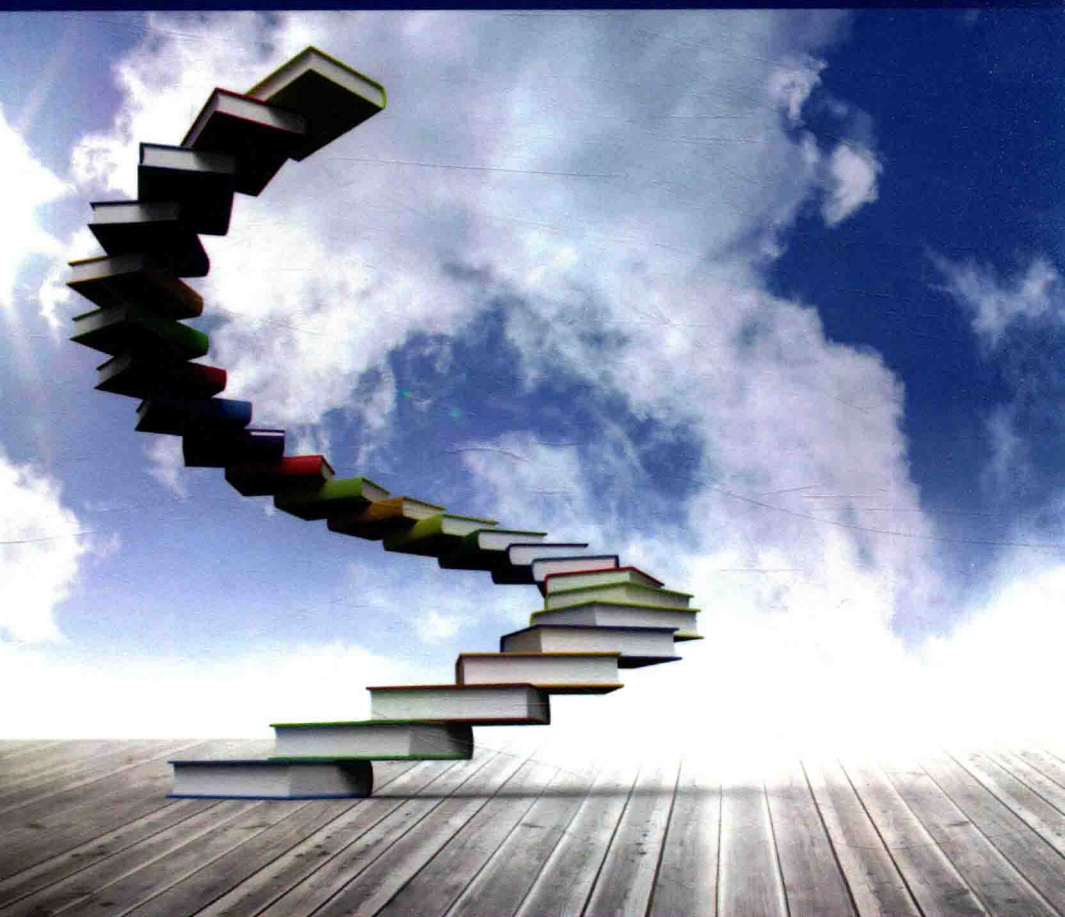


RETHINKING REFERENCE FOR ACADEMIC LIBRARIES



INNOVATIVE DEVELOPMENTS AND FUTURE TRENDS
EDITED BY CARRIE FORBES AND JENNIFER BOWERS

Rethinking Reference for Academic Libraries

*Innovative Developments and
Future Trends*



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Introduction

Reimagining Reference and Research Services for the Twenty-First-Century Academic Library

Jennifer Bowers and Carrie Forbes

The current literature on postsecondary education indicates that the system of higher education is at a tipping point, and that it will soon look nothing like it does today. At a time when college revenues and cash reserves are down, many institutions are facing bigger debts and ever-increasing expenses. Furthermore, too many students now must borrow heavily just to keep pace with tuition increases. Institutions of all types are struggling to meet the realities of today's economy as they grapple with shrinking resources, increasing demand, and calls for accountability.¹

At the same time, higher education is challenged to meet the needs of a new generation of college students. Data show that our institutions of higher learning currently serve only about a third of students well. More and more students are from low-income families, or they are older, juggling life, jobs, and family as they pursue their educations. They are often first-generation college-goers who lack the support and guidance crucial to navigating the thicket that is higher education. These students need highly personalized coaching, mentoring, and other supports tailored to their individual needs and goals.² Emerging technologies and partnerships with communities and corporations hold promise for making this kind of personalization possible by enabling colleges to effectively target these diverse student needs while reducing costs.³

All of these trends in higher education have impacted academic libraries and continue to shape reference and research services. In particular, collaboration with campus partners, diverse student populations, technological inno-

vations, the need for assessment, and new professional competencies present new challenges and opportunities for creating a twenty-first-century learning environment. In order to reimagine reference service, librarians must not only understand, but also embrace these emerging reference practices. This edited volume, containing five sections and fourteen chapters, reviews the current state of reference services in academic libraries with an emphasis on innovative developments and future trends. The main theme that runs through the book is the urgent need for inventive, imaginative, and responsive reference and research services. Through literature reviews and case studies, this book provides professionals with a convenient compilation of timely issues and models at comparable institutions. As academic libraries shift from functioning primarily as collections repositories to serving as key players in discovery and knowledge creation, value-added services, such as reference, are even more central to libraries' and universities' changing missions.

COLLABORATION: PARTNERSHIPS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Collaboration is a common refrain that runs throughout the recent Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Environmental Scan 2013* report. Designed to be a guide for future planning, the report identifies key trends and factors that will influence the direction academic libraries take as they strive to meet the needs of their communities and adapt to the changing higher education landscape.⁴ The report outlines opportunities for collaboration and partnerships to support ongoing and emerging forms of scholarship, including digital humanities projects, data curation, and online publishing; central to these efforts will be the imperative to take a more active role in the research process. In addition, building on a shared goal of fostering student learning through effective practices, libraries can partner with campus stakeholders to assess and analyze student learning and outcomes. The report also calls for libraries to work with other groups and departments on campus to create shared spaces for innovation and collaboration, such as those represented by Digital Scholarship Centers, as well as to consider radical collaborative endeavors to merge technical services and collections with external institutions. Efforts to integrate the library more fully into the academic enterprise will underscore the value of libraries' contributions to their institutions' educational mission.

Although the ACRL report discusses collaborative opportunities for libraries in general, a survey of the professional literature demonstrates that many reference departments, in particular, are already actively pursuing opportunities to partner with faculty and other affiliated groups on campus. Reference librarians have an established tradition of working together with

faculty to support student learning through library workshops, curriculum-integrated instruction, and online educational tools. Building on this foundation, reference librarians are exploring multiple ways to further enhance students' development into lifelong learners, such as collaborative teaching with faculty⁵ and partnerships with Writing Centers and student organizations. In addition to supporting student learning, librarians are collaborating with faculty and other campus entities to establish centers for digital humanities projects and data-management services,⁶ among other endeavors. Successful efforts have been grounded in creating communities of practice with shared goals,⁷ recognizing the critical role of communication,⁸ and shifting away from a service culture to forming genuine partnerships.⁹

The first section in this volume, "Collaboration," addresses the trend in expanding reference services beyond traditional boundaries. Michael Courtney and Angela Courtney's chapter, "Step Away from the Desk: Re-casting the Reference Librarian as Academic Partner," shows us that collaboration is not a new idea but that proactive partnerships will be key to the vitality and future of reference services. The authors offer a review of reference partnerships, from teaching endeavors to research activities, with a specific emphasis on digital scholarship projects. Encouraging librarians not to abandon but to build on their traditional strengths while also acquiring new skills to meet changing needs, Courtney and Courtney see this transformative time as an opportunity for reference librarians to reimagine their role "as partners in the vibrant academic life of their institutions." Merinda Kaye Hensley provides a working model for new collaborative enterprises with her chapter, "The Scholarly Commons: Emerging Research Services for Graduate Students and Faculty." This case study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign presents a suite of research services that range in areas of specialization from data services to digital humanities and from scholarly communication and copyright to online publishing, among other areas. Hensley identifies each partner, describes its contribution to the Scholarly Commons, and concludes with assessment and plans for future collaboration. Through building strategic partnerships, the Scholarly Commons serves to inspire practitioners and lead the way in innovative reference.

DIVERSITY: MEETING THE INFORMATION NEEDS OF A CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC

The changing demographics of higher education are significantly impacting the communities served by academic reference services. The ACRL *Environmental Scan* states quite directly that the "assumption of an 18–24-year-old age group as the traditional student will soon be a thing of the past."¹⁰ Not only is the academy seeing an increase in a wider age range of students as

veterans and professionals return to seek new educational opportunities, but growing numbers of Hispanics and African Americans, some of them first generation students, will also alter academic communities. With these changes come concerns about how libraries can position themselves to meet the needs of these students and best contribute to their recruitment and retention. Outreach to and partnerships with academic programs, such as the Ronald E. McNairs Scholars program, minority student affairs programs, and multicultural student centers on campus illustrate some of the ways that libraries are proactively working to attract and support a diverse clientele.¹¹

The globalization of education through the popularity of distance education, online learning, and MOOCs, in particular, has led to a more geographically dispersed and diverse student body.¹² Students from other countries are an integral part of the American on-campus community as well, with their own unique information and research needs,¹³ which could be partly served through offering library workshops and resources in foreign languages.¹⁴ Published in 2012, the ACRL *Diversity Standards: Cultural Competency for Academic Libraries* has prompted reference librarians to focus attention on cultural issues of library use, linguistically diverse populations, and critical information literacy, among other diversity-related issues, and to consider how these can transform existing or initiate new reference services. Diversity, in the literature and in practice, is being defined in increasingly expansive terms to include not only racial and ethnic minorities, but also “any student who differs from the typical college student with regard to abilities, age, gender/sexuality, nationality or ethnicity, and locale.”¹⁵ In turn, librarians are assessing these students’ needs and responding with tailored programs, services, and recommendations for best practices.¹⁶

The chapters in this section engage with their diverse communities through innovative reference and outreach. Matthew P. Ciszek’s chapter, “The Rainbow Connection: Reference Services for the LGBT Community in Academic Libraries,” is packed with good advice about creating a supportive reference environment for this increasingly visible population. He recommends easily implemented and effective practices, from creating top-level LGBT research guides to integrating LGBT topics and resources into instruction and reference consultations, as just some examples, and encourages librarians to become both knowledgeable and proactive about serving the LGBT community at their institutions. Valeria E. Molteni and Eileen K. Bosch describe their experience providing reference services in Spanish to meet the information needs of heritage language learners, immigrants, and international students. Their chapter, “Reference Services in a Shifting World: Other Languages, Other Services,” offers two case studies from California State University, Long Beach, and San José State University, which both have highly diverse populations and a significant number of Latino students. Bilingual proficiency will become even more central to reference

services and they remind us that to “serve the influx of library patrons with different cultural and language backgrounds, academic librarians need to rethink the English-only paradigm.” Also concerned with a shifting student population, Li Fu’s chapter, “As Needs Change, So Must We: A Case Study of Innovative Outreach to Changing Demographics” illustrates how the imperative to become a “changemaking campus” at the University of San Diego initiated major transformations in their reference services. Outreach and reference librarians at USD joined together to partner with academic and non-academic units for wide-ranging and targeted outreach to the underserved, including international students, disabled students, staff, and community members, among others.

TECHNOLOGY: REFERENCE SERVICE BEYOND THE LIBRARY WALLS

The *NMC Horizon Report: 2014 Higher Education Edition*, written in collaboration by the New Media Consortium and the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, details the following technology trends as having the most impact on higher education within the next five years: “the growing ubiquity of social media, the integration of online, hybrid, and collaborative learning, the rise of data-driven learning and assessment, and the shift from students as consumers to students as creators.”¹⁷ These evolving technological changes continue to push the boundaries of reference services, both literally and figuratively. Reference increasingly can happen anywhere and anytime, whether through Skype, chat, IM, or e-mail as students are served both on and off campus through these services as well as traditional means.¹⁸ In the chapter “Roving Reference: Taking the Library to Its Users,” Zara Wilkinson urges librarians to reconsider the benefits of roving reference, a traditional model of service that is seeing a rebirth due to the proliferation of tablets and mobile devices. She considers roving reference to be an important form of outreach to today’s millennial students, noting, “Roving reference is a way to combat what might be called the library *catch 22*: the only patrons who come to the reference desk for help are those patrons who already know to come to the reference desk for help.”

Technology developments also impact both the ways in which librarians communicate with their communities and the discovery tools and databases that are the foundation of their work.¹⁹ In “Connecting Questions with Answers,” Ellie Dworak and Carrie Moore provide a case study on the robust development of Frequently Asked Questions as a method of improving communications with students. Their chapter details the successful implementation and evaluation of LibAnswers, a Springshare reference product, at Boise State University to “bridge” the information gap between librarians and stu-

dents. In the *Horizon Report*, the authors stress the intelligent use of technology: "Simply capitalizing on new technology is not enough; the new models must use these tools and services to engage students on a deeper level."²⁰ Likewise, reference librarians need to be creative about how best to integrate new technologies in order to effectively serve the library's and institution's goals.

ASSESSMENT: DOES REFERENCE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

In order to remain relevant in today's digital age, reference librarians need to rethink traditional methods of reference evaluation. Current assessments of reference services still mostly focus on the quantity of reference interactions, rather than the quality. In *Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*, prepared for the ACRL, Megan Oakleaf states, "Internal, service quality, and satisfaction measures are of great utility to librarians who seek to manage library services and resources, but they may not resonate with institutional leaders as well as outcomes-based approaches."²¹

As the availability of online information has increased, the nature of reference services in libraries has changed dramatically, leading to fewer, but often more complex, reference questions.²² This shift has led many libraries to use new online reference data collection and assessment tools.²³ These new technologies have the potential to capture richer information about reference interactions. Recording information about reference interactions and outcomes is essential for demonstrating the value of the changing nature of reference work. Much of the recent literature illustrates the new complexity in reference interactions, as well as how to track new modes of reference (e.g., online, chat, e-mail).²⁴ Many libraries have implemented either vendor-provided (e.g., LibStats, LibAnalytics, Gimlet) or locally developed tools for recording reference assessment information. The benefits of using these new methods for library services assessment include continuous data collection, flexibility and mobility in the data-collection process, and increased detail.²⁵

In the opening literature review of the section titled "Transforming Reference Services: More Than Meets the Eye," Kawanna Bright, Consuella Askew, and Lori Driver stress that academic librarians need to be engaged in the "transformative" programs happening in higher education institutions that will help demonstrate the value and relevance that reference and research services bring to the student learning experience. While reiterating the urgent need for assessment, they boldly proclaim that "the desk will continue its iconic role in reference service delivery" as long as librarians are willing to adapt based on the needs of patrons. In the second chapter in the section, Corinne Laverty and Elizabeth A. Lee provide one example of innovative

adaption and assessment through their use of dialogic mapping in research consultations. In “Dialogic Mapping: Evolving Reference into an Instructional Support for Graduate Research,” they present promising findings indicating that the reference interview can enhance student learning through the use of increased dialogue and visuals. They further argue that in today’s fast-paced information age, “slow research” through dialogic mapping creates the best conditions for students to construct new knowledge. Finally, in “Does the Reference Desk Still Matter? Assessing the Desk Paradigm at the University of Washington Libraries,” Deb Raftus and Kathleen Collins delineate novel assessment measures and outcomes for their research services. Using the Reference Effort Assessment Data (READ) Scale to analyze reference questions at three different campus libraries, they developed a culturally sensitive and context-specific reference model for each library that met the needs of both librarians and patrons.

Oakleaf contends that “just as there are no ‘quick fixes’ to the problem of demonstrating the value of higher education, there are no simple solutions to the challenge of articulating the value of academic libraries.”²⁶ The models in this section, however, deliver useful strategies and tips for librarians just beginning an assessment program to those ready to engage in more complex correlations of student learning.

PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES: SKILLS FOR A NEW GENERATION

The highly changeable nature of higher education makes it necessary for reference librarians not only to adapt through the creation of innovative services but also, just as importantly, to make sure that their professional knowledge and skills are cutting edge. In some cases, this may mean enhancing traditional strengths, such as communication, resource expertise, and technological proficiency, and in others, it may entail branching out into new areas entirely, such as to collaborate in faculty research, data curation, online publishing, and digital scholarship projects, or to learn a second language. As we have seen from the previous sections, librarians will need to develop specific professional competencies to form effective partnerships with campus entities, support an increasingly diverse range of patrons, utilize a broad range of technological tools, and understand assessment planning, measures, and evaluation, and the role that assessment plays in demonstrating the library’s contribution to student learning. At the heart of all these efforts will be the librarian’s expertise in promoting and advocating for the value of academic libraries.

Laura Saunders approached the issue of new professional competencies head-on by surveying current academic reference librarians and hiring man-

agers about the skills they identified as most crucial. Concentrating on three areas of general, technology, and personal/interpersonal skills, she found that searching proficiency, customer service, familiarity with online resources, software troubleshooting, knowledge of chat/IM and social media technologies, web design, verbal communication skills, listening, approachability, adaptability, and comfort with instruction rated high on the list of desired attributes.²⁷ Recent studies confirm these findings, with online search skills, verbal communication, and customer service skills maintaining their centrality for current and future requirements; however, additional competencies, such as “understanding the research process and delivering research support, and a growing focus on teaching and instruction,”²⁸ were also highlighted. With a more targeted focus on developing competencies to meet the needs of a changing student demographic and an increasingly global educational environment, training in cultural competency and cross-cultural communication will be critical.²⁹ Knowledge of a foreign language will also be important now and over the next decade, according to a cross-national analysis of reference service competencies, but was found to be less so for the English-speaking countries surveyed.³⁰ In addition, library training programs need to be ongoing to respond effectively to the changing responsibilities and expectations and also should integrate assessment to ensure that they continue to be relevant.³¹

The last section in our volume is concerned with understanding and developing specific competencies for the changing academic reference environment. Melanie Maksin explores the intersection between reference and instruction as illustrated by the emerging model of one-on-one research conversations. In her chapter, “From Ready Reference to Research Conversations: The Role of Instruction in Academic Reference Service,” Maksin shows how the emphasis on information literacy and student-focused learning can shape new approaches to the reference interview and be put into practice by looking for teachable moments and cultivating active and more equal partnerships with patrons. Danielle Colbert-Lewis, Jamillah Scott-Branch, and David Rachlin provide a valuable overview of the core, technical, professional, and personal competencies required of reference librarians in “Necessities of Librarianship: Competencies for a New Generation.” They discuss the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) *Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians* and tie these competencies to the realities of daily practice. Christine Tobias demonstrates how traditional reference skills can be adapted to and enhanced for the online environment in “Professional Competencies for the Virtual Reference Librarian: Digital Literacy, Soft Skills, and Customer Service.” With a focus on virtual reference transactions, she addresses the conventions and differences in online communication required by chat and instant messaging, covers topics like how to create a friendly conversational tone and give feedback

online, and presents recommendations for overcoming challenges, such as the lack of visual and audio cues and communicative multitasking. Finally, Peggy Keeran's chapter, "Mediating for Digital Primary Source Research: Expanding Reference Services," explores how the increasing availability of online digital primary source documents is altering the research consultations and services offered by humanities librarians. In particular, she notes the blurring of reference and specialist responsibilities, "Because of the prevalence of digital commercially and freely available collections and finding aids, research in and access to primary sources, which was once chiefly the purview of special collection curators and archivists, has pushed the boundaries of what services can be offered by reference librarians." Together, these chapters will lead reference librarians to reevaluate their professional goals and move forward to develop the competencies best suited to current and future needs.

CONCLUSION

For higher education to fulfill its historic role as an engine of social mobility and economic growth, it must continue to change and evolve. This means that academic librarians and reference librarians, in particular, must think creatively about how to continue current reference services, while also ensuring that many more students receive the learning opportunities they deserve. Investments in collaborations with campus partners, innovations in the use of educational technology, improvements in outcomes assessment methods, and enhancements to professional-development programs for librarians are increasingly crucial to humanizing and cultivating research services for all students in the twenty-first-century academic library.

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