Research Notes

Use of Nonprofessionals at Reference Desks

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The staffing of reference desks by nonprofessionals has been a subject of controversy in academic librarianship. The view that only professional librarians are qualified to provide reference service has been challenged by the fact that nonprofessionals are being used and can effectively answer many patron queries. Several key studies have explored both the practical and theoretical implications of this use of nonprofessionals. Bunge's research (1967) on the relationship between library education and reference efficiency demonstrated no significant difference between nonprofessional and professional performance in answering questions accurately, although professionals took significantly less time to answer queries.[1]

A questionnaire survey conducted by Boyer and Theimer (1975) concluded that nonprofessionals were used in 69 percent of small- to medium-sized academic libraries.[2] This study was followed by an examination of question-answering success by nonprofessionals, done by Halldorsson and Murfin (1977), who found that professionals were more successful than nonprofessionals in dealing with "faulty information" questions.[3] Aluri and St. Clair (1977) concluded that well-trained nonprofessionals can answer 80 percent of the questions asked at the desk.[4] In their second study (1978), they examined the effect that this use of nonprofessionals

might have on faculty status, library education, user instruction, and other professional issues.[5] More recently, Kok and Pierce's study (1982) of questions asked at reference desks, though not directly examining actual use of nonprofessionals, supports previous research in its conclusion that only 0.7 percent of questions are in-depth, time-consuming reference queries.[6]

These studies have established two significant facts concerning the use of nonprofessionals in reference service: (1) well-trained nonprofessionals are capable of answering many, if not most, patron queries; (2) despite arguments that the use of nonprofessionals is detrimental to librarianship as a profession, nonprofessionals are being used on a regular basis to staff reference desks because of financial necessity.

Since nonprofessionals are essential to providing information services, it is important to look more closely at the nonprofessionals themselves and at the types of staffing arrangements in which they are used. In their study ten years ago, Boyer and Theimer looked at actual use, educational level, on-the-job training, amount of service provided, and continuing education opportunities. Because reference service in academic libraries has changed much since then, it is necessary to reexamine these elements. Furthermore, an ex-

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pansion of their study to include term of employment, off-desk job responsibilities, and staffing patterns would aid reference managers in making decisions on when and how to use nonprofessionals—scheduling, level of service, and selection and training.

METHODOLOGY

The intention was to conduct a broad descriptive survey which would expand on Boyer and Theimer's questions and gather more detailed information on the current use of nonprofessionals. A telephone interview was selected as the methodology that would allow maximum interaction with respondents, thereby providing richer data than could be obtained through a written response and allowing for a better exploration of complex issues. Because of the time involved in telephone interviewing, however, the survey was conducted in Illinois with hopes that it would lay the groundwork for further research.

In the summer of 1983 introductory letters and initial questionnaires were sent to the reference or public service librarians at sixty-nine four-year academic institutions in Illinois. The letters asked that the initial questionnaires, printed on pre-addressed and stamped postcards, be returned with responses to these questions: (1) Does your library use nonprofessionals at the reference/information desk(s)? and (2) Are you willing to participate in a telephone interview regarding this use? Librarians who responded yes to both questions were mailed the follow-up questionnaire.

The follow-up questionnaire defined important terms and outlined questions. These guidelines gave respondents the opportunity to gather necessary factual and statistical data prior to the telephone interview. For purposes of this study, nonprofessionals are defined as library workers who do not work in a librarian, professional, or academic position. They may or may not hold a master's degree in library science. Reference/information desks are library service points that assist patrons in using and interpreting the li-

brary and its collections. This definition includes "information" desks that provide a limited scope of reference services (e.g., card catalog assistance, ready reference, telephone reference) as well as the "full service" reference desk. It does not include information service provided at other library service points such as the circulation desk or administrative office. Also, the study is limited to reference/information desks in the main library, not in branch or departmental libraries.

Part one of the questionnaire asked for factual data on the institution, the number of hours the reference/information desk was staffed, and the number of hours staffed by nonprofessionals. Also, information was requested on each nonprofessional who staffed the desk, including job title, education, term of employment, off-desk duties, and participation in workshops, continuing education, and department meetings.

Part two consisted of questions asking the respondent to describe the staffing arrangement used with each nonprofessional, including hours, peak time vs. non-peak time coverage, and whether the professional worked the desk alone, with or without a librarian available for backup or referral.

In part three, respondents were asked to indicate the types of questions nonprofessionals answer, the guidelines for referring questions from nonprofessional to professional (and vice versa), and what was done if a nonprofessional could not answer a question. They were also asked to describe training methods used to prepare nonprofessionals for desk duty.

Finally, in part four, respondents were asked if their use of nonprofessionals had changed within the last five years and what they felt would be the ideal staffing arrangement, in terms of professionals and nonprofessionals, for their library.

RESULTS

Response

Of the sixty-nine initial questionnaires, forty-nine were returned within two weeks of mailing. Follow-up calls were made to elicit a total of sixty-four re-

sponses, a 93-percent rate. Of the sixty-four institutions, thirty-nine, or 61 percent, indicated that nonprofessionals were used at reference/information desks. Thirty-six institutions agreed to participate in the survey; thirty-three institutions were interviewed. From these thirty-three institutions, data were gathered on eighty nonprofessionals and fifty-six student employees.

Characteristics of Nonprofessionals

As shown in table 1, a majority of the nonprofessional staff (excluding students) in the libraries surveyed are college-educated. Fifty-four staff members, or 67.5 percent, have a B.A. or B.S., 11.5 percent have advanced degrees, and only 6 percent have no college education. Forty-one and one-half percent of the nonprofessionals have some library science education, but less than 10 percent have nearly completed or obtained M.L.S. degrees. Data on how long nonprofessionals have been employed in their libraries is also reported in table 1. The majority of the nonprofessionals (78 percent) have been employed two or more years.

As library employees, the nonprofessionals take on a variety of responsibilities other than desk duty. These tasks include nonprofessional assignments in technical processing (38 percent), interlibrary loan (28 percent), circulation (21.5 percent), and secretarial tasks (19 percent). Five percent participate in bibliographic instruction, usually by giving tours or preparing subject bibliographies. Eight percent participate in collection development, and 3 percent are trained in computerized literature searching.

Few nonprofessionals staff the desk for a large percentage of their work week. Forty-five percent spend less than five hours at the desk, and 23 percent spend five to ten hours there. Only 9.5 percent staff the desk for more than thirty hours per week. The percentage of total staffed hours that the desk is covered by nonprofessionals, either alone or paired with a professional, varies greatly among the institutions surveyed. Among the thirty-three institutions, data were gathered

TABLE 1
CHARACTERISTICS
OF NONPROFESSIONALS

	No.	%
College Education		
No college	5	6
Some college	12	15
B.A./B.S.	54	67.5
M.A./M.S.	7	9
Ph.D.	2	2.5
Total	80	100
Library School		
None	47	58.5
Some	26	32.5
Near MLS	2	3
MLS	5	6
Total	80	100
Employment		
Under 2 years	17	22
2–5 years	24	29.5
6–10 years	26	32.5
Over 10 years	13	16
Total	80	100
Desk Hours		
1–5 hours/week	36	45
6–10 hours/week	19	24
11–20 hours/week	16	20
21–30 hours/week	1	1.5
31–40 hours/week	8	9.5
Total	80	100

from fifty-two reference/information desks on the total hours staffed by nonprofessionals. Eighteen desks (36 percent) are covered by nonprofessionals less than 25 percent of the time the desk is staffed; thirteen desks (25 percent) are staffed 26–50 percent by nonprofessionals; twelve desks (23 percent), 51–75 percent by nonprofessionals; and nine desks (16 percent) are staffed 76–100 percent by nonprofessionals, including five information desks and one reference desk completely staffed by nonprofessionals (table 2).

TABLE 2
DESK HOURS STAFFED
BY NONPROFESSIONALS

% of Desk Hours	No.	%
1–25	18	36
26–50	13	25
51–75	12	23
75–100	9	16
Total	52	100

Eighty-five percent of nonprofessional staff regularly participate in departmental or library staff meetings. A smaller percentage (74) attend or have the opportunity to attend continuing education classes (although many attend classes that do not relate to library science) and job-related workshops such as OCLC training. Forty-four percent have attended or would be allowed to attend job-related conferences—at least on a local, if not national, level.

The institutions studied have large and frequently changing student staffs; consequently, we did not gather precise data on student employees. Instead, reference managers provided summary information on their student workers. The composite picture shows that few graduate students are employed. In only one case did a student have library science coursework. Students who work at reference/information desks are typically employed for less than two years and also perform circulation, technical processing, and shelving duties. They spend less than ten hours per week on the desk and have little opportunity to participate in departmental or library-related activities.

Use Patterns

Nonprofessional staff and students at reference/information desks frequently work alone, without a professional at the desk or on call. They not only work predominantly on weekends and during late evenings but also during early morning hours, meetings, and mealtimes. Twenty-four of the thirty-three institutions (73 percent) follow this pattern. When respondents were asked to designate "peak" or "non-peak" use hours, their responses varied. Many reference managers noted that evening and weekend hours can be peak times, particularly during exams, but staffing patterns are not altered as volume of use fluctuates during these periods.

Another common staffing pattern is to schedule the nonprofessional at the desk with the professional or to have the nonprofessional on call to assist the professional at busy periods. Sixteen institutions (48.5 percent) use this pattern; ten of the

sixteen also use nonprofessionals alone without backup. In six institutions (18 percent), nonprofessionals are scheduled at the desk in the same manner as professionals, rotating day and evening, weekday and weekend, and peak and nonpeak hours.

Since there are many times when nonprofessionals work without professional support, determining what a nonprofessional does when he or she cannot answer a question becomes quite important. For the most part, these situations are handled informally. The two most frequent approaches are to ask the patron to return to the desk (64 percent) or to have a librarian call the patron back (48.5 percent). Many institutions use both practices depending on the urgency of the patron's request or on how soon a librarian will be available for consultation. In five institutions, there is a log in which the question is recorded and passed on to a professional; otherwise, the information is communicated orally.

Another common procedure is to call the librarian at home for suggestions on how to answer the patron's query. This practice occurs in only eight institutions, however, and six of them are small schools (enrollment less than ten thousand). Only one institution has a procedure whereby the patron can make an appointment with a librarian for consultation and assistance with research problems. Finally, one institution in the survey has a professional available at virtually all times the library is open.

Referral and Training

Because nonprofessionals work alone at the desk, there is little attempt to formally define the types of questions they should or should not answer. Survey participants were mailed a description of four categories of questions (directional, instructional, reference, and extended reference)[7] and were asked to describe what types of questions nonprofessionals answer. At twenty-one of the thirty-three institutions (63 percent), nonprofessionals answered questions in all four categories, although many pointed out that extended

reference questions are frequently referred if a professional is available. The most notable comment that several reference managers made is that the nonprofessional's skill level and experience determine whether that person is restricted in the types of questions he or she can answer. Twelve institutions (37 percent) responded that they limit nonprofessionals to answering directional and instructional questions. Most said that the distinctions work fairly well in practice, although they are difficult to monitor and enforce. Comments ranged from a feeling that nonprofessionals lack the confidence to tackle extended reference questions to a sense that nonprofessionals are frequently overzealous and should refer more than they do. Only one institution had a fairly structured means of maintaining distinctions with student workers. Limited to answering only directional questions, students keep log sheets of all questions referred, and there are frequent staff discussions regarding when referrals should be made. The more typical approach, however, is an informal one of trying to give nonprofessionals a sense of when a question is "beyond" them.

To pursue this question further, respondents were asked if there are any established procedures or guidelines for screening questions or referring patrons from a nonprofessional to a librarian or vice versa. Some respondents seemed not to understand the question fully and reiterated their procedures for contacting the patron if the professional is unavailable. After clarification, no respondents indicated that a formal system or "team" approach exists between the professional and the nonprofessional. One example of such an approach would be to have a librarian greet all patrons and refer simple reference or instructional questions to a nonprofessional. Or, all questions could be screened by a nonprofessional and those beyond a directional or instructional nature would be referred to a librarian. Some libraries develop a referral pattern similar to this by establishing separate "information" desks to handle directional and other simple questions in addition to a "full service" reference desk.

Results indicate that it is almost always the nonprofessional who must judge when a question is beyond his or her capabilities and that the nonprofessional must make this decision in the absence of detailed guidelines and without a chance to consult a professional. One respondent did indicate that at busy times librarians will refer simple instructional questions to a nonprofessional, and two respondents commented that they hope to develop a closer and more precise working relationship between nonprofessionals and librarians.

In light of the judgments nonprofessionals must make in deciding when to refer a patron to a librarian, training is an important factor; however, few institutions reported having a systematic training program to prepare nonprofessionals for answering and referring questions. Only two institutions described what they considered to be formalized training programs, which include selected readings, quizzes, exercises, and departmental seminars on specific reference sources. Two institutions recommend but do not require formal coursework in library science. Thirty-seven percent provide orientation for nonprofessional staff in the form of tours, procedure manuals, or training sessions on departmental or library operations. These orientations do not, however, include training in specific reference sources. Seventy-three percent of the institutions (including many of the institutions providing procedural orientations) responded that nonprofessionals learn reference sources "on the job" or by a brief period of observation at the desk.

Trends for Desk Staffing

When asked if their use of nonprofessionals represents a change from five years ago, seventeen managers (51 percent) responded that they are using nonprofessionals more than they once did. Reasons for this change include expanded services coupled with a tighter economic situation and the need to free professionals to provide bibliographic instruction and computerized literature searching.

Also, some managers commented that the nature of reference desk use does not always require the presence of a professional and that desk duty is not the most efficient use of a professional's time. Thirteen institutions (39 percent) responded that their desk staffing pattern had remained essentially the same. In only three institutions had the use of nonprofessionals decreased.

It is interesting to note that when asked what their staffing pattern might be, seventeen managers (51 percent) responded that they would prefer more professionals to staff the reference desk, particularly during the evenings, weekends, and peak times currently staffed by nonprofessionals. One respondent commented that he was skeptical about the possibility of training nonprofessionals to differentiate among types of questions. Six respondents (18 percent) said that they would prefer more well-trained nonprofessionals. Comments included: (1) it is not always appropriate use of a librarian's time to be at the desk and does not help the librarian's job satisfaction; (2) selection and training of nonprofessionals is of the utmost importance; and (3) working as a nonprofessional is a good way for someone to test his or her interest in librarianship before attending library school. Six respondents (18 percent) thought a "team" approach would be ideal, either by dividing services between an information desk staffed by nonprofessionals and a professionally staffed reference desk or by double-staffing the desk so that a nonprofessional would handle directional and instructional questions, thereby freeing the professional for extended reference service.

CONCLUSIONS

This survey suggests that nonprofessionals frequently staff reference desks, especially during evenings, weekends, non-peak hours, and at times when librarians are unavailable (meetings, conferences, etc.). In this way, nonprofessionals are vital in offering reference service at times when there might otherwise be no assistance available. It also may be that the use of nonprofessionals at the desk began as a temporary or "stopgap" arrangement to meet demands for expanded services in times of limited financial resources; however, they are now an integral part of the staffing pattern.

What implications, then, does this use of nonprofessionals have on quality of service? Current use patterns suggested by this survey indicate that it is often the nonprofessional who must determine whether a reference question is beyond his or her capabilities. Many times a librarian is not immediately available for referral or consultation. The nonprofessional must either attempt to answer the question, or the patron must wait for a response from a librarian or return at a time when a librarian is available. In the best of all possible worlds, responding to the patron's request as quickly as possible would be ideal. Unfortunately, the unpredictable nature of reference questions and the diverse use patterns make it difficult to predict when certain types of questions will be asked.

A more practical alternative might be to expand the training of nonprofessionals to include more reference-specific instruction and to experiment with more formalized referral relationships between nonprofessionals and professionals. Training could include workbooks and exercises, orientation to subject areas by librarians with particular subject expertise, role-playing reference interview situations, or enrollment of nonprofessionals in a reference course.[8] Likewise, experiments with multiple desks or a "team" approach would maximize use of both nonprofessionals and professionals and might be a useful way for reference managers to identify optimum staffing patterns for their desk(s). Finally, examining referral relationships in other professions may provide suggestions for ways in which more formalized referral relationships could be established in libraries.

It may be that financial constraints and changing responsibilities of reference librarians will quiet the debate over the effect that use of nonprofessionals will have on the status of librarians. More benefits

might result if libraries focus on the effect that poorly trained non-professionals have on the quality of service. Properly trained nonprofessionals with an understanding of reference service and a clearcut referral relationship may enhance the job roles of both nonprofessionals and professionals.

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