

Reference Policy Analysis

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Conducting research can be a daunting task. The researcher must determine what topic to write about and how to narrow it down into to a workable project. This involves having access to materials necessary to write about the chosen topic. Reference librarians may greatly ease the stress of conducting research by helping patrons navigate the library's resources, answering basic research questions, and being approachable in-person, via email, by telephone, or through instant messenger for research-related questions. These elements of reference librarianship transcend the academic libraries at Canisius College (2000), Point Park University (n.d.), and the University of Cincinnati (2014). The libraries at these institutions have reference policies that explain the services performed by reference librarians and provide a framework that attempts to ensure clear, concise, and consistent research assistance.

Consistency and fairness play a significant role in helping patrons. For instance, when shopping in a store, what is more frustrating than waiting to check-out while the clerk attends to a new incoming phone call in the middle of a transaction? Establishing a clearly defined order for helping patrons prevents this sort of frustration. The Point Park University library (n.d.) does a great job of establishing a "first-come-first serve" policy and does not discriminate among all of the various mediums that patrons can utilize to reach the library. This first-come-first-served policy is similar to traditional business telephone messages, which state that "calls will be answered in the order received," except that it applies to in-person information requests as well. The library at Canisius College (2000) does not agree with that approach and clearly states that in-person information requests receive preference over all other requests. They have a clearly defined order in which patrons can expect to receive service, with in-person requests prioritized, followed by phone calls, miscellaneous questions not yet answered, questions received by email, with questions received by mail receiving the lowest priority. Clarity, such as this, enables

librarians to provide consistent customer service and to refer patrons to the library's reference policies in case of a complaint. Unfortunately, the library at the University of Cincinnati (2014) does not have such a clearly defined policy for how it responds to patron questions; they simply list all of the various methods of contacting reference librarians, including face-to-face, telephone, and email.

While discrepancies exist over what order to provide service to patrons, all of these institutions answer basic research questions from college and university patrons. This involves providing patrons with access to college and university materials, which is a core value of librarianship (American Library Association, 2004). When time permits, Canisius library (2000) specifies that its reference librarians may conduct library tours for patrons and classes. However, in the midst of a busy semester, finding time for such activities can be challenging, if not impossible, as Canisius notes within its reference policies that a librarian must always be present at the reference desk.

Providing fast and efficient assistance to patrons who seek assistance is essential, with Canisius (2000) articulating that research assistance receives priority over any other administrative responsibility performed by reference librarians. When multiple patrons are present at the reference desk, Canisius and Point Park (n.d.) recommend that reference librarians interrupt lengthy questions to answer basic questions from other patrons. However, Canisius elaborates that for the reference librarian to divert their attention to other patrons, it must be okay with the patron presently being helped. The University of Cincinnati (2014) does not provide guidance for how reference librarians should respond during busy periods, which offers the possibility of inconsistent service.

When students come to the reference desk, they arrive with questions, such as how to narrow down their topic, what sources are available for their topic, and to seek guidance on how to evaluate the sources that they find. Canisius (2000) and Point Park (n.d.) provide patrons with answers to basic questions, but they generally refer students with more complex questions to relevant sources within the library. This involves directing students toward print and audio/visual materials and providing students with useful finding guides. For students who still need help with complex questions, the libraries at Canisius College and the University of Cincinnati (2014) provide one-on-one assistance, but Canisius (2000) requires patrons to schedule appointments during non-busy times.

In addition to providing research assistance, reference librarians keep statistics regarding reference questions, help students with making copies, teach information literacy classes, engage in reference collection development, and participate in professional development activities, including reading new and relevant literature that could improve the library's holdings (Canisius College, 2000; Point Park University, n.d.; University of Cincinnati, 2014). While reference librarians provide students with an invaluable resource in research assistance, patrons must feel that librarians are interested in helping them. Point Park (n.d.) specifically explains the importance of making eye contact with patrons and approaching people who appear "lost." Students must also feel that librarians will not judge them for the information requests that they make and that their requests will be kept private. Showing professionalism and respecting privacy rights are core values of librarianship (American Library Association, 2004).

In order to provide clear, concise, and consistent research assistance, every library needs to have reference policies. Institutions, such as Canisius (2000) established in depth reference policies that mirror university course curriculum outlines with points outlined, such as 2.1, 2.2,

and 2.3 under subcategories, such as library clientele. Its reference policies of nearly eight, single spaced pages appear to provide an answer to any conceivable question from how to resolve patron questions when a particular librarian does not know the answer to prioritizing in-house research questions from patrons. In depth policies are less likely to create problems at a later time, including who was supposed to answer a particular question and how fast inquiries must be responded to. This is something that the University of Cincinnati's library (2014) likely faces as they provide brief bullet points for reference librarians to follow, which has the positive effect of providing the librarian with more individual freedom, but which may have a downside of providing students with inconsistent service.

Providing too little guidance, like the University of Cincinnati (2014), may create problems but providing too much guidance, like Canisius (2000) can create a sense of worry among librarians that they might do something wrong. Point Park (n.d.), on the other hand, strikes a nice balance of about three pages. Their reference policies include bolded subheadings, such as hours of service, whom we serve, and priority of service, with accompanying information below the subheadings. Creating user-friendly policies, which can quickly be referred to is essential in order to ensure quality service. Point Park, with its easily readable font and text size, adequate spacing with multiple brief paragraphs under each bolded subcategory, as well as providing clear and concise policies, provides a more effective guide than those established by either Canisius or the University of Cincinnati.

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