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Who Is Sitting at the Reference Desk?: The Ever-Changing Concept of Staffing the Reference Desk at the Bio-Medical Library

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Abstract

Providing excellent reference service at the University of Minnesota's Bio-Medical Library has always been a source of pride and a goal to those of us who work at the reference desk. With tightening budgets and shrinking staff numbers, who works at the reference desk is drastically changing. The Bio-Medical Library has always been in a unique position to offer the opportunity of working at the reference desk to staff members across all departments, including those who at other libraries would not normally be given the option to staff the desk. From circulation staff to technical services staff to our fee-based services staff (InfoNOW) to our current project of training a few undergraduate student workers, the Bio-Medical Library staff has created a unique reference desk environment. This article will discuss the many different ways the Bio-Medical Library keeps the reference desk functioning with its unique and multi-departmental staff.

Brief History and Overview of the Bio-Medical Library

The University of Minnesota officially opened its doors in 1851 as a preparatory school, transformed and reorganized around the time of the Civil War, and graduated its first two students with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1873. After building other libraries around campus, this land-grant university waited a century before building a separate library for its medical school. Funding had been sought in the 1940s and 1950s; finally, in the late 1950s, enough private donations were raised to build the Bio-Medical Library in Diehl Hall in Minneapolis. By December of 1960, books were filling up the library, and in January 1961 the Bio-Medical Library officially opened its doors (construction and funding were finally finished in 1965).¹

Today the Bio-Medical Library is one of fourteen libraries in the University Libraries system at the University of Minnesota, Twin

Cities campus. It is part of the Health Sciences Libraries, which also includes the Wangenstein Historical Library of Biology and Medicine and the Veterinary Medical Library. The library occupies three floors of the Diehl Hall, which is located within the University of Minnesota Academic Health Center. It is the Bio-Medical Library's mission "to enhance the teaching, research, and service activities of the University of Minnesota and to support the University of Minnesota Academic Health Center in its quest to improve health, by facilitating timely access to information needed by library clients on campus, throughout Minnesota, and nationwide."² The collection currently includes over 500,000 print volumes and 2,700 print and electronic journal subscriptions.

History and Background of the Reference Desk

The staffing of the reference desk at the Bio-Medical Library has evolved over time in



Aho, Beschnett & Reimer: Who is Sitting at the Reference Desk?

response to the changing nature of the reference desk. Going back to the 1980s, the reference desk was staffed primarily by librarians, with three people working the desk during reference hours. The desk was busier then, as there were few, if any, end-user databases. Conducting a literature search in Medline, the premier database within the health sciences, required the mediated services of a librarian who had the specialized knowledge to properly build a search strategy.

As end-user searching began to proliferate with the growth in personal computers and end-user interfaces in the late 1980s and 1990s, the mediated search that was once a necessity slowly became a thing of the past.³ While assistance from an experienced searcher was, and still is, a highly valued service, library patrons no longer had to rely on a librarian to carry out their searches. In response to this trend, non-librarian staff were beginning to work the reference desk with more regularity, and the first non-librarian whose primary duty was to staff the reference desk was hired in the late 90s.

The student reference assistant program was also started in the 1990s. The student workers were trained by the reference staff, and they worked during the weekends and off hours. It was roughly around the time when the Bio-Medical Library began hiring non-librarian staff members to work the reference desk that the student reference assistant program stopped, due in part to student schedules. Students were working fewer hours, making training a longer process. Over the last few years, the Bio-Medical Library has also lost staff members (librarians and non-librarians) who worked at the reference desk (and in other positions in the library) due to a variety of reasons--the most recent being the economy. Sadly, these positions were never replaced.

Now, the majority of shifts are covered by non-librarian staff. These non-librarian staff members are the ones who oversee the functions of the reference desk and staff the desk more hours than anyone, including the li-

brarians. This is due in part to the fact that the librarians at the Bio-Medical Library work within the liaison model. Each librarian is a liaison to one or more colleges or schools within the Academic Health Center. As more and more of their time is being directed towards their liaison duties, they have fewer hours to work the reference desk.

The reference desk is currently staffed fifty-seven hours per week by nineteen full-time staff members, who represent almost all departments within the library, and three student reference assistants. Great care is taken to account for all reference transactions that take place at the desk, and the online application Desk Tracker is used to track these transactions. Primary details, including how the question was received (walk-in, telephone, or instant messaging), the type of questions asked (reference, technical, directional), and the length of the transaction are recorded and date/time stamped. The recording of these transactions allows the Bio-Medical Library reference staff to review the nature and traffic patterns of the reference transactions and make any staffing or training adjustments as necessary.

Reference Desk Services

Services at the reference desk have evolved and changed with technology. No longer do our patrons need to physically come in to the library to receive reference help. Library patrons can come into the library in person, but they can also call, email and instant message for help with their reference needs. Students, staff, and faculty are offered a number of services, including expert literature searches, scheduled consultations, library-sponsored workshops, and citation clarifications. All patrons are offered on-the-spot reference assistance during desk hours.

Current Staffing

Unlike a few of the other reference desks in the University of Minnesota libraries system, the Bio-Medical Library reference desk is not necessarily staffed by people with



Aho, Beschnett & Reimer: Who is Sitting at the Reference Desk?

MLS or MLIS degrees. For example, Delbert Reed, who is a library professional and who works the most reference desk shifts, is not a "librarian." Del started in the Bio-Medical Library over twenty years ago as a library page and was inspired to learn reference skills as a student worker when he was working during the weekends and the reference librarians were not available to assist patrons. Over the years he has held a variety of positions and is now the lead reference specialist (albeit one with a PhD in Philosophy).

Out of the nineteen people who now help staff the reference desk, eleven currently hold MLS or MLIS degrees and two are currently working on their degrees. Others hold bachelor, master, or doctoral degrees in a variety of subjects. These nineteen reference desk workers include three people who form the core reference staff, one who is a librarian, a second who is a library professional, and a third who is a library assistant; two people from the Access Services department, one who is a library professional and one who is a library assistant; two people from InfoNOW, both of whom are library assistants; six liaison librarians, who are librarians with continuous appointment; two people from Technical Services, one who is a librarian and one who is a library assistant; one National Library of Medicine (NLM) grant-funded individual; and finally, three undergraduate student workers, of whom two are pursuing bachelor degrees in the health sciences and one of whom will soon be pursuing a masters in library science.

Training

Preparing staff for the responsibility of working at the reference desk occurs on a number of levels and is accomplished by a number of staff. All full-time staff members are invited to monthly reference instruction meetings, in which staff discuss current reference issues and hone reference skills through searching exercises and demonstrations. The meetings are a collaboration between Liz Fine, a reference and liaison libra-

rian, and Del Reed, a full-time, non-librarian reference specialist. In addition to these monthly meetings, non-librarian staff members are further trained by the reference staff. Training has typically occurred at the physical desk with new staff learning from more experienced staff. Reference staff are currently drafting competencies to identify a standard skill set for the library staff who work at the reference desk.

In addition to full time staff, the Bio-Medical Library relies heavily on student staff members across the board. In the Reference department, we have recently expanded our use of students by adding three student assistants to the mix of staff providing reference services. Students are in the process of being trained to work during non-business hours, starting with six hours on Saturdays and extending to Sundays and evenings in the future. Students chosen for these positions so far have worked for the library for a significant period of time and have demonstrated an aptitude for reference work. They have had significant and more structured reference training than typical library staff. Each has spent dozens of hours in one-on-one instruction, co-staffing the desk and observing staff-patron interactions, and completing quizzes designed to stretch their skills prior to being assigned to work a shift alone. Beyond their initial training, they will also continue their training during reference shifts shared with more experienced reference staff.

Integration of Service Points

In the summer and fall of 2008, some significant changes were made to the physical locations of various service points in the Bio-Medical Library. Prior to this time, the library had two circulation desks, a reference desk, and a computer help desk, which were all separate service points located on the second and third levels of the library. The circulation desks on both floors were located near the entrances of the library and the reference and computer help desks were located near the main computing area in the library.



Aho, Beschnett & Reimer: Who is Sitting at the Reference Desk?

The decision was made to combine the reference and circulation service points into one location near the main entrance of the library, where one of the circulation desks was located, to help facilitate a "one stop shop" and to make our services easier for our patrons to find. The computer help desk was dissolved and now the computer help desk staff work from their offices and are available to assist with computer issues on an "on call" basis. The circulation desk was expanded and reconfigured to accommodate the addition of the reference desk. This reconfiguration has led to further cross training of library staff. Those who used to sit exclusively behind the reference desk are now trained to perform basic circulation duties.

Conclusion

With ever-decreasing budgets and staffing, many libraries will need to reevaluate who works the reference desk. At the University of Minnesota's Bio-Medical Library, reference is provided by many different people with many different backgrounds and skills. This diversity in staffing makes our reference services more knowledgeable, more flexible, and more engaged than we might otherwise be. It also helps our staff expand their skills, lets us try new ideas, and allows many of us to participate in one of our library's main goals—providing and maintaining reference excellence.

Endnotes

¹ Leonard G. Wilson, *Medical Revolution in Minnesota: A History of the University of Minnesota Medical School*. (St. Paul, MN: Midewiwin Press, 1989), pp. 455-457.

² "Our Mission," University of Minnesota Bio-Medical Library,
<http://www.biomed.lib.umn.edu/about/mission>

³ Brian S. Katcher, *Medline: A Guide to Effective Searching in PubMed & Other Interfaces*. (San Francisco: Ashbury Press, 2006), p. 12.

