence helped to strengthen these partnerships. Small conversations at the desk eventually turned into big discussions about how to bolster communication and teamwork between the various departments in order to provide the most consistent and cohesive customer service to the library patrons.

Finally, I built relationships with the students who were referred to me. In a successful reference conversation, a librarian should ask questions to assess the information need and work with the students to find that information (even if the students did not know what they needed when they started). I did my best to help the students find the information they were looking for and make referrals to other subject librarians when necessary. Because of my evening hours, I had the time to really dig into the question and spend more than five minutes helping a student locate some resources. Several students emailed me later in the fall semester to ask for more help; they had a positive interaction the first time and now, for a new research project, wanted to start with my help.

Interpersonal Communication

Similar to building relationships, interpersonal communication is about understanding what someone else needs. This understanding applies to both library employees and library patrons. Pearson (2014) discusses "the relaxed atmosphere of the night shift allows the librarian to take things slowly, engaging in a deeper level of the reference interview…" (p. 176). I agree with Pearson; after 5:00 p.m., my meetings with other faculty and staff are over and there is a level of unpredictability to what might happen in the library on a given night. My open schedule affords me the opportunity to devote as much time as needed to help students.

Teamwork is essential when working with library employees and library patrons, and it is necessary to communicate changes and new information while working together to solve problems. Every day that I came into work, I let our desks know I was available to help through the chat service we use to communicate. If I had to leave early or was about to teach a class, I also let the desks know, so they would know when I would and would not be available. As I learned more about the reference questions our employees were receiving at the desk, I found ways to embed training or widely communicate information either about a database or finding a certain item in our search systems (e.g., a print copy of *National Geographic*). One of the most effective ways I embedded this training was through a bi-weekly newsletter that included "Hailley's Helpful Hints" with a reference trick or explanation of using a library resource.

I also employed teamwork when working with patrons on a reference question. When a patron and I went to my office to look for information, I made sure my computer monitor was turned towards them so they too could see the search results on their topic. Also, I had a wireless mouse that I would turn over to the patron at the start of every reference conversation. This was my way of saying I trusted the patron to do this search and I wanted them to take control over the results. I was signaling that this is *their* research and I was there to be a guide and support them in the process.

Interdisciplinary Methods

Pearson (2014) believes that being interdisciplinary is "the key to creative and effective library service" (p. 177). Being interdisciplinary is more than just being able to answer questions in a wide variety of disciplines; it also includes the ability to use different reference strategies that are personalized towards the student. This was definitely a skill I felt I continued to improve upon as the semester progressed and I became more comfortable in my position.

One of the strategies I developed was finding ways to assess the student's research need as quickly as possible. This strategy usually included asking questions about the due date and how soon the student needed resources. Knowing up front which students were doing assignments at the last minute allowed me to spend time effectively and look only for immediately available resources. For students who came to the library early for a project, I could recommend resources beyond those immediately available, such as a book from another Penn State campus or article we would have to loan from another library. Also, for lengthy research questions, I could make a referral to a subject librarian who could provide even more in-depth support to the student.

As I became more comfortable with Penn State Libraries' resources, I was able to discover more ways to find information when an initial search turned up empty. Over time, I found a rhythm and strategy that worked well for many of the questions students asked. However, I was also able to think of alternate solutions when the student's question did not fit into a thematic area I had answered before. During these conversations, I explored how far a teaching moment could go with more time for the reference interaction. This interaction became really interesting when students were researching topics that had not been widely written about or when an initial search yielded no useful results. These experiences opened up a conversation on information literacy that was easy to understand and relatable. In these moments, I felt I was building meaningful relationships that helped our students find the desired information.

Reference Results

At the Penn State Libraries, we record our various interactions with patrons in Desk Tracker, which is a service provided through Compendium Library Services. It is a web-based platform that is customizable for libraries to track the data they need (Compendium Library Services, n.d.). Every time I completed a reference conversation, I recorded the interaction in Desk Tracker. At the end of the semester, I pulled the data from Desk Tracker and analyzed it to see how the semester had gone. The important pieces of information I hoped to collect were length of conversation, time of day, and a brief summary, which I compiled into a separate document. When analyzing the data, I looked for trends in when questions were asked most frequently during the semester, how long reference conversations lasted, the time of day I was receiving questions, and which days of the week were the busiest for reference.

During the fall 2016 semester, I had 110 reference conversations. When averaged over the 17-week semester, I fielded about 6.5 reference questions per week. Among those 110 conversations, six students returned to me at least one more time after our initial conversation. Additionally, five of those students worked as student employees in our library. Figured 1 shows the numbers of questions asked during the 17 weeks of the semester.
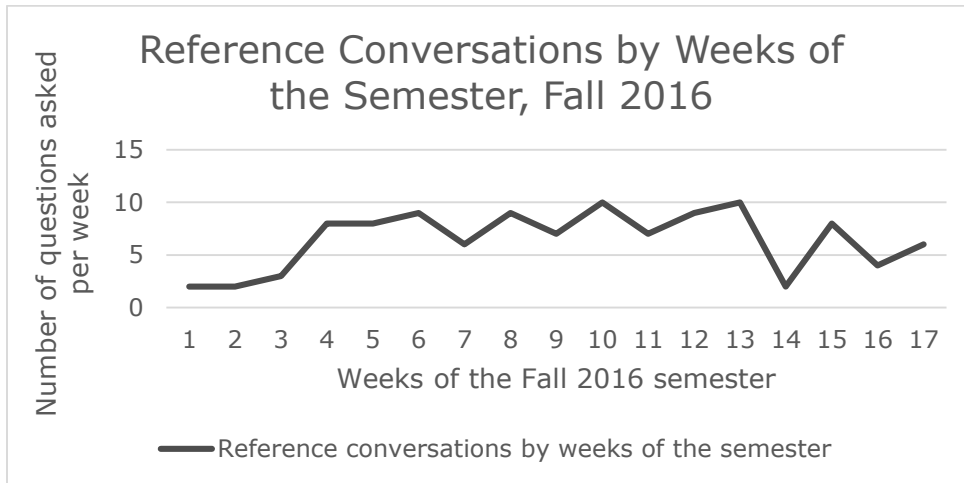
Figure 1

Number of reference conversations per week

Figure 1 shows a slow rise during the first three weeks of the semester. Students are still settling into classes and do not have any research assignments yet. Between weeks 4 and 13, we see a somewhat steady pattern of questions, 6-10 per week. In week 14, Thanksgiving Break, we see a sharp decrease, since the students had left for break and most projects were due before Thanksgiving. Finally, we see a rise for the final weeks of the semester. Even in the final week, I still received six reference questions.

I was also curious not only about the number of reference questions, but how long they lasted (Figure 2). From the 110 interactions, 40% of these conversations were 5-15 minutes. The questions lasting this length of time were often about citations, finding books in our catalog, or getting started on some keyword searches. If a conversation lasted longer than 15 minutes, it was likely to fall between 16 and 30 minutes (16%) or over 60 minutes (16%). These questions required some more in-depth searching and often multiple searches in multiple places to find useful information. The high percentage of reference conversations lasting over 60 minutes was likely due to me spending as much time as the patron needed to feel like they were making progress on their research.
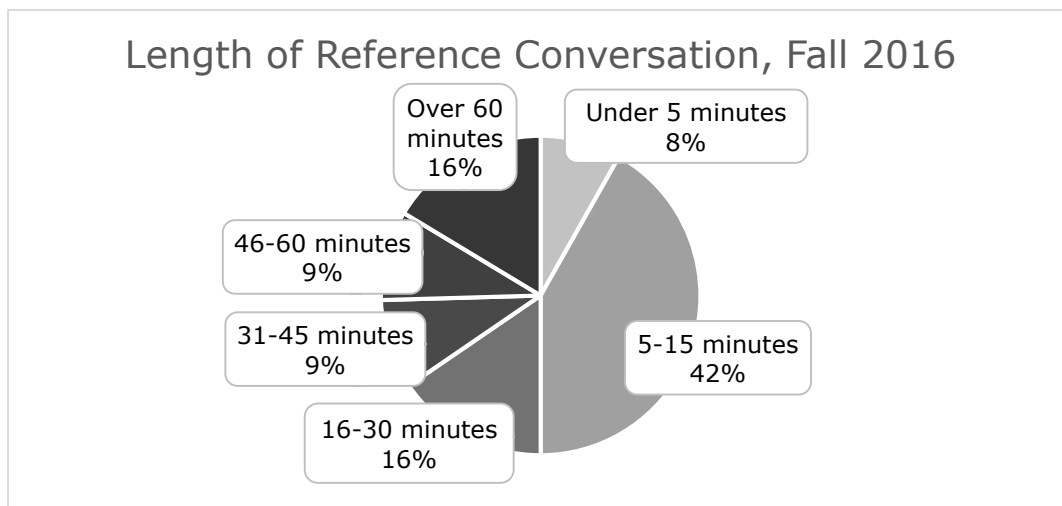

Figure 2

Length of reference conversations

Desk Tracker also captures the time the entry was completed. I usually logged my question immediately after the reference conversation. If I was unable to log the question right away, Desk Tracker's custom timestamp feature allowed me to accurately reflect when the interaction occurred. Figure 3 shows the time of day reference questions were asked. The graph pulls out Sunday questions to show the difference between weekend and weekday reference. Friday and Saturday are not included in this chart, since I do not provide reference services on those days.
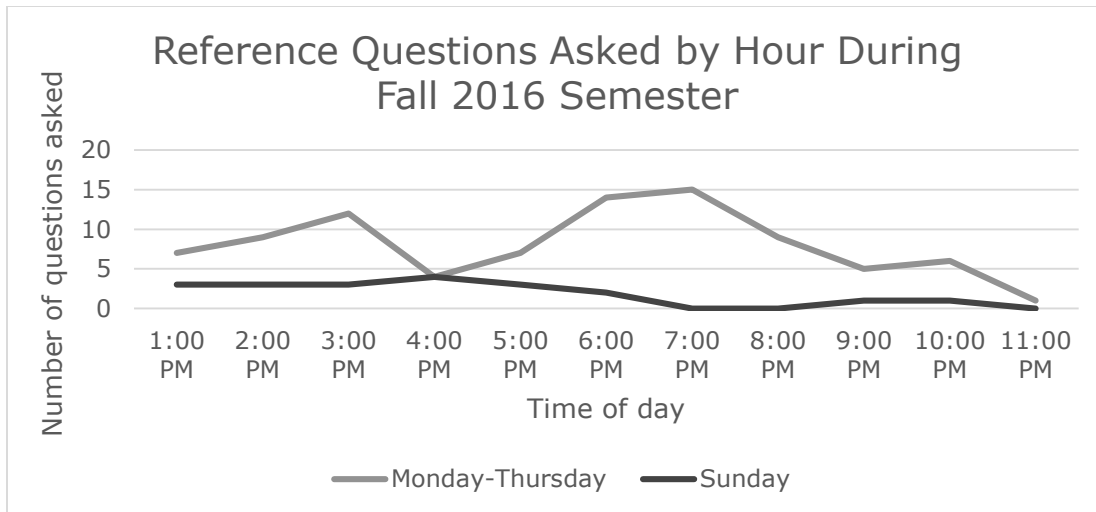

Figure 3

Reference questions asked by hour of the day. Note: one 8 a.m. question was removed

On Sundays, Figure 3 shows that reference questions are more likely to be asked from 1:00 pm. to 4:00 p.m. During the week, 3:00 p.m. seems busy, but more reference questions are asked between 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. Even 9:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. are busy, strengthening my claim that reference does happen frequently outside standard business hours. Students use the library on Sunday afternoons and in the evening during the week. Because I am available during those times, I am able to support students at their point of need.

Finally, I examined the data for the day of the week reference questions were asked. Figure 4 shows which days of the week were the busiest for me.
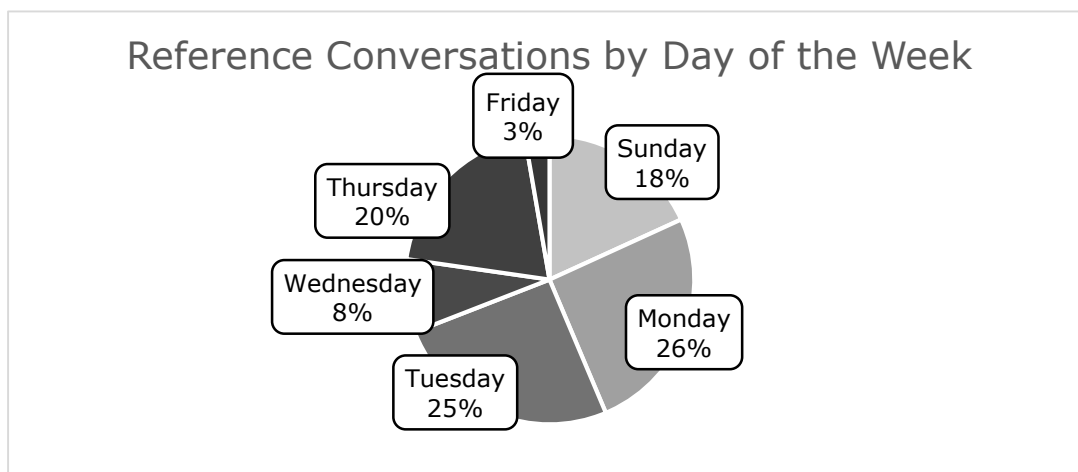

Figure 4

Reference conversations during the fall 2016 semester by day of the week

Mondays and Tuesdays were busiest, accounting for around 50% of the questions I answered during the fall semester. Thursdays and Sundays were also busier times, and Wednesday is the slowest day of my work week. Figure 4 also shows three reference questions on Fridays. While my normal schedule does not include Fridays, I did work a handful of them throughout the semester.

Conclusion & Next Steps

Evening and weekend reference was an excellent way for me to learn more about the institution, the employees of the library, our student population, and the ways our students use the library. By building relationships with our library employees and other library departments, I was able to assess their skill sets, allowing me to plan for future referrals and increased staff training on baseline reference services. These relationships enabled me to push for a required spring training for our employees, which included an information literacy session on our library's major systems for finding library resources, and schedule meetings with other departments to brainstorm ways we could work together and ways I could help them answer students' reference questions. Especially after the spring training, I saw increased confidence among our staff in their ability to use library resources. Our student employees often tell me their success stories and continue to be willing to call me for help when they get stumped with a patron question.

The data collected during the fall 2016 semester was quantitative combined with personal reflections I wrote down after the interaction. While the date, time of day, and length of question were important factors, so too was tracking the types of questions students were asking and other information I learned about the student's information-seeking habits. This mixed method of data allowed me to speak with my colleagues about the work I was doing and inform them of the types of students I interacted with. The types of questions students asked informed potential training questions for our employees, since I felt it was crucial for them to practice reference with actual queries asked at our desks.

As noted in the literature review, there is a gap in the research on evening reference and its impact on student success. The data collected in the fall 2016 semester shows there is something to say on this topic and we should expand the field of knowledge. However, in order to more fully assess the impact of providing evening reference services, I want to collect student responses to their experience of our reference conversation, ask questions about their library use and how they arrived at our desks, and find ways to assess the long-term success of students receiving individual reference support. Another assessment method I am interested in exploring is Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation project, which has been used by the Penn State University Libraries in the early 2000s in two areas of the library (Novotny & Rimland, 2007; Paster, Fescemyer, Henry, Hughes, & Smith, 2006).

Pearson (2014) says "the image of a librarian as friend, mentor, and information provider creates a powerful positive symbol for customers" (p. 178). Working atypical hours has given me the opportunity to assume those identities in a meaningful way. There are more questions to be answered, and I hope the relationships I built will continue to grow and provide more referrals, training opportunities, and reference success.

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