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From Reference to Research: Rebuilding, Redesigning, and Relaunching Research Services at Asbury Theological Seminary

by Thad Horner, Asbury Theological Seminary

WHO AM I?

Before describing what happened with the reference to research transition at the B.L. Fisher Library, perhaps readers would like to know exactly who made this transition happen and why they have any authority to speak on the subject.

I received a MDiv from Asbury Theological Seminary in 2005. I then was accepted into a PhD program in New Testament at London School of Theology. Because of several reasons, most importantly a request from the Director of the Library to pursue a library degree, I stopped the PhD program and began an MLIS at Florida State University, graduating in 2010. I hope to one day resume PhD work.

My work experience includes nearly every single role in the library, with the exceptions of director and archives. When I was first hired, my responsibilities included library loan, scanning, desk responsibilities, periodicals supervision, and being designated as the “expert” in reference. Seriously, those were all my responsibilities. Several years later when our media cataloger left the library, the director approached me and asked me to start the MLIS and become the media cataloger. I was in this role for several years before my responsibilities once again shifted to that of Digital Resources Librarian with responsibilities for overseeing all of our electronic presence. Finally, I moved back into public services into a research position. I received a wealth of experience and a breadth of information and perspective from working in these various positions that would help bring a unique approach to Research Services.

My colleague Lisa Setters was actually hired into a reference position. While she also helped with library loan, she largely handled all of the reference duties for a number of years. She has an MA from Asbury Theological Seminary and a MLIS from Florida State University.

WHAT IS “TRADITIONAL REFERENCE”?

For the purpose of this paper, “traditional reference” means a librarian sitting at a desk, waiting for patrons to come and ask him or her a question and then finding and telling the patron the answer to that question. The term “ready reference” comes to mind. The reference librarian is often a guardian of information. Perhaps vital resources reside behind his or her desk, invoking the idea that one must approach the “expert” in order to receive assistance. Often, at least in the experience of the B.L. Fisher Library, traditional reference librarians offer poorly attended workshops.

WHEN I FIRST ARRIVED

I cannot speak to what existed prior to my arrival at Asbury Theological Seminary, but when I came as a student in 2001, the library used a very traditional reference model. There was a “reference desk” staffed by a dedicated reference librarian. Reference

services were separate from the other services offered by the rest of the library. In fact, one had to go to the circulation desk to check out material. One had to go to the reserves desk to view class reserve material, and so forth. The reference librarian was indeed a gatekeeper of information as essential resources were located around her desk.

WHEN I WAS HIRED

Although I had already been working at the B.L. Fisher library for nearly two years as a student worker, I was hired full time almost immediately after finishing my MDiv Degree. I had no MLIS yet and no intention of getting one. My focus was on the Ph.D. Despite my apparent lack of qualifications, I was put in charge of helping students with advanced research. I say “advanced” because at the time, the library used an Information Commons model where everyone was considered a reference librarian. In theory a student could go to the Information Commons desk, ask a reference question, and receive an answer from whoever was working. Advanced research was meant to be for specialized skills, knowledge, or questions whose answers required more than 15 minutes worth of work (the reality of this situation will be addressed later in the paper). Also, I was in charge of in-class presentations whenever the library was invited.

WHEN I MOVED TO TECHNICAL SERVICES

After I moved to the media cataloger position, the library hired another former student worker to assume my previous responsibilities. He essentially continued with the pattern of service that I had established with some small changes. He possessed no professional credentials.

WHEN HE MOVED TO TECHNICAL SERVICES

A position in Technical Services opened, so my replacement took that job. To fill this new vacancy, another former student worker, my current co-worker, Lisa, was hired. She had just graduated from Asbury Theology Seminary and had not yet started on a library degree. She basically duplicated the job functions as she found them while making some minor changes.

A GAP EMERGED AND ITS SOLUTION

The library staff, and Lisa in particular, discovered that no one was reaching masters-level students. Most of those asking “advanced” reference questions were doctoral students and nearly all training sessions were oriented towards doctoral students. Masters students were, unintentionally, largely being ignored.

The idea that “everyone is a reference librarian” was never true in practice. Just as other workers directed anything that remotely sounded like a reference question to me when I was in this role, people continued to direct nearly every reference question to Lisa. Just as I had a plethora of other responsibilities in addition to reference, she served as a very needed helper to the library loan department and was in charge of all of our web apps. In other words, she was swamped. Morale and job satisfaction in the reference “office” were low.

A solution needed to be found. The B.L. Fisher Library had now tried several different models of reference support in a relatively short amount of time. None of them worked properly. The Information Commons model was defective, at least in terms of reference, since most of the other workers automatically referred all reference questions. The team decided to create something else and rebrand it.

RESEARCH SERVICES

The solution could have been as simple as adding reference responsibilities back into my job description. Doing so would have at least alleviated some of the pressure that Lisa faced. But we went further than that. I already had an MLIS and Lisa was working on one. Both of us took new roles and combined into a new office in a different workspace. I changed buildings. The area that housed Lisa's former work space was soon to become the school's new Writing Center, so we both moved into a new office together and named it "Research Services."

Research Services differs from traditional reference in several key ways. We offer regular, scheduled training workshops online and in person. We purposely keep the maximum attendance at these sessions low to better allow us to serve students and to not be discouraged if few students come. We both have very particular titles. We are both called "Research Librarians" and have digital responsibilities in our titles as well. Through our web presence powered by LibGuides, we offer regularly scheduled office hours for appointments. While we allow patrons to drop in, we encourage people to sign up for an appointment through LibGuides and to provide us with as much information as possible, so that we can better prepare to serve the researcher. Research Services has two research librarians, which allows at least one to be present if the other is out. Lisa and I often supplement each other's knowledge. The main philosophy of Research Services is to teach someone to fish versus giving them a fish. We do not do people's research for them. Rather, we work with them, demonstrating how they are to do the research. This way, they not only are served in this one instance, but receive knowledge to apply in future projects.

Further differences between Research Services and traditional reference exist. The words "reference" and "research" convey different things and we wish to emphasize that research is a process. Lisa and I are not only in charge of training, but also of developing and maintaining our online resources. We know the product because we developed it (or at least administer it). We now have increased collaboration with faculty as they come to us for help and invite us into their classes. Perhaps the greatest difference between the two models is the decreased importance of the actual reference section. One of the first projects that Lisa and I tackled after creating Research Services was weeding the reference section of almost half of its items. Material that was kept in reference simply because it was "reference" material was moved to the main collection or off-site storage if it was not used. Only material that supported the degrees and purpose of the Seminary was kept in reference. In certain subjects, we collaborated with faculty, but Lisa and I handled the overwhelming majority of this project ourselves.

As Research Services, we actively offer in-class presentations at the request of faculty, hold regularly scheduled training sessions, and make extensive use of our

LibApps products. We continue to create LibGuides and refine other portions of our use of the product. These changes have given a better experience for the student as we receive feedback from them and also a better experience for us.

The Research Services model offers many benefits. Our shared responsibility allows us to have a multi-faceted focus and tackle more than one project at once. Our different backgrounds assist in understanding a patron's problem and finding an answer. We now have needed time to accomplish other projects. Our job satisfaction and morale have improved. We are now able to offer better specialized training to our student workers. Our staffing hours are longer. We have predictability of scheduled office hours. The small workshops allow for a lot of interaction and serve as a nice pathway into individual appointments. We are better able to raise awareness of the services that we offer. Because there are two of us, we can offer workshops at different times during the week and reach more people. And finally in this specific instance, I was easily able to cover for Lisa's maternity leave.

Despite the plethora of benefits, a few disadvantages of this model exist as well. We are still at the mercy of the ebb and flow of seasons. Whenever doctoral cohorts arrive and new semesters begin our time is almost exclusively devoted to them. Therefore, we are not able to tackle other projects during this time.

FINAL THOUGHT

No matter what other projects we are doing, no matter if a student had an appointment or not, no matter what we call ourselves; we will drop everything to help those who come to us for research help. This statement is the core of our mission at Research Services and our reason for existence.