

Reference Interview

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On September 8, 2015, I had the pleasure of talking with a reference librarian from South University in Royal Palm Beach, Florida, named Laura Balseiro. Ms. Balseiro did not set out to become a librarian; the idea came as a suggestion from one of her employers. She started at the University of South Florida as a pre-med major, with the intention of becoming a physical therapist. Part of the course work for this degree, however, involved taking an Anatomy and Physiology class, which would have required her to dissect a cadaver; that is something that she could not bear to do. Consequently, she changed her major and received a Bachelor of Science in psychology. Before graduating with that degree, she worked at USF's law library during her senior year of college. At her boss' suggestion, she applied to graduate school, in pursuit of a master's degree in library science.

As a reference librarian for a small academic institution, South University, she assists students with a multitude of endeavors, including teaching information literacy classes, maintaining library resources, and providing research assistance to students. Students frequently visit the library when professors assign research projects and she guides students through the process. She introduces them to databases, such as JSTOR and will suggest books that they can utilize to complete their work. Decisions on what databases to purchase are made by the institution's head librarian. Ms. Balseiro showed me that the school subscribes to dozens of useful databases, more than at any other school that she has worked for. In addition to databases, the local chapter of South University possesses about five thousand books, focusing on topics in the humanities, business, and health sciences. It also houses law books, but a disclaimer is placed near those books informing students that it is preferable to use databases, such as GreenFile which may be more up-to date.

When students arrive at the library, she has to contend with a digital divide. Many students are not familiar with the intricacies of Microsoft Office, which she helps them to learn. This is especially the case as new editions, such as Microsoft Office 365 are installed on all of the computers on the campus. Questions on how to format margins and how to insert page numbers are common questions that arise when such changes are made. There are ten computers in the media-center sized library, which are available to students, and reference librarians are available at all times to assist them with any questions that they may have, from research needs to printing questions.

Reference librarians are available not only available to assist students in the library but they are also available to assist students in the classroom. Librarians are available to provide in-class instruction, which can be tailored to meet the needs of individual instructors and their course assignments. Librarians are available to provide forty-five minute lessons to students on how to find resources, navigate the South University databases, teach them on how to evaluate resources, and train them on how to cite resources in APA format, which is the university's required documentation method. Students who require further assistance with APA are encouraged to visit the library at any time.

Ms. Balseiro explains that, often times, students will not know what materials they need in order to complete an assignment. Since she works at an academic institution, the vast majority of the information requested is for academic assignments, so she asks students about the requirements of each of the assignments. That way she can visualize what the instructor might be looking for. Based on the information provided by the student, she will suggest relevant books and electronic resources available at South University. She contends that South University has all of the necessary materials to meet the needs of its students; however, on the

rare occasion that students request print materials not housed in the library, the school participates in inter-library loan with its other branch campuses. The school does not, however, participate in interlibrary loan with other libraries. In addition to print sources housed in the library and databases available through the school's website, she adds that she will periodically make suggestions for students to utilize particular government websites and public library databases.

Conducting research can make students feel stressed. She explains that students occasionally arrive at the library in a state of panic or confusion. It is necessary to empathize with their concerns and help them in any conceivable way. Students must feel welcomed in the library and know that the librarian wants to help them. She adds, however, that "often times, they just want someone to listen!" Students receive attention with their reference questions on a first-come-first serve basis. When phone calls are received while students are present, she takes down the phone number of the individual calling in to provide complete assistance to them after the patrons within the library have been assisted.

In addition to assisting students with reference questions in-house, she maintains that she has a number of other responsibilities, including participating in an online reference service, called LibChat. She also helps other reference librarians with establishing research guides that can be useful for students. Additionally, she is involved with circulating books, re-shelving them, making suggestions for books that should be purchased or weeded, and administering make-up exams for students. She cautions aspiring librarians to make sure that they truly enjoy the profession as it does not pay very highly. Overall, though, she attests that enjoys being a librarian as she feels that students are appreciative of the help that she provides to them.