

Where are the Librarians? Innovative Approaches to Reference and Instruction, and Implications for the Librarian's Role

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Abstract

Academic librarians strive to provide high quality reference and instruction services and engage with their user communities. How do they balance their sense of commitment when faced with financial constraints and added responsibilities in the workplace? The current economic climate, together with growing student demands for immediate support and also expanded opportunities for distance and collaborative learning, make it tempting to assign professional duties to paraprofessionals and student workers. Given the demands for greater accountability, it is appropriate for libraries to assess current practices and alter delivery methods for reference and research instruction. In this discussion session, participants will have the opportunity to listen and contribute to the perspectives on both sides of a debate that, on the one hand, advocates the value of students in the provision of reference/instruction services and, on the other hand, seeks to understand the role of librarians amidst these innovative changes. Through this session, participants also will gain a better understanding of the unique benefits students receive from both their peers as well as academic librarians.

Discussion

CARLDIG-South was thrilled to sponsor a *Discussion Session* at this year's CARL Conference in San Diego. On April 7, 2012, approximately 70 librarians and library school students attended this session. Each panelist spoke for 10 minutes, and then the floor opened up for participants in attendance to provide questions and comments.

First, Brett Bodemer discussed the LibRAT (Library Research Assistance Technician) program at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, which employs undergraduate students in the areas of reference and instruction. He emphasized the pedagogical values in peer-to-peer teaching in both reference and instruction. Brett discussed the training, assessment and success he has experienced in implementing this model and stated that undergraduate students not only can, but *should* provide reference and instruction.

Next, Shahla Bahavar discussed the tiered staffing model used at USC's Leavey Library service desk, which utilizes Student Navigation Assistants (SNAs), librarians, and computer consultants. Librarians and computer consultants are available during certain hours, while the SNAs staff the desk all hours the library is open. This tiered model utilizes SNAs to answer basic questions, while training them to refer more challenging queries to the librarians and computer questions to the computer consultants. This tiered model has been developed and adjusted over time and has been successfully used at USC for eighteen years.

Finally, Lise Snyder reflected on the changes the librarian profession has had in reference and instruction work, as well as changes in reference and instruction staffing patterns. She spoke of the varied positive and negative results of these changes and asserts that as a profession, there

are some questions that need to be carefully addressed: What is a librarian's work in reference and instruction? How is the librarian's role different? Where does their specific expertise come into play? Is there a growing sense that librarians are not really necessary to providing excellent user service in these areas?

Following the panelists' brief presentations, Angela Boyd, Reference Services Librarian at California State University, Santa Barbara, moderated a discussion involving questions and comments from the audience. Attendees shared their views on these creative approaches that advocate the use of students in the provision of reference services. Many attendees debated the impact these approaches have on the traditional role of the librarian in higher education and the quality of service being provided to users. Ultimately, the session was aimed at encouraging discussion on a controversial topic and to provide those in attendance with multiple perspectives on the unique benefits students receive from both their peers and academic librarians.

CARLDIG-South is grateful to Brett Bodemer, Shahla Bahavar, and Lise Snyder for their time and preparation on serving on this panel, as well as to Angela Boyd for serving as moderator. We would also like to express our gratitude to the librarians and library school students in attendance and the CARLDIG-South members who helped plan the engaging discussion session.

For more information on the CARLDIG-South interest group as well as related links to material presented at this CARL 2012 Discussion Session, please visit: <http://www.carl-acrl.org/ig/carldigs>