# The disappearing reference desk

## Finding new ways to support the curriculum of a small liberal arts college

by Peter Giordano, Christine Menard, and Rebecca Ohm Spencer

B y the spring of 1999, the reference librarians at Williams College were willing to admit what they had suspected since 1997—that their reference desk had all but disappeared. Of course, that fortresslike structure was still there, but complaints about printing problems and queries about citing Web pages had begun to replace traditional research questions. As many of the library's resources migrated to the Web, more and more students were asking, "Can I do this from my room?" Paradoxically, the librarians discovered that the more they embraced technology, the less relevant the library was in the eyes of the students.

### Unrealistic expectations and changing roles

The shift to electronic resources, particularly in the deceptively user-friendly world of the Web, created two problems that made old models less workable. First, the ease of the Web could make anyone a self-identified expert; novice searchers could (and did) generate reams of paper on almost any topic. Second, the librarians were faced with the daunting task of keeping up with an ever-growing selection of databases, including full-text journals, indexes, and specialized Web pages.

As each student worked to develop a topic, the proliferation of online databases, some available only through the library and some freely accessible, made the selection of resources somewhat idiosyncratic. The Web also raised many unrealistic expectations; for example, that students could get detailed budgetary information from any municipality in the country, or professional legal analysis, or journal articles from Finland; in a few cases, the Web did deliver these. This raised expectations to the unrealistic level that all information would be timely, accurate, and accessible from any machine the student touched. When a student did approach the reference desk with a question, the reference transactions were taking more and more time because there was simply so much to offer in addressing each question.

Concurrent with these radical changes in the research life of the student was another fundamental change in the librarians' interpretation of their roles at Williams. Traditionally, each librarian has been assigned one or more academic departments to work with as a liaison. The librarian managed the acquisitions of library materials in those subjects and kept the faculty informed about developments in the library. The increasing availability of electronic resources, though, prompted more

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librarians to begin using their liaison role to promote bibliographic instruction because the need was so obvious. Because this liaison role grew and solidified, the roles of librarians at this small liberal arts college began to take on some aspects of subject bibliographers at large university libraries.

All of these factors—the evolution of reference transactions into technical support questions, the proliferation of resources combined with the changes in access, and the specialization of the librarians—forced a reassessment of the ways research support was supplied on campus.

## Results of the reassessment

The reassessment led to changes. The old, massive reference desk was redesigned to allow for more one-on-one help with databases. What was once a closed structure, almost fortlike, is now an open table, allowing the librarian to move easily through the reference area. The term *reference* has been dropped in favor of *research help*. A cadre of student workers is being developed to help with printing problems and directional questions. But the biggest change has been the development of a formal research appointment program.

The program started small. In the spring of 1997, a flyer went out to all students inviting them to make an appointment with a reference librarian. The response was dramatic: 10 to 15 calls were received that week. Then the program began to grow. The key to growth was word of mouth; frequently, a librarian would be approached with "You helped my friend in her economics class, can you help me now with art history?" Because the program developed around each librarian's subject expertise, there was a lot of swapping and trading of clients; but more important, the program was growing because it was filling a need. That spring four or five librarians did about 60 appointments.

The next year, the library sent out another



Students receiving help at the new reference desk at Williams College.

flyer in the fall, about midway through the semester. Williams students are always extremely busy, and it was important to emphasize that a reference appointment could save them time. In addition to the flyers, the appointment program was mentioned in all regular BI sessions. The number of sessions doubled; by the end of the year, with another flyer appearing in the spring, we had a total of 221 appointments by eight librarians.

During the 1998–99 academic year, the program started itself. Students didn't wait for a flyer; instead, they sought out librarians. Professors were directing their students to see librarians who had been helpful to previous classes. The concept of reference appointments was becoming part of the culture of the campus.

At the onset of this program, most librarians felt the need to prepare extensively for the appointment. After conducting a reference interview, the librarian would run searches in the online catalog and various databases, gathering relevant subject headings, references to books and articles, bibliographies, and so on. The flaws in this model quickly became evident. By doing so much beforehand, staff were following the model of the librarian handing out answers rather than showing how to resolve the problems. And, of course, they also quickly realized that the preparation time was a tremendous drain on our already-overbooked schedules. By the beginning of the second year, most librarians had abandoned the idea of preparation, favoring, instead, an exchange with the student that became a dialogue about the resources available.

It became evident that how the students decided to make an appointment shaped the nature of the interaction. Students who asked for the appointment on their own tended to have very specific needs: "I can't find any journal articles on this topic," "I need statistics on child labor in Asia," "I am researching women's

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organizations in Jamaica," and so on. These lent themselves to teaching very specific aspects of the collection and resources and were reminiscent of the reference questions handled daily at the research desk.

On the other hand, students who were encouraged by their professor to meet with a librarian and students who scheduled an appointment as a follow-up to a course-related library session tended to have a more general approach. Frequently, these appointments started with the dreaded "I don't know where to start." This approach can be tricky because students sometimes expect librarians to define their topics for them! But in every case an emphasis was put on teaching the student to work independently. The research problem, no matter how narrow, was placed within the larger scope of the student's academic discipline.

By far, the biggest concern is the major investment in time for all concerned. The sessions average about 40 minutes; in some cases, a librarian will spend as much time doing appointments, as working on the reference desk. If one person were doing all the appointments it would have been a full- time job for four weeks during the first full year of the program and six-and-a-half weeks of full-time work in the second year. Up to this point, the librarians at Williams have been doing the appointments while maintaining their regular shifts on the desk, making it critical to find a balance among the tasks. A program like this will work best if all participants are equally committed and administration support is strong.

Because the library director is a liaison and participates in the program, there is an understanding of the impact of the program on resources. It is important to monitor the program to be sure that other library functions do not suffer because of this work.

The amount of resources put into the appointments may seem a big investment, but the dividends outweigh the costs. Not only do the students get more out of the very expensive resources the library is providing, but the librarians learn more about the students' research needs and the level of skills in the student body. The in-depth questions are indicators of trends in the curriculum and help inform collection development decisions. Students who have had appointments use the skills and concepts they learn and have become more sophisticated library users; questions at the desk are more complex and challenging; and many students are using a wide variety of library resources, not just those that are easy to find on the Web.

## What's next

At this point, Williams College, like any institution supporting research, needs to reassess the delivery of resources and services. The long-term effect of the appointments program will have to be evaluated in terms of both the work of the students participating in the program and the ability of library personnel to sustain this level of work. Probably the best measure of the former will be the faculty's acceptance of the program; the latter will be harder to measure because the program affects many aspects of the librarians' daily activities.

This is a model talked about somewhat in library literature, generally in the university setting. Douglas Herman describes the program that has been in place at Brandeis and calls it "a mildly qualified success."[1] Anne Lipow, of Library Solutions, sees the appointment model as a step backward in reference service.[2] Perhaps a distinction needs to be made between reference service and research service; the librarian needs to be committed to supporting both while recognizing that the user is finding alternatives to reference service that meet the demands of a 24/7 environment. With that in mind, it is important to remember the argument of Bonnie Nardi, of AT&T Labs, that the digital environment will increase the demand for human contact in service.[3] The research appointments can be viewed as the ultimate result of this demand.

For schools planning to institute such a program, several things must be considered:

1. There must be sufficient subject expertise to support the curriculum. Faculty must have faith in the individual librarian's ability to handle the literature of his or her field. This is an area where the role of librarian as subject bibliographer bears fruit.

the capital of the state of Yucatán; ruins of Chichén Itzá, Cobá, and Tulúm; seaside resorts; water activities, like floating downstream in a river and swimming in cenotes, the Yucatán version of sinkholes; and university libraries in the Yucatán peninsula.

## Success

There were some materials and supplies that we hauled all the way to Mexico and never used. These included a six-drawer card catalog, cards for the catalog, and Dewey Decimal schedules in English and Spanish. At first I felt guilty. In retrospect, I see that this was a good decision, and part of our capability of being flexible and working within the constraints of time and money and the present situation. A first-time village library with a full-blown card catalog and the responsibility of keeping it up when the local librarian added new materials would probably have been overwhelming. But now they have the card catalog and on our next visit, if we are able to expand the library, we may implement some of these library tools.

We finished putting together the library a day ahead of schedule. This left time for another swim and a few hours to do last minute clean up and, most importantly, to train the new Cobá librarian, Gertrudis Xooc May, who conveniently lived behind the library. Gertrudis had worked with us every day to create this new and wonderful community library in Cobá. She had also taken English classes daily from our students who taught the classes. I spent the last few hours in Cobá writing a manual of operation and training Gertrudis for her new role. Our most fluent student, Stephanie Litka, translated the manual into Spanish for Gertrudis to keep in the library.

## Conclusion

My advice to you if you have a similar opportunity: Grab it, you won't be sorry. And don't worry about details. Do your best and depend on those around you.

And did I increase my Spanish language skills, which was my original goal? *¡Si, hablo español mucho mas!* ∎

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2. Librarians must work with faculty to demonstrate the need for such a program. Again, the general outreach informs this process; faculty should be making the connection between the proliferation of resources and the ability of their students to maneuver in such an environment. The librarians should be able to discuss students' work with faculty in detail. This also means putting the program in the context of faculty and curriculum goals.

3. Librarians must assess the culture of their academic environment. What are student and faculty expectations? Is the campus aware of the library resources and services already provided?

4. The appointments program needs to be promoted, to both students and faculty; it's not enough to reach the motivated students. Such a program is critical to the academic success of all students.

## Conclusion

There is a traditional image of Williams College that suggests the model for teaching and education on campus; it is called the Log. It's an image of the teacher on one end of a log in dialogue with a student on the other end. This rustic image handed down from more than a century ago still resonates in this technological age. The proliferation of technology and information resources gives even the smallest academic library the power of a large university. At the same time, there are unique opportunities to develop new ways to reach each student individually. The reference desk may be disappearing, but the need for research support has never been more critical.

## Notes

1. Douglas Herman, "But does it work? Evaluating the Brandeis reference model," *Reference Services Review* 22 (winter 1994):17–28.

2. Anne Lipow, "'In your face' reference service," *Library Journal* 124 (August 1999): 50–2; Anne Lipow and Gail Schlachter, "Thinking out loud: Who will give reference service in the digital environment?" *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 37 (winter 1997): 125–35.

3. Bonnie A. Nardi, "Keynote address in the Great Hall of the Library of Congress: Information ecologies," *Reference Service in a Digital Age.* Available online at http://lcweb. loc.gov/rr/digiref/nardi.html. ∎