

# The Use and Training of Nonprofessional Personnel at Reference Desks in Selected College and University Libraries

*A questionnaire survey was conducted to determine the use and training of nonprofessional personnel (including student assistants) in academic libraries with student enrollments of 500-6,000. Information was gathered on scheduling, educational background, and training of these nonprofessionals.*

A LEADING CHIEF LIBRARIAN in a Canadian university has made the following statement: "There is no doubt at all in the minds of most Canadian academic library administrators that 85 percent . . . of questions at public service desks can be answered by non-professional staff."<sup>1</sup> Controversial? Yes, especially to many U.S. academic librarians!

Yet, it is recognized that the nonprofessional or supportive staff—whether called paraprofessional, subprofessional, preprofessional, library assistant, library technical assistant, library technician, or library associate—constitutes a major work-force in any college/university library.<sup>2</sup> The overall ratio of one professional to two nonprofessionals is frequently used as a guideline for full-

time staff,<sup>3</sup> even though this ratio "will vary according to the specific needs of institutions."<sup>4</sup> What will also vary will be the ratio from department to department within the library. A recent survey reveals that in many Canadian academic libraries the average ratio of nonprofessionals to professionals is 5:1.<sup>5</sup>

According to Rogers and Weber, "A bright subprofessional assistant can serve to handle the majority of directional and interpretative questions" at a reference desk in a college library,<sup>6</sup> while Bunge's study of reference staffing and performance concluded that professional librarians did perform "more efficiently than those lacking formal training, though not spectacularly so."<sup>7</sup> Dawson has stated that nonprofessionals can do much in reference work under supervision,<sup>8</sup> as well as Taylor, who has said that "a fairly large proportion of the questions that come to a reference desk could be answered by a non-professional."<sup>9</sup>

One source of nonprofessional em-

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ployees, frequently a gifted source, available to college and university libraries is the student element. Although students have been, and are being used at reference desks in many college and university libraries, this resource has not been developed as fully as perhaps it could be. For example, a student assistant with reference desk experience has expressed the opinion that "until all librarians accept the fact that they are not granting students any favors by employing them and begin treating students as responsible adults, a valuable resource is being neglected and wasted."<sup>10</sup> Thus, student assistants form another aspect of the nonprofessional spectrum.

Since nonprofessionals are being used in libraries, the training provided for them is obviously most important. As stated in "Library Education and Manpower," "The library profession has responsibility for defining the training and education required for the preparation of personnel . . . at any level, supportive or professional."<sup>11</sup> Aiyepoku echoed this when he remarked that it is not realistic to consider "the issue of training sub-professionals in isolation from the training of professionals."<sup>12</sup>

One can certainly marshal arguments on both sides as to whether nonprofessionals should or should not be used in a college reference situation. But the question here is: "Are they being used?" Are nonprofessionals actually being scheduled to "work the desk"? How much formal education do they have? Do some have a college degree and some no college education? Are student assistants included as members of the non-professional staff? Are nonprofessionals trained through in-service programs, either formal or informal? How much are they used to give reference desk service? What are their opportunities for continuing education and professional growth?

## THE SURVEY

To obtain answers to these questions, a study was conducted to determine the actual use and training of nonprofessional personnel at reference desks in academic libraries in the United States. The purpose was to survey a representative nationwide sample of colleges and universities having enrollments of between 500 and 6,000 students in order to ascertain and report the current practices in these selected libraries.

A questionnaire was devised after consulting with librarians serving libraries of differing sizes in several states. This pilot questionnaire was tested on a sample of six college libraries across the nation and revised on the basis of the librarians' responses and suggestions.

### *Population and Sample*

Libraries of accredited four-year colleges/universities (enrollments 500-6,000) were selected from the U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics' *Opening Fall Enrollment in Higher Education, 1970*<sup>13</sup> and the American Council on Education's *Accredited Institutions, 1971/72*.<sup>14</sup> Specialized schools, such as art schools, music schools, and technical schools, were not included. The schools chosen were divided into three categories: (1) small colleges/universities with enrollments of between 500 and 1,499; (2) middle-sized colleges/universities with enrollments numbering between 1,500 and 2,999; and (3) larger colleges/universities whose enrollments ranged from 3,000 to 6,000. A 20 percent stratified random sample was selected from each category. One hundred fifty questionnaires were then mailed to this sample according to the following schedule:

- Group 1: 500-1,499 student enrollment—81 libraries
- Group 2: 1,500-2,999 student enrollment—42 libraries

Group 3: 3,000-6,000 student enrollment—27 libraries

The letter accompanying the questionnaire was addressed to the reference librarian and requested that the information regarding the use or non-use of nonprofessionals be limited to the main library and to library and reference hours during the academic year only. The respondents were assured that their responses would be considered confidential and that their institution would not be identified in any publication. The term *Nonprofessional* was defined as any person who did not have a master's degree in librarianship or the fifth-year BLS degree. Included, therefore, were those with a bachelor's degree, with or without some library science units; those with a master's degree in a field other than librarianship; those with some college education or no college education; and student assistants.

#### Returns

In response to the initial mailing on February 28, 1973, of 150 questionnaires, 113, or 75 percent, were received. After two follow-up letters had been mailed to those who had not answered, the total response rose to 144, 96 percent. Of these responses, 141, or 94 percent, were found usable and are included in the following analysis.

#### RESULTS

##### *Relative Use of Nonprofessionals at Reference Desks among the Various College/University Libraries*

A significant difference ( $X^2 = 19.92$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was found in answer to the basic question as to whether nonprofessionals are used to staff reference desks regardless of amount of time spent at the desk. In 69 percent of the reporting libraries, nonprofessionals are used at the reference desk, while in 31 percent, nonprofessionals are not used at the reference desk. This relationship was consistent across the three size cate-

gories of colleges/universities, and no significant differences were found in the proportion of libraries in each category who use nonprofessionals. Approximately one-third of the libraries of the larger colleges do not use nonprofessionals at all in staffing the desk. Thus, while the majority of colleges and universities are making use of nonprofessionals, a substantial group of these institutions is not.

Having established the fact that nonprofessionals are rather widely used in staffing libraries, one must take into consideration the hours to be worked; therefore, the number of hours that libraries are open compared with the number of hours the reference desk is staffed in these libraries was determined. Hours the libraries were open ranged from 50 to 112 hours per week, with the majority of libraries open from 70 to 100 hours per week. Only one library reported being open more than 100 hours per week and twelve libraries less than 70 hours. Whereas there was no difference among the categories of colleges and universities in the number of hours the main library was open, the data in Table 1 show that there were significant differences in the number of hours the reference desk was open. (It should be noted that ten of the institutions indicated that they had no separate reference desks in their institutions. Thus the total possible number of responses on questions relating only to reference desks was 131.)

TABLE 1  
NUMBER OF HOURS REFERENCE DESK IS STAFFED PER WEEK, BY SIZE OF STUDENT BODY

Size of Student Body	Number of Hours per Week Reference Desk Staffed			Total Number of Libraries
	10-59	60-79	80-99	
500-1,499	26	31	9	66
1,500-2,999	9	23	6	38
3,000-6,000	3	8	15	26

$X^2 = 25.98$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .001$

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF PROFESSIONAL AND NONPROFESSIONAL\* PERSONNEL USED AT REFERENCE DESKS IN COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES, BY SIZE OF STUDENT BODY

Size of Student Body	Professional Personnel	Nonprofessional Personnel	Total Personnel	Number of Libraries Reporting
500-1,499	172	265	437	67
1,500-2,999	177	77	254	37
3,000-6,000	126	124	250	26
Total	475	466	941	130

$\chi^2 = 59.2$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$

\* Student assistants included.

Generally, the smaller colleges staff their reference desks fewer hours than the larger colleges. The majority of libraries of the smaller colleges staff the desks from 10 to 79 hours per week; the majority of the middle-size schools from 60 to 79 hours; and the majority of the larger schools from 80 to 99 hours. The number of hours of reference service, regardless of school size, ranged from 16 to 99 hours per week, with an average of 63 hours.

The personnel scheduled to work these hours are shown in Table 2. This number includes all persons whether full-time or part-time, professional or nonprofessional, since one must observe the use of professionals in order to assess the real use of nonprofessionals. The three categories of libraries in the colleges and universities differ significantly in the number of nonprofessionals who staff the desk. The libraries

of the smaller and larger schools use significantly more nonprofessionals than do the libraries of the middle-sized schools.

#### *Nonprofessional Personnel (Reference Assistants and Student Assistants)*

Since the respondents to the questionnaire were queried as to whether student assistants were also used to give reference service, Table 3 shows the number of students and the number of other nonprofessionals, called "reference assistants" for the purpose of this paper, who are employed by each group of libraries. The libraries of the middle-sized colleges use significantly fewer students than the libraries of either the smaller or larger schools. Reference assistants account for between 30 and 40 percent of the nonprofessional personnel in the libraries of the smaller and

TABLE 3

NUMBER OF NONPROFESSIONAL PERSONNEL (REFERENCE ASSISTANTS\* AND STUDENT ASSISTANTS) USED AT REFERENCE DESKS IN COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES, BY SIZE OF STUDENT BODY†

Size of Student Body	Reference Assistants		Student Assistants		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
500-1,499	101	22	164	35	265	57
1,500-2,999	39	8	38	8	77	16
3,000-6,000	39	8	85	19	124	27
Total	179	38	287	62	466	100

$\chi^2 = 7.38$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$

\* The term "reference assistant" is used in this paper to identify those nonprofessionals who are not student assistants.

† Percentages based on total nonprofessional personnel.

TABLE 4  
 NUMBER OF PROFESSIONAL AND NONPROFESSIONAL<sup>o</sup> PERSONNEL BY  
 EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND USED AT REFERENCE DESKS IN  
 COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES, BY SIZE OF STUDENT BODY

Size of Student Body	Professionals		Total	Nonprofessionals			Total
	A.M.L.S. or Fifth Year B.L.S.	A.M.L.S. plus Second Master's		A.B., A.M. (not in L.S.)	A.A.	No College	
500-1,499	145	27	172	56	20	25	101
1,500-2,999	151	26	177	35	3	1	39
3,000-6,000	104	22	126	23	6	10	39
Total	400	75	475	114	29	36	179

Professionals  $X^2 = .4$ ,  $df = 2$ , n.s.

Nonprofessionals  $X^2 = 15.41$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .01$

<sup>o</sup> Student assistants not included.

larger colleges but account for 50 percent in the middle-sized colleges.

#### *Educational Level of Reference Assistants*

The formal education of the supportive staff who are not students, the reference assistants, as compared with the professional staff is shown in Table 4. In the libraries of all three sizes of colleges, approximately 16 percent of the professional librarians have a second master's degree. Two librarians have a Ph.D. degree, while a third is completing the requirements toward a doctorate.

Significant differences exist in the educational background of the nonprofessionals used in the three groups of college/university libraries, as shown in Table 4. Of the total number of these reference assistants, roughly three-fifths have a bachelor's degree or an additional degree, while about one-fifth have a junior college education and one-fifth no college at all. In libraries of the middle-sized colleges, 90 percent of the nonprofessionals have a bachelor's degree or above, while approximately 50 percent in the smaller and larger-sized schools have a college degree. An interesting observation is that significantly fewer persons with a junior college education or less are employed by the libraries of the middle-sized schools.

#### *On-the-Job Training Provided by Libraries*

Besides the formal education which an employee brings to a position, training in the library is essential before these persons are ready to assume the responsibility at the desk. Some college libraries have formal in-service training programs; others have only informal practices. There are no significant differences among the libraries of various sized colleges and universities responding to the questionnaire in the number who provide formal in-service training to their nonprofessional staff. The great majority, more than 80 percent, indicated that formal in-service training was not provided. Of the thirteen who responded positively, only five indicated that they had a written manual to help them in their in-service training work. Unfortunately, the questionnaire was not designed to provide information regarding qualitative differences in the in-service training offered by these libraries. Further research should seek to determine whether nonprofessionals who receive this formal training provide a substantially different kind of service to their institution.

If they provided no formal in-service training in their library, the respondents who used nonprofessional help were asked if they had an informal in-

TABLE 5  
 NUMBER OF PROFESSIONAL AND NONPROFESSIONAL\* PERSONNEL WHO WORK AT  
 REFERENCE DESK, BY NUMBER OF HOURS WORKED PER WEEK

Type of Personnel	Hours Worked per Week				Total Number of Personnel
	10 or less	11-20	21-30	31-40	
Professional	218	111	34	81	444
Nonprofessional	363	44	9	17	433
Total	581	155	43	98	877

\* Student assistants included.

service training program. Of the fifty-eight who responded negatively to a formal in-service program, fifty-five indicated the existence of an informal in-service program, i.e., tour, general orientation, reference interview techniques, etc. Although no written responses were required, one respondent commented: "I try to make a considerable effort with our work study students in terms of having their work be a challenging learning experience. . . . Our non-professionals who work evenings and weekends, especially the latter, include older people who may or may not be going for their MLS. We aren't around to give them the same attention as we do the student [assistants]."

#### *Amount of Service Provided at Reference Desk by Nonprofessional Personnel*

To determine how much reference desk service the supportive staff renders, one must compare the hours worked at the reference desk by both professional and nonprofessional personnel. In

the pilot questionnaire an attempt was made to determine the number of hours the nonprofessionals worked on their own. Questions were devised to try to obtain this information, but all proved too complicated to get meaningful responses. Unfortunately, therefore, this information is not available. It can be observed (Table 5) that approximately one-half of the professionals and slightly more than four-fifths of the nonprofessionals staff the reference desk ten hours or less per week. Substantially more professional librarians work more reference desk hours than do the nonprofessionals in the remaining divisions of hours worked per week. This fact is reflected in Table 6, which shows that 67 percent of the total reference desk hours are staffed by professional librarians, 19 percent by reference assistants, and 14 percent by student assistants. It can, therefore, be noted that a total of 33 percent of the reference desk time is staffed by nonprofessional personnel.

TABLE 6  
 TOTAL NUMBER OF HOURS WORKED PER WEEK AT REFERENCE DESK BY  
 PROFESSIONAL AND NONPROFESSIONAL PERSONNEL, BY SIZE OF STUDENT BODY

Size of Student Body	Hours Worked per Week							Total	
	Professional		Nonprofessional						
	Number	Percent	Reference Assistants Number	Percent	Student Assistants Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
500-1,499	2,929	29	1,141	12	768	8	4,838	49	
1,500-2,999	1,875	19	419	4	208	2	2,502	25	
3,000-6,000	1,862	19	296	3	395	4	2,553	26	
Total	6,666	67	1,856	19	1,371	14	9,893	100	

### *Opportunities for Continuing Education and Professional Growth*

For the nonprofessionals who are not students, opportunities should exist for continuing education and professional growth. In responses to questions concerning staff development programs, 70 percent of the libraries answering indicated that nonprofessionals may take classes during the working day. Time has to be made up in one-half of those libraries which indicated that classes may be taken. Fifty-one percent of the libraries stated that tuition waivers are given nonprofessionals who take classes. Also, nonprofessionals may attend professional library meetings during the working day in 74 percent of the libraries responding who use nonprofessional personnel. This information indicates that libraries in these institutions generally are interested in improving the competencies of their nonprofessional staff. It would appear that many also feel that the benefits to the institutions are sufficient to allow time off for their nonprofessionals to take advanced academic work without loss of pay and/or tuition waiver.

#### SUMMARY

This nationwide study, which was designed to determine if nonprofessionals are scheduled to work at reference desks in academic libraries, revealed that over two-thirds of the libraries questioned do use nonprofessionals at the desk to

some degree. A nonprofessional was defined as any full-time or part-time employee who did not have a master's degree in librarianship or the fifth-year B.L.S. Student assistants were also included with nonprofessional personnel.

The amount of time spent at the reference desk by nonprofessionals varied from emergency use only to as many as forty hours per week. From a tally of reference desk hours reported, it was found that 33 percent of the total hours the reference desk was staffed was filled by nonprofessionals (reference assistants and student assistants), while 67 percent of the total time was filled by professionals.

The survey data showed that roughly three-fifths of the reference assistants had at least a bachelor's degree; about one-fifth had a junior college education; and one-fifth had no college education. A few formal in-service training programs were reported by libraries using nonprofessionals; more had informal programs, but no significant differences could be gathered from the data regarding in-service training.

Consequently, this study has shown that nonprofessionals at reference desks in academic libraries are indeed used in a supportive manner. Additional research in the area of in-service training programs for both reference and student assistants would be valuable as well as research into the exact times nonprofessionals are scheduled and the evaluation of the quality of service given.

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