# Staffing the reference desk during conferences

## By Tara Lynn Fulton

*Reference Instruction Librarian*
*Loyola University**

*Balancing professional activity with responsibility for public service.*

Twice a year at regular departmental meetings, a poll is taken in the reference department at Northwestern University Library: "How many people plan to go to ALA?" Every year the percentage of people wanting time off seems to grow, and it has become increasingly difficult to accommodate everyone's wishes. Soon there may not be enough bodies to go around: single-staffing, using more students during non-peak hours, asking some people to come back early, and other make-shift measures are just not going to be sufficient much longer. In an effort to find a solution to this dilemma, we decided to find out if other institutions were having the same problem and how they were handling it.

## The survey

A telephone survey of fourteen university libraries was conducted in April 1986. We anticipated that three primary factors would affect an institution's response to reference desk staffing during conferences:

1) size of the professional reference staff;

2) proximity to metropolitan areas sponsoring library conferences on a regular basis; and

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*At the time of writing the author was assistant interlibrary loan/reference librarian at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.

3) professional pressure on the librarians to attend conferences.

The institutions surveyed were selected because of their variations on these three factors. The schools ranged in size from 10,000 students to over 40,000. Eight of the libraries had between six and eight librarians serving on the reference desk, while the other six employed between nine and thirteen reference librarians. Half were close to cities in which major library conferences are frequently held (e.g., Washington and Chicago). Half had faculty status or promotion documents—a measure believed to result in pressure to attend.

## Methodology

Since the survey was designed only to gather information, it was developed and conducted informally. No attempt was made to control the three primary factors—staff size, conference proximity, and professional pressure. The larger libraries sampled turned out to be further away from conferences than the small or medium-sized ones. Not surprisingly, the institutions with faculty status or promotion documents tended to be larger institutions as well. Therefore, in some cases it is difficult to determine which of these factors most influenced the responses of a given institution.

Since respondents were not prepared in advance

for the telephone survey, they were answering questions from memory. We presumed that department heads (who were reached at eleven of the libraries) or reference librarians who had been at the institution at least two years (as was the case in the remaining three) would be fairly familiar with the department; but it is possible that these individuals would have responded differently had they more time to gather the requested data. Finally, because responses to quantitative questions tended to be given in ranges, personal judgment was used in fitting responses into representative categories.

## ALA commitments and attendance

Staff size, conference proximity, and professional pressure affect the number of librarians who choose to make professional association commitments and the number of librarians who choose to attend conferences. These numbers in turn determine how much difficulty a library has staffing its reference desk during conferences. Therefore, data on these two factors—ALA commitments and ALA attendance—were also sought. Since ALA is the largest U.S. library organization and sponsors the most heavily attended conferences, the survey singled out ALA conferences for the sake of simplification.

Responses reflect significant ranges of professional involvement among the libraries surveyed. Four institutions have fewer than two librarians with ALA commitments, seven have two or three, and the other three libraries have four or five. Two institutions have fewer than two librarians attending ALA regularly, six have between two and four, and the remaining six have from five to eight. Institutions, regardless of staff size, conference proximity, or pressure to attend, have an average of one and one-half more librarians attending ALA regularly than are committed to attend.

Because of the small sample size, observations based on numbers of libraries did not reveal any trends. Therefore, the total number of librarians with ALA commitments and the total number attending ALA regularly in each of the three primary factor categories were calculated (Table 1).

As we see from this data, librarians from larger departments have commitments to and attend ALA more frequently than do librarians from smaller departments. Whether this indicates that large libraries recruit professionally active librarians, that large departments offer the scheduling flexibility to permit librarian absences, or that librarians from large libraries more often feel the need to get away is not an issue that is easily determined. It is clear, however, that some relationship exists.

Librarians under pressure to attend and to contribute to ALA do so more regularly than those who are not under pressure. However, it is also noteworthy that even at faculty status institutions, fewer than 50% of the reference librarians are active in ALA.

Contrary to prediction, librarians living close to conference centers attend conferences less frequently than those who have to travel to get there. As indicated previously, the libraries close to conferences in this sample also tended to be smaller, and this overlap may account in part for the figures. It is also possible that respondents were not considering single or half-day visits when asked how many librarians attend ALA on a regular basis. Other possible explanations are alluded to in other sections of this article.

## Coping with shortages

The survey first sought to determine the overall level of concern with reference desk staffing during conferences. Four general scenarios were offered as response options. Each respondent was asked to choose the one that best reflected the general tenor in his or her department. In addition to the total number of responses for each scenario, Table 2 also lists how many of those responses came from institutions with a larger staff size, institutions which are close to conferences on a regular basis, and in-

**TABLE 1**

REFERENCE LIBRARIANS WITH ALA COMMITMENTS AND ATTENDING ALA REGULARLY BASED ON STAFF SIZE, CONFERENCE PROXIMITY, AND PROFESSIONAL PRESSURE.

|  | Number of Librarians | with ALA Commitments | Attending ALA |
|---|---|---|---|
| All Institutions | 123 | 32 (26%) | 54 (44%) |
| Staff size |  |  |  |
| 6–8 | 54 | 12 (22%) | 22 (41%) |
| 9–13 | 69 | 20 (29%) | 32 (46%) |
| Conference Proximity |  |  |  |
| Yes | 50 | 8 (16%) | 18 (36%) |
| No | 73 | 24 (33%) | 36 (49%) |
| Professional Pressure |  |  |  |
| Yes | 67 | 22 (33%) | 33 (44%) |
| No | 56 | 10 (18%) | 21 (38%) |

**TABLE 2**

NUMBER OF LIBRARY RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION,
"WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING BEST DESCRIBES YOUR SITUATION?"

|  | Total | Large | Close | With Pressure |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Has worked out naturally | 4 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Have managed to arrange among individuals | 8 | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| Have had to short-staff or limit attendance | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Have overtaxed those who stay | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

stitutions with professional pressure to participate.

Only two out of fourteen libraries experience much difficulty in this regard. The seven schools at which librarians are under pressure to attend are slightly more inclined to have to make arrangements. Neither department nor size nor proximity appears to affect responses to this general question.

When asked about specific measures taken to keep the reference desks staffed during conferences, only three institutions said they do not use any extraordinary measures at all. Two institutions use as many as four of the options displayed in Table 3.

It is comforting that none of these institutions have had to tell a librarian not to go to a conference, although it is apparent by the number of conference-goers who return early and/or attend for only half or single days that the pressure to "arrange among individuals" is felt at more than half the institutions.

Only in the smaller departments do librarians attend ALA for half or single days. Larger institutions appear to be able to get help from other departments more easily. About two-thirds of both small and large libraries use short-staffing and increased paraprofessional staffing as options.

Institutions close to conferences make up the overwhelming majority of those that short-staff and/or use librarians from other departments. Not surprisingly, they are the only ones that have librarians attending for single or half days. Proximity does not appear to affect the use of paraprofessionals or people returning early from conferences: responses are equally divided in this category.

None of the institutions with pressure to attend report using librarians from other departments. These librarians seem to prefer increasing the number of paraprofessionals serving on the desk, with

some individuals asked to return early, or short-staffing if necessary. Many reasons for this choice can be imagined. Perhaps it is a reflection of increased function specialization in these libraries. Perhaps the librarians in other departments are also too active at professional conferences to be available to assist on the reference desk. It is also conceivable that these libraries already use more paraprofessionals on the desk than other libraries and therefore tend to rely more on them than on colleagues from other departments. In any case it is apparent that the choices made by larger, faculty-status institutions are significantly different from the choices made by smaller schools that are close to conference sites.

## Priorities for attendance

The last survey question asked whether or not priorities for conference attendance had to be established and, if so, how questions of attendance were resolved. While no institutions have had to deny someone attendance, some institutions are forced to schedule individuals for particular days. Several have institutional policies in the event a conflict should arise.

Nine institutions, however, reported no need, as yet, to set such priorities. Among the five institutions that have priority systems, several determining criteria were used to create them. The number of institutions in each category reporting the use of each criterion is listed in Table 4.

None of the three contributory factors (staff size, conference proximity, or professional pressure) seems to affect these choices. Most who must choose seem to agree that furthering one's knowledge or professional status are the most important criteria, with fairness running a close second.

**TABLE 3**

NUMBER OF LIBRARIES EMPLOYING EXTRAORDINARY STAFFING MEASURES

|  | Total | Large | Close | With Pressure |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Short-staff | 7 | 2 | 5 | 2 |
| Use more paraprofessionals | 10 | 4 | 4 | 5 |
| Require some librarians to return early | 5 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| Limit some librarians to half or single days | 4 | 0 | 4 | 1 |
| Use librarians from other departments | 4 | 1 | 3 | 0 |
| Refuse someone attendance | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

TABLE 4

## PRIORITY SYSTEMS USED BY LIBRARIES
## TO DETERMINE WHICH LIBRARIANS ATTEND CONFERENCES

|  | Total | Large | Close | With Pressure |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Have not needed to set priorities | 9 | 5 | 5 | 4 |
| Committee members/officers given preference | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Relevance of sessions to job | 3 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Fairness based on previous attendance | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| New librarians given preference | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Alphabetized rotation | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| First come first serve | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

### Other factors

Three additional factors were mentioned by respondents as contributing to their ability to staff the reference desk adequately during conferences. Five institutions (of which four were smaller institutions, three were close to conferences, and two had faculty status or promotion documents) mentioned insufficient travel funds as a reason for the lack of competition to attend. Unfortunately this factor was not included as a survey question: it would be interesting to see if the common-sense supposition that faculty status institutions provide better travel funding holds true. Perhaps we would find that cost rather than proximity is the true accessibility issue when it comes to attending conferences.

A second factor, again pertinent at five institutions (four smaller institutions, three close to conferences, and three under pressure to attend), is that the major conferences tend to fall during interim and summer sessions. At these times respondents report feeling less uncomfortable short-staffing the desk and/or making greater use of paraprofessionals. It is noteworthy that during the interviews, each librarian's tone of voice clearly indicated regret in having to take a chance on compromising the quality of reference service.

A third factor, mentioned by four institutions (three small, two close to conferences, and one faculty status), is that not everyone attends the same conferences. Some prefer state and regional conferences to ALA while others prefer subject-specific conferences. Whether or not this perception represents a trend toward decentralization and/or specialization would make an interesting study in its own right.

### Conclusion

In conducting the survey we hoped to find an institution with a novel, successful solution adaptable to our conference staffing dilemma at Northwestern. Instead, we found that most institutions do not yet perceive the problem to be critical enough to warrant formal policies. A combination of juggling acts has enabled most reference departments to get by. It seems that few institutions share the unfortunate configuration that Northwestern does: they are a small university, close to major conferences on a regular basis, and operating under a merit system based partially on professional activities. However, all of the librarians contacted are concerned that staffing the reference desk during conferences may become a greater problem in the near future if staff cutbacks continue, if airline fares remain low, and if librarians continue to be encouraged to serve the profession outside their own institutions.

As reference departments grapple with this issue, we must look for options that consider the needs of individual librarians, the needs of our institutions, and the needs of our users. Our professional ethics require us to be service-oriented, but they also require that we maintain a high level of competence and contribute to the development of librarianship. Balancing these responsibilities demands hard choices and sacrifices. As we plan for conferences in the future, we should remember that we are not discussing "getting by" two weeks out of the year; we are asking ourselves the broader question: To what degree should thorough, immediate, quality reference service be compromised for the long-term professional development of librarians? ■■

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