Reframing Reference Services: Perceptions and futures of the reference desk, findings from a mixed-methods survey of United States academic libraries

Samantha Kennedy
Rowan University, kenedysd@rowan.edu

Ashley Lierman
Rowan University, lierman@rowan.edu

Daniel G. Kipnis
Rowan University, kipnisd@rowan.edu

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Reframing Reference Services:

Perceptions and futures of the reference desk, findings from a mixed-methods survey of United States academic libraries

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Samantha Kennedy, Information Literacy Librarian
Dan Kipnis, Life Sciences Librarian
Ashley Lierman, Instruction and Education Librarian
Outline

• Background
• Statistics
• Takeaways
• Directions for Future Research
Background

- Purpose:
  - Environmental scan to investigate our reference model
  - Librarian attitudes and perceptions of a physical reference desk
- Initial survey of NJ public university/colleges in Fall of 2018 (10 respondents), presented at VALE January 2019
- National Survey of university/colleges in Spring of 2019 (239 respondents)
- Made slight changes to survey based on initial data collection
Survey Respondents: Public vs. Private

- Private: 103, 43%
- Public: 136, 57%
Survey Respondents: Faculty Status

No, 96, 40%

Yes, 143, 60%
Survey Respondents: Type of Library

- Main, 203, 85%
- Other, 13, 6%
- Medical/Dental, 8, 3%
- Branch, 15, 6%
Survey Respondents: Type of Institution

- University, 103, 43%
- Four Year, 84, 35%
- Community, 45, 19%
- Other, 7, 3%
Survey Respondents: Student FTE

- Less than 1,000 students: 27
- Over 1,000 but less than 5,000 students: 100
- Over 5,000 but less than 10,000 students: 45
- Over 10,000 but less than 20,000 students: 37
- Over 20,000 but less than 30,000 students: 14
- Over 30,000 students: 16
Survey Respondents: Urban/Suburban/Rural

Rural: 2,500 or less
Suburban: 2,501-49,999
Urban: More than 50,000

Source: [https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural/2010-urban-rural.html](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural/2010-urban-rural.html)
Survey Respondents: Regional Breakdown

- West, 27, 11%
- Midwest, 60, 25%
- South, 68, 29%
- Northeast, 84, 35%

Source: https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf
Poll Question #1

Do you have student workers (undergraduate or graduate) answering reference questions?
Do you have library staff (non-librarians) answering reference questions?
Survey Respondents: # of Non-librarian Staff at the Reference Desk

- Student Workers
- Library Staff
- Part-time/Adjunct Librarians
What are pros or cons of using non-librarians to answer reference questions?
Poll Question #3

How many full-time librarians provide reference services? 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8; 9-10; 11+
Poll Question #4

How much time do you spend in a typical week on answering reference questions (in person, virtual, email, etc.)? 0-20%; 21-40%; 41-60%; 61-80%; 81-100%
Survey Respondents: # of Librarians providing reference

- 1-2: 54
- 3-4: 55
- 5-6: 44
- 7-8: 33
- 9-10: 21
- 11+: 30
Poll Question #5

What is your current reference desk model? No current physical reference desk; Traditional; Share Services; Information Commons
Survey Respondents: Current Desk Model

- Traditional, 108, 45%
- No physical reference desk, 34, 14%
- Reference desk/information commons/learning commons, 16, 7%
- Shared Services, 81, 34%
Do Librarians staff your reference desk (if applicable)?
Survey Respondents: Do librarians staff the desk?

- Yes, 171, 83%
- No, 35, 17%
Open-Ended Question #2

What are the origins of your current desk model?
What percentage of the questions asked at the reference desk are reference questions (this excludes directional questions, like asking about the printer and where the bathroom is located)? 0-20% 21-40% 41-60% 61-80% 81-100%
Survey Respondents: % of Reference Questions asked

- Highest 81-100%, 36, 17%
- Lowest 0-20%, 43, 21%
- Low 21-40%, 61, 30%
- High 61-80%, 42, 20%
- Moderate 41-60%, 24, 12%
How if at all do you track statistics on your reference questions? Do you make any changes based on the statistics (data-driven decision making). What have you learned?
Poll Question #8

Is a physical reference desk necessary?
Survey Respondents: Is a physical reference desk necessary?

- Yes, 164, 69%
- No, 75, 31%
Poll Question #9

From 1 (least valuable) to 10 (most valuable) how much do you value a physical reference desk?
Survey Respondents: Value of a physical reference desk
Poll Question #10

Do you support maintaining a physical reference desk? Strongly Support; Somewhat Support; Neither Support nor Oppose; Somewhat Oppose; Strongly Oppose
Survey Respondents: Do you support maintaining a physical reference desk?

- Strongly support, 123, 52%
- Somewhat support, 54, 23%
- Neither support nor oppose, 32, 13%
- Somewhat oppose, 19, 8%
- Strongly oppose, 10, 4%
Since the pandemic has driven services online, what has been your reference experience? Are you getting similar questions? What are the commonly asked questions? Has your pandemic experience changed your perspective on the need for a physical reference desk?

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Takeaways

• Statistics show while some people are using different desk models, the traditional reference desk is still prominent
• 37% of respondents think their reference desk gets mostly reference questions
• 59% of respondents rank the value of a physical reference desk at 8 or above
• 10% of respondents rank the value or a physical reference desk below a 3
• Statistics show approximately 75% of respondents support maintaining a physical reference desk
Directions for Future Research

• International Survey
• Student needs assessment
• Perceptions vs reality
  • Short follow-up survey for detailed reference stats
• Engage staff in conversation
Contact Information

Samantha Kennedy, kennedysd@rowan.edu

Dan Kipnis, kipnisd@rowan.edu

Ashley Lierman, lierman@rowan.edu