

BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

Reference assessment and evaluation. Edited by Tom Diamond and Mark Sanders. Binghamton, N.Y.: Haworth Information Press, 2006. 200 pages, includes index (soft cover). ISBN 978-0-7890-3193-8. US\$19.95.

Reference assessment and evaluation is a collection of 10 articles published simultaneously as Vol. 2, No. 2–3 of the journal *Public Services Quarterly*. In their introduction, editors Tom Diamond and Mark Sanders highlight the increasing importance of high quality reference services and consequently the need for assessment and evaluation of those services as librarians compete with Google and other search engines for users' attention. Each chapter presents a case study from a North American college or university library and reports on the measures taken to assess or evaluate selected aspects of reference services and the respective successes or problems encountered using those methodologies. A variety of methods are presented, including the provision of standard evaluation forms following reference or instructive interactions, administration of quizzes to assess knowledge retention by staff, peer review of reference transactions, and the application of statistics for determining staffing levels at the reference desk. Three of the papers focus on the evaluation of virtual reference services, looking either at patron satisfaction or staff attitudes toward the service.

Most articles follow a standard format with introduction, literature review, methodology, and results sections. Each paper begins with a useful summary and list of keywords used for indexing the articles. Figures and graphs aid readers in visualizing the study outcomes. Many articles include sample evaluation forms, checklists, or questions either in-text or as appendices. I especially liked the appendix presentation in Smyth and MacKenzie's article, "Comparing virtual reference exit survey results and transcript analysis: a model for service evaluation". The authors not only provide the questions they used to analyze virtual reference transcripts but also include an interpretation of each response.

Only one study, "Evaluating a chat reference service at the University of South Alabama's Baugh Biomedical Library", was undertaken in a health sciences library. Although the remaining studies have been conducted almost exclusively in academic settings and therefore will be of most interest to reference heads in institutional libraries, elements of each study can potentially be applied to various health science libraries. The practical examples and useful tips can be adapted to any library milieu. The most useful chapters will therefore depend on your individual context.

While many standard methodologies are represented, including patron surveys and statistical analyses, a couple of innovative methods of assessment are notable. "Floating and idea: peer observations across the Mississippi" recounts a joint project between the Augustana College Library in Illinois and St. Ambrose University Library in Iowa. Librarians armed with an evaluation checklist traveled to the other in-

stitution to observe and assess their peers in action at the reference desk. Summaries of personal and institutional service ratings were provided to the individual librarians. In addition to learning new teaching methods, marketing, and resources, the librarians involved felt that one of the biggest benefits was the opportunity to network and interact with their peers. It would be interesting to initiate such a project between a university library and a hospital library to gain perspective on each other's environments and the respective challenges each presents.

The article "Student assistant training in a small academic library" also describes a novel approach. Instead of simply being offered a session of verbal instruction, the assistants were assessed through biweekly quizzes to improve their knowledge of available resources. The study showed both levels of retention, assessed using a cumulative quiz, and student enjoyment of quizzes to be quite high. This type of training can be provided anywhere in any type of environment and not simply in training for reference provision. For instance, new circulation staff can be assigned quizzes to develop their familiarity with policies and procedures. The only drawback of this system is the time required to develop the quizzes. Such novel approaches demonstrate the extensive possibilities that assessment programs can offer.

At a time when evidence-based librarianship is becoming increasingly recognized as a necessary practice, this book is very timely. The Canadian Health Libraries Association statement of values includes the assertion, "We continuously improve and update our professional knowledge and skills" (www.chla-absc.ca/assoc/chlawhat.html). What better way is there to improve our services than by evaluating what we already have, determining what works and what doesn't, and adapting our offerings to best suit the needs of our users? However, because of budgetary and time constraints, exchange of ideas and information is essential so that we can draw on the experiences of others and use them as benchmarks for our own programs. Books such as this contribute to that exchange. A message I took away from this work is that you don't have to think of assessment as a huge project but should view it as a step-by-step process. The full range of reference services does not need to be revolutionized overnight; incremental modifications as technology and user needs change are all we need to ensure that our clients receive the quality of service they deserve.

For a description and complete listing of topics covered in the book, please see the Haworth Press Web page at www.haworthpressinc.com/store/product.asp?sku=5873.

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