



## Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign: What Does “Reference” Mean to Academic Library Users?



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### ABSTRACT

In the library profession there is abundant use of jargon and acronyms to describe library activities. The terminology used is important to both market and describe library services. Often library professionals make assumptions that their users understand what library terminology means. Reference is a term widely understood by librarians and library workers, but is that understanding conveyed to the library user especially in academic institutions? The Regis University Library Reference Services Department faculty were curious to discover whether their students and faculty knew what the word “reference” meant especially since this word was on the sign above their service desk and used in the name of their department. A survey was developed by the Reference Services Department to answer that question and others. Results from the survey were used to propose a new name for the desk, department and librarians.

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### INTRODUCTION

When entering a library, visitors may expect to find a bespectacled, conservatively coifed librarian reading quietly behind a desk. This may be the stereotype, but library professionals know it is an inaccurate portrayal and one librarians rail against. Over the years, libraries and librarians have fought to explain, market and define their services to the public. While it is true that the perception of the services and duties of librarians vary among library users and are often misunderstood, it is especially true for those who serve in the reference department or on the reference desk of a library. In a 2009 study by Sutton, Bazirjian and Zerwas only 1% of those surveyed even thought of “reference” when they considered the library. Other studies by Luzius and Noe (2003) and Jenkins (2001) noted that university students did not have a clear understanding of the librarian's role or that a Masters in Library Science was needed for most academic positions. The members of Regis University Library's Reference Services Department felt that their user's perception was no different and sought to discover whether this was the reality.

The Regis University Library is set in an urban campus with four colleges that serve undergraduate and graduate students and faculty. The university has five campuses with a student and faculty population of over 10,000. The library departments include Reference Services, Access Services, Media Services, Electronic Services, Archives, Distance Services and Technical Services. The Dayton Memorial Library is the library

building where these departments are housed on Regis' main campus. The Regis University Library refers to all library services — online and physical, serving both campus-based and online students. The library collections include over 394,000 print books, serial backfiles, government documents, bound periodicals, and newspapers, 119,000 eBooks and 13,000 media/audiovisual items which are housed on the four floors of the library and online. The library has sixteen faculty librarians, fifteen staff members and multiple student workers. The Reference Services Department offers a variety of service points, such as reference desk service, office appointments, email, virtual chat, and phone. The library has a website with a large offering of databases, research guides and other electronic resources.

As part of the reference services configuration, the Regis University Library employs a traditional reference model which puts a value on personal service delivered by a librarian who answers questions from a desk or service counter (Tyckoson, 2001). The Regis Library Reference desk is staffed by a librarian seven days a week for a total 76.5 h. This service model has its roots back to 1891, when the Providence Public Library Director convinced his Board of Trustees to allow an information desk, staffed by a librarian, that would be beneficial to the community (Rothstein, 1953). In more recent times, library literature indicates that the trend in academic libraries throughout the United States is to move away from the reference desk to an appointment or consultation-based approach (Meldrem, Mardis, & Johnson, 2005; Tyckoson, 2001) or even roving reference where the librarian meets the patron where they may be studying. However, in a 2011 survey of academic libraries of similar Carnegie Classification, 66.7% reported that they still use the traditional reference desk model to deliver service (Miles, 2013). Based

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on Regis University Library's previous LibQual+® surveys and personal experience, the Reference Services Department members agreed that the ready accessibility and visibility of the reference librarians is a vital part of their service and marketing efforts.

Recently, the department underwent a staff transition, by adding four new Reference Librarians to fill vacant and new positions for a total of six librarians who serve at the Reference Desk. Following this transition, most of the department felt that it was time to explore a general rebranding of the Reference Services Department. Most members of the department felt the word reference, although widely used, was tired and misunderstood. It was thought that the department's commitment to having a reference desk was poorly served by signage that meant little to users. However, other members of the department wholeheartedly objected to the change based on their belief that "reference" is a long-standing, venerated term dating back to the late 19th century (Rothstein, 1953), and therefore easily recognized by library users.

Many professions strive to stay relevant in changing times. Librarianship is no different. Defining terminology to fit current practices can help the next generation of users understand those practices better. In 2008, the Reference & User Services Association (RUSA) of the American Library Association (ALA) updated the definitions of "reference transactions" and "reference work":

"Reference Transactions are information consultations in which library staff recommend, interpret, evaluate, and/or use information resources to help others to meet particular information needs. Reference transactions do not include formal instruction or exchanges that provide assistance with locations, schedules, equipment, supplies, or policy statements."

"Reference Work includes reference transactions and other activities that involve the creation, management, and assessment of information or research resources, tools, and services" (ALA, RUSA, 2008).

With the complex definition and perception of the term "reference" and the variety of roles that a librarian fills it follows that terminology and services could be confusing to library users (Arndt, 2010). Based on anecdotal evidence and the library literature, the Regis Reference Services Department already suspected that many of their users did not have a clear understanding of the librarian's role and services offered within the library, but they needed more evidence to support a change. With this in mind, the Reference Services Department decided to create a survey in order to collect formal data on how Regis University Library users perceived and used the Reference Services Department. Additionally, the department wanted to find out what words users felt best described the Reference Services Department's functions. The authors hoped that the research would support a proposal to change "Reference Services Department," "Reference Librarians," and "Reference Desk" to names that had more meaning to their users.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been little study of library department naming or whether a name change would affect usage or the understanding of library reference services (Harden, 2013). There has however, been a great deal of discussion regarding the use of a physical reference desk and library users' perception of library reference services. Traditionally, in academic libraries the reference desk has been the heart of the library, however there is an increasing divide in opinion on which version of service is best, for example, traditional face-to-face reference or virtual; reference desk or no desk (Carlson, 2007). The choice of service really depends on the institution's needs. Ford (1986) wrote the earliest argument for eliminating the reference desk, followed by the strong opinion of Ewing and Hauptman (1995) who expounded that "traditional

academic reference service...does not need to be rethought or reconfigured, it needs to be eliminated" (p. 3). This is quite a change from the earlier writing of Rothstein (1953) who asserted that direct personal assistance is the hallmark of reference librarianship. At Regis University, where a personal touch is part of the institutional culture, the physical reference desk as a place to seek the assistance of a librarian is important. However, even with that, the question remains, do library users know what "Reference Services" are, what a librarian does, and, who the librarians are?

Studies indicate that library users are often confused about the functions of library departments and personnel (Fagan, 2003; Hernon & Pastine, 1977; Massey-Burzio, 1998). Loprinzo (2009) found that the majority of users did not know all of the services offered by the library. Is technical services for computer help? Are serials something you eat? Can you get your blood pressure checked at the circulation desk? As the authors pose these questions tongue-in-cheek, there is some reality to these queries. Boyd (1993) found that terms like "reference," "circulation" and "periodical" meant little to library users, especially those not from North America. She concluded that keeping away from library jargon and using simplified language on signage is helpful in directing all library users.

Library users are often unaware who is a librarian compared to other library staff members (Massey-Burzio, 1998). Library users often assume anyone behind a public service desk is a librarian and as Arndt (2010) observed, if student workers staff the desk when the librarians are out this further confuses the patron. Additionally, Hernon and Pastine (1977) and Fagan (2003) supported this in their research, finding that no difference was made between professional librarians and clerical staff. This issue is problematic when there is more than one service desk and the signage is not clear. As Tyckoson (2001) states, "users frequently did not know where to go or who to ask for help" (p. 261) and have no problem asking whoever in the library is available. This can be frustrating for the library users who may need a trained librarian who can answer a research question or give assignment help, not just a polite answer from a staff person on a directional question or the checking out of a book.

In some academic libraries, changing the layout of the reference service area has proven to influence the recognition and visibility of the librarian. When Oberlin College in Ohio redesigned their reference area by changing signs, furniture and equipment, they had an increase in usage. Their reference desk signs now read "Research Help" and "Information" (Mitchell, Comer, Starkey, & Francis, 2011). The signage change seemed to give users more clues as to where to go in the library for help with assignments. The Regis Reference Services Department hoped that a similar change would increase the number of reference transactions and clarify the services offered at their service desk.

## METHODOLOGY

The Regis Reference Services Department developed a survey to gather information about how the library is used, whether users know what the term "reference" means, and whether they can tell what services are offered by observing the sign over the reference desk. Although the primary goal of the study was to gather data about renaming the department, the survey was also an opportunity to collect more information on library usage. Several online and print versions were drafted and revised until the survey was ready to pilot. The print survey had seven questions. The online version was created with the Springshare LibGuides survey tool and included eight questions. The additional question was the result of separating the two-part question in the print version into two separate questions online because of the way the Springshare survey tool functioned. The two versions of the survey were otherwise identical.

The first survey question asked the respondent what type of user they were, e.g., faculty, undergraduate, etc. The next four questions (the next five of the online version) included both multiple choice and

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