

I completed my live reference desk assignment at the Monroe Library, the main library at Loyola University New Orleans. I chose to visit Loyola University because that is where I earned my bachelor's degree in communications. Since I was a commuter student, I spent a lot of my time in between classes at the library, and I was never disappointed in my time spent there. I was always impressed with the staff and resources of the library, and I attended Loyola when it was chosen as the best academic library in 2003 by the Association of College & Research Libraries. To me, that was a sign that my university library was something special.

Seeing this library from the other side of the desk—from behind the reference desk—was a great opportunity, and I learned a lot about my alma mater, the way academic libraries work, and the way that Loyola's values shape the day-to-day operations of Monroe Library.

I was stationed at the reference desk from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on July 5, 2006, and was able to meet and talk to many people who work at the library as well as other members of the campus community.

When I arrived, Trish Del Nero, the library's reference coordinator, welcomed me and warned that we probably wouldn't see too many reference transactions. Even though Loyola was offering special summer semesters to make up for time lost due to Hurricane Katrina, the reference desk was not being utilized a great deal. She remarked that the reference desk is a great thing, but she felt that the workers in circulation probably answer a lot of questions that were more suited to the reference desk. She was not bitter about this or had any sort of us (reference) versus them (circulation) that I have read about in various pieces of library literature; she seemed to feel that circulation was in a better physical position to answer questions and were available more often. And at times, Del Nero remarked, the reference staff places signs on the reference desk guiding people to the circulation desk when they need reference help because she cannot justify stationing a librarian at the desk when no one comes for help during that worker's shift.

Loyola University is a small university, so it is easy to get to know people. Because Del Nero and I were not being approached by any patrons, other members of the campus community came to the desk for general conversation with us. Most, obviously, were wondering who I was, but after the initial introductions, Del Nero and the person began having a great conversation; it was obvious that they knew each other well and enjoyed talking to each other. Not all of these were other library employees, and it was impressive to see so many different types of people come to the reference desk because they like the conversation. The library definitely has a friendly atmosphere, and this is important to note because it is more likely that people will think of the library as a resource when they need information when they already have had a positive attitude toward it.

Del Nero was able to show me some of how the administrative parts of her job work, such as scheduling staff and posting messages to the library's staff-only wiki—a type of web site that allows users to easily update and change information found on it. The Monroe Library also plays a large part in the university's use of the Blackboard software, which was interesting to me as I assumed that it was always the technology departments of universities that administered the software. To keep track of reference questions, a clipboard with various categories is kept by the reference desk. The library staff marks who the question came from (student, faculty, and staff) and what type of question it was.

I was also shown how they use a virtual reference service, something that I have never been directly exposed to before. Because Loyola is a Jesuit University, it provides this service with other schools that are in the Association of Jesuit Colleges & Universities; each school has a time to virtually staff this reference desk, and students from any of the schools in this partnership can ask questions of the librarian on duty. Del Nero said that it is a good service, but it can become confusing trying to navigate the web sites of schools that you are not familiar with.

The Monroe Library seems to be attuned to the needs of its students. There is a small Starbucks Coffee area near the entrance to the library, which is convenient to students, staff, and faculty using the library. There is also a room near the front of the library that has a large television and a lot of movable furniture in it. Del Nero said this is the “Living Room,” and students, staff, and faculty can reserve it for special presentations. When it is not reserved, people can go there to relax and watch the television.

As Del Nero was giving me a tour of the above two areas, we were joined by Deborah Poole, the library’s public service coordinator. We discussed the use of computers in the library. While there are two sizable computer labs in a separate part of the library, there are a number of computers in the library itself that the university community can use to surf the Web or use Microsoft Office software on. Both said that a lot of their questions come from people needing help on the computers and recognized this as a growing trend.

They are also considering moving the location of the reference librarian to be closer to the circulation desk. Currently, the circulation desk is immediately when you enter the library, while the reference desk is a bit further into the library and its view is blocked by large columns. Del Nero is hoping that more patrons will utilize the reference services if it is moved closer to where most of the patron interaction is currently occurring. This was another instance of Del Nero discussing ways that the library could better serve the university community. While discussing this, she commented that she was concerned about the future of reference services in the academic arena, but we did not get a chance to discuss this further since she had a meeting to attend. I would like to read more about this and see if it is a common sentiment among librarians in general, something specific to academic librarians, or just the feeling that Del Nero has gotten in her personal experiences.

Del Nero left to attend her meeting, and Teri Gallaway came to staff the desk as she left. Gallaway soon had to load more paper in the printers and help someone obtain a copy card. She said that she does that sort of thing a lot.

Talking to Gallaway was a different sort of experience than talking to Del Nero, but the time that I spent with her was also educational. Gallaway is a recent graduate of the University of Michigan’s School of Information. She was able to give me some pointers on the transitions that need to be made between school and work, such as not limiting myself to one area geographically. She remarked that she had seen many library school graduates unable to find jobs because they were unwilling to move to a different location.

Gallaway handled the reference transaction that I saw. I was able to pick up on a number of techniques that I remembered reading about during the transaction. First, she listened to the patron and made it known to the patron that she was actually listening by the comments she made and the questions that she asked. She also included the patron in the search and allowed the patron to point out the things that she had already done and also guide the search to what she knew would be most beneficial to her needs. Gallaway made sure that the patron left with all of the information she needed to conduct similar searches for herself (at the patron’s request) and reminded her to return to the desk if she ran into any trouble.

Although there was just this one reference transaction while I observed at the reference desk at the Monroe Library at Loyola University New Orleans, I learned a lot about the role of reference in a university from talking to the librarians. They were very honest about their jobs and librarianship in general. It would have been nice to be able to better observe them “in action,” as you will, but the opportunity to talk to them about their feelings on the subjects that I have described above was a great one.

I left with a better understanding of how an academic library is structured and actually works on a day-to-day schedule. It was also impressive to hear all of the staff I talked to sound so excited about trying to make the library better for the university community.