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Do the Statistics Match Reality? Accuracy of Recorded Reference Transactions at a Joint Academic/Public Reference Desk

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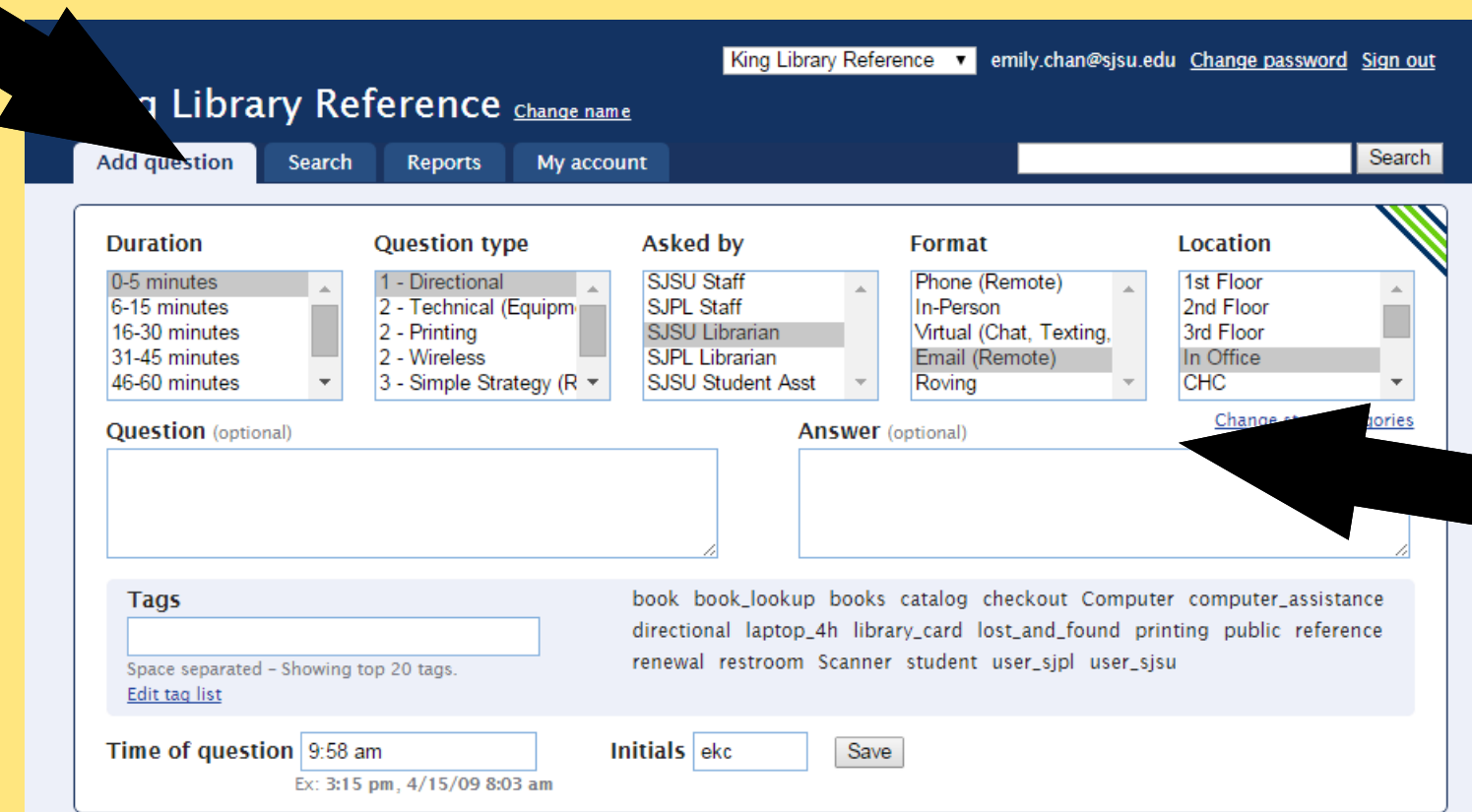
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Abstract

There have been many changes in how libraries are recording and quantifying the work performed at the reference desk. Instead of collecting uninformative hash marks, many libraries have moved towards electronic collection of reference statistics.

The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library has begun to collect all reference transactions through the online reference tracking system, Gimlet. These numbers are aggregated and supplied to various agencies to demonstrate library impact.

Since the implementation of the online tracking system, a decrease of reference transactions has been noted. This project seeks to shed some light on this topic by comparing a series of in-person observations of the work performed at the desk to the corresponding recorded transactions in the online program.



Research Methodology

All reference interactions at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library are recorded in the online, reference tracking software system Gimlet. Individuals staffing the 2nd floor Reference Desk are asked to enter their interactions in the software system to ensure accurate statistics.

The author unobtrusively observed the 2nd floor Reference Desk at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library for five one-hour shifts during the months of October and November. All interactions that library users had with staff were noted, including questions that came via the telephone.

As library users approached the desk, the author noted the time, question format, and the staff member who interacted with the user. After an individual left the desk, the author cross-referenced the library's online reference statistical tool, Gimlet, to verify inclusion in the database.

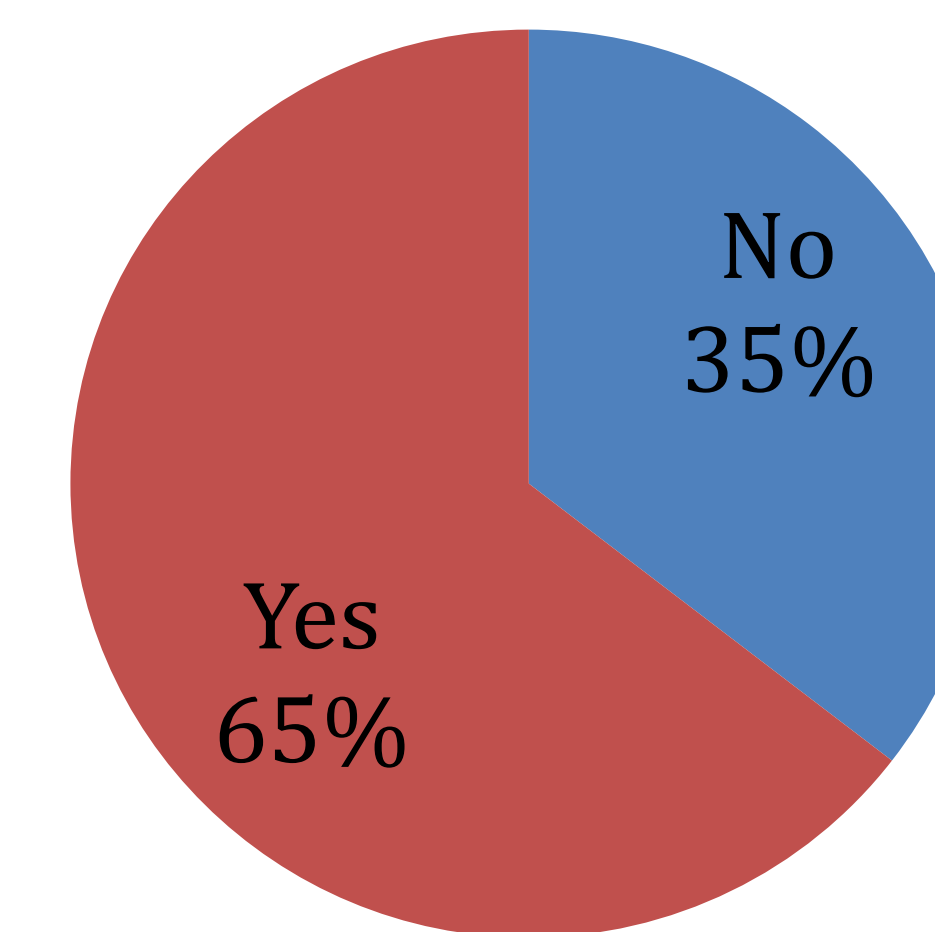
The author's assumption was that every exchange with a library user constituted a reference interaction.



Results

- * There were a total of 79 interactions over five observed hours.
- * Over the course of the five hours, fourteen staff members were observed.
- * Of the total 79 interactions, 28 or 35% were not entered into Gimlet.
- * Many of these unrecorded interactions occurred near shift changes (top or bottom of the hour).

Percentage of Recorded Transactions



Study Limitations

- * The author observed only five one-hour shifts and was subject to human error.
- * The distance from the desk prevented the author from verifying that the exchange constituted a reference interaction
- * Hearing the telephone and ascertaining the nature of the interaction (internal vs. external concerns) were difficult.
- * Four individuals were observed multiple times, which may have skewed the results.

Conclusions

- * In this limited study, 35% of observed interactions do not appear to be recorded.
- * There may be a high degree of under-reporting at this service point.
- * Training, emphasizing the importance of recording, and promoting a culture to document transactions may help in ensuring future accuracy of statistics.