

UCLA

Librarian Publications

Title

Collaborative research services: a peer-led cohort approach

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/10m1q3pc>

Journal

Reference Services Review, 51(1)

Authors

Johnson, Matthew Weirick
Bowline, Estéfani
King, Diana Leigh
et al.

Publication Date

2023-01-13

DOI

10.1108/RSR-09-2022-0049

Peer reviewed

Collaborative Research Services: A Peer-Led Cohort Approach

Abstract

Purpose

Prior to 2020, UCLA Library's research services spanned multiple service points. Multiple locations were staffed by Library Student Research Assistants (LSRAs) and each location was supervised independently. While efforts to increase collaboration had been underway, much of the work and services remained siloed and often duplicated training and service hours.

Approach

With the onset of COVID-19, UCLA Library rapidly transitioned from entirely in-person to entirely online services. With multiple service points pivoting, it quickly became apparent that it was redundant to have multiple online desks providing Zoom appointments. Moreover, transitioning in-person student work to remote work was paramount to providing both normal services to our users and allowing LSRAs to keep their jobs during a time of uncertainty and insecurity.

Findings

While our original consolidation of services and implementation of shared supervision was a result of the pandemic and primarily involved online services, we

have maintained this shared approach and collaborative vision in returning to in-person services. For the past year, we've offered shared in-person (at two library locations) and online services. As subject-specific library locations begin to reopen their desks, we continue to identify ways to leverage shared supervision and a robust referral model for those onsite services while negotiating student staffing and the need for both general and subject-specific services.

Originality

We present a novel approach to peer-to-peer teaching and learning and research services and shared student worker supervision with services coordinated across multiple locations and disciplines within a large academic library serving a large student population.

Keywords: academic libraries, research consultations, reference services, peer-to-peer, COVID-19, supervision, management, student workers

Article Classification: Case Study

In 2020, UCLA Library's User Engagement division began consolidating its research services. As a result of the pandemic, each of our physical desks, staffed primarily by Library Student Research Assistants (LSRAs) from separate library locations, went online; however, it quickly became apparent that it was redundant to have multiple online desks providing Zoom appointments. The LSRA supervisors worked together to develop a shared service model for providing Zoom consultations. This built on previous shared work by our Research Functional Team to hire and train LSRAs as a cohort across locations in the summer and fall. Expanding this model, we've created a cohort of student workers who provide online and in-person research help services and library instruction across multiple locations (e.g., Arts, Music, Powell, and Biomedical Libraries) with multiple subject specializations (e.g., arts, music, and sciences). This is a novel approach to student supervision and peer-to-peer research help services across multiple locations and disciplines within a large academic library serving a large student population.

Literature/Landscape Review

Libraries across the field have been exploring and implementing consolidated service points for some time. The literature over the past twenty years shows this practice as more common than not, particularly within the academic library. However, the majority of studies focus on the consolidation of service points within one physical location to a single location - most often a central circulation desk. At this time, there is a gap in the literature on the specific evolution of a service

shared among several library units to just one centralized location (in the case of the UCLA Library, a shared online research support desk). What is documented in literature is the trend of movement away from separate librarian staffed-reference desks and circulation desks to one desk staffed most often by Access Services staff and student assistants.

Crane and Pavy (2008), Flanagan and Horowitz (2000), and LaMagna, Hartman-Caverly and Marchetti (2016) all provide a lens into the work required to create a single service point, noting benefits of increased convenience for patrons and opportunities for increased knowledge in library staff. For library users, the ease of a “one-stop shop,” utilizing a reduced number of staff, to fulfill most needs became a quick selling point for libraries facing limited staffing resources and the increasing blurring of service-specific questions at reference desks (Crane and Pavy, 2008). Moreover, as library users turn towards online platforms for initial interactions with library staff, reference desks see less and less traffic over time (Flanagan and Horowitz, 2000). Shifting from multiple desks to one enables better use of staffing resources in addition and for capable staff to provide expansive service in areas they are already working in. The integration of peer-to-peer learning into library reference service also moves away from the traditional model of the librarian-staffed reference desk, putting student staff on the front line to triage inquiries. Peer-to-peer services offer opportunities for student workers to become more invested in making library services more student-centered, with a mission of reducing library anxiety and fostering a collaborative learning environment (Venner and Washburn, 2021).

When training student staff to provide collaborative tiered reference support for three science libraries, Hoffner *et. al* (2021, p. 192) note the anticipation of the

“variety and complexity of research needs” requires a dynamic training structure including both practical and theoretical learning. When staff are provided the opportunity to train across several areas, patrons are able to work with staff working from a larger knowledge base in comparison to those specializing within one area (Crane and Pavy, 2008). This is not to say students handle all reference support, but they are given the training to perceive how far their skills can assist a patron and when to refer advanced questions to librarians. However, in studies conducted as recently as 2018, Alexander and Wakimoto (2018) found that there is still much resistance from librarians in transitioning to shared service points staffed by non-librarian staff. Doubts about the ability to carry out training and a lack of trust for student assistants to provide service at the same quality level of librarians continue to persist and prevent changes from traditional reference models.

The onset of the COVID-19 in the United States in March 2020 accelerated the need for virtual reference services at most academic libraries. Unsurprisingly, much of the literature on this period highlights the increased demand for chat and live video services (Radford, Costello and Montague, 2021) and the ways in which library systems had to rapidly transform service models (Gerbig *et al.*, 2021, Cohn and Hyams, 2021). In an article forecasting the lasting impact of the shift to virtual reference services, Flierl noted that now that all services were available from one point (the library website), reference services models have effectively been “broadened and flattened” for users (Flierl, 61, 2019). There are other, less user-focused contributing factors to this trend of consolidation. Flierl’s article acknowledges the economic pressures many libraries faced during the early part of the pandemic, resulting in staffing shortages and limited resources (Flierl, 62, 2019). Though some literature has raised discipline-specific concerns in the rapid

transition to virtual services (Lapidus, 2022; Charbonneau and Vardell, 2022a; Charbonneau and Vardell, 2022b) there is a gap in literature discussing these approaches in relation to the general library research assistance efforts of this time.

Background

UCLA is a public land-grab institution founded in 1919 in Los Angeles, California on the unceded lands of the Gabrielino/Tongva peoples. UCLA is an “R1: Doctoral Universities - Very high research activity” under the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education system and has consistently ranked as the number one public university in the *US News & World Report* rankings. In Fall 2021, UCLA’s enrollment included 32,121 undergraduate students, 13,994 graduate students, and 1,403 interns and residents, totaling 47,518 students (UCLA Office of Academic Planning and Budget, n.d.). As of October 2020, 7,790 faculty members were employed at UCLA (UCLA Newsroom, n.d.). UCLA is part of the 10-campus University of California system. In Fall 2022, UCLA Library employed 91 represented librarians (i.e., librarians who are not managers), the greatest number of librarians of any UC campus.

UCLA Library’s User Engagement Division was created in 2017 as a matrixed organization comprised of library staff who provide public services. The Division originally included three units based primarily on location of staff members and proximity of library buildings—Arts, Music, and Powell Libraries; Science User Engagement (Biomedical, Science & Engineering, and Geology Libraries); Research & Rosenfeld (Humanities & Social Sciences division within the Young Research Library, and Management Library)—and five functional teams identified as core

functions of the library and public services—Collections, Outreach, Research Assistance, Research Partnerships, and Teaching & Learning. Each staff member in User Engagement is a member of a unit and a functional team, allowing for collaboration across the division. The Associate University Librarian for User Engagement also oversees the Unified Access Services division in the Library. In Fall 2019, Unified Access Services staff joined functional teams by invitation of User Engagement leadership. Also, in 2019, the Research Assistance and Research Partnerships teams were combined into a Research Functional Team, and in 2021, an Anti-Racism Functional Team was formed. The Research Assistance Functional Team and then the Research Functional Team has been in charge of overseeing the various research services offered across the three units. As of Fall 2022, User Engagement included 19.5 FTE librarians across these three units: Arts, Music & Powell Libraries (10 FTE librarians), Sciences User Engagement (4 FTE librarians), and Research & Rosenfeld (5.5 FTE librarians), which represents several vacancies.

Like many large academic research libraries prior to 2020, UCLA Library's research services spanned multiple service points, across different locations on campus. Multiple locations were staffed by Library Student Research Assistants (LSRAs) and each location was supervised independently. While efforts to increase collaboration across research services had been underway, much of the work and services remained siloed and often duplicated training and service hours.

The onset of COVID-19 in March of 2020 prompted a quick pivot in the way research services were being offered. A switch from in-person, drop-in consultations to

offering online research support was critical to continue to provide research services to our patrons, who now did most of their work and learning online. But with multiple locations/service points pivoting to online services, it quickly became apparent that it was redundant to have multiple online desks providing Zoom appointments. Moreover, transitioning in-person student work to remote work was paramount to providing both normal services to our users and allowing LSRAs to keep their jobs during a time of uncertainty and insecurity.

Building upon the previous work that was done by the Research Functional Team to hire and train LSRAs as a cohort across the multiple service points and locations, the supervisors worked together to develop a shared service model for providing Zoom consultations with LSRAs. This cohort approach to research services gave the opportunity to both allow students to continue to work and gain valuable experience, while updating reference services to better meet the needs of users and the library. As the pandemic ebbed and flowed, and a return to campus was imminent, changes to the model were made to adapt it as a hybrid service. In its current iteration, the supervisors created a model that supports a cohort of student workers who provide online and in-person research help services and library instruction across multiple locations (e.g., Arts, Music, Powell, and Biomedical Libraries) with multiple subject specializations (e.g., arts, music, humanities and social sciences, and sciences). As a cohort, LSRAs are trained together to minimize redundancies. As they work and collaborate together, this allows for peer-to-peer training opportunities and improves the quality of peer-led research services. This paper will further explore this novel approach to student supervision and peer-to-

peer research help services and its impact on a large academic library serving a large student population.

Overview of Shared Services Consolidation

Role of the Research (Assistance) Functional Team

The Research Functional Team (RFT) is responsible for coordinating research assistance at all physical and digital service points, ensuring a culture of engagement and between librarians and researchers at UCLA. The primary work of RFT members manifests through the provision of research assistance in consultations, online interactions, tutorials, guides, and partnerships with campus groups supporting scholarship. RFT group members also take leadership in the collaborative management and training of Library Student Research Assistants (LSRAs) across all public service points in the Library. The Research Help Training series, first developed by RFT (then named the Research Assistance Functional Team/RAFT), provides an introductory overview to research assistance at UCLA. It includes weekly synchronous trainings during the fall quarter, on such topics as “The Reference Interview” and “Research Assistance for Music, Moving Images, and the Visual and Performing Arts.” These weekly trainings are complemented by a series of asynchronous modules to be completed throughout the fall quarter. Both training curricula are put in practice as the LSRAs shadow/support returning LSRAs during consultations through our service points, until the Winter Quarter. When RAFT debuted the joint training (along with a new joint hiring process) in Fall 2017,

it opened the possibilities for the development of a cohort of student assistants and a new baseline standard for the multiple research assistance service points across the Library. Since then, RFT and the LSRA supervisors have continued to refine the curricula, adding in a spring workshop series, on topics such as “Inclusive and Accessible Reference” and “Maps and Government Documents.” These workshops, along with the synchronous fall trainings, have been held on Zoom since 2020.

Role of the Teaching & Learning Functional Team

The Research Functional Team’s Research Help Training for Library Student Research Assistants (LSRAs) provided the foundation for a training series developed by the Teaching & Learning Functional Team: Library Instruction Training. In Winter 2020, we offered our inaugural Library Instruction Training across 8 weeks with two hours each Friday spent asynchronously on Zoom training student workers to provide library instruction, including topics such as information literacy, pedagogy and learning theories, developing lesson plans, and working with course instructors. This training built on research help skills students developed in their training with RFT in the fall, and then dovetailed with research help training in the Spring, where we offered workshops on assessing instruction, universal design for learning, and anti-racist pedagogy in conjunction with RFT’s workshops on anti-racist and inclusive reference. We’ve now offered this training two years in a row.

With our LSRAs trained to provide library instruction, we’ve focused on outreach with entry-level undergraduate classes to develop a student instruction program.

Each quarter, our LSRAs teach a series of Cornerstone Research Workshops, which we collaborate on with our Undergraduate Research Center for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, introducing attendees to developing research questions and keywords, using library resources, and citing sources. Our LSRAs also teach hour-long sessions for our University Studies program, which is primarily open to first year and transfer students to introduce them to UCLA and help them get acclimated. Finally, our LSRAs have worked with our Disability Studies 101W discussion sections, where students are working on their own research projects. Disability Studies 101W is classified as a Writing II course at UCLA, which is a requirement for undergraduate students and a focus for the Library's instruction program in order to reach students earlier in their careers at UCLA.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Consolidation

Like most academic libraries, UCLA had to rapidly rethink reference services in the spring of 2020. While the Research Functional Team swiftly produced documentation on best practices for virtual consultations, the LSRA supervisors from the Arts Library, the Music Library, the Sciences Libraries, Powell Library, and the Young Research Library collaborated to ensure administrative support to allow the LSRAs to continue their work remotely. They shared work log templates and Slack check-in procedures for the students. But the most significant collaboration concerned the service points. For the rest of the 2020 spring quarter (from March-June), each physical library unit had its own general reference Zoom account, staffed by LSRAs and available via LibCal. For whatever reason, some of these Zoom

accounts received very few appointments, while others received substantially more. Due to this uneven workload, concerns about how isolating the experience was for LSRAs, and the confusion multiple general virtual service points presented for users, the decision was made to consolidate into two virtual research help desks, staffed by all the LSRAs from all of the different units.

This service, which appears as the first option for all online appointments in LibCal as a “peer to peer service,” has continued and evolved since then. When UCLA’s campus reopened in Fall 2021, the supervisors, in consultation with the Research Functional Team and the LSRAs, decided to continue the service. Additionally, they opened the first ever shared in-person service point at UCLA, at Powell, staffed by LSRAs from every unit. The goal of this decision was to prioritize accessibility by providing users (and LSRAs) with different mode options. The following quarter, another shared in person service point was opened: at the Young Research Library. Notably, the statistics for the virtual desk have steadily remained the most popular for users of the three shared service points.

Recruitment and Deployment of LSRAs

In Fall 2022, we hired 15 new LSRAs for a total of 24 LSRAs and one Library Student Teaching & Learning Lead, who also staffs research desks. Of these, 4 work in the Arts Library, 2 work in the Music Library, 6 work in Powell Library, 3 work in Sciences User Engagement, 1 works for the Teaching & Learning Functional Team, and 9 work in the Young Research Library. Among these 25 student workers, 17 are in the MLIS program. While MLIS students are traditionally the focus of recruitment, over the last few years more students outside of the MLIS program have been

considered and accepted for LSRA positions. Depending on their interests and major focus, undergraduate students and graduate students outside of the MLIS program have proven to be successful research assistants - in part due to the opportunities offered by the cohort training. Students can develop skills together as a cohort, allowing students to gain research assistance expertise quickly and effectively. Additionally, hiring students from multiple departments increases our outreach opportunities which is vital on a large campus.

In Winter and Spring 2022, we generally staffed Powell Library from 10am to 1pm and the Young Research Library from 1pm to 4pm from Monday to Thursday while the Virtual Research Help Desk was staffed from 10am to 4pm from Monday through Friday. Appointments are available in 30-minute time blocks. We generally aim to have two LSRAs staffing each of the desks at any given time. In total, this was 108 work hours shared by approximately 25 LSRAs. On average, each LSRAs worked between 4 and 5 hours on the desk, though additional hours were available via teaching and project work. As one measure of scale, if every 30-minute appointment available throughout the 10-week quarter were booked by unique users, we would be able to serve 2160 learners, which would amount to a little more than 6.7% of our undergraduate student population.

Challenges and Opportunities from the Supervisor Perspective

The different UCLA Library locations prior to the COVID-19 pandemic had primarily operated independently from one another, with loose coordination and

communication among different supervisors regarding training, standards, hours and modes of service, and staffing. Some consolidation and increased collaboration was already in place and evolving even before the pandemic among both student supervisors and the Research Functional Team, including joint shared general training with LSRAs across units in the Fall quarter, some limited shared interviewing and hiring of students, marketing of student positions to the Information Studies program, and improvements to shared documentation. However, there were still several differences in service models and approaches that required reconsideration once there was a switch to a temporarily all-virtual and then hybrid environment. Some larger units, such as Powell Library and Young Research Library, offered both drop-in desk service and scheduled consultations via online calendaring staffed primarily by LSRAs. Smaller subject-specific units including Arts and Music offered more limited drop-in desk service staffed by a combination of LSRAs, librarians, and library staff members. The Sciences libraries had already accomplished some rethinking and consolidation, combining efforts in planning and branding to patrons instead of retaining separate Biomedical, Science and Engineering, and Geology Library service points, offering an appointment-based consultation system instead. In all cases regardless of locations, patrons had the option of contacting either a subject specialist directly for assistance/consultation or using the regularly scheduled drop-in and/or scheduled consultation model with LSRAs and scheduled library staff. This remains the case under the current model.

Other libraries and affiliated units at UCLA, including Library Special Collections, the Law Library, the Rosenfeld Management Library, and Rudolph East Asian Library, have both historically and currently distinct approaches to research assistance and do not hire LSRAs or provide general reference assistance. While this

is related to the specificity of their collections, staffing, and primary patron bases, it poses some challenges for both training and continuity of research assistance. As the units providing peer-led research assistance at shared virtual and physical service points use a centralized calendar and shared email address for triaged inquiries, other units have their own workflows, contact information, and policies. This makes training LSRAs and new staff members in the nuances of appropriate referral for subject specialist assistance to these units all the more important and at times complicated. Accurate referrals are also increasingly important in other areas as more consultation appointments and email inquiries come in on topics related to scholarly communication and open access, e-resource troubleshooting and licensing, and data and digital scholarship tools, topics that are not always easily addressed by the Library's public website and directory.

In addition to both shared and unit-specific research assistance service points, LSRAs participate in project work in collaboration with supervisors and sometimes across units with other students. Projects can involve the co-creation of Libguides and other pathfinders, online and physical exhibits, social media, and collections work. During the switch to an all-virtual environment at the start of the pandemic, all project work necessarily changed to remote activities, some of which continues as a practice in the current hybrid environment and allows students more flexibility to work either on campus or from home. LSRAs at Music, for example, have unique work that continues along this vein, including preservation and access to audiovisual materials and managing (online) events. Audiovisual projects at Music have also become more collaborative across units, including a joint project involving preservation of rare content from Music, Arts, and Young Research Library, and participation by LSRAs from both Music and Arts. In more recent years, several

Libguides and digital exhibits have also involved collaborative work by LSRAs and subject specialists from across different libraries and disciplines.

Our legacy location-driven approach proved to be a significant challenge to a coordinated response in several ways. Although the Research Functional Team had been established, several locations had student supervisors that were not on the Research Functional Team. This limited the ability of the team to develop and cultivate a shared vision for research services. We started the pandemic without a clear vision for research services nor a shared understanding of service models or standards. An ad-hoc group formed out of necessity, but largely focused (understandably) on the technical aspects of making shared service points work. Without a clear directive or official leadership, the team progressed through consensus, often leading to elements of a shared vision intermittently. The task for members was to simultaneously think structurally *and* for their unit. At times, the location focus was a renewed obstacle in the new paradigm. For all supervisors involved, leading research assistance for their location was just a part of their job, and this was especially true for librarians at smaller locations. Our funding models were also location-based and an obstacle to combining efforts. While supervisors were enthusiastic about shared online service points, the concept of bringing budget lines together into one fund for LSRA staffing was a sticking point due to administrative and structural challenges.

LSRAs who began work pre-pandemic also had to adjust to many contingencies and uncertainties during the pandemic, adapting to a greatly increased use of Zoom, chat, and other digital tools to coordinate their projects and research assistance schedules, in addition to the stress of hastily coordinated online classes, concerns about personal and familial health, and the isolation of working

from home environments with a wide mix of technology and space access. Newer LSRA hires who joined the Library mid-pandemic had arguably a more seamless experience, with all interviews and general shared training conducted online via Zoom, supplemented by on-site and more unit-specific training both in-person and virtual, and on-site work with returning LSRAs. However, frequent changes in masking and access policies, as well as working with multiple supervisors, also necessitated frequent information sharing and polling of student comfort levels with staffing in person. While the current environment of hybrid shared services allows more opportunities for cross-unit connections with LSRAs at other units, it necessitates that student employees continue to juggle a number of interconnected tools for scheduling and communication, perhaps even more than during the all-virtual environment at the height of the pandemic. As more units, including Arts and Music libraries, move to slowly re-open some unit-specific physical desks for drop-in and scheduled on-site assistance, albeit with more limited hours than pre-pandemic, this adds another layer of scheduling for student employees and supervisors to manage. Other unknowns in this scenario are how to manage, fund, and assess service hours as more physical locations consider reopening research assistance desks outside of the larger libraries to address patron needs, even as we retain shared and popular virtual research consultations.

While legacy challenges remain and emergent challenges will always occur, the ongoing transformation of a more coordinated and centralized approach to research assistance and LSRA supervision has offered many opportunities for growth and a more scalable approach to our services. The first of these is a more coordinated, cross-unit approach to hiring and supervision, including the posting of a single job description across multiple units, rather than the other way around.

Multiple supervisors participate in the interview process with candidates, allowing for shared notetaking and discussion of candidates, and the creation of a more thoughtfully constituted cohort of LSRA's across several locations and disciplines. Shared training is a shared effort covering general information on key topics (the reference interview, library catalog, etc.), supplemented by unit-specific training on disciplines and physical spaces as determined by individual supervisors. Supervisors also share labor across units regarding general communication, supplemental training modules in our LMS, and other tasks needed regardless of location. Ongoing service provision, co-supervision, and staffing in physical and virtual spaces are also coordinated among all student supervisors, and often shared among multiple people in the larger library locations with service desks.

Crucial to ongoing training and learning effort has been the use of Slack channels for real-time inquiries from any LSRA or library staff member on a specific topic or point of referral, which has proven to be helpful in crowd-sharing of information and improving the speed of responses for peer-based sharing instead of using e-mail or relying on one supervisor who may or may not be available. Slack is used for shift check-ins between supervisors and LSRA's, but also to indicate both virtual and physical presence among LSRA peers. While not a substitute for archived documentation, e-mail, or in-person and/or Zoom meetings between LSRA's and supervisors, the increased use of Slack during the pandemic rendered it an essential communication tool for connecting both supervisors and student employees across units to address immediate questions as they come up. That has included requesting a supervisor's on-site assistance with patrons violating masking policy when in place, technical issues, and other points of concern while staffing either virtual or physical spaces. The use of cross-unit documentation and research

assistance tools, including Slack, Confluence (our internal wiki), and LibAnswers, has also given both LSRAs and supervisors a wider view of the breadth of inquiry across disciplines and specific library service points than was the case in the past.

Student Perspectives

Maggie Tarmey

During my time facilitating reference services in the 2021-2022 academic year, the cohort experience was vital to my growth and learning as a reference assistant. Shadowing returning reference assistants and learning from their experiences as both students and workers helped me become comfortable with the reference consultation experience beyond the weekly team training. Working with returning assistants helped me pick up on some of the smaller nuances of reference consultations to make patrons more comfortable, such as asking student patrons (particularly first-years and new transfers) how they are feeling about their coursework and schooling more broadly, and being able to refer students not only to the academic research resources that they seek, but also to student support services on campus when students indicate that they are in need of help beyond what the library can provide. These cues that I learned from returning members of the reference team have taught me to make my interactions during consultations less robotic and more personal, with the goal of making patrons feel comfortable when asking any type of question, as well as encouraging them to not hesitate to contact the team for further assistance at any time in the future.

Working across multiple service points with both in-person and virtual consultations has been an interesting experience. While the reference consultation

is fundamentally similar across all service points and modalities, there are subtle differences that influence the experience that are not immediately apparent. I have found that in-person consultations have the potential to encourage more “casual conversation” about how a patron is doing due to their physical presence as they take the time to approach the desk, sit down, and retrieve any materials they want to use during a consultation. This can include simple questions such as asking about how their day has been or how their classes are going.

However, in virtual consultations, the patrons are often ready and waiting with their materials prepared ahead of time on their device, and they are more likely to want to jump right in with their questions. This gives less space for personal interaction that would normally precede an in-person consultation. With the removal of physical transitional periods (patrons approaching or leaving the in-person desk) and that casual chatter that happens in those periods, patrons appear a bit more serious in the virtual environments due to the more structured feel. Recognizing this difference has changed my approach to virtual consultations, and I am intentional in incorporating some of that casual conversation within the virtual consultations in an effort to humanize myself and to make the space feel more welcoming and approachable. My goal with all reference consultations, whether virtual or in-person, is to help patrons feel comfortable asking questions of any kind, whether it is a patron who has never used library resources before and needs help on how to start the research process, or a patron with lots of experience who has very specific and narrow questions. I believe that patron comfort begins with feeling welcomed in the space as an individual, and focusing on how to best make that happen across both virtual and in-person environments is vital for reference consultation success.

Alohie Tadesse

I was hired as an LSRA in Fall 2020 while campus was still entirely remote. I do not think I would have acclimated as quickly to the UCLA Library and connect with my peers and staff had there not been cohort-grouped training. Over the course of the 10-week training period, my peers and I met with different departments of the library over Zoom, and because we were a small group, we were able to ask plenty of questions to staff from parts of the library that we would not encounter routinely. It was specifically the intimate cohort grouping that made me feel more comfortable asking questions and sharing my own personal experiences since everyone in that room would do the same every training session. While awkward and intimidating at first, Zoom provided a surprisingly casual platform for all of us to share candid aspects of our previous work and experience as learners. Shadowing other LSRAs and being able to assist them as they led appointments also helped me gain confidence in eventually leading my own appointments. In particular, it was the interdependent and supportive approach of my peers and staff that gave me the assurance that I could help students even outside my own academic areas of expertise.

I do think the virtual format has some mixed advantages and disadvantages. The "Screen Share" function makes demonstrating how to navigate the library site more visually apparent and easier to follow for patrons, as opposed to having them look at a screen from a distance in-person. However, I do notice that during virtual consultation appointments, there is an onus on the LSRA to consistently narrate each click they make while the patron watches, making the appointment feel more instructive rather than conversational. It can also be particularly challenging to gauge the patron's affect and level of satisfaction, since the "Screen Share" function

hides all other video windows. Recognizing this, I've made it a point to check-in with the patron every few steps, take in their feedback, and adjust my approach from there.

While working virtually is convenient and sometimes a more direct way of helping a patron, I have enjoyed being able to work in-person again. It has helped me feel more a part of the library community and more acquainted with the library as a physical space. I can locate departments, books, and special study areas more aptly for patrons, which I couldn't do working entirely remote. Overall, working in both physical and virtual spaces have given me invaluable experiences as a future librarian, but I think I may have underestimated how crucial the virtual service point is for some users. In my virtual appointments, I've met with patrons who were too ill or too bombarded with life obligations to physically visit the library who made it a point to say how thankful they were for the virtual help desk service. As a future librarian, I hope to make my patrons feel that they are supported in the virtual space, by not only offering resources for online access but also approachable and conversational reference services.

Conclusion

As we continue to evolve our research assistance services to meet changing community needs, it's equally important that we establish more structural ways to involve the LSRAs in that evolution. Assessment has certainly been one of the continual challenges of the ever-changing services and staffing models of the past couple years. Though we have been steadily gathering patron feedback about the quality, convenience, and preference in mode (virtual vs. in-person) for our services,

our assessment of the LSRA experience staffing the service has been more ad-hoc, mostly through scheduled and informal check-ins individually and as a group. Some supervisors have been using exit interviews for students who leave the position to gain more insight into the experience. Additionally, we have made great use of Google Forms for anonymized feedback, which has been particularly necessary to gauge the cohort's temperature in regard to public health and COVID-19 safety at our service points.

As we keep solidifying the parameters of supervision, scheduling, and spaces for the cohort, we look forward to moving increasingly further towards a more "peer-led" model. One of the many strengths of the cohort model is the opportunities it presents for the LSRAs to not only learn from multiple supervisors/mentors, but from each other. The cohort is comprised of both graduate and undergraduate students, many, but not all, of whom are enrolled in UCLA's MLIS program, providing for a rich network of subject, functional, and experiential expertise. As the LSRA accounts in this article demonstrate, they have invaluable frontline knowledge of patron needs and creative ideas of how to meet those needs. The potential for peer-to-peer learning and peer-to-peer leadership are endless: we hope to maximize that potential together with current and future cohorts.

References

Alexander, S. and Wakimoto, D.K. (2019), "Exploration of reference models in a public university system", *Reference Services Review*, Vol. 47 No. 1, pp. 21-36.

- Charbonneau, D.H. and Vardell, E. (2022a), "The impact of COVID-19 on reference services: a national survey of academic health sciences librarians", *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, Vol. 110 No. 1, available at: <https://doi.org/10.5195/jmla.2022.1322>.
- Charbonneau, D.H. and Vardell, E. (2022b), "Health sciences librarian research and instruction services in pandemic information environments", *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Vol. 48 No. 4, p. 102553.
- Cohn, S. and Hyams, R. (2021), "Our Year of Remote Reference: COVID19's Impact on Reference Services and Librarians", *Internet Reference Services Quarterly*, Vol. 25 No. 4, pp. 127-144.
- Crane, J. and Pavy, J.A. (2008), "One-Stop Shopping: Merging Service Points in a University Library", *Public Services Quarterly*, Routledge, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 29-45.
- Flierl, M. (2019), "Opportunities for Reference Services after Covid-19", *Internet Reference Services Quarterly*, Vol. 24 No. 3-4, pp. 59-63.
- Flanagan, P. and Horowitz, L.R. (2000), "Exploring new service models: Can consolidating public service points improve response to customer needs?", *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Vol. 26 No. 5, pp. 329-338.
- Gerbig, M., Holmes, K., Lu, M. and Tang, H. (2021), "From Bricks and Mortar to Bits and Bytes: Examining the Changing State of Reference Services at the University of Toronto Libraries During COVID-19", *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 1-10.

- Hoffner, C., Worsham, D., Myers, B., Osuna-Garcia, A., Bowline, E. and Pham, K. (2021), "Reference Revamp: A 1-2 Model for Training and Tiered Services", *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*, Vol. 40 No. 2, pp. 188-204.
- LaMagna, M., Hartman-Caverly, S. and Marchetti, L. (2016), "Redefining roles and responsibilities: Implementing a triage reference model at a single service point", *Journal of Access Services*, Vol. 13 No. 2, pp. 53-65.
- Lapidus, M. (2022), "Reinventing Virtual Reference Services during a Period of Crisis: Decisions that Help Us Move Forward", *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*, Vol. 41 No. 1, pp. 41-53.
- Radford, M.L., Costello, L. and Montague, K. (2021), "Surging virtual reference services: COVID-19 a game changer", *College & Research Libraries News*, Vol. 82 No. 3, p. 106.
- UCLA Newsroom (n.d.), "About UCLA: Fast facts", available at: <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/ucla-fast-facts> (accessed 15 November 2022).
- UCLA Office of Academic Planning and Budget (n.d.), "Enrollment", available at: <https://apb.ucla.edu/campus-statistics/enrollment> (accessed 15 November 2022).
- Venner, M.A. and Washburn, J. (2021), "A peer-to-peer service approach in academic libraries", *Journal of Access Services*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 149-172.