

DRAFT

Chapter Ten

Does the Reference Desk Still Matter?

*Assessing the Desk Paradigm at the University of
Washington Libraries*

Deb Raftus and Kathleen Collins

[10.0]

The University of Washington (UW) comprises three campuses and several off-campus facilities and is the largest comprehensive research institution in the Pacific Northwest. UW's Seattle campus, its largest, has thirteen libraries, which serve 43,000 students and 4,300 faculty and host over 5 million annual visits to library facilities and 9 million separate visits to the libraries' websites.¹ With the increasing availability of research content online, a significant portion of UW's faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates now privilege desktop delivery of content over physical visits to library buildings for their research.² A growing shift toward remote access is similarly evident in reference services—one-fifth of questions in 2011 came in via e-mail and chat.³ It is logical, then, to ask: Are librarians with advanced degrees making their most effective contribution to the scholarly community by staffing walk-up reference desks, where annual statistics show a steep decline in business? To address this question, the Reference Desk Services Task Force (hereafter "the task force") was established in winter 2011 to assess services at the three Seattle campus libraries that still maintained stand-alone reference desks: the main research library, Suzzallo-Allen; the Odegaard Undergraduate Library; and the Engineering Library.

[10.1]

REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

[10.2]

In completing its charge, the task force trod a well-followed path; the questions of *how* and even *whether* to staff a physical reference desk are hardly



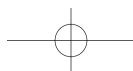
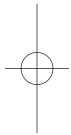
new ones. Traditionally, libraries have used a “just-in-case” model, staffing reference desks with professional librarians in anticipation of the occasional in-depth research question requiring such expertise.⁴ As early as 1977, however, a study concluded that 80 percent of the questions asked at the reference desk could be answered by trained nonprofessionals.⁵ More recently, similar studies found that the majority of questions asked at the reference desk could be answered without extensive research knowledge.⁶

Some argue that freeing librarians from answering directional and low-level reference questions at a desk will give them more time to pursue high-impact professional-level activities, such as teaching, curriculum mapping, and in-depth research consultations.⁷ Since collaborations with faculty and partnerships with campus teaching and learning programs, writing centers, and computer labs provide opportunities to meet students when and where they need help, librarians’ time could be better spent conducting outreach to their departments and establishing such partnerships.⁸

Many libraries have experimented with offering in-person help beyond the physical service desk, employing a referral and consultation model, virtual reference services, a roving-around model, or a blended model incorporating multiple services.⁹ Reference librarians are expanding their scope through outreach to become embedded field librarians. Given budget pressures in the new century, a 65 percent decline in reference statistics in Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member libraries over the last twenty years,¹⁰ and the by-now well-documented disinclination of students to seek research help from staffed reference service points,¹¹ some libraries have completely eliminated their reference desks, while an argument has been advanced to do away with face-to-face reference services entirely.¹²

ASSESSING THE REFERENCE DESK PARADIGM AT UW

The literature makes clear that, for many librarians, the reference desk carries an emotional and symbolic weight, serving as an emblem not only of reference service, but also of librarianship itself. Thus, taking away the desk devalues the reference librarian and removes the most prominent public representative of the profession. The powerful symbolism embodied in the reference desk has even been used as a justification for keeping it, and institutions that have moved away from a traditional reference desk describe the change as a “paradigm shift.”¹³ As Steven J. Bell explains, “Some reference librarians are so attached to the idea of the desk that they will likely refuse to even discuss the possibility of exploring alternative service delivery models. But talk about it we must.”¹⁴ The totemic power of the reference desk was brought home to the task force when one member repeatedly experienced



DRAFT

Does the Reference Desk Still Matter?

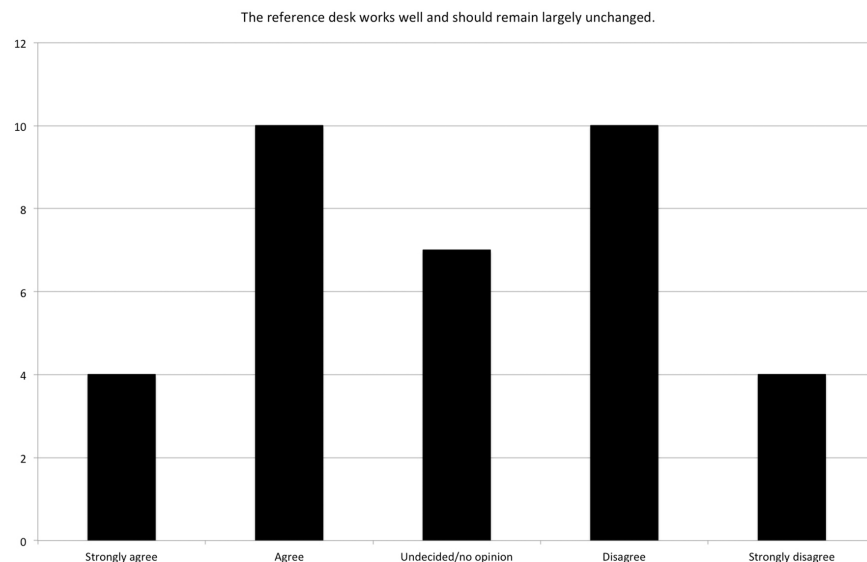
librarians shouting, “Save the reference desk!” as they passed by her office door.

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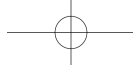
To invite staff input and open up a conversation about the reference desk paradigm, the task force developed a survey to determine the value reference staff placed on the reference desk and the role they believed it played. The survey included fifteen multiple-choice, short answer, and ratings scale questions covering staff demographics, work history, and feelings on and ideas about reference desk services. Thirty-five respondents completed the survey. Over a third of the respondents indicated they had than twenty years of reference desk experience, while most had at least eleven years of experience and participated in other reference services, like chat and consultations, in addition to desk hours. Most indicated that the reference desk was important to them personally. Interestingly, when asked whether changes should or should not be made to the reference desk, respondents showed an even split in opinion (figure 10.1). Further responses were more nuanced, with the overall impression indicating that, although the majority of reference staff vehemently opposed doing away with in-person reference services altogether, some might support merging reference with other service points or ceding desk time to trained students.

[10.8]

Comments reiterated the split feelings among staff: In answer to one open question, “One thing I would keep about the reference desk is . . .” one librarian wrote simply, “the reference desk.” Several respondents expressed



[10f1] Figure 10.1. Staff responses to survey question: “The reference desk works well and should remain largely unchanged.”



variations on the statement that “Reference is why I became a librarian,” even as some acknowledged that walk-up desks were no longer the central service they once had been, “an antiquated mode of service delivery that is no longer relevant to the majority of students and faculty that make up our academic community.”

As with many surveys of this nature, the results were inconclusive. What did emerge is that staff continued to value the walk-up reference desk for its opportunities for personal, one-on-one interaction and connections with students, “the chance to humanize the library/research experience for all who come here for help.” While some respondents argued that, with proper training and a willingness to help people, students could successfully staff a reference desk. Others, however, clearly expressed the importance they placed on the desk as symbol and safety net: “If we get rid of the reference desk, we are telling our patrons in a very dramatic way that reference is not important, nor are librarians. If anyone can sit at a desk and answer any type of question, then really why do we need librarians?”

[10.9]

Based on the strong reactions in the survey, the task force knew it would need to communicate openly and regularly about the work of assessing reference services, and that we would need clear and unquestionable data about what was—and was not—going on at the Seattle campus reference desks, in order to begin to break down strong staff resistance to changing what so many saw as an essential service and a cornerstone of their professional identity.

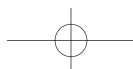
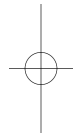
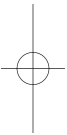
[10.10]

CAPTURING QUESTION DATA

[10.11]

Statistics at the UW Libraries mirrored national trends: over the last decade, there was a steep drop-off in the number of reference queries, even with the exponential growth of e-mail and chat reference services factored in.¹⁵ Meanwhile, anecdotal evidence suggested that “ready reference” inquiries, now easily answered by readily available online sources, were less frequent, while the proportion of questions requiring construction of an answer or counseling on a search strategy had increased. The UW Libraries had tried variations on the traditional staffed reference desk model by experimenting with roving reference, on-call reference, and various configurations of e-mail and chat reference services; co-locating reference service points with circulation desks or with campus IT help desks; and holding office hours in academic departments. Some of these experiments had been abandoned, but a number had taken hold. However, many of these services were offered *in addition to* physical reference desks rather than as alternatives, with the effect of placing yet more time demands on subject-liaison librarians, who were also increasingly drawn into teaching and outreach efforts. The Seattle campus

[10.12]



DRAFT

Does the Reference Desk Still Matter?

employs a liaison model of librarianship; subject librarians serve their academic departments with reference services, teaching and learning partnerships, outreach and marketing, and guidance on other relevant issues, such as scholarly communication. The charge of the task force made clear that the most pressing question was whether it was an effective use of the libraries' most specialized personnel to staff a general walk-up reference desk. Unwilling to rely on anecdotal evidence, the task force sought an assessment method that would not simply count but also document the complexity of reference questions.

[10.13] Although the UW Libraries collects user query statistics at all service points during four one-week sampling periods each year, this existing data was not sufficiently granular, since it merely *counted* reference questions¹⁶ and gave no other context. The task force wanted data documenting the range and type of questions received at the Suzzallo, Odegaard, and Engineering reference desks, and in discerning whether there were consistent patterns in the times of the day and time of the academic quarter when types of questions clustered—information not available in UW Libraries' statistical samples.

[10.14] Since the libraries already used Compendium Library Services' Desk Tracker, a cloud-based subscription statistical system, to track not just user queries but also instruction sessions and some research consultations, the task force chose Desk Tracker to collect data on every question received at the three reference desks for an entire eleven-week academic quarter. A simple Desk Tracker form used quick-pick radio buttons to facilitate quick recording (figure 10.2).

[10.15] While the task force's initial intention had been to develop a coding system based on the "Type of Question" and "Time Spent" categories of the question form, a continuing scan of professional literature turned up Dr. Bella Karr Gerlich's Reference Effort Assessment Data (READ) Scale. The READ Scale attempts to assess the effort, knowledge, and skill required to answer a reference question—information that has not been systematically recorded in other question-tallying methods.¹⁷ The scale consists of six levels of effort, from 1 (least amount of effort, no specialized knowledge or skill required) to 6 (most time and effort expended, requiring substantial specialized knowledge and research). Coding reference questions received at UW Seattle's reference desks according to this scale would add a needed dimension to question data by including a judgment on the knowledge necessary to answer the majority of questions logged at the desks—and thus, perhaps, help to determine the optimal level of staffing needed at those desks.

[10.16] The READ Scale is intended for use by individual librarians to record effort at the time questions are answered. Since the task force decided to use the READ Scale to code question data only after the Desk Tracker form had been in use for several weeks, it was decided to test whether it could be

The screenshot shows a web interface with three tabs: 'Activity', 'Ref Desk Survey', and 'Reports'. The 'Ref Desk Survey' tab is active. At the top left is a 'Submit' button, and at the top right is a 'Custom Timestamp' field. Below these are two main sections. The left section is titled 'Reminder:' and contains text: 'We are collecting data and categorizing questions asked (including not answered & referrals). Use the textbox after the type of question to briefly describe it. Please do not tell us how you handled it.' Below this is a section titled 'Type of Question' with a 'required [help]' label. It contains five radio button options, each with a corresponding text box: 'General information:', 'Technical help:', 'Known item lookup:', 'Reference:', and 'Other:'. The right section is titled 'Comments (Optional - anything else you want to tell us?):' and contains a large, empty text area. At the bottom left of the form is another 'Submit' button.

[10f2] Figure 10.2. Form for recording questions at the reference desks

applied by one coder to analyze transactions after the fact. A graduate student assistant with data-analysis experience was assigned to the task. With guidance from the task force, she developed a detailed coding system defining sample questions for the form’s five categories and then mapped those examples to READ Scale code ranges. To test the consistency of the coding guidelines, the data coder consulted with a task force member on a representative sample of twenty-five questions.

Because the initial question data from spring 2011 applied READ Scale codes in this manner, for comparative purposes the task force repeated the study for another eleven weeks during fall 2011 quarter, once again recording every question asked at the three reference desks. In fall, however, staff themselves were asked to assign READ codes to the questions as part of the recording process. Discrepancies in the spring and fall quarter data were expected because of the different coding methods; however, although more effort codes clustered in the lower nonreference (1–2) and fewer in the lower-level reference (3–4) categories during the fall quarter, the higher proportion of orientation-type questions from new students and the research rhythm of the academic year more than likely account for a significant proportion of this difference.

As in other studies applying the READ Scale at service points,¹⁸ the majority of questions (over 70 percent) recorded during the two-quarter sam-

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DRAFT

Does the Reference Desk Still Matter?

pling period fell into the 1–2 categories of effort, while 27.5 percent of questions were in the lower 3–4 range of reference effort. Only a small fraction of questions fell into the 5–6 range, where subject librarians are most often necessary. While this pattern, illustrated in tables 1 and 2, held true for all three service points, the Suzzallo reference desk, as would be expected from UW’s flagship research library, recorded the highest overall number of questions (70 percent of the total questions) and also an overall higher number of questions in the 5–6 effort range. Suzzallo, however, also recorded slightly higher percentages of questions in the “nonreference” (1–2 range) categories, perhaps because the desk is located on the main floor of a complicated three-wing library building and, thus, patrons require considerable way-finding assistance.

[10.19] Significantly, even during the heaviest traffic time of the quarters at UW Libraries’ busiest reference desk, staff fielded an average of 8.5 total questions per hour, and only slightly more than one-third of those inquiries were reference questions, as opposed to directional, policy, or technology ones (figure 10.3).

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APPLYING THE DATA

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While it had been obvious for some time that the majority of questions asked at University of Washington Libraries’ reference desks were not research-level questions, the very small proportion of inquiries requiring true expertise did come as a surprise. Although many reference staff had been skeptical of the task force’s charge at the outset of the study, the question data gathered over two quarters began to convince staff that changes were necessary. The READ Scale, contextualized by the actual questions themselves, provided a clear and true representation of desk activity. Armed with actual data and an

[T10_001.t1] Table 10.1. Question Percentages by READ Code, Spring 2011 (Rounded to Nearest 0.1 Percent)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	% of Total Questions
Engineering	43.4%	18.0%	29.3%	8.6%	0.6%	0.0%	11.6% (801)
Odegaard	42.7%	18.5%	28.4%	8.6%	1.7%	0.0%	20.8% (1,432)
Suzzallo	35.8%	28.4%	28.9%	6.3%	0.5%	0.0%	67.5% (4,647)
All Desks	36.4%	26.5%	28.2%	7.6%	1.3%	0.0%	100% (6,880)

[T10_002.t1] Table 10.2. Question Percentages by READ Code, Fall 2011 (Rounded to Nearest 0.1 Percent)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	% of Total Questions
Engineering	47.0%	30.0%	16.2%	4.0%	1.8%	0.2%	12.5% (940)
Odegaard	46.4%	27.6%	15.9%	7.0%	2.9%	0.2%	15.3% (1,148)
Suzzallo	50.6%	29.0%	13.9%	5.0%	1.2%	0.2%	72.1% (5,409)
All Desks	49.5%	28.9%	14.1%	5.2%	1.5%	0.2%	100% (7,497)

archive of the questions asked rather than mere anecdote, the task force was equipped to argue for some different staffing models and approaches to reference services.

Engineering Library Reference Desk

[10.22]

Although the lowest number of reference questions was recorded at the Engineering Library, even questions at READ Scale levels 3 and 4 often require the use of specialized collections like standards, technical reports, and patent and trademark information. Thus, the engineering librarians judged that it was still important to maintain an active help presence. However, the question data collected over two quarters was used to justify merging the circulation desk and the reference desk into a single service point. Reference librarians and trained students from the UW Information School’s Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program now work at a sit-down desk located behind the single service desk, where they are available to be called into transactions that require their expertise, but can otherwise concentrate on other liaison, committee, and managerial work.

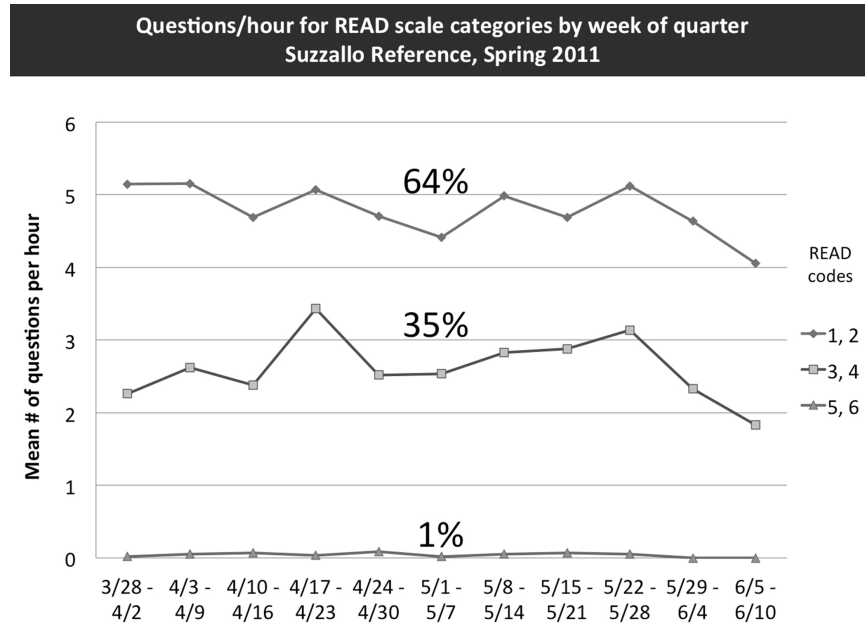
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Odegaard Undergraduate Library Reference Desk

[10.24]

In the Odegaard Library, the question statistics added support for a move that some had already been advocating. Even as the data was being analyzed, Odegaard was planning a major building renovation for the 2012–2013 budget year. Because the entire first floor of the three-story building would be closed during the renovation project, it was necessary to consolidate services located on the first floor into a central service point during construction. The reference desk, which had been co-located with the second-floor Learning Commons help desk run by UW’s Information Technology department,

[10.25]



[10f3] Figure 10.3. Questions per hour by week of quarter, Suzzallo Reference, spring 2011

closed to make room for the information desk, formerly located on the first floor. Odegaard’s reference librarians spent a transitional year holding “office hours” in a second-floor room, where question statistics dropped dramatically, but most of the questions fielded actually required research resources.

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When the renovation ended, Odegaard’s research help service relocated to the prominent new Odegaard Writing and Research Center (OWRC) space on the first floor. The reference question data and the upcoming renovation were the perfect chance to change the service model to one of closer collaboration with a writing center that had formerly been run on a shoestring in an out-of-the-way third-floor room of the library building.

[10.27]

The OWRC functions primarily by appointment, although walk-in writing and research help are offered on an as-available basis. The research help service is staffed by seven librarians and four graduate assistants. Odegaard’s subject librarians (who handle many of the social science disciplines for the UW Seattle campus) advertise their assigned OWRC research help hours as “office hours” on their subject pages. While the collaboration between library and writing center is not an original idea¹⁹ and both departments are still feeling the way toward wholehearted partnership, it is the hope to expand the scope of research services by cross-training peer writing tutors to engage in a sort of “viral reference.” This plan makes sense when one consid-



ers the lopsided numbers—there are now seventy-five student peer tutors who offer writing experience in dozens of disciplines and the librarians anticipate doubling last year’s 11,751 tutoring sessions in the coming academic year—far more than the reference staff could manage alone.²⁰ The same Desk Tracker form the task force devised for collecting READ Scale statistics is currently being used in the OWRC to gather comparative data in order to assess the impact of the new service model on the nature of the research help interactions taking place there.

Suzzallo Reference Desk

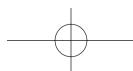
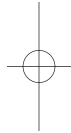
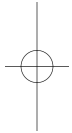
[10.28]

The Suzzallo-Allen Libraries comprise a labyrinthine maze of collections and spaces, spanning three buildings and five floors. Due to the confusing nature of the buildings and the quantity of questions received at the reference desk, librarians concluded that a desk must be maintained precisely where it is currently located—in the middle of the complex, nearest the elevators, central staircase, computers, printers, and reference collection. Because Suzzallo logged thousands of reference-level questions during the sampling period, it was decided that the desk should be staffed full time by trained reference personnel: a mix of librarians, staff, and graduate MLIS students. However, the question data initiated a shift in Suzzallo’s staffing model; formerly staffed primarily by librarians, the desk is now chiefly staffed by paraprofessional staff and trained graduate students.

[10.29]

Two years after this shift, one big obstacle still stands in the way of its complete success: fall quarter. Graduate student appointments begin at the start of the quarter, and thus new hires are at the beginning of their training during this crucial time and therefore are not yet competent to staff the desk alone. Thus, until the training of new graduate student specialists is completed every fall, librarians are required to work more hours than envisioned to cover desk hours and to staff weekend shifts. However, the Suzzallo Reference and Research Services division regards itself as analogous to a “teaching hospital” for library school students. While the mentoring and training shown these future librarians benefits the division in subsequent quarters as they assume more hours on the desk, on chat reference, and in the classroom, it is also in service to them and to the profession and thus an appropriate use of librarians’ time and expertise. Therefore, fall quarter requires the division to use a slightly different staffing model, even though consequently librarians have less time for outreach activities when the reference and instruction load is at its peak.

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DRAFT

Does the Reference Desk Still Matter?

[10.31]

CHARTING FUTURE DIRECTIONS

[10.32]

As user needs and habits change, the UW Libraries will conduct further assessments of reference services and staffing models, continuing to take occasional quarter-long snapshots of questions coded with the READ Scale to compare that question data against the 2011 benchmark. Further, the task force recommended that the libraries conduct a similar study of other reference services, notably chat and e-mail reference, which in 2011 accounted for over 20 percent of total reference traffic. Since these services were excluded from the initial study of the UW Seattle’s physical reference desks, using the READ Scale to once again answer the question, “Is this the most effective use of librarians’ time?,” is a natural extension of work already begun.

[10.33]

At UW Libraries, the reference service paradigm is in the process of shifting from the sacred tradition of librarians staffing a desk “just in case” to striving toward more intentional and profound collaborations with faculty, students, and student support services. However, the manner in which we now do so attempts to conserve librarians’ skills for use where they are truly necessary. In making this change, we had to push past subjective impressions by gathering and assessing the data necessary to check those impressions; and then apply solutions while mindful that local climate and user needs dictate individual, rather than cookie-cutter, solutions.

[10.34]

University of Washington Libraries still remains dedicated to providing face-to-face, on-demand research help, especially since brand-new data indicates that students who consult with a librarian report greater ability to find needed information, complete coursework, and achieve academic success.²¹ In realizing that such valuable consultation with librarians did not have to take place at the reference desk, we have begun at last to “separate the service from the symbol.”²²

[10.35]

NOTES

[10.36]

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the other members of the UW Libraries Reference Desk Services Task Force: Grace Chung, Julie Cook, Nancy Huling (chair), Terry Jankowski, Lisa Oberg, and Margarete Walden.

[10n1]

1. University of Washington Libraries, “Libraries Fact Sheet,” accessed October 10, 2013, www.lib.washington.edu/assessment/stats/facts.

[10n2]

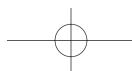
2. University of Washington Libraries, *2010 Triennial Survey Report to Libraries Council*, 2010, accessed October 10, 2013, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/dspace/handle/1773/19833>; UW Libraries, “Triennial Survey,” accessed October 10, 2013, www.lib.washington.edu/assessment/surveys/triennial.

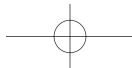
[10n3]

3. UW Libraries, “Libraries Fact Sheet.”

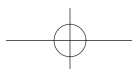
[10n4]

4. Irene M. Lubker et al., “Refocusing Reference Services outside the Library Building,” *Medical Reference Services Quarterly* 29 (2010): 218–28.





- 5. Jeffrey W. St. Clair, Rao Aluri, and Maureen Pastine, "Staffing the Reference Desk: Professionals or Nonprofessionals?," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 3, no. 3 (July 1977): 149–53. [10n5]
- 6. Scott Carlson, "Are Reference Desks Dying Out?," *The Reference Librarian* 48 (June 2007): 28; Bella Karr Gerlich and Edward Whatley, "Using the READ Scale for Staffing Strategies," *Library Leadership & Management* 23, no. 1 (January 2009): 26–30. [10n6]
- 7. Marianne Stowell Bracke et al., "Finding Information in a New Landscape," *College & Research Libraries* 68, no. 3 (May 2007): 248–67. [10n7]
- 8. Marianne Ryan and Julie Garrison, "What Do We Do Now?," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 12–14; Caroline Cason Barratt, Phoebe Acheson, and Emily Luken, "Reference Models in the Electronic Library," *Reference Services Review* 38 (2010): 44–56; Susan Miller and Nancy Murillo, "Why Don't Students Ask Librarians for Help?," in *College Libraries and Student Culture*, ed. Lynda M. Duke and Andrew D. Asher (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2011), 49–70; Bracke et al., "Finding Information." [10n8]
- 9. Sarah Watstein and Steven J. Bell, "Is There a Future for the Reference Desk?," *The Reference Librarian* 49, no. 1 (2008): 1–20; Eric Novotny, *Assessing Reference and User Services in a Digital Age* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Information Press, 2006); Christy R. Stevens, "Reference Reviewed and Re-envisioned," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 39, no. 2 (March 2013): 202–14. [10n9]
- 10. Martha Kyrillidou, "Research Library Trends," *Research Library Issues* no. 280 (September 2012): 20–27. [10n10]
- 11. Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons, *Studying Students* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2007); Andrew D. Asher, Lynda M. Duke, and David Green, "Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries," in *College Libraries and Student Culture*, 1–14 (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2011); Alison J. Head and Mike Eisenberg, *Lessons Learned: How College Students Seek Information in the Digital Age* (Seattle: Information School, University of Washington, 2009). [10n11]
- 12. Lynda M. Duke, "Transformative Changes in Thinking, Services, and Programs," in *College Libraries and Student Culture*, 145–47 (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2011); Sara Davidson and Susan Mikkelsen, "Desk Bound No More," *The Reference Librarian* 50 (2009): 346–55; Jerry D. Campbell, "Clinging to Traditional Reference Services," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2000): 223–27. [10n12]
- 13. Stephanie J. Schulte, "Eliminating Traditional Reference Services in an Academic Health Sciences Library: A Case Study," *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 99, no. 4 (October 2011): 273–79. [10n13]
- 14. Watstein and Bell, "Is There a Future?" [10n14]
- 15. UW Libraries, "Selected Library Statistics by Campus," accessed October 10, 2013, www.lib.washington.edu/assessment/stats/default; UW Libraries, "Libraries Fact Sheet." Over five years, recorded queries dropped by 50 percent. [10n15]
- 16. UW Libraries uses the ARL definition of a reference question: "An information contact that involves the knowledge, use, recommendations, interpretation, or instruction in the use of one or more information sources by a member of the library staff." Queries that do not fit this definition are recorded as "nonreference." [10n16]
- 17. Bella Karr Gerlich and G. Lynn Berard, "Testing the Viability of the READ Scale," *College & Research Libraries* 71, no. 2 (2010): 116–37. [10n17]
- 18. Gerlich and Berard, "Testing the Viability;" Gerlich and Whatley, "Using the READ Scale for Staffing Strategies." [10n18]
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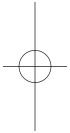
DRAFT

Does the Reference Desk Still Matter?

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Deb Raftus and Kathleen Collins

DRAFT

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