**Where the Old Meets the New:**

**What Does the Next Generation Really Expect From Librarians?**

**Cheryl L. Blevens**

**Associate Reference Instruction Librarian**

**Indiana State University**

**Terre Haute, IN**

**Valentine K. Muyumba**

**Associate Librarian**

**Chair of Technical Services Department**

**Indiana State University**

**Terre Haute, IN**

**Abstract**

The paradigm of librarians who continue to follow the “traditional” behavior of sitting behind a Reference Desk expecting students to come to them, is shifting. A literature search reveals a variety of ways librarians are embracing “new” ways to connect with students. They are going where the students hang out: in the classroom, in residence halls, food courts, and student lounges. The reader of this paper is given a brief overview of literature searches that were conducted by the writers but the primary focus of the paper is on the library’s program of “Librarians in The Residence Halls (“LRH”),” where librarians set up weekly, lunch time “Help” desks outside Residence Hall Dining Rooms. The program presenter will share conclusions that were drawn by the librarians as they evaluated the conclusion of the program, “What was good, what was challenging, and what could have been done better?”

**Purpose and Background**

In 2014, the Public Services Department which includes the Circulation Services and the Reference Instruction services at Indiana State University’s Cunningham Memorial Library (CML), abandoned the traditional reference desk model. Eight librarians who were scheduled at the Reference Desk eighty hours a week, Monday through Sunday, in addition to monitoring an instant message/chat service, were now free to pursue other means of service to students. The University’s accreditation process of which information literacy and student success were important pieces, coincided with the librarians’ dawning realization that their approach to information literacy needed to change to counteract declining user statistics. Monthly reference statistics which were divided into general information questions and research-based queries revealed that one component, the research-based queries, were down. At the same time, the Circulation services reported that gate counts were also down, leading librarians to the assumption that among those decreased figures, student visits to the library had decreased. The millennials whom the library served were obviously employing other methods to get the information they needed to satisfy class assignments. What were the other “new” methods that the students were using? And more importantly, what could the Reference and Instruction librarians do to make themselves relevant and useful to the students, many of whom seemed to have had minimal experience using academic library sources? This is not a new problem or unique to CML, as shown in a 2009 article by Lizah Ismail, “What Net Generation Students Really Want: Determining Library Help-Seeking Preferences of Undergraduates.” The author states “Reference service in academic libraries is experiencing a tumultuous time that is both exciting and challenging. The internet explosion and the introduction of Web 2.0 and other new technologies are seen as the main cause for the decline of traditional in-house reference statistics.” (Ismail, 2009.)

The old system of having librarians staff the reference desk was replaced with a triage system wherein Circulation staff and their student workers referred all students’ research requests to reference librarians. The reference librarians additionally promoted their availability by scheduling office hours, encouraging faculty to bring their classes to the library for bibliographic instruction, taking full advantage of invitations to go into the classroom, and by embedding their services in classrooms’ BlackBoard pages. Although these steps placed emphasis on actively working one-on-one with students away from the library, truthfully, these methods were not department-driven. It was up to individual librarians to forge their own liaison relationship with their departments and the students. Some departments were more willing to take advantage of this concentration of attention from their librarians than others which meant that some librarians were more successful in their endeavors than others.

There was very little formal assessment of the effectiveness of these actions. Librarians “felt” the students were learning what was thought that they should know; the teaching faculty and the students may or may not have agreed. CML librarians began to look outward by conducting a literature search to determine examples of other libraries’ experiences with diminishing library use. They were primarily interested in students’ research habits and some methods employed by other librarians to help strengthen students’ research skills. Article after article documented that at the heart of helping students was the need to be where they were—food courts, commuter lounges, the student union, and residence halls—providing them with effective information literacy instruction geared to their particular research need.

A 2011 study done at Pima Community College (PCC) East Campus in Tucson, Arizona, provided perspective on the research habits of Millennials. The study cited students’ belief that after years of using technology and searching the Internet, they felt confident of their search skills, that they knew how to find answers and therefore didn’t need the librarians’ help. Sadly, their entertainment-based search skills did not match the level needed for academic-based searches. The study concluded, “We find that, in their quest for efficiency, they are many times duped by familiarity, common sense, and time constraints; an environment where the one competitive advantage of the library and librarians can be the affinity and empathy created by good service coupled with user education…. The research shows that one way to increase library use is by providing meaningful and integrated information literacy instruction across the curriculum.” (Becker, 2012.)

Through personal observation and talking to ISU students, CML librarians found that they could relate to PCC students’ research habits and that they agreed with the observations of Van-Kampen-Breit and Cooke in their 2015 article, “Do They Think We’re the Frenemy?: Examining Student Anxiety and Service Perception in Toady’s Academic Libraries.” Van Kampen-Breit and Cooke (2015) referred to two problems: library anxiety and research anxiety. The authors theorized that a student’s library anxiety might have stemmed from a prior negative experience with a stereotypical, unapproachable, librarian. Students might have been frustrated by the difficulty in locating materials in an academic library which used the Library of Congress classification system, a system they were completely unfamiliar with, since they had likely grown up using libraries that employ the Dewey Decimal classification system. Research anxiety was defined as reflective of a student’s disappointment with the library’s resources when a catalog search might not have yielded the materials the student deemed necessary to their research. “Students continue to need assistance but are reticent in asking for help; most students indicated that they visit the library for scholastic pursuits but very few responded that they were visiting the library specifically to get help from a librarian.… One should explore opportunities to engage and support students face-to-face and online in a manner they find to be most helpful, convenient, and non-threatening. It is time to open a dialogue on how to make every interaction with students a personal and positive one, whether it be in the library, the classroom, or the student union.” (Van Kampen-Breit and Cooke, 2015)

The literature search for alternative outreach reference services revealed that librarians established specialized “point of need” libraries over a half century ago. In their article, “Purposes and Uses of Residence Hall Libraries,” Oltmanns and Schuh (1985) describe the services provided in eleven residence hall libraries that were established in 1941 at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. The modern day evolution of this residence hall service is the Michigan State University Librarians’ practice of the presentation of bibliographic instruction programs to Residence Hall Directors and Assistants who in turn help students with their research when librarians are not available (Barnes and Peyton, 2006). Although for training purposes only, this brief physical presence in the Residence Halls encouraged the CML librarians’ development of a method for reaching out that was reminiscent of Lucy from Charles Schultz’s Peanut cartoon strip. (Lucy sits in an information booth, puts up a “Psychiatric Help 5¢. The Doctor Is In” sign and proceeds to dispense advice.) The idea of the “Librarians in the Residence Halls” project had begun.

**LRH Program Design and Implementation**

Choosing the location that would better serve the students had to be considered during the “Program Design” phase of the project. As described in an article by Barnett, Bull, and Cooper (2016), “the ‘Pop-Up Library’ has to be set up in different locations across the campus and be able to serve over the lunch period of 11:45 am – 2:15 pm.” On October 5, 2016, the CML Reference Services Librarian who served as the organizer of the “Librarians in the Residence Halls” project met with the Associate Director, Residential Education program, of the Office of Residential Life and Housing, to coordinate the library’s proposed project with the Residence Halls’ Area Coordinators. LRH began in the Fall 2016 semester and was repeated during the Spring 2017 semester. As noted, there were eight reference instruction librarians who were engaged in the need to reinvent themselves with students but who were also actively engaged as subject specialists, selectors, and liaisons to their assigned departments in six University Colleges. Busy and frequently over-committed librarians adjusted their schedules to participate in the staffing of two “pop-up” reference desks that were located outside the two dining rooms of the Lincoln Quad Complex and the Sycamore Complex which are physically located at opposite ends of the campus but that together serve ten residence halls. (Cunningham Memorial Library is somewhat in the middle.) For the fall semester, the table staffing schedule was determined by the librarians and was based on their availability. The four week schedule was from 11:30 am - 12:00 pm, every Tuesday between November 8, and December 6. (There were no tables set up during Thanksgiving break.) Residential Life supplied the tables and chairs and the librarians used their own laptops. “Grab and Go” tote bags containing office essentials (paper, pencils, hand sanitizer, etc.) for the librarians were prepared and made available during duty shifts. A librarian sign-up sheet was prepared that included a back-up librarian who could be called on to replace the scheduled librarian, should the need arise.

Publicity plans for the LRH program fell short. Promotional flyers that were to be taped next to the elevator on every floor of the Residence Halls were designed but turn-around time for their production proved to be impossible for them to be produced. This was also true for a banner that was designed to promote the librarians’ service but that was never made available. The Resident Halls’ Residence Assistants (“RA’s”) agreed to promote the service during their meetings with the students who were living on their floors. Word of mouth of the librarians’ availability did not generate much student participation. During the four scheduled sessions, only two students received face-to-face help with their research questions.

On January 19, 2017, the Reference Services Librarian again met with the Residential Life and Housing team to evaluate the fall semester’s project and to discuss the continuation of it into the Spring 2017 semester. This time, the scheduling of the sessions was chosen by the Residential Life and Housing team. They chose Mondays, from 11:30 am – 1:30 pm, beginning February 6, and ending April 24, 2017, for eleven sessions with no session being scheduled during the week of Spring Break. A more aggressive promotional campaign was initiated. Promotional flyers were prepared and posted next to the elevators. New telescopic floor signs promoting the program were purchased. They were used at the sites during the sessions and then stored behind the Residence Hall’s reception desk when not in use. An automatic tweet promoting the librarians’ availability was posted weekly to the library’s Twitter account, messages were posted to the library’s FaceBook page, and a promotional ad appeared in the students’ monthly global announcement newsletters during the program. Resident Assistants were again asked to promote the service during their meetings with each other and with their students. The project began and eleven weeks later, ended. There were sixteen students who asked for and received help with their research.

**Evaluation**

Why did CML librarians start the “Librarians in the Residence Halls” program? Were they attempting to overcome the loss of face-to-face attention between the student and the librarian, when the Reference Desk was eliminated? Or was it a reaction to students’ changed behavior of not coming to the library as often as in the past? Change is always difficult to accept by all and brings out the “we’ve always done it this way” feeling. After learning the results that only two students took advantage of the fall semester’s program, some of the librarians voiced reluctance to devote their time to staff a remotely located “pop-up” reference desk which they perceived as a “doomed for failure” project. However, consensus was reached that the project would be given another try. Although the Spring 2017 session numbers were higher with sixteen logged helps during the eleven sessions as compared to the Fall 2016’s four sessions with two helps, the students’ reception of the service was decidedly lukewarm.

**The Future**

In a department meeting held after the program ended, CML librarians agreed that the “Librarians in the Residence Halls” project should be dropped. This meant that the librarians returned to the drawing board to brainstorm ideas that would effectively help students in their educational pursuits. Ideas that are being considered are a limited return to staffing a renamed “Research Desk” during “high needs” times such as mid-semester and during a couple of weeks prior to finals, when research papers are usually due. Another library service under consideration for modification is that of the instant message/chat service, which is monitored by all of the Reference Instruction librarians and the Circulation Service’s support staff people and their student workers. Currently there is no established schedule for who will answer chats. It is a catch-as-catch-can situation where at times, the requester might have their research query answered by a librarian if one happens to be available or by a Checkout Services support staff person or student worker. This “no librarian available” situation is increasingly more likely to happen as librarians find themselves working with faculty who are being asked to teach additional classes in departments that develop new curriculums. This practice is especially true of the distance learning program which is one of Indiana State University’s biggest growth areas. It is hoped that the establishment of a schedule where librarians are assigned to be responsible for answering chat for a predetermined block of time, and which becomes a part of their work related duties, will result in a more productive experience for the requester by putting them in direct contact with a librarian who is an expert in the student’s field of study.

CML Reference Instruction Librarians are indeed mindful of the “need for providing meaningful and integrated information literacy instruction across the curriculum (Becker, 2012).” They continue to use content management systems such as LibGuides and E-Learning tools and technology like SoftChalk to develop online literacy instruction tools, while monitoring the next best practice for helping the students who are enrolled in Indiana State University to successfully pursue the achievement of lifelong information literacy.

**Works Cited**

Barnes, N., & Peyton, G. (2006). Reaching Out to the Net Generation on Campus: Promoting the MSU Libraries in the Residence Halls. *Public Services Quarterly*, *2*(4), 47-68. [doi:10.1300/J295v02n04\_03](http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J295v02n04_03)

Barnett, J., Bull, S., & Cooper, H. (2016). Pop-Up Library at the University of Birmingham: Extending the Reach of an Academic Library by Taking “The Library” to the Students. *New Review Of Academic Librarianship*, *22*(2/3), 112-131. [doi:10.1080/13614533.2016.1168307](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2016.1168307)

Becker, C. H. (2012). Student Values and Research: Are Millennials Really Changing the Future of Reference and Research?. *Journal Of Library Administration*, *52*(6-7), 474-497. [doi:10.1080/01930826.2012.707948](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2012.707948)

Ismail, L. (2010). What net generation students really want: Determining library help-seeking preferences of undergraduates. *Reference Services Review*, *38*(1), 10-27. [doi:10.1108/00907321011020699](http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/00907321011020699)

Oltmanns, G., & Schuh, J. (1985). Purposes and Uses of Residence Hall Libraries (Research Note). College & Research Libraries, 46(2), 172-177. [doi:10.5860/crl\_46\_02\_172](http://dx.doi.org/10.5860/crl_46_02_172)

Van Kampen-Breit, D. J., & Cooke, R. (2015). Do They Think We're the Frenemy?: Examining Student Anxiety and Service Perception in Today's Academic Libraries. *Library Leadership & Management*, *30*(1), 1-16. Retrieved from <https://ezproxy.indstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lih&AN=110871164&site=ehost-live&scope=site>