

Another look at staffing the reference desk

By Felix Chu

Using graduate assistants may be the wrong move

In the past few years many articles have appeared arguing for various models for staffing the reference desk or doing away with the reference desk entirely. Descriptions have appeared on the research consultation model, on information desk plus reference desk, on desires for patrons to consult during librarians' "office hours," etc. The emphasis has usually been on the use of graduate students or clerical staff to filter out the easy directional and factual questions. The intent is for librarians to concentrate their limited time on what they do best—work with those who pose difficult and research-oriented questions. Whether this move is due to budgetary constraints I do not wish to address. But I wish to argue that it is not an appropriate option for academic libraries.

In reading newspaper and magazine articles in the last few years one becomes very aware of calls for accountability voiced by legislators, employers, parents, and students. One overriding concern is the quality of undergraduate education. They all want full-time faculty to teach classes instead of concentrating on research. They argue that using graduate teaching assistants shortchanges the students who want to learn, parents who pay bills, and citizens who support institutions through their tax dollars. Teaching assistants do not have the breadth of knowledge about the discipline, may not be committed to teaching introductory courses, and may not know how to teach. Part-time temporary instructors do not have the commitment to the institution and are often not available to help students except for the few hours when they are on campus to teach. So some of the selling points colleges and uni-

versities have used to attract students have been a low faculty-student ratio and the fact that all or most courses are taught by full-time faculty (with terminal degrees).

In this climate, if we move to using graduate students and clerical staff, might we not be viewed as moving backward and away from accountability for quality undergraduate education? Might we be choosing to work only with advanced students? In my experience as a practicing reference librarian, the most important part of a reference encounter is the first couple of questions. A seemingly directional question by a freshman who came from a small high school, or a transfer student from a small community college, may hide a bigger question concerning the need for information. Questions regarding the location of almanacs or encyclopedias often mask the real need because a student thinks that the source he or she asked for will give the appropriate answer when in fact the answer can only be found in more specialized sources that junior college and high school libraries usually do not get. In this sense, the librarian, akin to the full-time professor, has the breadth of knowledge that may be necessary to participate in the process of giving a quality education to students. It is only after the initial filtering by the librarian that the truly directional and factual questions may be handed to a graduate assistant. It is also true in my experience that although those "easy" questions may be numerous at the beginning of a semester, they take very little time.

We need to rethink whether a seemingly fiscally prudent move on our part to staff the reference desk with graduate students and clerical staff may be viewed as a library's abdication of its role in providing a quality education for students. My intent is to engender measured dialogue concerning a quality education and the role of the library in that process. ■



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