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Deprofessionalism at the Reference Desk: Validating Room for the New and Evolving Roles of the Information Professional

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Introduction:

The colloquially named reference desk at public libraries is the quintessential meeting point between patron and librarian. In fact, the desk "remains a tangible symbol of [the librarian's] mission and work" (Johnson, 2019, p. 92). However, many researchers have questioned the purpose and value of the desk in the "changing reference landscape" (Cassell and Hiremath, 2018, p. 3). According to Association for College and Research Library (ACRL)'s Academic Library Statistics, the number of reference transactions in doctorate-granting institutions declined 49% between 2000 and 2012, and nearly all the questions that remain are directional, basic search questions and questions related to library operations (ACRL, 2013).

Indeed, several authors have raised questions about the type of expertise necessary to staff a reference desk, and some libraries have replaced librarians with paraprofessionals (Alexander and Wakimoto, 2019; Bishop and Bartlett, 2013; Johnson, 2019; Maloney and Kemp, 2015; Stevens, 2013). As an example, in line with other academic libraries that have experienced a decline in both the number of inquiries and the level of complexity, Rutgers University Libraries replaced the staff serving its service points with paraprofessional or non-professionals (Maloney and Kemp, 2015). The paraprofessionalization, or deprofessionalization, observed at library's reference desks may be a necessary response to the "changing reference landscape" (Cassell and Hiremath, 2018, p. 3).

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore this changing reference landscape more in depth, what reference services really are, and to reiterate the distinction between a professional librarian (or information professional) and a paraprofessional. A small amount of research serves

to provide a snapshot of this changed landscape. Lastly, the importance of LIS curriculum and service evaluation will be highlighted with specific examples and adaptations for future research.

Distinguishing Information Service and Reference Service:

The idea of "libraries without librarians" and the "fear of deprofessionalization" is not a new or novel concept (Schacher, 2007). When it comes to this practice, defining and categorizing inquiries that come to the reference desk helps to understand the skills and requirements of those who should work at the desk. Indeed, there are many ways to categorize, define, and contextualize information inquiries, and these ambiguities can quickly destroy any semblance of an argument for, or against the deprofessionalization of the reference desk. Nevertheless, the importance of the American Library Association (ALA)'s and Reference & User Services Association (RUSA)'s definitions should be emphasized. Importantly, there should be a distinction between Reference Services and Information Services (ALA, 2006). Frustratingly, the two are often grouped together as Reference and Information Services (RIS).

In *Reference and Information Services: An Introduction* (2018), published by the American Library Association (ALA), reference services are described as a *kind* of information service which requires that library staff recommend, interpret, evaluate, and/or use information resources to help others to meet particular information needs (Cassell and Hiremath, 2018). The Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) in fact, describe these requirements, and associate these reference interactions as "information consultations," (RUSA, 2008). In other words, reference services are the more involved type of information service.

Who Should Provide Reference Services:

However, providing reference services, despite their greater complexity, is not necessarily reserved for professionals with accredited Masters of Library Science (MLIS) degrees. Paraprofessionals, without degrees, are more frequently carrying out these kinds of information services, as well as RIS in general (ALA, 2006). Therefore, a mixture of MLIS professionals and paraprofessionals, with varying degrees of training and experience, are carrying out reference service.

In fact, RUSA's *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services* refer to librarians as "all who provide reference and informational services directly to library users" (RUSA, 2008). Within the guidelines, it does not say a MLIS degree is offered to supply quality reference services. Also, confusingly, within this document RUSA lumps together paraprofessionals and professionals into the group of "librarians." In other words, RUSA themselves recognize and sympathize with the fact that a MLIS degree may not be required to provide quality RIS, or learn the art.

Additionally, it is not clearly established what the intended audiences for *Reference and Information Services: An Introduction (2018),* a handbook which seeks to educate the user on various RIS models, ideologies, and methods, is. Aside from the About the Authors and Contributors section, not once do the words "Masters of Library Science," "MLIS," or "MLS," except twice when Dr. Bill Crowley stresses providing quality Reader's Advisory may require a degree (Cassell and Hiremath, 2018, pg. 283). "Graduate" appears only a handful of times but never with any assertive requirement holding context and what constituents define a librarian or professional librarian are unclear. These keywords also do not appear in the RUSA guidelines. In

both of these documents it is apparent that the intended audience to learn from them need not be MLIS students.

Lastly, currently existing frameworks for distinguishing inquiry type and suggested expertise do exist and stem from years of research grappling with these assignments. One such matrix assigns nonprofessionals, generalists, and librarians to various levels of inquiry (Maloney & Kemp, 2015). However, the matrix demonstrates that many models exist, but none of them seem to completely agree on the suggested expertise to carry out reference inquiries. It appears as though, in general, both professional librarians and nonprofessionals can provide reference service in *subjective* levels of difficulty. Simply put, the LIS field itself admits a degree is not not necessary to acknowledge these RIS guidelines/models and put them into practice. Indeed, even the ALA admits the line between paraprofessional work and professional work is blurring in many areas of library work including reference services and cataloging (ALA, 2007, 2008).

The Association of Reference Desk as "The Reference Desk":

The reference desk at many public libraries is a place for both information and reference questions. In fact, many public libraries do not refer to their primary reference desk as "the reference desk" (see Table 1). A randomly selected group of 12 public libraries offering instant messaging (IM) chat were selected for a short questionnaire between March 30 - April 12 2023. Library workers were simply asked what the name of their primary reference desk is called over IM chat.

Library	State	Primary Reference Desk Names
Los Angeles Public Library	CA	Reference Desk
Brethel Public Library	CT	Reference Desk
Greenwich Library	CT	Reference Desk
Jacksonville Public Library	FL	"Customer Service Desk" *nameless*
Downers Grove Public Library	IL	Ask Us Desk
Elmhurst Public Library	IL	"2nd Floor Information Desk" *nameless*
Iowa City Public Library	IO	Information Desk or Info Desk *labeled "INFO"*
Worcester Public Library	MA	Reference Desk *labeled "Information"*
Queens Public Library (Central Branch)	NY	Reference Desk
Akron-Summit County Public Library	OH	Business Government & Science Desk
Mead Public Library	WI	Customer Service Desk
Tysons-Pimmit Regional Library	VA	Information Desk

Table 1: Public Library Name, State, and Primary Reference Desk Name

These data reveal that a small majority of public libraries do not refer to their reference desk as "the reference desk." These data also reveal the popularity of the term "information desk," or some sort of term labeling the desk for all information inquiry such as the "Ask Us Desk." The largest exceptions are Akron-Summit County Public Library's desks which have names assigned to a specific function. Its primary reference desk was determined to be the "Business Government & Science Desk," although general information services are still offered at this desk.

Associating the reference desk as an "information desk" (or something similar) feels more inquiry inclusive and less restrictive. This helps to imply the desks welcome both information and reference questions, as Casssel and Hiremath (2018) have distinguished. Indeed, it may be argued that using the term "reference desk," for a desk that provides more than reference services is confusing and rigid. Perhaps the fundamental issue is asserting the desk is for reference rather than all-encompassing user inquiry.

The fundamental reason for this associative change could be that of a response to the "changing reference landscape" (Cassell and Hiremath, 2018, p. 3). Indeed, the majority of questions and inquiries asked at the desk are not reference questions (Bøyum et al., 2021; ACRL, 2013; Stevens 2013). Greg Royce of the Jacksonville Public Library elaborated on the library's decision during the brief survey:

> *"The thinking is that most customers didn't differentiate between MLS staff and clerical workers - they're just all librarians since they work at the library."*

Here, "clerical workers" refers to paraprofessionals, those without a MLS degree.

> *"The physical (previously associated reference desks) are still there but they aren't being utilized. I know at two of our regional branches they only staff the circulation desks (and sadly, most of what we've traditionally called "reference" questions just don't exist - most issues are customer account related). Smaller locations have always just had one desk, and though traditionally librarians sat at one "reference" seat and another station was a clerk for circulation. They are all staffed by librarians or associates (our associates are called Customer Experience Associates) and both do circulation and reference work."*

Royce's elaboration agrees with the research of Bøyum et al., 2021, ACRL, 2013, and countless others, in that the "reference desk" just isn't being used for reference inquiry most of the time. Royce suggests that was a time in which references services were a community need, requiring a separate desk or seat, however the Jacksonville Public Library and its branches have

opted to staff their "information desks" with both professionals and paraprofessionals to better meet the needs of its patrons.

Intentional or not, the association of "reference desk" as "information desk," or something other than "reference desk," validates the use of paraprofessionals at these kinds of desks by removing its contextualization as a desk exclusively for reference delivered by librarians. It is curious that many public libraries have opted for a more inclusive reference desk name, though doing so seems to be in an effort to better meet the information needs of users. Shockingly, these observations are nothing new:

> *"(1) the majority of queries are directional or ready-reference pure and simple;*
> *(2) generally, the queries and sources used are basic and easy to understand; and*
> *(3) most questions, therefore, could be answered by a well-trained person with a bachelor's degree"*
> - *(Katz, 2002, pg. 21).*

Indeed, when asking for reference service, studies have shown that the library user often does not know who is a librarian and who is a paraprofessional (Dewdney & Ross, 1994).

> *"The reality is that most studies show that the majority of questions asked at reference desks are not research questions at all, and of those that are labeled as research queries, only a small percentage are complex enough to require the help of a subject specialist."*
> - *(Stevens, 2013, pg. 206).*

For the time being, the use of paraprofessionals at the reference desk appears to be legitimized as they are able to offer almost exactly the same services a professional librarian has to in order to meet the majority of patron needs.

Changes to the Reference Model:

The lack of reference questions has caused many libraries to re-approach the reference help model. In one study, on-call and by appointment models are described as popular alternatives to the always on-desk reference help model after surveying references models offered from 14 academic libraries (Alexander & Wakimoto, 2019). This allows for professional reference help to still exist, however at the specific occasional request of patrons.

Additionally, virtual RIS has proved to be an exceedingly popular option constituting their own sets of guidelines. Both RUSA and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) have their own sets of virtual guidelines including the *IFLA digital reference guidelines,* the *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers*, and the *Guidelines for Implementing and Maintaining Virtual Reference Services* documents (IFLA, 2005; RUSA; 2008; RUSA 2008). Given growing popularity and demand, virtual reference services are even being described as "the norm" (Vogus, 2020, pg. 249).

These changes and shifts in priority are undoubtedly responses to the "changing reference landscape" (Cassell and Hiremath, 2018, p. 3) and altogether paint a messy picture of the current reference landscape Indeed, putting a professional or paraprofessional behind a screen only adds to the inability for users to distinguish between the two, as Dewdney & Ross (1994), have expressed. All of these responses result in a RIS landscape that is on-call, online, and deprofessionalized, to better meet the needs of users. The only consideration left to justify this professional mixture and on-call/online model, though perhaps unethical, is with evaluation, assessment, and direct comparison between the two professional levels.

Reiterating The Role of a "Professional Librarian" at the Information Desk:

Overall, these considerations pose a threat to the role of the librarian, since they are not so different in function to paraprofessionals - at least, at the information desk. It is difficult to assert the kind, quality, or value of the work of a librarian is any different from the paraprofessional at the desk without evaluation or assessment. But, to do so, especially in public library settings may be highly unethical. However what is presented is an urgency for the LIS field and LIS education to respond to the evolving reference landscape and consider the new and disgusted roles of the "information professional." The use of the term "information professional" serves to be in-line with the popularity of information desks and the "shift from the librarian as a keeper of knowledge to an information professional who engages with the community in innovative ways and who acts as a pathway or connector to knowledge and information and facilitates the interaction of the community members of the community" (Cassell, 2021, p. 127).

The skills and experience typically acquired through completion of an ALA accredited MLIS program are the critical barrier for entry into LIS professionalism. Rightfully so, in defense of professionalism, it is important to understand the value and what consists of a MLS education. Altogether, perhaps information professionals do not need to be at the information desk at all times. Perhaps the deprofessionalization of the desks is not a bad thing. Perhaps it is a perfectly fine response to better meet the information needs of patrons. Perhaps true information professionals are better suited behind the scenes for other things like advocacy, outreach, marketing, visual asset design, technology training, and any number of more involved professional roles that require understanding the importance of soft-skills and ethics/values, of which are taught in an ALA accredited MLS program.

Indeed, curriculum assessment with explicit adherence to current MLS requiring job descriptions as well as adherence to the conclusions posed by countless LIS researches can be an effective way to ensure MLS course work aligns with the evolving demands of information professionals, what they should do at the desk, and how it compares to paraprofessionals. For example, researchers Valenti & Lund (2021), sought to determine how current masters-level coursework addresses education and instruction for future professional teaching librarians. The researchers used content analysis methods to examine course titles and descriptions published online by ALA accredited programs. Course titles and descriptions were analyzed for instances of elements of the ACRL Seven Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians document. The work discusses how to go about closing the gap between MLIS education and functional teaching librarian responsibilities by comparing this document to course titles, descriptions and syllabi themselves. A similar approach should be considered for MLS requiring job descriptions and specific LIS literature (such as the ALA, IFLA, and RUSA guidelines), in order to close this gap and determine how MLS course curricula is preparing future information professionals for these evolving roles. Indeed, the plethora of literature and research shared within this paper present valuable conclusions about the trajectory of RIS that public libraries should consider.

But, when it comes to information and reference services at the information desk, continued evaluation of the quality of these services is important as well. While ethically questionable, comparing the quality of information and reference help between professionals and paraprofessionals can help to further legitimize the decision for many libraries to staff its information desks with paraprofessionals. However, this service has long been considered one of the most difficult services to evaluate due to the 1:1 nature of the service (Terry, Weech, & Goldhor, 1982). It is difficult to capture the organic process of information and reference

inquiries. A focus is put on the specific behaviors that are key to successful or unsuccessful reference encounters (VanScoy, 2013). Measures of quality in RIS tend to focus on concrete outputs reported such as user satisfaction (Saxton & Richardson, 2002). Information accuracy, according to the patron, is also a common measure of quality (Mathews, 2018). These are the key features of an assessment of reference service; a useful and important way to determine the quality of the service. There are many pre-existing methods of reference service evaluation but some of the most effective include data and perspectives from both the library worker and the patron receiving the help such via Obtrusive methods (Matthews, 2018).

However, there isn't a true standardized way to assess LIS curriculum or information services. For example, the "defunct" (Saunders & Ung, 2017, 50), Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation Program (WOREP), was designed to be a standardized way to measure the quality of reference question help (Novotny & Rimland, 2007). Ultimately, standardized tests may be useful, but researchers should not be afraid to contribute without them. Similar studies in assessing more all-encompassing information inquiries (and not just reference interviews) in public library settings to a set of standards or guidelines can help to illuminate the quality (and frequency) of the services. Again, quality comparisons between paraprofessional and professional while unethical, may be illuminating. For example, the comparative study of nonprofessionals and professionals conducted by Murfin & Bunge (1988), demonstrated that, overall, satisfaction and accuracy from professionals was higher than paraprofessionals. History has repeated itself more recently with the same conclusions being drawn from Lux & Rich (2016) after comparing the perceived quality of chat reference transcripts delivered by library assistants and professional librarians. It is valuable studies such as these that help to validate the importance of having professionals at the information desk from time to time. Claiming that

paraprofessionals offer the same or better RIS is not a very popular conclusion. However, the overall service ought to be reconsidered by many public libraries given downward trends in voter enthusiasm for library staff based on qualities and soft-skills such as friendliness, approachability, perceived advocacy level etc. (OCLC, 2018). These skills ought to be stressed and developed within LIS curricula as well, however need not be the only place to learn them all things considered.

Studies that both assess the value of LIS curriculum and reference services together are especially novel. Saunders & Ung (2017) for example, sought to determine the quality of MLS students' reference interviews. Reference interviews were conducted and later both the student giving reference help and receiving reference help were asked to participate in a short survey. Additionally, the work of Lapidus et. al., (2020), serves as another example of measuring the preparedness level of MLS students in providing quality reference services. These survey data proved to be an informative snapshot of the preparedness level of LIS students in giving reference help, and the elements of the reference help that are successful. Indeed studies like these, perhaps with direct measurement of the adherence level to standardized reference guidelines (such as those provided by RUSA and the ALA), may be fruitful. Researchers Shachaf & Horowitz (2008), took on such a task when evaluating specifically the RUSA and IFLA guideline adherence level of virtual reference services; in-person reference services, as well as all virtual and telephone modes, should be considered for future comparative research.

Conclusion:

It is the hope that ultimately, these studies may help to distinguish the difference between professional help and paraprofessional help beyond a piece of paper, especially at the information desk. Ethical evaluation and assessment is the only way to assert the value of information professionals at the desk within a certain reference model and reiterate that these information professionals can and should have room for more interactive library functions. Information professionals may not need to be at the information desk at all times. However, in this sense the reference desk can be argued to be "deprofessionalized." Continued assessment seeking to make specific judgments about the value of LIS education in preparing information professionals for MLS requiring jobs, and continued assessment seeking to understand the quality and demand of the information desk service itself (especially in public settings), can help to reiterate the existence of Cassell and Hiremath's "changing reference landscape."

Since the work and observations of Murfin & Bunge (1988), perhaps earlier, the deprofessionalization of the reference desk has been justified given the kinds of questions that are asked and the frequency of extended reference questions themselves. The paraprofessional staffing and associative shift towards "information desks" and "information professionals," the changing reference models, and the shift in popularity towards online RIS, only further emphasize the existence of the "changing reference landscape." The work of the professional librarian or information professional is therefore not a priority at the patron-end at all times.

The majority of the work of MLS degree holders, in comparison to their paraprofessional counterparts, is best suited behind the scenes. This allows for the continued success of the information desk service, being staffed by paraprofessionals, and the continued success of more complex library functions to be handled by MLS professionals. Again, continued evaluation of

the education itself in preparing students for MLS requiring jobs and of the information desk service itself are the best possible methods to ensure LIS students are prepared for these complex roles, prove the information desk service still runs optimally with paraprofessionals at the patron-end, and deblur the line between paraprofessionals and professionals once again. Lastly, the LIS field may benefit from more clear written distinction from the ALA as to how exactly "information professional" compares to a "paraprofessional," to clarify, rather than admitting to the blurring lines.

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