Exploring the Research Help Service through Student Interviews

April 2019
Diane Granfield, Don Kinder, and Lisa Levesque

Study Outline and Methodology
Precursors: SWOC analysis and Cognitive Mapping Study

Summary

Three words capture the overarching themes of this study - regret, relief, and awareness.

Students expressed regret that they had taken so long to visit the research help desk or book an appointment, given that their experience there was very helpful. Before seeking help, they describe being “stuck” in their research or unable to complete it. Some did not seek help until they absolutely needed it, even if they knew about the service - one of our interviewees was even highly familiar with research help services. Some students talked about waiting too long to visit the research help desk, saying that they took “four years” or their full degree before getting help, or saying “I wish I went earlier.” Students were also emphatic in stating that the help they received was very useful and they would apply it in the future and would “absolutely” return for more assistance. One student said: “I’ll definitely utilize the research help desk again. It was so helpful and this is the best mark I’ve gotten on a paper.”

After they sought help, they were relieved. They found that library staff are approachable and nonjudgmental, and their anxiety about visiting the research help desk dissipated. They described the research help that they received was process-based, rather than based on a specific assignment. They were relieved that they now possessed the skills to complete their current work, and that they have also gained general research skills. They told us that they would apply the skills that they used for future academic work including their next assignment and for their lifelong learning, including future education. Several mentioned how they now thought of research with a different lens, which we might call information literacy. One student told us that “the librarian asked me a question that totally changed my perspective about my research...it gave [my research] the extra step it needed.” Students described learning about the structure of information, the cost of access, how to navigate information overload, how to evaluate resources, and how to synthesize their research questions and develop search strategies.

Students spoke a lot about the importance of awareness, including how they became aware of library research help. Several students became aware of the library through referrals from professors, peers, or by having a librarian speak in class. We suspect from their comments that students who have visited the research help desk or had an appointment will go on to become ambassadors for the research help desk in turn as “no one knows about it.” Students who have used the service have overcome a threshold of anxiety and are now aware of its value. The students in this study told us that the library should try to boost awareness among students, recommending more marketing and library presence at campus events.
**Recommendations**

- **Continue to build capacity in our Research Help staff**
  - Build capacity - impress on staff that while the appointments service is an important service for users, it’s not scalable to make this our default when we feel out of depth with some research questions.
  - Referrals out to see a specific librarian can create a bottleneck. By implication, it is frustrating for the users to be referred out. Additional training and confidence-building for reference staff can assist with giving all staff the skills that they need to assist researchers.
  - Students come with a specific topic in mind but end up leaving with generally applicable research skills.
  - After visiting the research help desk, students no longer think about research in quite the same light. Students develop information literacy, stating that they know more about information and the structure of information, the cost of access, how to navigate information overload, how to evaluate resources, and how to synthesize their research questions and develop search strategies.
  - As a reminder to reference staff - don't overdo it at the research help desk. Think about things in stages. Stratify - take it one step at a time. For example, we might provide students with some basic skills and approaches and send them off to do some reading, etc., then come back for further tweaking.
  - Assess the appropriate level of skill that students possess and teach to that level.

- **Market and boost the awareness of research help services**
  - These were emphasized by students and emerge as both a major theme of both this study and of the SWOC analysis.

- **Improve the visibility of the research help desk**
  - Leverage the location and physical presence of the research help desk. Seeing that this service is available helps students become aware of it, as does the visibility of the library at campus events. This study affirms the current desk model, where the research help desk is clearly demarcated from other service desks, works best for the needs of our users by making it clear where research help is available.
  - Awareness could still be increased through improved signage. This could emphasize that scheduling appointments are not needed for help. The service could be radically reframed as a walk-in service and made to be clearly visible as such. Ideas for this including increased signage, a banner, and/or messaging that includes testimonials or sample questions.

- **Continue to be present in the classroom, as this is an important way that students find out about Research Help Services.**
Referrals from professors and TAs and librarian presence in class are both important ways that students learn about the library.

- **Explore the idea of students as library ambassadors**
  - This study showed that students are enthusiastic about Research Help Services after they have used them, and we suspect, given their willingness to return for help and their sense of relief, that students will tell their peers about the service. How could we encourage this behaviour?
  - The strategies of other academic libraries should be considered eg. University of Waterloo Library Ambassador Program

- **Conduct User Experience Testing**
  - Students also find out about library services through the library website and Ask a Librarian chat.
  - Improving the usability of the website will be a key factor in boosting the awareness and visibility of Research Help services.

How did students know about Research Help Services? Students told us that this was often non-linear.

Coggle diagram
Appendix: Summary of Responses

Q3 When was the last time you used the reference desk?

It had been between a term and month since the students used the reference desk.

Q4 Was it for: an assignment?

Assignments that brought students to the research help desk include an even split of reports and essays, and to a lesser extent theses.

Q5 What was it you were trying to find?

Most respondents came to the research help desk to find help with a specific topic, while others came to find more scholarly sources or general research help.

Q6 How did you go about looking for the information? Prompt: Where did you look?

Most students started with a search of library resources - using Search Everything or library databases. Students also used Google or other resources they were familiar with, including class readings or pleasure reading. Several students noted that a librarian had visited their class or they had had an appointment with a librarian.

Q7 Where were you?

Most students were at home, but some worked on campus in the SLC, Library, and at TRSM. Some expressed a preference for quiet or private study space.

Q8 How long did you keep trying to find information before thinking that you might need to ask someone for help?

Most students took 1-4 weeks to seek help. They expressed that they took too long on their own before seeking help.

Q9 What made you seek out the person who helped you find your answer or think through your problem?

Students hit a wall and could continue no further on their own, and that is when they sought help.

Many students found out about the research help desk from other sources, including the library website, a professor, a librarian class visit, or referral from drop in.
Q10 How did you know who to contact in the library? How did you know where to ask for help?

They were referred from the drop in reference desk, library website, a professor, library instruction, or virtual reference.

Q11 Please describe for me what the librarian did when you asked for help?

All students were taught research process skills, including being taught search skills such as phrase searching. An example of this from one appointment: "She explained how to navigate around the site, by using my research topic as an example and pulled up the results. She also explained how to narrow my search through using keywords, and the filter option. Then showed me how to quickly preview if a large document has the information I need by reading the abstract or looking for keywords in the table of contents, and appendix." The research skills that students were taught were both practical and caused a change to their thinking and knowledge of information.

Q12 How did you feel while being assisted? How did if feel when you were finished?

Seven out of eight participants felt better after the assistance, using words like “relief” and “comfortable” and that they felt good. Only one respondent felt overwhelmed, which was a result of the amount of literature encountered.

Note: Reminder - don't overdo it at the research help desk. Think about things in stages. Stratify - one step at a time.

Q13 Is there a context you would find yourself asking for help from a librarian in the future?

All student replied that they would ask for help from a librarian in the future. Some specified that they would do this for similar assignments or their next assignment, while others suggested they would visit to take research further or if they find themselves getting “stuck.”

Some of these results were emphatic, with students saying that they would “absolutely” or “definitely” visit, with some student saying “oh my god, yes” they would visit again.

Q14 With hindsight, if you had it to do over again, tell us how you would look for information for this assignment/question?

Their encounter with research help services gave students an awareness of the support they can get early on. Several respondents stated that they would start with library staff or databases early in their research process going forward.

Q15 What did you learn from your visit at the research help desk / appointment?
Students learned from their visit that we are here to help and that we don't judge. Subjects also learned about information generally and became more information literate or metaliterate. They described where to find information, the cost of information, research processes, and reflected on their own information seeking processes.

Q16 Where will you use what you learned?

Research services had an impact on students, who commented that they would use what they learned for their next assignments, including all future research. Students also talked about the impact of research help services on their lifelong learning, including graduate education and work.

Q17 At what point in your search did you contact the librarian?

Students sought librarian help after they were stuck in their research. This happened when they were unable to find sources or did not know about resources, had issues with their topic, and so on.

Q18 Can you talk about any difficulties you may have encountered when asking a librarian for assistance?

Some students talked about issues related to booked or to being referred out a number of times. As an implication for research services, referral out to see specific librarian can create a bottleneck. By implication, it is frustrating for the users. Additional training and confidence-building for reference staff can assist.

Student expectations for research help were sometimes incorrect. One student wasn’t prepared for the appointment and didn’t know how much preparation was needed, while another didn’t know about the drop in service and believed that an appointment was necessary to obtain help.

Some students also talked about the initial anxiety in seeking research help. Some also discussed issues that are inherent to working with information, including the difficulty of dealing with too much information and the difficulty of synthesizing and articulating a research question. One student noted that it was uncomfortable to ask for help as they had never done it before, but “desperate times call for desperate measures.”

Q 19 Tell us how librarians can be more approachable.

The students talked less about how librarians acted or appeared and more about how they became aware of library services as a measure of approachability. Students noted that professors who recommend librarians impact how they feel about approaching librarians. Librarian instruction is a way to boost awareness of the services. The visibility of the reference desk and library presence at events also helps. Students recommend that the library increase marketing and boost an awareness of help.

Q 20 I’d like to ask if there’s anything you would like to add.
When asked if they had anything else to add, students again emphasized the importance of more marketing and a need to hire more librarians.