
SPECIAL LIBRARIES, SPECIAL CHALLENGES

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Special Libraries, Special Challenges is a column dedicated to exploring the unique public services challenges that arise in libraries that specialize in a particular subject, such as law, medicine, business, and so forth. In each column, the author will discuss public service dilemmas and solutions that arise specifically in given subject libraries, while drawing links to how such issues affect librarianship in general. Special or subject-matter librarians interested in authoring a piece for this column are invited to contact Melissa K. Aho at ahox0017@umn.edu.

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Using an Untapped Resource: Expanding the Role of the Student Worker at the Bio-Medical Library

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Student workers have always been a traditional and valuable component to the smooth running of many academic health sciences libraries. However, in recent years many libraries have redefined student workers' roles to extend beyond their traditional scope due to a range of factors, such as loss of staff and budget cutbacks. The Bio-Medical Library at the University of Minnesota has been no different. Facing a general staffing shortage and the changing role of liaison librarians, we needed to find a solution to close gaps in our reference desk schedule. We filled this need via the creative solution of having our student workers expand their traditional roles into positions with more responsibility and far more training than they had typically received and introduced the position of student reference assistant.

The Bio-Medical Library, located in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is one of 14 libraries in the University Libraries system at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. It is part of the Health Sciences Libraries, which also includes the Veterinary Medical Library and the Wangenstein Historical Library of Biology and Medicine. The mission of the library is "to enhance the teaching, research, and service activities of the University of Minnesota and to support the University of Minnesota Academic Health Center in its quest to improve health, by facilitating timely access to information needed by library clients on campus, throughout Minnesota, and nationwide" (University of Minnesota, Bio-Medical Library). The collection, located on three floors, includes more than 500,000 print volumes and 2,700 print and electronic journal subscriptions. Students work in a variety of library services, from ILL to technical services to circulation and reference, and some student's even cross-train in several areas (which does make time-cards and schedules a challenge!). Even before student reference positions were introduced (or reintroduced, as they had been used years earlier), student hours comprised a significant percentage of library staff hours, especially in Public Services.

In 2008, the Bio-Medical Library's organizational structure was significantly altered. Reference, formerly its own department, was reorganized with Access Services into Public Services. Several librarians were moved out of the old Reference department into a newly created unit called Liaison Education and Instruction Services to recognize their increasing need to work outside

staff or other student workers. Each student works a weekly two-hour training shift during business hours with full-time staff. In addition, each assistant has spent dozens of hours in one-on-one instruction and observing staff-patron interactions. Student reference assistants learn to instruct patrons on the use of MEDLINE and other health sciences bibliographic databases, reference manager software, online clinical resources, and the University of Minnesota's library catalog, MNCAT. In order to ensure that the student reference assistants are able to perform the tasks required of them, reference competencies have been developed by two members of the reference staff. These reference competencies are a way to identify the standards required for basic and advanced reference provision. A formalized reference training plan using Moodle, an open-source e-learning software platform, is also underway. Eventually we would like to develop evaluation tools using Moodle to monitor each student assistant's progress as they acquire increasingly sophisticated reference skills.

The incorporation of students into reference desk service has not always been a smooth journey. At various times, old-fashioned attitudes on who can provide library services and general misgivings have prevented the expansion of using student workers. However, this current incarnation of student reference assistants has provided valuable help at the reference desk and has improved our service to library patrons. The student reference assistants have also provided valuable feedback and suggestions for library services and further training.

By using student reference assistants at the Bio-Medical Library, we have come up with a relatively easy, cost effective, and creative way to provide services when reference librarians are not available. We have seen our students rise to the occasion, expanding their knowledge and comfort zone and providing much needed help in the library. While students cannot perform all functions within the library, they can provide help when help is needed if they are given the proper training and support.

REFERENCE

- University of Minnesota Bio-Medical Library. (n.d.). *Our mission*. Retrieved November 8, 2009, from <http://www.biomed.lib.umn.edu/about/mission>