Alone at the Reference Desk: An Undergraduate Student Providing Reference Services

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Very few students have the opportunity to staff a reference desk at an academic university. I am one of the few that have. Winona State University (WSU) Library decided to implement a new program in the fall of 2003 that would have an undergraduate student worker staffing the reference desk instead of a librarian. The student worker would be responsible for answering questions asked at the reference desk. Difficult or in-depth questions would be directed to a reference librarian, who would be on call in case of problems. The idea was that a librarian backing up the student worker would provide some confidence to the student worker and continue to provide high quality reference service for the patrons. Having the librarian there would give a reassurance that even if the student worker did not know how to answer the patron's question, the question could still be answered.

WSU is a comprehensive state university with a strong history of teacher-education. It has also developed a large nursing college with a graduate program. WSU is also a laptop university with all students given a leased laptop. All classrooms have Internet access and almost half of the classrooms provide power and network connections at each seat. The WSU Library opened in 1999 as a laptop library. It was designed to provide support for WSU's laptop program. Ninety-five percent of all library seats have power and network connections. Over 2,000 students can be online at one time in the library, that is over a quarter of the enrollment. A wireless network is also available. There is an information commons that provides support and training as well as circulation of laptops and peripherals such as CD-RWs and data projectors. The library has become the preferred computing location on campus.

The WSU Library is the only library on campus and the place to go to do any research in Winona. The majority of library patrons are undergraduate students, who are there to study, use the computers, or do research. Faculty also use the library, but not nearly as much as students. Faculty use the library mainly to support their teaching, not their research. This could be due to the fact that WSU is not a research-based university and has few graduate programs.

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In addition to students and faculty, the library is open to the public and issues library cards to residents of southeast Minnesota. Students attending the other two higher education institutions in Winona are also allowed full use of the library. These other students primarily use the WSU Library for research, since it is much larger than their institutions' libraries. The non-college public also uses the WSU Library. The most popular resource is public access to the Internet. The WSU Library is also a government depository which attracts some general public usage. A few local businesses also use WSU Library resources.

I originally worked in the library's information commons and after a year transferred to circulation. When the program was created to place an undergraduate student at the reference desk, I volunteered and was accepted. Several factors both challenged and influenced the success I had in fulfilling this newly created position. I worked at the reference desk for one academic year, a minimum of ten hours per week. My scheduled hours were normally 8:00 to 10:00 a.m., however I was often asked to substitute during the library department meetings or when a librarian was absent.

Major Aspects

My experiences at the reference desk are organized into five major aspects: approachability; credibility; preferred reference specialist; blurring of lines; and unique success factors. These five aspects should provide a deeper understanding of what I experienced as an undergraduate student providing unsupervised reference services at a university library. There are other aspects, but these seem the most relevant. Examples are given to illustrate each of theses aspects. There is some overlapping between the aspects, as will be apparent from the examples.

Approachability

The first factor that I had to contend with was the idea of approachability. Most library patrons could instantly identify that I was not an actual librarian. Many patrons would then give me strange looks as they walked past. A few would be unsure about why I was at the reference desk and ask if I worked at the library. To help stop any confusion about my purpose in sitting at the reference desk, I adopted wearing a name tag which said "Keary Dennison Student Reference Aid." I was

in fact the only student worker in the library to wear a name tag. However, this enabled patrons to easily identify that I could help them even though I was a student. A few patrons would still ask if I worked there, but the vast majority stopped asking if I worked at the reference desk.

For some patrons, that fact that I was a student did not matter, for others it affected how they treated me. Occasionally, a patron would start walking towards the desk, get a better look at me, identify me as a student, then start to walk away. I found the best way to deal with patrons that acted in this manner was to ask if I could help them as they started walking up to the desk. Sometimes just smiling at them and looking approachable was enough to encourage patrons to ask me their questions instead of waiting for a librarian. This did not work for all patrons however. There were still a very few patrons who refused my help and just wanted to talk to a librarian. One time a patron approached the reference desk and told me that he had a question for a librarian. When I identified myself and told him I could help him, the patron became angry and said his question would be too hard for a student to answer and he needed a real librarian's help. He did tell me the question though, which turned out to be one for which I knew how to find the answer. The patron was very surprised when I told showed him how to find the information he wanted. After that, he at least never asked to get aid directly from a librarian.

The kind of patron who approached seemed to affect how that patron treated me. The patron classes were the typical: students; faculty; and general public. Although there was individual variation, especially if the patron already knew me, most members of each class reacted similarly. For example, students seemed to care the least that I was also a student. For some students it even made me more approachable. They were willing to seek aid from someone they thought of as an equal but not from someone above them.

Faculty seemed to find me less approachable then students did. This could be for some of the same reasons that students found me approachable, namely my age. While students enjoyed the help of someone close to their age, faculty also liked going to someone closer to their age, like a real librarian. Many faculty members have existing relationships with librarians and prefer to keep their routines.

The faculty that would approach me mostly asked where a specific librarian's office was or if in a certain librarian was in that day. Occasionally, a faculty member would ask me a reference question, but I usually sensed hesitation in doing so. For instance, once a faculty member that recognized me from another area of the library approached me at the reference desk looking confused. I asked her if I could help and she asked if I normally worked in another area. I then explained how I worked in both areas. At this point she started some polite chitchat and after a few minutes got around to asking me her questions. It seemed like she was getting a feel for me to decide if I was able to help her before she asked for my help. Other faculty treated me in similar fashion. However, the professors whose classes I had been in found me more approachable. This may have been since they already knew me and knew what I was capable of. The majority of my professors also knew that my father worked at WSU library as a librarian, which might have also played a part.

The general public that came to me did not seem to find me more or less approachable than a librarian. One patron from the community did not even notice that I was a student until I was almost done helping her and she said something about how talented librarians were and I felt obligated to say that I was not an actual librarian. She expressed surprise but no concern over the matter. Another community member approached the reference desk looking confused and asked for a librarian. After I explained what my job was the community member promptly asked me she question.

How approachable I was perceived to be varied greatly based on the type of patron. Some groups found me more approachable then other, like students. I did try to make myself more approachable to all groups. One of the main reasons few faculty members may have come to me could have been the hours I worked however. Very few faculty even came into the library when I was working the reference desk. So I did not have many experiences with faculty.

Credibility

Another factor which influenced the success I had in this program was the need to establish credibility. Reference responses must be accepted as accurate and reliable by patrons or the credibility of reference service will be undermined. A number of patrons in addition to the one mentioned previously, displayed surprise after I helped them. It seemed like the patrons did not think I was capable of helping them but they were willing to try anyway. These were the patrons I most enjoyed helping. I loved facing the challenge of changing the patrons' minds about me and my competency.

I faced the least amount of challenge from students. Most students assumed I gave credible answers just because I sat at the reference desk and never questioned the answers I gave. Some students did not even care about how credible the sources I found for them were. These students wanted a quick and easy source; accuracy ranked low on their concerns. I even had a student go so far as to say he did not care what source I found him since he did not plan on using it really; he only planned on citing it on the speech outline he turned in.

I did have a few students question my credibility. They were mostly upperclassmen who had more of a specific source in mind they were looking for. Another concern students expressed about credibility focused on the internet. Students occasionally questioned me when I used databases, like PubMed, saying they could not use internet sources. After I explained the difference between finding an article in one of the databases the library subscribed to and the internet, the student accepted the source.

Faculty proved to be the group that questioned my credibility the most. This makes sense since many did not even want to approach me in the first place. The few that would approach me often expressed doubt about my abilities to answer the question. These were the same patrons that expressed surprise after I helped them. One time when I was unable to answer the question and did, in fact, need to get the on-call librarian, the faculty member acted like I should have done that instantly. The more that I helped faculty, the more credibility I was able to build with them. By the end of my second semester working at the reference desk, the faculty I helped expressed fewer doubts about my ability to help them.

The general public fell somewhere between students and faculty in this category as well. With all categories, however, the more I helped the patrons the more confidence they had in me. This confidence I had to earn and establish my credibility with the patrons, which was one of the challenged I overcame while working at the reference desk.

Preferred Reference Specialist

One of the unforeseen effects of my job at the reference desk was how my teachers reacted. Many of my teachers already knew that I worked in the library, but not that I worked at the reference desk there. Upon hearing of my job at the reference desk, my teachers were thrilled. None of them doubted my ability to perform the job and most were not even surprised to find out that I had been given this new position.

My teachers also did not take long to take advantage of my situation. One of my teachers talked to me before class one day and asked if I would help some of the students find primary sources for an upcoming paper. It surprised me that one of my teachers wanted me to help some classmates, but I did not mind at all. After all, my classmates could just approach me at the reference desk when I was working and I would be obliged to help them.

Another teacher took it a step further. He assigned a research paper which a large portion of the class had difficulty finding sources for. His solution to students' difficulties in finding sources was to send them to me. In fact, he even went so far as to announce to the class that they should consult me if they had trouble doing research and then asked me for the hours I worked at the reference desk so that he could write them on the board. Although I felt like I was an assistant professor posting my office hours for the class, I felt honored to be able to help classmates in this way. The majority of the class never took advantage of my services but some of my classmates did ask me for help finding sources.

After helping out fellow classmates I developed a small following that always came to me for research aid. My following consisted mostly of students, many of whom I had helped with a question that they thought was impossible to find. The majority of these students were also history students. I was myself a history major, so this made perfect sense. A number of education students also came to me since I had met many of them in education courses I took. My personal friends also preferred to come to me for reference questions.

Students who preferred me to help did so for a number of reasons. The main reason was that fact that I was myself a student. It seemed easier for other students to come to me for research aid since they thought of me as a peer and not some one above them. One student even confessed to me that she would never have asked a librarian her question for fear of looking stupid. When it came to me, she said it was ok since I was closer to her age and could sympathize with her. Other patrons expressed similar reasons for preferring to come to me.

Another reason patrons gave when expressing a preference for me was that I had been in the class they had to do the research for. Many patrons thought this gave me an advantage in helping them since I knew exactly what the professor wanted. It also boosted the confidence the patrons had in me knowing that I had completed the same assignment as them.

Blurring of Lines

One of the major obstacles I faced while working at the reference desk occurred since I also worked at another public service department at the same time. It proved to be more difficult then I had imagined working in two departments. The lines between the two jobs blurred and I ended up doing work for one while I was at the other. While most of the time this was fine, it did cause problems on occasion.

Occasionally while working the reference desk, my supervisor from the other department would give me tasks to do. These tasks did not relate to the reference desk at all and would even take me out of the area to accomplish them. At times I had to go to a different floor of the library. While I was off doing these tasks the reference desk was unstaffed and I was not able to do the job I was supposed to do at the time. For instance, one of these tasks was to search for some books which the patron said had been returned but for which the library had no record of books being returned. The search required me to go up to the second floor of the library and shelf read. There was no way for me to know if a patron waited for help at the reference desk, and therefore no way for me to help them. Although my supervisor said he would keep an eye on the desk for me until I returned, it was difficult for him to do so all the time. Sometimes he had his own work to do in his office and his office did not have a view of the reference desk. Unfortunately, the result was that the reference desk was occasionally left unstaffed. Since the rationale to have a student staff the reference desk was to free librarians' time for other duties, there should be agreement among the reference staff about what duties should be performed during that freed time. All WSU librarians work some hours at the reference desk, regardless of their major work assignment. This

type of situation requires discussion and agreement among the librarians.

The task of shelf reading for missing books is one that is normally assigned to students working at the circulation desk, at which I also worked. While this is a typical task assigned to student workers, it is inappropriate to assign to a reference desk worker for a couple of reasons. First of all, it takes the worker away from away from the job and makes it impossible to do the job assigned for which he or she was hired. Secondly, there are other workers available to do these tasks, who are assigned to the circulation department. It was easy for this supervisor to blur the lines between the two departments since I worked in more then one position. The requirements of the reference desk are very different from the requirements of other departments, and supervisors of one department may not always be aware of the responsibilities of the students in other departments.

The supervisors were not the only ones to be confused. Patrons often came up to the circulation desk with reference questions. This happened throughout the day, and while I could answer their questions, not all of my fellow circulation workers could. My dilemma was if I should answer their questions or not. While I was capable of answering their questions, circulation desk protocol said I should send them to the reference desk unless it was a directional question. I found it very difficult to refuse to answer a question which I knew I could answer. I would find myself answering patrons' questions occasionally. For instance, if no one was at the reference desk or if there was a long line I would try to answer the question. I did try to educate patrons by making sure to tell them that next time they should go to the reference desk though.

Unique Success Factors

There were many personal and unique factors that contributed to my success at the reference desk. The first of these is my background. I had a deeper understanding then most student workers of the library since I worked in numerous areas of the library. In fact, by the time I graduated from WSU, I had worked in four of the five areas that hired student workers. My experiences working in other areas of the library aided me at the reference desk. Without my extensive library background, the job at the reference desk would have been very difficult.

Other areas of my background also contributed to my success. My father is also a librarian at WSU library and my step-mom is a librarian at a different library. Having my father as a librarian gave me exposure to the job from an early age. I also had a librarian that I could go to for advice outside of work. I think it is interesting to also note that my father was the only librarian at WSU library to vote against having a student staff the reference desk.

My major and the classes I took factored into my success as well. Being a history major taught me a great deal about doing research and finding information. Lots of techniques I learned in class I applied to the reference desk. I also had taken many education classes, which helped me provide better reference services. The training and experiences I had in my classes made it possible for me to work at the reference desk.

My prior library work, close connections to librarians, and my class experiences all contributed to my success at the reference desk. Very little training for the job at the reference desk took place and without these other factors I might not have succeeded. I would have preferred more specific training for the reference desk, but I was able to complete the job without it; not all student workers would have been.

Conclusion

The major aspects of approachability, credibility, preferred reference specialist, blurring of lines, and unique success factors were not the only aspects of working the reference desk, but were the most relevant. These factors provide a deeper understanding of what I experienced working at the reference desk and the challenges I faced. I found out that many patrons questioned why I was at the reference desk and faculty found me less approachable. I also determined that faculty found my answers less credible then students did. Many students chose not to question my credibility since they were more interested if quick, easy information. One unforeseen aspect was some students preferring my help and my teachers using me as a class resource. Another unforeseen aspect was the blurring of the lines between my jobs at the library. This could be solved by clearly defining the student reference aid job. Along with the unique factors that contributed to my success, a clearer understanding of my experiences at the reference desk should be achieved.

I look back on my time spent on the reference desk as one of the most rewarding jobs of my life. I

loved the work I did there as well as the atmosphere. I felt accepted by the librarians and included in library functions. This made it easier for me to ask librarians for advice while working or take concerns I had to them. The acceptance of the librarians and other library staff made it easier for me to pioneer the job of student reference aid. I would recommend more training for future student reference aids however. It would have helped me and I am sure it would help other students.

My experiences at the reference desk opened my eyes to what I wanted to do with my future. I realized how much I enjoyed working in the library and especially at the reference desk. So although I had spent practically my entire life in the library, and I had worked at a library for a number of years, it took my experience at the reference desk to convince me to become a librarian. My experiences working at the reference desk are ultimately what convinced me to become a reference librarian at an academic university.