



More than a Help Desk: The Lasting Impacts of Reference Services

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the author's experience shadowing the Bobst reference desk, where seemingly simple, practical questions revealed the desk's deeper function. Rather than serving primarily as a site for complex research, the desk fosters reassurance, approachability, and student confidence. Drawing on relational cultural theory and professional guidelines, this essay argues that brief interactions are the basis to cultivate intellectual engagement, belonging, and successful independent research, demonstrating that the reference desk remains essential as a visible, human-centered hub within a largely digital academic world.

During my time shadowing the Bobst reference desk, I was initially surprised by how few substantive research questions were asked. Most inquiries were practical and immediate,

such as “Where is the bathroom on this floor?” “Can I use this pencil sharpener?” or “How can I reserve a study room?” At first glance, the reference desk appeared underutilized in its traditional sense; however, this apparent quietness ultimately reshaped my understanding of its function and importance within the greater NYU library ecosystem.

Although the desk was not constantly fielding complex research consultations, its presence was unmistakably vital as a point of stability and reassurance in the large, sometimes overwhelming, atrium of Bobst. According to the ALA’s *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers*, assurance is foundational to a successful reference interaction, as patrons must feel comfortable approaching a librarian for help.^[1] Even when students are not seeking in-depth research assistance, the visible availability of help communicates that guidance is accessible and that someone is ready to answer even simple questions.

The value of these brief interactions can be understood through the idea of relational cultural theory, where relationships are viewed not just as an additional element but as the actual site and source for learning.^[2] When a librarian brings positivity to a repetitive question, they are utilizing “energy” to transform a student’s stress into a sense of mutual empowerment. Research into undergraduate library use suggests that the friendliness of the reference staff is one of the best influences on a student’s confidence in their own research abilities.^[3] By being poised and ready to engage, a librarian can place a patron at ease in a situation that might otherwise be perceived as intimidating or confusing.^[4]

These interactions also foster a sense of “intellectual mattering,” which is described as the experience of knowing that one’s ideas or work have touched or influenced another person.^[5] When working at the reference desk, asking a student why they chose their specific research topic can foster critical thinking and strengthen the connection between the user and the library worker. This level of engagement helps students begin to see themselves as successful scholars, particularly if they are unfamiliar with research techniques that can help them be successful in a large academic library, such as Bobst.

The reference desk also plays a crucial role in acclimating users to the library as a whole, helping them learn how to inhabit the space through navigation and orientation. This is just as important as answering academic queries because a single, meaningful exchange can make a significant difference in a student's academic life and can encourage them to return in the future.^[6]

Despite the relatively low volume of traditional research questions I observed, the desk's function remains indispensable in a world growing ever reliant on digital tools. The physical presence of the desk reinforces the idea that the library is a responsive, relational space where help can still be present and human. It creates what instruction librarian Laura A. Sheets calls "Five Good Things" within the user: increased energy, knowledge, a sense of worth, a plan for action, and a desire for more connection.^[7] By inviting patrons to return if they have further questions, librarians ensure that the reference interview does not end prematurely and that the student feels the institution is relationally available to them.^[8] Ultimately, the desk is foundational because its value lies in its readiness and visibility, making the library feel navigable and welcoming to all.

In conclusion, the evolution of the reference desk from a purely transactional hub to a responsive and relational space reflects the lasting value of the library as a human institution. Even when the questions are simple, the act of being there, prepared to assist, remains central to how libraries effectively interface with their communities. By maintaining a physical presence, librarians transform routine navigational questions into foundational moments that foster a patron's confidence and sense of belonging. Ultimately, a ready and reliable human presence remains the most effective tool for assisting and encouraging academic success, and nowhere is this more apparent than at the reference desk at Bobst.

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[1] Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers," American Library Association, 2013.

[2] Laura A. Sheets, "Five Good Things: Incorporating Relational Teaching Practices in Reference Services," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2021): 16-19.

[3] JoAnn Jacoby and Nancy P. O'Brien, "Assessing the Impact of Reference Services Provided to Undergraduate Students," *College & Research Libraries* 66, no. 4 (2005): 324-40, <https://doi.org/10.5860/>

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[4] RUSA, "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance."

[5] Sheets, "Five Good Things."

[6] Sheets, "Five Good Things."

[7] Sheets, "Five Good Things."

[8] Donghua Tao, Patrick G. McCarthy, Mary M. Krieger, and Annie B. Webb, "A Case Study of an Onsite Reference Service Program at the School of Public Health," *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 97, no. 1 (2009): 34-40, <https://doi.org/10.3163/1536-5050.97.1.006>

REFERENCE DESK REFLECTIONS