An analysis of reference services usage at a regional academic health sciences library

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INTRODUCTION

The University of Illinois Crawford Library of the Health Sciences at Rockford (CLHS-R) has been serving University of Illinois College of Medicine faculty, students, and staff and the area community since 1972. CLHS-R is a regional academic health sciences library for the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). The mission of the UIC University Library includes ''ensuring that faculty, students and other users have access to a broad and diversified range of scholarly resources'' and ''engaging in outreach to the community'' [1]. In keeping with this mission, CLHS-R welcomes members of the community into the library and provides borrowing privi-

leges to Illinois residents with proper identification. The collection at CLHS-R primarily focuses on the curriculum and research needs of the faculty, students, and staff from the colleges of medicine, nursing, and public health. The secondary focus of the collection is on consumer health. At CLHS-R, the consumer health collection has been pulled from the regular collection and resides in a quiet reading area in the back of the library that offers privacy. Providing health information to consumers is a common practice among academic health sciences libraries [2, 3].

The purpose of this study is to examine the trends in reference services usage provided by CLHS-R from 1990 through 2009. Numerous articles can be found in the literature discussing the most efficient method of staffing the reference desk [4, 5]. Many studies have also asked if the reference desk should be eliminated completely [6–8]. At CLHS-R, the traditional reference desk has been phased out even though patrons still walk in the door and need assistance. Using a triage approach, patrons come to the user services desk to request assistance. The library staff member at the user services desk determines the difficulty of the question and handles the query directly or refers the patron to a reference librarian. Training of the library staff is critical so that the reference questions are handled properly.

Over the past two decades, the method of providing reference services has changed dramatically [9–12]. The explosion of the Internet has changed the way libraries provide reference services today [13–16]. Overall traditional reference transactions have declined, while electronic reference questions have increased [17]. The author asked, ''Who is really using the reference services at CLHS-R and why?'' Knowing who is using reference and why should help reference librarians plan for the future.

METHODS

Reference statistics were gathered monthly by the entire library staff from 1990 through 2009. A standardized form was used to record the number of transactions with any faculty, staff, students, or members of the public who used library services in-person or by telephone, email, or chat. The reference statistics form had a section to indicate types of reference transaction questions that included the options: directional, ready reference, in-depth reference, and demonstrations/consultations. Directional questions referred to questions regarding location of services, policies, collections, and materials contained in the building or university. Ready reference questions were questions that could be answered quickly in five minutes or less. In-depth reference questions were those that required more than five minutes to answer and/or involved the use of several resources. Demonstrations/consultations included demonstrations of one or more print or online resources or consultation sessions on conducting research on a project or topic and might be individual or small group. This form also included a section to indicate

Figure 1
Decline in reference transactions, 1990–2009
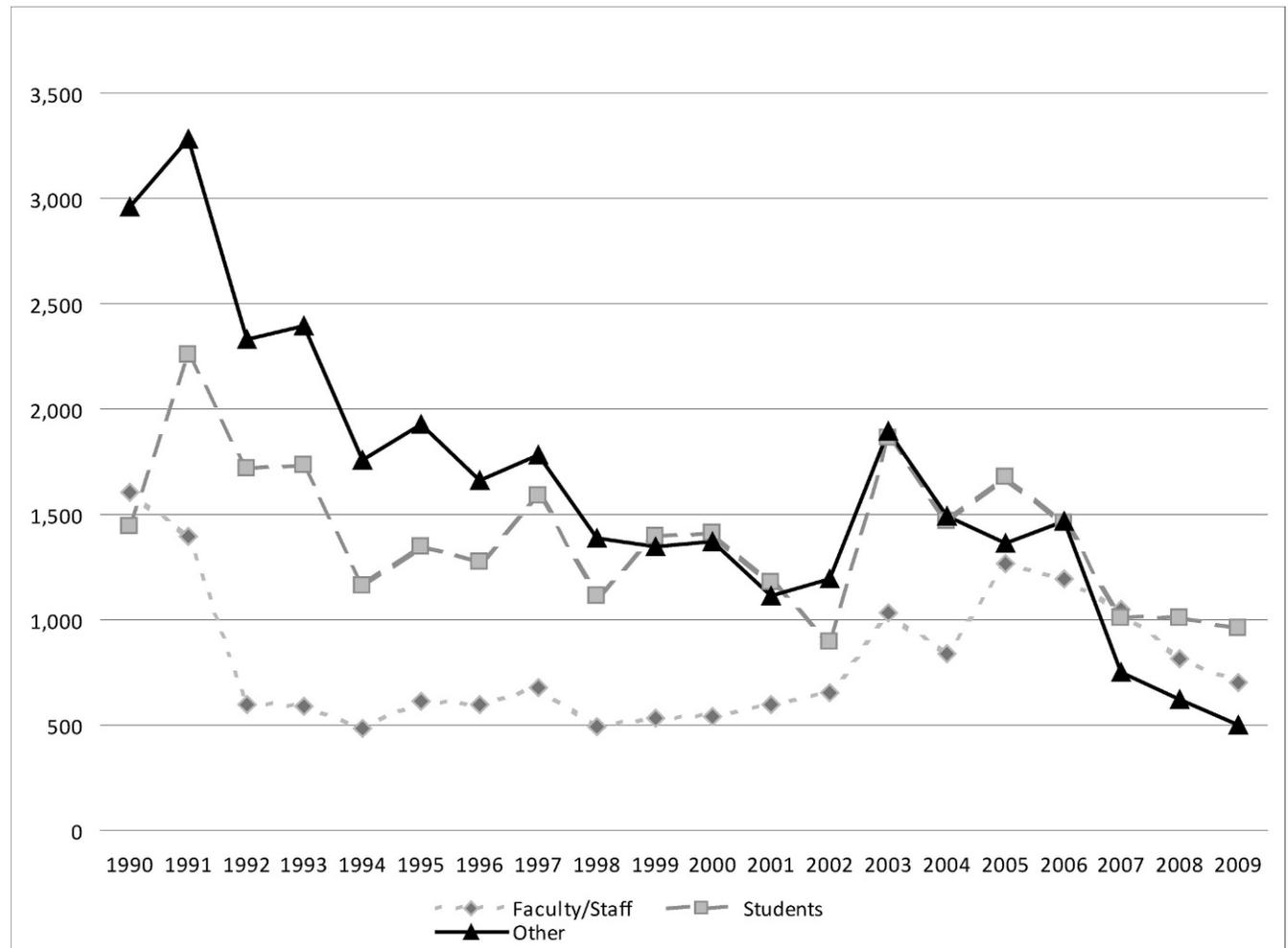
which of three categories of user groups were assisted: UIC faculty/staff, UIC students, and others. The others category included Rockford area community residents and nonaffiliated students from local universities, community colleges, or high schools.

RESULTS

The utilization data showed an intermittent decline in the aggregate number of reference transactions requested over the entire 20-year time frame. The total number of reference transactions for 1990 was 8,738, but in 2009 it was 2,505. The decline in the totals for each year was more pronounced over the most recent years, 2007 through 2009. The majority of these questions fell into the category of directional and ready reference, with each averaging 37% of the total amount of reference questions. Each year, the consultation/demonstration category had the fewest numbers, averaging only 5% of the total. The in-depth questions for the 20-year period averaged 21% of the

total number of reference transactions. Other than the overall decline, there was no consistent pattern of usage for the different question types during the years of this study.

The others user group accounted for the most reference transactions as a percentage of the total, averaging 42% during the 20-year period. In comparison, over this same time frame, UIC students accounted for 36% and the UIC faculty/staff group accounted for 26% of the total. At the outset, 1990 through 1998, others patrons were responsible for 44% to 52% of the total number of reference transactions. This number steadily declined, so that by 2007 through 2009, this group only accounted for 23% to 27% of the total number of queries (Figure 1).

The percentage of questions posed by UIC students steadily increased in over the 20-year period. By 2008, they represented the most predominant user group and reached their highest utilization level (41%). For the majority of the 20-year period, the UIC faculty/staff group asked the lowest amount of reference

questions. From 2001 to the present, utilization by the UIC faculty/staff group showed a sharp increase as a percentage of the totals. The overall number of questions increased for a short period beginning in 2003 until 2006.

DISCUSSION

Overall utilization of reference services has decreased over the twenty-year time frame of this study and is consistent with reports in other articles discussing the issues of decreasing reference questions [18–20]. The distribution of reference transaction by question type was consistent throughout the twenty-year study. Directional and ready reference questions were the most popular types of questions asked. Because these types of questions are answered in less than five minutes, they accumulate rapidly. The most common directional questions deal with library hours, location of a book, and printing or technical issues. Ready reference questions usually refer to which database to use to search for articles. Once a library staff member points the patrons in the right direction to begin their searches, the patrons are left to browse and search at their leisure. Library staff can easily overlook recording these types of questions because they happen so regularly and quickly. This number might be a larger percentage than actually reported.

In-depth questions involve a deeper reference inquiry. Usually, the patron is beginning a research project and does not know where to start. These questions are usually referred to the reference librarians who have the expertise and training to determine how to assist the patron. The number of transactions has fluctuated over the last twenty years. This fluctuation might have occured because each incoming class of students has varying levels of computer expertise. The consultation/demonstration category was the least frequently requested. Consultation sessions are usually research sessions that are scheduled in advance. Demonstration sessions are sometimes scheduled in advance but more often are impromptu opportunities that arise to perform a one-on-one teaching session on relevant databases. These totals have stayed constant over the twenty-year time frame, with some minor decreases in 2000 and 2001.

For the first 13 years of the 20-year study, the CLHS-R addressed more reference questions for nonaffiliated patrons than UIC patrons. The percentages for the nonaffiliated patrons were between 39% and 52% during this time frame. The author believes this change was due to the more limited availability of medical information to the general public in these early years. With the introduction of the Internet and the increasing availability of medical websites, those in the others user group have gained more access to convenient consumer health information and rely less on the university library. The Rockford Public Library provides many public computer stations to accommodate those patrons who do not have a computer or access to the Internet in their homes. It also encourages members of the public to utilize the CLHS-R when searching for consumer health information.

In contrast, the UIC students, faculty, and staff usage has gained momentum. The inception of chat and email reference services has broadened the patron base to include the UIC Daley Library, Science Library, and Library of the Health Sciences at Chicago, Peoria, and Urbana. This increase of patrons across many locations might explain why the UIC student and UIC faculty/staff user groups' percentages have grown. Even though nonaffiliated patrons can use chat and email, they may not realize this option is readily available to them. Librarians promote these digital reference services to UIC students, faculty, and staff during their library orientation, tours, and database workshops.

Another factor that might be contributing to the increasing percentages in the reference transactions for UIC students, faculty, and staff is the dynamic changes in acquiring their education and research information. The adaptation of electronic resources and databases has created an immense need for library instruction. The learning curve has been extended with some of the resources requiring hands-on instruction. However, over time, the existing faculty, staff, and senior students should gain the skills and knowledge to utilize these resources and databases effectively. The need for instruction will still exist as incoming students enter the system and as new resources become available. Library instruction is a vital part of all academic health sciences libraries. One-on-one instruction provided during reference assistance is essential for all users.

CONCLUSION

The data from this twenty-year period at the CLHS-R confirm the findings of studies at many other academic libraries. Overall reference transactions have declined. This analysis has highlighted the shift in utilization by different patron types. The general public now has convenient access to the Internet to locate the consumer health information they desire from their homes. In contrast, the UIC students, faculty, and staff are consistently exposed to a dynamic environment that may require additional library instruction in obtaining their educational and research information needs.

Balancing reference services between affiliated and nonaffiliated users can be a daunting task. Knowing who is requiring the reference services and what types of questions they are asking may help improve library services by providing valuable information to the library staff. Continuing education of the library staff will help ensure the quality of assistance given to the library patrons.

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