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## Ideas, Hints, and Tricks: So Much More Than What's On The Surface: Assessing Reference Services at Academic Libraries

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## So Much More Than What's on the Surface: Assessing Reference Services at Academic Libraries

By Paula Adams



This October at the COMO conference in Macon members of the Reference Services Interest Group (RSIG) will present and facilitate a discussion concerning reference services and assessment. Many

academic librarians providing reference services are familiar with traditional statistics gathering utilizing quantitative methodologies. Quantitative assessment has provided golden opportunities to improve desk coverage and hours of operation. However, today it is critical we venture more into the qualitative waters of assessment if we are to improve customer satisfaction and service while at the same time uncovering nuances of service often overlooked. This is easier said than done as many librarians cite obstacles such as lack of staff and time needed in gathering and analyzing data in order to unearth relevant correlates and so on. Most daunting is fine-tuning the questions we should be asking before implementing initiatives to assess quality and effectiveness: What are we looking for? What is the current data not telling us?

As if this isn't enough, with the need to track current trends of use (usually technology driven) and understand the many shades of customer satisfaction, broader implications exist when qualitative measures are employed to ascertain, for instance, the impact of reference services on student learning

outcomes. The one aspect of reference service needing more attention is understanding fully what happens between librarians and students during interactions that are basically one-on-one instruction sessions. Academic libraries are by nature teaching libraries. Our mission is teaching students how to eventually "fish" for themselves. Qualitative assessment can help shed light on how we can improve reference services to better engage students in the learning process when providing research assistance.

To place qualitative assessment of reference services in a much broader context, consider the implications for higher education. For instance, our contributions (actual and potential) to retention, progression, graduation (RPG) rates can be seen as critical. Today higher education finds itself under siege by federal and state government budget restraints to not only do more with less but to provide substantial proof that students matriculate; that they are able to progress and graduate in order to take part in an uncertain economic environment which today requires much more of those who are educated. This explains the continued shift in focus by many institutions of higher education to vigorously investigate the web of issues surrounding the need to improve RPG rates.

This reality will not be lost on academic libraries that begin to leverage their role as an important piece of the RPG puzzle since academic libraries are usually not the first place many institutions consider when implementing initiatives and focusing resources to improve RPG. Data from

qualitative assessment of reference services can provide to universities a critical snapshot of how academic libraries can and do contribute to student learning outcomes. This is demonstrated when students interact with librarians learning to search a database using Boolean logic, evaluating a source or, using information ethically to produce scholarship that reflects what they've learned in a course. From this perspective, it becomes difficult to argue that academic libraries have little impact on student learning when we are fulfilling our central mission: to create information literate graduates.

In essence, academic libraries, particularly reference services, should see qualitative assessment as an invaluable asset that can provide various avenues for improvement and

innovation while also enabling librarians to articulate in more nuanced ways our impact on the educational goals and mission of the universities we serve.

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#### **Notes**

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