

Academic Library Patrons Value Personalized Attention and Subject Matter Expertise in Reference Consultations

Rogers, E., & Carrier, H. S. (2017). A qualitative investigation of patrons' experiences with academic library research consultations. *Reference Services Review*, 45(1), 18–37. <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-04-2016-0029>

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Evidence Summary

Academic Library Patrons Value Personalized Attention and Subject Matter Expertise in Reference Consultations

A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To examine the experiences of patrons with one-on-one reference consultation services.

Design – Qualitative analysis of open-ended interviews.

Setting – Academic library at a public university in the Southern United States.

Subjects – Students who attended a consultation with a reference librarian.

Methods – All students who attended a reference consultation with a librarian were invited to participate in an interview. Open-ended interviews were conducted after informed consent was collected. Interviewers were provided with prompts to help participants discuss their experiences but were not intended to guide the conversation. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed line-by-line. The transcripts were then analyzed using a conventional, inductive model of content analysis. Transcripts were first analyzed in an initial phase to identify basic themes, and then further examined in an advanced analysis in light of these themes.

Main Results – 10 students agreed to participate for a response rate of 38%. Most participants became aware of the reference consultation service by receiving library instruction as part of their course or through word-of-mouth recommendations from peers or faculty. No participants were aware of consultations through library marketing efforts or the library website. The major theme that emerged from the analysis was that patrons chose a reference consultation because it allowed them one-on-one attention from the librarian and because of the librarian's perceived subject expertise. The primary problems participants identified with the service were that it was not adequately marketed to the students and that students were not aware of the service. Participants intended to use the skills and information gathered from the consultation to continue their independent research and they also largely intended to use librarian's services as they continue working on their projects.

Conclusion – The authors found that the reference consultation is a valuable service for academic libraries and that consultation with a librarian in their office provides unique perceived benefits to the patrons compared to a traditional reference desk interaction. Further research is suggested to determine the value of consultations for distance or online students, to ensure that reference consultations services are sustainable, and to further examine student's emotive reactions to the consultation experience.

Commentary

In a time of limited resources and increasing change for academic libraries, establishing the value of time and resource-intensive services is essential. The authors of this study investigate the value of face-to-face research consultation services by examining the experiences of patrons. This study builds on the considerable literature looking at individualized reference consultations by taking a qualitative approach using extensive interviews with individual students (Faix, MacDonald, & Taxakis, 2014; Fournier & Sikora, 2015; Magi & Mardeusz, 2013).

This study was assessed using Glynn's critical appraisal tool for library and information research and was found to have an 80% validity rating (2006). The research methodology is clearly described and the outcomes are thoroughly discussed. As the interviews were intended to be open-ended, there was no survey instrument used. However, the authors do state that there were prompts provided to the interviewers to help guide the discussion, and it would have been beneficial for these to be included with the paper. In addition, full transcripts of the interviews would have also been helpful for assessing the author's conclusions. The authors openly recognize that volunteer bias was a major concern and a potential weakness in their study. Interviewers were directed to ask participants why they agreed to the study to determine the presence of volunteer bias. The responses did confirm that volunteer bias was a major limit to the study; a majority expressed that they wanted to participate because they wanted to help the librarians due to their positive experiences with the library. The authors acknowledge that this limits their study, although overall they feel that the results are still valid, which is supported by the 80% rating found in the critical appraisal process.

The researchers were librarians at the institution and they ensured that no participants were interviewed by the librarian with whom they had a consultation. However, the fact that the interviewers were also librarians could be another source of bias in the results and this is not addressed by the authors. The study could possibly have been stronger if the interviewers were a more neutral party, to ameliorate the possibility of participant bias.

Despite the limitations, this study adds insight to patron's experiences with reference consultations and potentially opens up new areas to examine in terms of both analyzing patron experience and marketing of consultation services. Particularly notable was that the authors found that patrons highly valued librarians' perceived subject matter expertise, despite the fact that librarians at this

institution are hired as and marketed as generalists. If this tension was further examined in research, it could have considerable practical implications for the model of reference services at both this and other institutions. This study would be useful for librarians and library administrators in academic libraries looking for insights into how reference consultation is structured and perceived by patrons at other institutions as well as a basis for further research.

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