



## Staffing Chat Reference with Undergraduate Student Assistants at an Academic Library: A Standards-Based Assessment



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Academic library  
Reference  
Virtual reference  
Library staffing  
Undergraduate students

### ABSTRACT

Academic libraries have long experimented with how to staff the reference desk. Recent trends at college and university libraries indicate a shift toward a tiered staffing model, relying on a mix of professional librarians, library paraprofessional staff and often graduate students when available. Fewer academic libraries employ undergraduate students to work at the reference desk. This paper examines the use of undergraduate library assistants specifically to staff chat reference services at an academic library. It analyzes chat transcripts for content and comparative quality between different types of answerers: professional librarians, paraprofessional staff, and undergraduate students. Our analysis of 451 chat reference transcripts determined that undergraduate students can indeed provide satisfactory chat reference services, comparable in quality and content to that of paraprofessional staff and professional librarians. The data suggests that having well-trained undergraduate students staff chat reference is a viable, and even desirable, option for academic libraries.

### Introduction

*Answerer:* Hi, you're connected now. So you need juvenile recidivism statistics specifically from Idaho, correct?

*Patron:* Yeah if they can be found. This topic seems pretty difficult to find exact info.

*Answerer:* I'm wondering if maybe this information is protected since it involves juveniles.

*Patron:* It could be. I didn't think of that. That's probably why it is so difficult to find.

*Answerer:* I found information on Ada County's website, but I didn't see anything on recidivism. This may help you out though. <https://adacounty.id.gov/Juvenile-Court/Annual-Reports>

*Patron:* Answerer, Thank you for all your help and the links you sent me. I'll take a look and I may have to choose a different topic. I really appreciate you looking into it.

*Answerer:* Yeah no problem. I would suggest contacting the juvenile department at Ada County. Perhaps they have the statistics they could send you. You could also contact the library liaison featured on the criminal justice library guide for more help. Anything else I can help you with?

*Patron:* I think I'm ok for now. Thanks again.

*Answerer:* [idjc.idaho.gov](http://idjc.idaho.gov) is the website for the Idaho Department of Juvenile Corrections. Thank you for using library chat and have a wonderful day! Feel free to utilize this service again with any other questions you might have.

The chat transcript above was received by our institution via chat reference. We rated this as a 4 on the READ (Reference Effort Assessment Data) Scale, a “six-point scale tool for recording... supplemental qualitative statistics... placing an emphasis on recording the effort, skills, knowledge, teaching moment, techniques, and tools utilized by the librarian during a reference transaction” (Gerlich, n.d.). We coded this chat reference interaction based on the following criteria: the answerer (the term used by our chat software to designate the individual who engages with a patron in a chat transaction) greeted the patron; the answerer's language was clear, courteous, and grammatically correct; the answerer performed a search for the patron, provided instruction along the way and provided links and sources when necessary; and, finally, the answerer encouraged the patron to come back with further questions, and signed off to end the chat. Overall, we determined that this was an excellent example of a successful chat reference interaction.

What makes this notable is that the answerer was not a professional librarian, but an undergraduate student.

Academic libraries have long experimented with how to staff the reference desk. Recent trends at college and university libraries indicate a shift toward a tiered staffing model. Many academic libraries rely on a mix of professional librarians, library paraprofessional staff and sometimes graduate students to staff their reference desks. Fewer academic libraries employ undergraduate students to work at the reference desk.

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This paper examines the use of undergraduate library assistants to staff chat reference services at an academic library. It analyzes chat transcripts for content and comparative quality, as defined by a set of answerer behaviors based on the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) Behavioral Guidelines for Reference and Information Services (RUSA Guidelines) between different types of answerers: professional librarians, paraprofessional staff and undergraduate students (RASD Ad Hoc Committee, 2013).

## Literature review

### *Reference services staffing in the academic library*

In recent years many college and university libraries have had to reconsider the role and staffing of academic reference services for a variety of reasons. Brenza, Kowalsky, and Brush (2015); Bracke, Brewer, Huff-Eibl, and Lee (2007); and Faix et al. (2010) noted the need for extended library hours accompanied by a lack of additional staffing to cover those hours. Seeholzer (2013) observed that library staff's roles and duties have grown and changed, even though the number of staff members hasn't increased (p. 216). Budgetary constraints are another commonly cited reason to consider staffing models. At times, staffing concerns have been driven by new reference service models such as chat reference. In 2006, Blonde surveyed Canadian academic libraries regarding chat reference staffing, and reported that chat reference was an added workload for most staffers who took on the activity (p. 83), which confirms an unsurprising hypothesis regarding the realities of reference staffing.

In addition to budget and staffing concerns, discussions of reference staffing focus on the changing role of reference. Bracke et al. (2007) found that customers need less assistance from the reference and circulation desks, which is part of wider changes in library use patterns (p. 248). Similarly, King and Christensen-Lee (2014) found that visitors were asking more technical and directional questions, rather than ready reference and subject-specialty questions. (p. 34). Faix et al. (2010) noted that because patrons could access and seek assistance for electronic and online resources, rather than visiting a reference desk for assistance, reference librarians' responsibilities were changing (p. 94). Bracke et al. (2007) reached a similar conclusion, citing statistics demonstrating a decline in both the number and the complexity of queries at all service points (p. 261).

Librarians are increasingly tasked with more and more high-level tasks and Hendricks and Buchanan (2013) indicated that one benefit to staffing changes was that faculty librarians were "being relieved of the 'burden' of sitting at the reference desk" (p. 39). Whether or not all librarians agree that staffing chat services is a "burden," research clearly shows that librarians are expected to take on new duties. The most commonly mentioned shift is the expectation that professional librarians take on increased library instruction duties, leaving them less time to cover reference responsibilities. Faix (2014) found that "the reference librarians... were experiencing ever-increasing demands for their time to be spent at other places, in the classroom teaching library instruction sessions and all across campus in various committee meetings or at library outreach events" (p. 308). Similarly, Seeholzer (2013) explained that "Librarians and staff working at these service points were... asked to assist with coordinating new public programming, teaching more library instruction sessions, and assisting with weeding projects. The additional projects often proved taxing on the service model set up at the circulation and reference desks" (p. 216). Other librarians mentioned additional duties such as increased publishing (Bracke et al., 2007), grant writing (Bracke et al., 2007), digital content management (King & Christensen-Lee, 2014) and staffing new library locations (Faix et al., 2010).

Blonde (2006), Bracke et al. (2007), Faix et al. (2010), Faix (2014), Stevens (2013) and others have examined the cost effectiveness of using professional librarians to staff reference services and found that it is

more cost effective to use alternative staffing at public service desks. Ryan's, 2008 reference transaction cost analysis made the argument that "librarians can leave answering most questions to others and can now concentrate on working on tasks that better utilize their training and experience" (p. 399). In many cases, studies have concluded that a tiered reference model, which usually involves some combination of professional librarians, library staff, graduate students (especially at those universities that have MLS graduate students) and undergraduate students, is an effective alternative (Brenza et al., 2015; Stevens, 2013). Brenza et al. (2015) found that this is a more appropriate use of staff in general and argued that academic libraries should "not [use] master-level staff members to perform work that is appropriate for undergraduates" (p. 725).

### *Tiered reference services staffing with undergraduate students*

The use of tiered staffing models that engage undergraduate students in reference services is not new. Faix (2014) found that "As academic libraries in the late 1990s and 2000s began to build information commons and to merge separate help desk into single service points with multiple functions, employing undergraduate student workers to provide this basic reference assistance in a tiered system has become more and more common" (p. 306). Bodemer (2014) traced it back even further, pointing out that libraries have been trying since the 1970s to engage undergraduates in reference (p. 165).

Much of the literature is highly positive regarding the use of students at the reference desk. Bodemer (2014) concluded that "This is an optimal time to employ undergraduates for reference" (p. 168) and that "The case can be made that trained undergraduates are optimal for providing peer reference" (p. 163). Faix et al. (2010) concurred, stating, "Undergraduate students are not only capable but perhaps optimal at providing high-quality reference service to their peers" (p. 90–1). Her research found that "The undergraduate RSAs proved to be ideal reference providers. Not only did they have the advantage of being familiar with the particular courses students were involved in... but they also demonstrated a strong desire to present a knowledgeable face to their peers. They took their positions, and the responsibilities they entailed, very seriously" (Faix, 2014, pp. 101–2). Stevens (2013) noted the benefits to those patrons whose needs were well-met by undergraduate student assistance, allowing increased service hours and "circumventing time and space limitations" (p. 211).

Other researchers found that undergraduate students improved the public service capacity in perhaps unexpected ways. Brenza et al. (2015) posited that in addition to providing key library services, students were shaping users' perception of libraries (p. 724). Brenza et al. also proposed that academic libraries think of student assistants as "ambassadors" of the library, stating "The value of student assistant extends well beyond the fulfillment of their duties as library employees. Specifically, they can bring positive or negative attitudes about the library to their friends and classmates," which would affect future library patronage (p. 722). "The employment of student workers may be a great way to introduce the library to its users, encouraging them to make contact and then referring them, if necessary, to other professionals who can assist them with their research needs" (p. 726).

Furthermore, Faix (2014) found that student patrons often preferred getting help from student employees (i.e. peer assistance) (p. 306). Similarly, Bodemer (2014) argued that "Academic libraries would be remiss in not seeking to harness peer learning dynamics to enhance student learning and success" (p. 162). Bodemer posited that students could communicate with peers in ways that librarians could not (p. 176), while Faix (2014) concluded that library users wanted their needs met and weren't concerned about who helped them meet those needs (p. 309). Brenza et al. asserted that because student reference assistants often are the first impression that users have, they greatly affect users' overall experience (p. 723), which appears to validate Bodemer's idea that "Peer reference... providers can create contiguity between student

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