



## Research Consultation Assessment: Perceptions of Students and Librarians



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### ABSTRACT

Both students and librarians evaluated face-to-face research consultations scheduled in an academic library. The survey asked both participants to rate usefulness of the interaction and to mark a list of the resources that were used. Results showed that librarians frequently underestimated the effectiveness of the consultation, a phenomenon known as provider pessimism, and that students were confused by the library terminology used for resources. Research consultations are potentially important “teaching moments” as long as students and librarians speak the same language and librarians verify learning outcomes using communication cues during the consultation.

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Over the last few decades, academic libraries have witnessed a steady decline in the number of in-person reference transactions (Applegate, 2008), even as colleges and universities enjoyed a steady increase in student enrollment (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). As more information becomes easily accessible online from anywhere at any time, librarians are no longer gatekeepers of information. The days of being asked to answer reference questions that require a definitive answer are long past. But academic reference librarians do have something important to contribute: knowledge of research sources and strategies tailored with a personal touch. In an era when reference interactions are dwindling, librarians can offer personalized, in depth research consultations.

As reference librarianship moves from providing answers to questions to guiding researchers through a process, many libraries have eliminated the traditional reference desk, a move that can cause consternation among librarians. In addition to the loss of a physical space within the library, librarians themselves are left with providing a service that, while beneficial to patrons, rarely provides a satisfying conclusion to librarians. In turn, librarians conducting research consultations are often left with “provider pessimism” (Hansen, Johnson, Norton, & McDonough, 2009), a feeling that the service rendered did not satisfy the patron’s needs.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The library literature abounds with studies evaluating reference transactions. Accuracy is the measure frequently used in obtrusive and unobtrusive studies: Did the librarian answer the question correctly? Hernon and McClure (1986) famously concluded that librarians were accurate only 55% of the time. Patron satisfaction is another measure used in library studies, and exit interviews in many studies demonstrate that accuracy is not as important as the friendliness of the librarian (Weech & Goldhor, 1982). Bunge (1999) combines user satisfaction with accuracy, and includes the librarian as a data source, in a standardized tool, the Wisconsin–Ohio Reference Evaluation Program (WOREP). The WOREP was designed to assess an entire reference department’s effectiveness, and besides accuracy, the WOREP takes into consideration situational characteristics (strength of the collection, special needs of the patron, time available for consultation) that affect satisfaction.

In academic libraries, an under-researched dimension of the research consultation is the librarian’s perception of user satisfaction and the librarian’s perception of successful teaching. Kuruppu (2007) approached this topic stating, “Librarians’ assessment of success may be different from that of users.” Whitlatch (1990) asked students and librarians to fill out separate surveys after interactions, and found that librarians consistently underrated satisfaction. Miller (2008) created a form to be completed separately by student and librarian after a reference transaction, and the results showed that librarians consistently scored effectiveness of the transaction lower than did the students. Martin and Park’s (2010) exploratory study of student perceptions of

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## Usefulness of Consultation

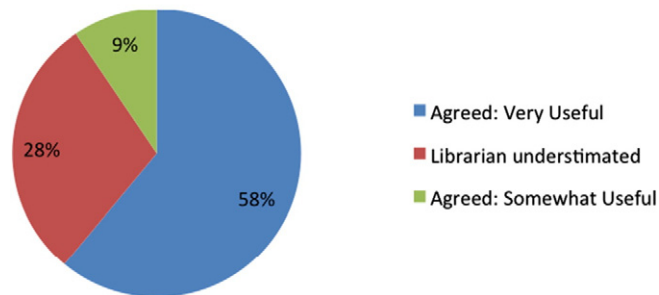


Fig. 1. Agreement on usefulness of consultation.

research consultations showed a positive response from students who participated. Hansen et al. (2009) defined “provider pessimism” in virtual reference transactions, and used surveys evaluating a single transaction by both students and librarians. Results showed that librarians consistently underestimated student satisfaction with the online interactions. Radford (1999) used qualitative means to assess librarians and patrons’ perceptions of reference interactions. Besides showing some provider pessimism in the results, the study showed that librarians valued content and accuracy, while patrons valued personal treatment.

Gale and Evans (2007) examined one-to-one research consultations to see if it is a valuable addition to reference services. The survey of students and librarians who participated in one-on-one consultations revealed inconclusive results, but students were grateful, if overwhelmed, by the assistance provided by the librarian. Elmborg (2002) considers reference interactions as “academic conferences where teaching and learning occur.” However, a study of librarian assessment of student learning showed incongruence in what students said they learned and in what librarians said they taught. Sixty percent of the student responses matched the librarian descriptions of teaching (Green & Peach, 2003).

Our research questions evolved from gaps in the literature regarding in-person research consultations and librarian perception of student satisfaction and learning outcomes: 1) Do librarians underestimate the effectiveness of research consultations? 2) Do students and librarians agree on what is taught during a research consultation?

## METHODOLOGY

### PARTICIPANTS

This study used convenience samples to recruit academic reference librarians at a single university library and students who met with librarians for research consultations over the course of the 2013 fall

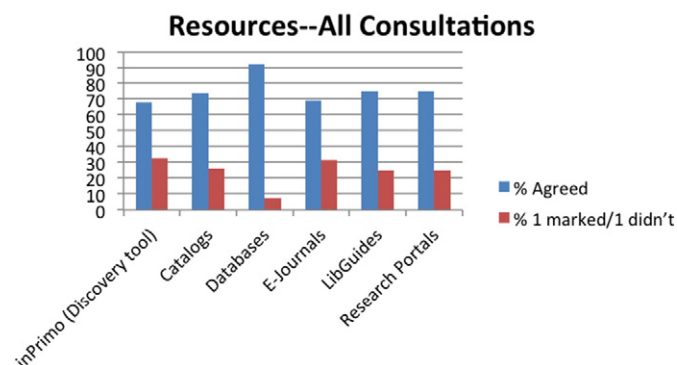


Fig. 2. Agreement on resources shown.

## Resources--Provider Pessimism Consultations

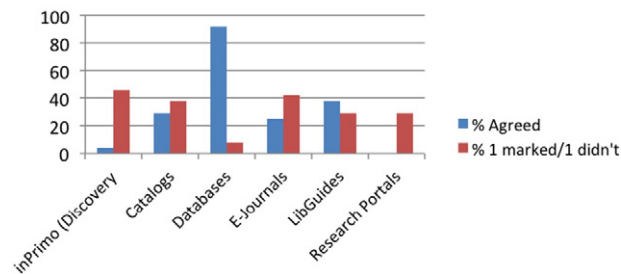


Fig. 3. Showing discrepancies in vocabulary where librarians underestimated effectiveness.

semester (15 weeks). The subject librarians were very busy with consultations assigned by the Honors Program, so a large proportion of consultations were with Honors freshman engaged in writing their first academic research paper.

Before starting the project, 18 librarians who agreed to participate met with the authors. The aims and procedures of the study were explained, and librarians were asked to sign an Informed Consent. Students “clicked through” an informed consent page when they opened the online survey. The authors also showed a sample script to use when asking students to fill out the survey at the end of the consultation, which emphasized that participation was anonymous and voluntary. Also at the project meeting, “research consultations” were defined:

Research consultations are information interactions in which library staff recommend, interpret, evaluate, and/or use information resources to help others to meet particular information needs. Consultations should address one or more of the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education by the Association of College and Research Libraries. Research consultations do not include formal in-class instruction or exchanges that provide assistance with locations, schedules, equipment, supplies, or policy statements. There is no minimum time requirement for an interaction to be considered a research consultation.

However, the language used on the survey specifically does not include the phrase “research consultation.” The authors conducted an informal poll of library student employees about the concept of a research consultation, and no students identified “research consultation” as the name of this service. When asked if the name “research consultation” made sense to them, most students responded, “No.” Therefore, the survey was specifically constructed to avoid the use of that term. Instead, the survey instrument referred to “this service” or “meet(ing) with a librarian,” terms that are admittedly vague yet not confusing.

## METHODS

This study used two online surveys: one survey completed by the student, and one survey completed by the librarian who conducted the research consultation. A two-part perforated card was given to the librarian, and at the end of the consultation, the librarian gave the student the first part that contained a URL to the survey and a 4-digit code to identify the interaction. The student’s card also allowed for an optional, specific 2 digit code which the librarian could enter to later identify survey results for an individual librarian. The librarian kept the second part of the card with a corresponding 4-digit code and URL to the librarian survey.

The patron survey asked basic demographic data, including university class and referral method. Then, students were asked to identify the reason for their time with a librarian and the specific resources discussed. Finally, patrons were asked to rate the usefulness of the

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