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# Student Workers at the Reference Desk

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At the University of Portland's Wilson W. Clark Memorial Library, three reference librarians each spend approximately 12 hours per week at the reference desk during the academic year. Yet, we advertise that the reference desk is staffed all 101.5 hours that the library is open. How do we accomplish this? By hiring undergraduate student workers as reference assistants. The University of Portland library is not the only academic library in Oregon to employ undergraduate reference assistants—Oregon State University and the University of Oregon also have students working at the reference desk, and we imagine other libraries do as well. Nor were we the first; we learned a lot from the University of Oregon program. But we might rely on ours more heavily than these larger institutions.

Over the past 11 years, we have employed 62 reference assistants. In the beginning students covered a few hours a week, but we gradually expanded hours of student coverage so that librarians could fulfill the increased demand for library instruction. During the school year students cover evening and weekend hours when a librarian is not available, and some morning and afternoon hours with librarian backup. During the summer they are at the reference desk all hours that the library is open, with librarian backup from 10 am–4 pm on weekdays.

Our hiring process identifies mature students capable of handling a variety of questions. We screen for applications from sophomores or juniors who have spent some time at the university and can answer questions about the campus—and who have probably taken at least one research-intensive class. Occasionally we hire second-semester freshmen, but we generally do not hire seniors as we would like to retain our reference assistants for as long as possible once we've trained them. We look for familiarity with research tools but don't perform any other screening, such as knowledge or ability tests. In the interview, we ask students to describe the process they used when they taught someone how to do something, not necessarily research-related, and about a time when they had to refer a question. We look for students who are cheerful, energetic and outgoing but who are also good listeners.

Students receive intensive training. The initial training takes 4–6 hours and covers a wide range of topics:

- the library facility, services and policies
- the library catalog inside and out as well as our consortial catalog
- database searching tips, especially for our most frequently-used databases
- citation help, including using RefWorks
- tracking down full text of articles and books
- computer-related troubleshooting

Throughout the training we emphasize important reference behaviors: looking approachable, asking questions to determine what a patron needs, helping patrons use databases and resources, and knowing when to refer questions to the librarians.

We reinforce this early training with a set of worksheets that students complete over the course of their first semester. In addition to covering the above bullet points, these worksheets are about communicating with people with disabilities, which students complete after viewing a film, and recognizing inadequately-answered questions.

Ongoing training also occurs throughout the students' employment, via replies to their shift reports. At the end of each shift, students post the questions they received and how they responded to a reference team blog hosted on Blogger. Shift reports are formatted as a numbered list to facilitate statistics-keeping. Librarians post comments to shift reports as necessary, usually

to explain how we followed up on a referral, but sometimes to suggest that a referral would have been a good idea, or to offer additional resources to recommend if a similar question is asked. Blog posts and comments are sent to the entire team through a Google Groups mailing list. To increase the probability that students have seen librarian responses to shift reports, we send a monthly executive summary to the mailing list. From tracking student shift reports and librarian responses, we have found that students can adequately answer more than 90 percent of the questions they encounter (see table 1).

Table 1

| Reference assistant questions with librarian follow-up | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Year | # Questions answered by students | # Questions with librarian follow-up | % of questions with librarian follow-up |
| 2009 | 4433 | 92 | 2.08 |
| 2008 | 4198 | 97 | 2.30 |
| 2007 | 3812 | 112 | 2.98 |
| 2006 | 3983 | 118 | 2.96 |

During the fall semester, and ideally each semester, we bring the reference team together for a training meeting to discuss changes that have occurred during breaks. Past training meetings have included hands-on practice with Libstats (our web-based reference statistics tracking program), answering Instant Messaging questions via Meebo and using the RefWorks citation management tool.

We continue to work on getting students to refer questions to the librarians. Since they receive so much training, they sometimes believe they can solve every problem. Or they are reluctant to refer when a librarian will not reply until the next day; we have better luck with referrals when a librarian is immediately available. To increase the likelihood of referrals, we coach the students in our different categories of reference statistics (Directional, Reference 0–5 Minutes, and Reference 5+ Minutes), and encourage them to have a librarian follow up on the extended questions. During training we tell students to offer referrals proactively; they should say "let me take your contact information to have a librarian follow up" rather than "would you like a librarian to follow up?" In the latter case, patrons might see a referral as imposing on the librarians, while we want them to see it as a natural part of reference service.

In our 11 years of experience, we have rarely had reliability and service problems with student workers. One student had a habit of responding "I don't know," and another impersonated one of the reference librarians while instant messaging friends, but the most common issue has been punctuality and attendance. We have resolved these problems by emphasizing appropriate behavior in our employment contract, by instituting a "three strikes and you are out" system, and by adding and revising interview questions to better identify good candidates. A librarian meets with each student after an infraction occurs, to offer suggestions for improvement and additional training if necessary, so that if the pattern continues all parties can recognize that the student is not a good fit for a reference assistant position.

Students benefit from their work experience as much as, if not more, than the library. They use their research knowledge in their school work and after graduation report that potential employers are pleased with their apparent ability to research and to help others. A few of our students have gone into library school or are considering it. Overall, we are pleased with our reference student experience, have confidence in their abilities, and are happy with their service. We encourage other libraries to explore this opportunity to expand their reference service.