



*Evidence Summary*

**Decline in Reference Transactions with Few Questions Referred to Librarian when the Reference Desk is Staffed by a Paraprofessional**

**A Review of:**

Dinkins, D., & Ryan, S. M. (2010). Measuring referrals: The use of paraprofessionals at the reference desk. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 36(4), 279-286.

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**Abstract**

**Objective** — To determine the type and percentage of questions referred to a librarian by a paraprofessional (i.e., an individual without an MLIS) staffing the reference desk, whether the percentage of referrals would decrease over time, and any consequences from having a paraprofessional rather than a librarian staffing the desk.

**Design** — Quantitative analysis of reference desk transaction statistics.

**Setting** — Reference desk at the main library of Stetson University, a private university in the United States of America with approximately 2,500 FTE (full-time equivalent) students.

**Subjects** — A total of 486 reference desk transactions recorded by a paraprofessional staffing the reference desk during the Fall and Spring semesters of the 2008-2009 academic year.

**Methods** — The first year that he worked in the Library at Stetson University, a paraprofessional recorded all reference desk transactions during his shift from 10:00am to 12:00pm, four days a week, for the Fall and Spring semesters of the 2008-2009 academic year. This paraprofessional, with computer expertise, received "relatively minimal" (p. 281) training on "reference desk policies and procedures... the use of the catalogue and the subscription databases" (p. 281). For each transaction, the paraprofessional categorized the question as "direction, " "reference, " or

"machine." He was instructed to contact a librarian if he could not answer a reference question. The paraprofessional also completed a questionnaire regarding his level of comfort answering questions and his thoughts on the training at the end of his first year of staffing the reference desk.

**Main Results** — In the Fall semester, 9.5% of all reference desk transactions were referred to a librarian. This decreased to 4.2% of the total transactions during the Spring semester. The percentage of reference questions referred to a librarian in the Fall semester was 21.9% and only 5.0% in the Spring semester. There was a 49.5% decrease in the number of reference desk transactions during the paraprofessional's hours on the desk compared to the previous year when the desk was staffed by professional librarians. Overall, reference desk transactions for all hours decreased 4.1% compared to the previous year. The results from the questionnaire on his experiences at the reference desk showed that the paraprofessional was satisfied with his training, comfortable with referring questions to the librarians, did not use the print reference collection extensively, thought the "interface for searching the library's catalogue/databases is dated at best" (p. 285), and felt that being close in age to many of the students was a disadvantage while working at the reference desk.

**Conclusion** — The authors concluded that staffing the reference desk with a paraprofessional was a success and that the "referrals to librarians had been made appropriately and when necessary" (p. 285). The results corroborated previous studies that showed only a "small percentage of reference desk transactions would need to be referred to a librarian" (p. 285). In part, because of the success of staffing the desk with a paraprofessional, the authors suggest that reference desk staffing configurations at academic libraries should be reevaluated. Librarians freed from duties at the physical reference desk could use this time to "develop virtual reference services" and expand information literacy programs (p. 286).

To explain the decrease in number of transactions during the paraprofessional's time on the reference desk, the authors surmised four possibilities: patrons' reluctance to ask questions of someone new on the desk, their dissatisfaction with the paraprofessional's answers, the similarity in age between the paraprofessional and the "age of the student population" (p. 284), or the librarians being more conscientious in tallying every transaction. However, the authors doubted that users perceived the paraprofessional's answers as "less satisfactory" as "patrons likely got a higher level of service on computer-related queries from the computer science-trained paraprofessional" (p. 284). Computer-related queries, coded as "machine" transactions, formed the majority of queries answered by the paraprofessional.

### Commentary

This study extends current research on alternative reference desk staffing arrangements. It suggests that paraprofessionals with minimal training can handle the majority of questions asked, including reference questions. This study will be of interest to those considering implementing or expanding the staffing of the reference desk with paraprofessionals; however, caution should be used when applying this study's results as they are based on the experience of only one paraprofessional and therefore may not be generalizable to other situations.

The authors provided context for their study with a thorough overview of previous studies on reference desk staffing and they explained their methodology clearly. However, a more detailed description of the training provided to the paraprofessional after he was hired and details on when the authors informed the paraprofessional about this research study would have strengthened the article. It would have allayed questions of whether the paraprofessional knew about the study before he was hired or whether he felt pressured to

participate in the study as it was his first year working for the library. It is also unclear why the questionnaire was included in the article as the questions do not directly map to the research questions as stated.

While the descriptive statistics, as shown in the tables and graphs, are easily understood, the inclusion of inferential statistics to clarify the level of statistical significance for the changes seen in the number of referrals and the overall decrease in number of questions would have been appreciated. There is also the more fundamental question of how the librarians know that the referrals were made "appropriately and when necessary" (p. 285). Another major unanswered question that needs to be explored further is what, if any, connection is there between a paraprofessional staffing the reference desk and the precipitous decline in reference questions during his shifts as compared to previous years.

Future research could include qualitatively exploring the effects of staffing the desk with paraprofessionals to complement quantitative studies such as this one. The extension of the "one-year trial of using a paraprofessional at the desk" (p. 285) will serve to answer more fully the authors' question of whether the paraprofessional's gaining familiarity with the library and campus will decrease the number of referrals. With changes in the reference landscape, staffing decisions "should be realigned to best meet the needs of the library's users" (p. 286); studies such as this, when combined with other research, can assist library managers in this realignment.