Coding Reference: An Analytical Approach to Assessment

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Our Service Model

The Academic Liaison Department provides sixty hours of general reference service per week using a two-tiered service model: graduate students staff an Information Desk and handle routine questions such as directions, catalog look-up, and printing and wireless troubleshooting, while true research questions are referred to the librarian on duty in the Research Consultation Office.

- 1 year
- 2,600 hours staffed
- 2,400 reference transactions
- 18 librarians
- $72,800 spent
- 59% of service used as-designed

Methodology

Seemingly elusive inputs such as reference interviews can be converted into hard numbers with relative ease, becoming powerful and persuasive tools to effect change.

Looking at the questions recorded, we began to identify themes and grouped like items together under a unifying parent node.

We then manually applied the codes to every entry in the set using NVivo. Though time-consuming, the end product is a rich, quantitative summary of precisely what services patrons requested.

Reference Effort Assessment Data

We turned to READ, a six-point scale developed by Dr. Bella Karr Gerlich, to help us document our hypothesis that while the number of transactions is declining, we are helping patrons with more difficult questions.
Analysis

Our findings are not the end of the investigation, but rather the beginning. By sharing with librarians the types of questions that are coming in, collectively we can begin to make some adjustments with regards to our reference model, web portal, outreach work, etc.

Ultimately the aggregate data just puts us in the position to be asking more informed questions of our patrons and of ourselves. As we adjust services based on our assumptions, we will continue to track how the frequency and spread of reference questions change and revise accordingly.

Findings & Implications

Service as Intended?

- 41% of questions were READ 1’s and 2’s
- Non-Affiliates comprise 20% of service
- Librarians are frequently serving as catch-all

Evolving Service Model

- Expanded Info Desk staffing may help support reference service as intended.

Broader Implications?

- 25% of questions concern “Subject Search.” Can we work across departments to make this easier?
- 50% of patron questions concern printed items. Does this have implications for collection development?

Approximately 25% of all questions coming through the office involve subject searches.

Ex: I need books on solar electricity, limited to this building

We ask ourselves why the patron came to the reference office. Is this their first time in the library and they needed a general orientation? Did they need help in narrowing their topic? Are the limiters on the online catalog confusing?

Based on how we answer these questions, there are any number of ways we might go about addressing the issue of browsability. We could hold more instructional sessions targeted at generalized searching, overhaul our website to better support subject searches, train grad students at the Information Desk field the more basic inquiries...

Matrix Queries

NVivo allows for sophisticated analysis of user behavior where one variable is cross-referenced against another one. Here we have run all child nodes by READ Scale.

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<th>Matrix Queries</th>
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<td>Ex: I need books on solar electricity, limited to this building</td>
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