Core Reference Responsibilities for Public Service Librarians

In May of 2011 the User Services Council appointed a Core Reference Responsibilities Task Force and charged it with setting out expectations for core responsibilities of Rutgers public service librarians in contributing to the various forms of reference that we provide. As stated in the charge, the goals of this Task Force were to:

- Specifically name and affirm core responsibilities of public service librarians
- Recommend any modifications in services and provide appropriate rationales
- Suggest a model or set of norms for the number of contact hours that each public service librarian should be expected to deliver regardless of other duties (liaison, selection, technical, administrative roles)
- Recommend any additional types of support (e.g. training, administrative or technical support, use of part-time librarians) needed to deliver superior quality reference service

In the course of the Committee deliberations, we

- Reviewed recent reports relating to reference services, including Reference Organizational Review documents (5/17/10); the Report of the Chat Reference Services Task Force (4/26/2011); and a report on RUL Virtual Reference Services Volume and Participation
- Reviewed existing RUL reference statistics within units and virtually
- Reviewed how reference statistics within RUL units were being collected and recorded
- Reviewed comments from the Counting Opinions surveys
- Surveyed public service librarian job descriptions from other institutions
- Conducted a literature review
- Surveyed peer institutions about any existing models for evaluating the appropriate levels of reference participation by public services librarians

What Responsibilities/Whose Responsibilities?

Core Reference Services

Before discussing general norms and expectations, the Task Force had to decide what core services we were focusing on, and exactly to whom those expectations would pertain.

The “core reference services” were defined as:

a. Face to face
b. Chat
c. Email
d. Individual consulting
Public Services Librarians

While what constitutes a “public services librarian” can be defined in any number of ways, the Task Force ultimately decided for the purposes of this report to base it on reporting structure. Therefore at the Rutgers Universities Libraries “Public Services Librarians” were defined as:

- In New Brunswick: All librarians who report to the AUL for Research and Information Services except for the Deputy AUL for RIS, the Head of Access and Interlibrary Loan Services, and any Special Projects librarians.
- In Camden: All librarians who report to the Robeson Library Director.
- In Newark: All librarians except for the Dana Library Director, Assistant Director, and Institute of Jazz Studies Librarians.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Service Librarians at RUL¹</th>
<th>Camden</th>
<th>New Brunswick</th>
<th>Newark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Face-to-Face Reference:** As far as we have been able to determine, all RUL public service librarians participate in scheduled face-to-face reference, generally at a Reference Desk, to some degree. The number of hours that a librarian may be scheduled may vary depending on the primary base unit of the librarian, the perceived need at that unit, and the ability of the person responsible for scheduling at the unit to take into account individual workload issues. At some units the Reference Desk schedule is done on a weekly basis, at others on a monthly basis, and others on a semester basis.

Only Alexander and Dana have librarians staffing the Reference Desk on Sundays during the academic year. The Kilmer Library only uses RAs on Sundays; the Robeson Library does not offer in-person reference service on Sundays. LSM and Douglass offer no in-person reference service on weekends.²

**Virtual Reference:** Of the forty-four public service librarians identified above, in the spring of 2012 twenty three participated in Ask a Librarian, the email reference service; and 30 participated in the chat reference service.

¹ As of May 2012. May include open positions.
² As the Interim Associate University Librarian noted in her 2010/2011 Annual Report: “There appears to be statistical evidence to support a reduction in librarian staffed hours of service. At the same time, serious consideration also needs to be given to the value of serendipitous intervention and then posited against the most effective use of librarians’ time...This intervention cannot take place if no one is available.”

http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/staff/ris/reports/RIS_annual_report_10-11.pdf (p.6)
Public Service Librarians Participating in Virtual Reference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ask a Librarian</th>
<th>RefChatter</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Neither</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Camden</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Brunswick</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3(^4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newark</td>
<td>4(^5)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1(^6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reference Services

On-site demand for reference services has fluctuated between campuses and individual units. Statistics in Newark and Camden have remained fairly constant; some units in New Brunswick have reported greatly decreased demand and have subsequently significantly curtailed their reference desk hours. The demand for chat reference has remained constant, as has the reference portion of the Ask a Librarian email service.\(^7\)

Despite decreased demand experienced by individual units, over 53,000 questions were tallied in FY 2011/2012.

Rutgers Reference Services 2011/2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On-Site Reference</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dana Library</td>
<td>13,280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Brunswick Libraries</td>
<td>17,315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robeson Library</td>
<td>10,311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>On-Site Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>40,906</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Reference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RefChatter</td>
<td>7,331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask a Librarian</td>
<td>4,831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Virtual Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>12,162</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Reference</strong></td>
<td><strong>53,068</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While these are numbers that may appear in any number of official reports, we know that in many ways they are merely estimations. What gets counted and how it gets counted varies not just campus to campus, but unit to unit. Some librarians count questions; others count transactions. The major units in New Brunswick have recently adopted Gimlet, a reference statistics tracking tool, for keeping track of their reference transactions. However what they track varies from unit to unit. Dana uses a simple web-based tracking tool developed in-house during the Spring 2012 semester.

\(^3\) Excludes an empty position and a librarian who was on leave for the Spring semester.

\(^4\) Includes one public services librarian who participates on Ask a Librarian as part of the Access Team.

\(^5\) Excludes one new public services librarian who only began at Rutgers in April.

\(^7\) Although Ask a Librarian totals have significantly decreased in recent years as a result of the elimination of the need for a PIN for most library services.
to keep track of their reference statistics; Robeson uses a manual form. Dana and some New Brunswick libraries keep track of their off-desk reference consultations; Robeson does not.

“A Framework of Equity and Fairness”

As the charge to the Task Force noted:

The challenge for this task force will be to provide recommendations that are neither too rigid nor formulaic but nevertheless provide some guidance to help each librarian determine whether he/she measures up to peer expectations in their responsibility to provide what we consider to be reference service. All public service librarians need to operate within a framework of equity and fairness in their delivery of this core service.

While the need to develop a framework for ensuring that the responsibility for the delivery of critical reference services does not fall on a core group of public services librarians but is rather shared in a reasonably equitable manner was pointed out in earlier reports, those reports did not suggest what that framework might be. A literature review did not find any studies or reports that discuss balancing responsibilities among public services librarians, or the equitable distribution of reference responsibilities. A survey of job descriptions for reference or public services librarians found no language that suggested an institution might have a framework for addressing these issues.

A survey of peer academic libraries found most of those that responded to be much like Rutgers, with no formal requirements for specific levels of participation in reference services. The one exception was Michigan State, which at the original hire asks librarians to participate in a 25% “secondary assignment.” Reference is the most popular secondary assignment, with approximately 30 librarians, primarily those hired as subject specialists, participating. These librarians spend 25% of their time doing general reference services, which may include a mix of chat, email, and in-person.

It seems evident that if the Rutgers University Libraries can come to consensus on norms and expectations for reference service participation among all public service librarians, they will truly have gone boldly where few have gone before.

Recommendations

Core Reference Responsibilities: Individual Consulting

In considering the four modalities that make up core reference services, the Task Force felt that availability for “Individual Consulting” should be a normal expectation for every public services librarian.
**Expectation:**

Public service librarians are expected to respond to reasonable requests from students and faculty, and to reasonable requests from others for individual assistance in any mode including telephone, email, or scheduled appointment.

Obviously depending on subject expertise and liaison responsibilities, the demand for individual consulting will vary from librarian to librarian. This is not a responsibility for which there can be an expectation of equitable distribution.

**Core Reference Responsibilities: Face to Face, Chat, and Email**

Unlike individual consulting which is either unscheduled or individually scheduled, the other three core reference responsibilities require prior scheduling. There is a reference point, be it either physical or virtual, at which a user has the expectation that help will be available. Someone must be responsible for being at the point at a specific time. This responsibility must be shared between all public services librarians.

**Expectation:**

Public service librarians are expected to participate fully in all of the scheduled reference activities.

It is anticipated that public service librarians will participate in all three of the scheduled reference activities. However there may be legitimate reasons for a librarian to choose to participate in only two. In the context of overall workload, adjustments to the appropriate level of involvement may be set in consultation with the unit and/or the AUL or Director.

**Other Recommendations**

If reference is, as we believe it to be, a basic core responsibility of public service librarians, we need to make sure that this expectation is clear from the beginning. Therefore we recommend that the job descriptions for all public services positions include a statement indicating that “Public service librarians are expected to participate fully in the provision of face-to-face and virtual reference services.”

We need to be more consistent in our understanding of how we measure the reference services that we provide. At the very least we should have a common understanding of what constitutes a reference question. The implementation of a READ (Reference Effort Assessment Data) Scale for the Rutgers Libraries—a goal recently adopted by the User Services Council—would be a major step in this process.
Core Reference Responsibilities Task Force
Natalie Borisovets
Kayo Denda
Melissa Gasparotto
Tom Glynn
Jackie Mardikian
Julie Still
Susan Beck (until November 2011).

September 25, 2012