In Reference to Reference:
How do Students Seek Information? What can Reference Services do to Help?

Barbara Fister
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How do students seek information?

Three large-scale studies have recently been completed on students' information seeking habits. The following findings are ones of interest in reconsidering reference services:

[The OCLC White Paper on the Information Habits of College Students](#) (June 2002)

- Accuracy of information is important to students.
- When students need help using information, they prefer face-to-face interaction rather than remote help.
- They will ask fellow students or their teachers for help more often than librarians, but when they ask librarians for help, they are as satisfied as they are when getting help elsewhere.
- Students use the library; 89% of students report using print resources (books and journals) for at least some of their research.

[Dimensions and Use of the Scholarly Information Environment](#) conducted by Outsell for Digital Library Federation and Council on Library and Information Resources (released Oct. 16, 2002)

- Though 80% of students and faculty say the Internet has changed the way they use libraries, two-thirds report they have not decreased their use of libraries as a result. Faculty are more likely than students to use the library less as a result of desktop access.
- Information provided by libraries is trusted and used.
- Both students and faculty report being comfortable using both print and digital resources and expect to continue to use both formats for at least the next five years.
- Most respondents claim to verify information found online in a print resource. Though this is suspect, at least it reflects a sense that online sources are not infallible.

[The Pew Internet Life study: The Internet Goes to College](#) (Sept. 15, 2002)
This study presents some methodological problems that impair its usefulness. Two quotes and analysis will suffice to demonstrate what I mean:

- "The Internet, rather than the library, is the primary site of [college students'] searches." The questions asked of students made no distinction between the "free" Web and library-provided Web-based sources--nor did it acknowledge that even library catalogs are now searched on the Internet.

- "It is our observation that [students] use electronic resources more than paper resources." The observations were made by researches standing near public computers in libraries, dorms, and elsewhere on campus, which limited their field of observation significantly. They did not attempt to observe students in the stacks or using carrels or in the process of composing from sources.

One more note: In 1990 I did a small-scale qualitative study of the research processes of successful undergraduate researchers ("The Research Processes of Undergraduate Students," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 18 [July 1992]: 163-169); last spring I replicated the study to see if there were significant changes in a digital world. Though I haven't finished analyzing the interview transcripts, initial results suggest that, while the tools and resources may be quite different, their processes for defining research questions, locating and selecting evidence, and using it in their composing process haven't changed significantly.

What are the implications for reference service?

- The library (physical and virtual) as a site for reliable information remains important. Students expect to do their research in a hybrid print-electronic environment for the near future; they are not abandoning traditional library resources. By extension, the real reference desk may still have a function if we position it properly.
- Face-to-face help is preferred over remote help. This may explain why so many virtual reference services are not drawing many questions.
- The reference desk is not well identified as a place to get expert help; however, students who discover it are happy with the help they get. *We need to do a better job of making clear what reference is all about--and why it's valuable.*
- Working with sources in print remains very important--whether in print originally or printed from a digital source. This has practical implications (the continuing need for working printers and photocopiers) as well as implications for the development of intellectual property law and product development. (For example, studies of patron use of e-book readers suggest the assumption older readers will resist e-books, but students will embrace them have been confounded by studies conducted at the University of Rochester and Ball State University.) *We shouldn't develop alternative services without first determining if, in fact, there is a market for them. Find out first if our assumptions about what students want are true.*

Fister's "Top Five Bad Reasons to Move to Virtual Reference"

- **We'll save money.** No librarian in her right mind would make this assumption, but non-librarians might assume sharing one librarian virtually among several libraries will be cheaper than hiring many librarians.
- **If we don't weave ourselves into the Web, students will Ask Jeeves instead.** While we do need to do a better job of identifying the reference desk as a place to ask for help with research, what Jeeves does and what we do at reference are two different things; see my essay in the Chron for further ranting on this subject.

- **Students always prefer online access to information and like the anonymity of virtual reference**. In fact the studies above suggest students prefer face-to-face help; the anonymity of virtual reference is particularly troubling since many virtual reference software programs track questions and answers. Researchers using virtual transaction data are doing so without informed consent of the patrons and retaining this data not only makes it available for discovery in the event of a subpoena, we may be retaining records of information use in violation of state data privacy laws (though it's totally in keeping with the invasiveness of the Patriot Act).
- **We'll answer students questions immediately at the times when they want answers.** This, of course, suggests reference services are about providing quick answers like fast food, rather than about providing individual help in sharpening a research question, querying sources, and putting them to use in deriving an understanding--work that takes time and effort on the part of the student (as well as the librarian).
- **Students are our customers; to serve them, we should behave more like business.** In fact, business does a poor job of providing service as good as what we traditionally have given at the reference desk. See a [recent article](#) on the dark side of Google Answers for the gory details. (Incidentally, the author of the author was fired by Google after the article was published.)

Some practical suggestions for making the *analog* reference desk more effective

- Integrate reference into the instructional program. Have faculty formally build a visit to the reference desk into their nurturing of students' research processes. For example, librarians working with faculty in the disciplines could put up a course resource page at the beginning of a semester, meet with the class as a whole for a workshop in the library when they have started work on their projects, then faculty could assign students the task of discussing their project individually at the reference desk to go over options. Some of our faculty require students to have a librarian sign off on their preliminary bibliographies; others have students fill out a form that requires them to formulate three questions for the reference librarian (aka "stump the librarian") and note down what they've learned as a result.
- Invite faculty to hold their office hours in the library and give them a place to meet students that's visible and readily accessible to computers, the stacks, and the reference desk. Nothing tells a student more clearly that librarians know their stuff than having a faculty member approach a librarian with a question; seeing their teachers in the library will also confirm for students that the library is a site of scholarship and discovery.
- Adjust reference desk schedules as much as possible to mesh with students' needs (while taking into account the different diurnal clocks of college students and older adults). We need to be there for them during the evening and on weekends--in person, not just remotely.
- Make every effort to bear in mind the instructional mission of the library when making *any* changes in library services. The reference desk needs to be one effort of many to sharpen and focus the library's centrality to teaching and learning.

[Barbara Fister](#) - *October 16, 2002*