Undergraduate Research Assistants at Hope College

Jessica Hronchek
Hope College, hronchek@hope.edu

Rachel Bishop
Hope College, bishop@hop.edu

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14

Undergraduate Research Assistants at Hope College

Jessica Hronchek and Rachel Bishop

In response to changing desk traffic and shifting librarian responsibilities, Van Wylen Library at Hope College made the decision to change its Research Desk model to one in which undergraduate Research Assistants primarily staff the desk and research librarians are available on call. To best support this modification, the Research Desk supervisors implemented an improved hiring procedure, an updated training program, and a new referral process for research questions at the desk. Initial assessment shows that the model generally works, though we continue to try to improve Research Assistants’ judgment on when to refer questions to librarians and to foster a collaborative dynamic between student Research Assistants and librarians.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Hope College is a private liberal arts institution in Western Michigan. It is a residential campus of approximately 3,400 undergraduate students with over 35 majors in disciplines ranging from dance and philosophy to nursing and engineering. Its student population draws primarily from the Midwest, with 69 percent of students coming from Michigan and an additional 20 percent from surrounding states, but others come from throughout the United States and from over 30 countries. Hope is a school where undergraduate research has a strong tradition, and faculty–student collaborative research is an established part of the curriculum in all disciplines. For example, Hope receives more science grant funding for undergraduate research than any other liberal arts college in Michigan. At the College’s annual Celebration of Undergraduate Research and Creative Performance, over 300 students present posters on original research projects they produced the previous year. Students frequently have the opportunity to work alongside faculty through summer research programs and regularly coauthor papers with faculty. Building on this strength, our recently established collegewide strategic plan outlines a goal for all students to have some sort of individualized experiential learning opportunity that supports their major and vocational interests. Parallel to this focus is Hope’s mission to cultivate leadership and service traits within our students. Both of these are areas in which the Library can serve a key role through curricular partnerships, internships, and student employment.
BACKGROUND OF THE PROGRAM

Since at least the 1990s, Van Wylen Library has employed undergraduate assistants on the Research Desk, which is staffed all hours that the Library is open. These students worked collaboratively with research librarians, co-staffing during business hours and evenings and providing solo coverage during the quieter times of late nights and most of the weekend. Because of the independent nature of this job, these Research Assistants were traditionally hired based on their strong research skills and received on-the-job training shadowing librarians.

Beginning in 2014, the research and instruction team began to reconsider the current model for Research Desk services. We noted two major trends that became the rationale for changing our approach. The first was the decreasing traffic to the physical Research Desk. Though patrons still seemed to greatly prefer a personal visit to the desk as opposed to a distance reference communication (e-mail, chat, text, and phone are all available), the overall number of questions received at the desk was declining substantially, and the majority of questions were categorized as directional, technology-related, or basic lookup or item access questions, most of which could be capably fielded by student Research Assistants. Less than a quarter of interactions were considered to be research questions.

The second trend was a shift in focus of the research and instruction team. The members of this group increasingly found that their time was devoted to course-focused instruction, prescheduled individual research consultations, and efforts to increase campuswide integration of information literacy. Librarians were beginning to experience burnout from having large blocks of time committed to sitting at a quiet desk when their time could be devoted to other initiatives. Because of this, the team began to investigate if an on-call desk service model would allow for better use of librarian time. Could student Research Assistants be trained in a triage model that allowed them to independently handle most simple queries and refer more complex research questions to a librarian? This model wouldn’t be jarring within the broader context of our Library. Most of the other service points, including the Circulation Desk, a Media/Technology Desk, and a Writing Center, employ undergraduates as the primary face greeting patrons, with librarians or paraprofessionals providing assistance as needed. In reviewing best practices at other institutions, we found several other examples of libraries that had implemented the triage model of service, one in which student assistants help their peers with most basic questions, such as directions, printer problems, and known item searches, while referring more complex research questions to librarians (Massey-Burzio, 1992; Sonntag & Palsson, 2007; Stevens, 2013; Peters, 2015).

Given the factors described earlier and the close proximity of librarians’ offices to the desk, the department decided to experiment with an on-call model. Librarians would continue to staff the desk the same number of hours as before but could stay in their offices. Student Research Assistants would staff the desk all hours that the Library was open and handle most basic questions but would consult with a librarian for more complex research queries.

In addition to allowing for more flexibility in librarian workload, this decision also had the potential to capitalize on the strengths of peer learning. By training Research Assistants who were comfortable and confident navigating library systems, they could serve as ambassadors of Van Wylen Library to other students, both during and outside of their work time. Some students visiting the Library may be more comfortable asking a fellow student a question than asking a librarian, opening the door to research conversations
that might not happen otherwise (Cotton, Kilner, & Oliver, 2014). In reaction to this decision, the student co-supervisors identified three areas of initial focus: improving hiring practices, cultivating a teamwork-based culture and referral model, and increasing the level of formal training to replace the informal on-the-job learning previously relied upon.

The Research Desk at Van Wylen Library has always relied heavily on recommendations for the Research Assistant positions. Since we only hire students who are sophomores or older, we contacted departments where we knew that the faculty would have early evidence of students’ research abilities. We also solicited recommendations from the Phelps Scholars, a diversity program at Hope in which students from a range of backgrounds live together during their freshman year, are placed in the same First-Year Seminar sections, and participate in other research, community service, and group activities together. We recruit from this group of students in order to ensure a diverse face for the Research Desk in the hope that this would encourage students of all backgrounds to feel comfortable asking for help.

We try to do most of our hiring at the end of spring semester, in preparation for the fall semester and to assist with summer coverage. Because of the popularity of off-campus study, we sometimes need to hire for the spring semester to keep the 11 to 12 students needed to staff the desk all hours. Most Research Assistants, once hired, remain with us until graduation. We try to maintain a balance of sophomores, juniors, and seniors to avoid a large influx of inexperienced assistants at any one time. Though we don’t hire explicitly for disciplinary balance, we usually end up with a wide mixture of majors.

Based on conversations with another institution that had moved to a peer-assisted research model, we decided to make the application process more complex in order to narrow down to particularly motivated students. After receiving a list of student recommendations from faculty, we contacted these students and asked if they were interested in applying, providing them with the required application materials. A few students contacted us directly with interest in the position, and we included them in the application process. In addition to filling out a general application and schedule, we asked students to provide an example of a recent research paper and a statement describing why they wanted to work at the Library Research Desk. During the follow-up interview, we asked them to describe their research process for their example paper, including the aspects of research in which they felt most confident and where they had difficulties. We also asked them to come prepared to demonstrate their favorite library research tool, so that we could get a sense of what they were already comfortable doing. This interview process gave us the opportunity to ask leading questions and establish their general level of comfort with the Library. These research-focused questions were paired with questions designed to ascertain their customer service experience and reliability as independent workers (Appendix 14–1). The application method helped us feel confident in the cohort of students we were hiring under the new model.

In addition to revising our hiring process, the team also spent time fleshing out documents that clarified the overall mission of the desk and our vision for the referral model. We were very concerned with maintaining an excellent level of library service and also creating a culture where our research assistants were very comfortable teaming with librarians. This had been easy to cultivate when librarians sat with students for the majority of shifts. We didn’t want to lose this connection because of both physical and figurative office doors. Our new and revised documents included the following:

- A new Research Desk mission statement (Appendix 14–2)
- A document clarifying the types of questions we wanted Research Assistants to feel very comfortable answering on their own and the types of questions that warranted a librarian referral
• Methods for the referral process to librarians (whether in person or via email when a librarian isn’t in the building)
• Best practices for creating connection and contact between Research Assistants and librarians

TRAINING AND PREPARATION OF RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

Formalized training was an important element for the new desk model. As mentioned earlier, previous Research Assistants were trained through a much more organic process. After hiring, they attended a brief group orientation on general employee policies and walked through a training checklist with the librarians who worked the desk with them. The training checklist consisted of a list of every element that was included in the job, from printer maintenance to searching our catalog and databases. Because multiple librarians were involved in the training of each new student, we used a checklist to keep track and make sure that every item had been covered verbally once. After that, they learned on the job by shadowing librarians.

For the new model, we implemented a multilevel training program intended to provide exhaustive coverage and repetition of the primary skills needed for the desk. It involved an expanded orientation session for all Research Assistants, a training checklist for new students, weekly practice sessions with different assignments for new and returning students, librarian mentors, librarian-led workshops on more advanced research skills, and a group meeting at mid- and end-semester (Figure 14.1). Some of these ideas, as well as some of our hiring practices, came as a result of conversations with Grand Valley State University Libraries, which had recently moved to a peer research consultation model at its new library (O’Kelly, Garrison, Merry, & Torreano, 2015).

![Image of the training workflow](image)

Figure 14.1 Research Assistants training workflow.
Research Assistants Training Workflow

For a number of years, new and returning research assistants were required to attend a two-hour orientation at the beginning of the year that primarily focused on employee policies. The new orientation was lengthened to three hours and included the following: ice breaker exercises, a discussion about Library mission, practice on the reference interview and referral model, and policy overview (Appendix 14–3). After general icebreakers, we shared the Research Desk mission statement as well as the Van Wylen Library mission statement, and we talked about the Research Desk’s place in the overall structure of the Library. The students broke into groups and considered what the mission statement meant to them and what it meant to them to be student ambassadors for the Library and for good research. We then discussed the kinds of questions that typically came to the desk and described what questions could be handled by Research Assistants and what questions merited a referral. We talked about the art of the reference interview, emphasizing the importance of asking good questions, and brainstormed the kinds of questions they could ask. We then gave them sample research questions and had them create and perform mock research interviews in pairs. Almost all of the questions were of the type that needed to include a librarian, so they practiced the referral process. The meeting ended with an overview of desk employee policies and a summary of the training plan for the rest of the semester.

We retained the training checklist because it was a good way to ensure that each new Research Assistant received a basic orientation to all the elements of the job. This ranged from printer and fax supplying and troubleshooting to an introduction to basic research tools and to Library policies and emergency procedures. Much of this material was repeated in an online Research Desk Manual created in LibGuides. In addition to being instructed on all of the items on the checklist, we also asked students to read through the manual and refer to it as needed. This initial checklist training took place over approximately the first two weeks that students worked, led by whichever librarian happened to be on call with each new student. Each student had their own copy of the checklist that was kept in a binder at the desk so that they and all the Research and Instruction librarians knew what remained to be completed.

The first piece of follow-up training was weekly practice exercises that the students completed on their own (e.g., see libguides.hope.edu/palsampletraining). These exercises focused on the known item searches that we wanted our students to be comfortable navigating: looking up books in our catalog and discovery tool and finding them on the shelf, helping students navigate our link resolver from databases and discovery tool, and locating items from citations. Students also practiced developing good keyword searches, exploring subject specific databases beyond the discovery platform, and creating basic citations in several formats. Both new and returning student assistants had exercises to complete, and we plan that every semester students will have exercises that serve to refresh key skills and offer more advanced practice. The exercises were outlined using a LibGuide, and answers were submitted via printouts, e-mails, Google Forms, and the online quiz-making tool classmarker.com. We continue to explore better ways to centralize these exercises, such as transitioning to our campus course management system, a tool that students are likely more familiar with.

These assignments were submitted to and graded by librarian mentors. The mentor arrangement was created to ease the training workload on the Research Desk supervisors and to encourage the kind of engagement that came more organically when students and librarians sat together on the desk. It also afforded the supervisors more insights into each
student’s strengths. The twelve Research Assistants were divided between four Research and Instruction Librarians (two of whom are the Research Desk supervisors). We asked mentor librarians to get to know their mentees and provide continuing education for these students as areas of need arose through questions and feedback gathered from the training exercises. This was done as each librarian saw fit, through formal or informal meetings with individual students, even through social activities outside of the Library in some cases. The librarians met on a regular basis to discuss the performance of the student assistants, to talk about any issues, and to review and assess our structure.

Each of the four research librarians also offered a workshop during the course of the semester. Workshops ranged in focus from a particular skill or tool (like searching for music scores or navigating LexisNexis) to broader sessions on the major database interfaces, and the conceptual framework for search strategies. Research Assistants were required to attend at least one of these workshops each semester, which gave us the opportunity to work with smaller groups of students on additional research skills. It also allowed librarians to share skills in their areas of expertise.

Finally, we held check-in meetings with the entire group of students twice during the semester. The end-of-semester meeting was a social gathering with food and crafts, to help encourage community among the Research Assistants. For our mid-semester meeting, students came with questions and experiences from the Research Desk, which we discussed as a group. This group conversation was particularly helpful as it allowed us to see that students were still not clear on what the referral model should look like. We were able to clarify this and provide follow-up communication after the meeting reminding them of the triage goals.

During this meeting we also highlighted a couple of areas that we wanted to focus on for improved service at the desk, particularly in chat reference. Because Research Assistants staff the desk all hours the Library is open, we have them serve as the first point of contact for most of our chat reference, referring complex research questions to librarians. As a part of our initial orientation we provided Research Assistants with training on best practices in chat reference, particularly with respect to professionalism and etiquette (Appendix 14–4). Because our chat service saves all transcripts, throughout the semester we consulted the transcripts to evaluate these interactions. We would occasionally point out a mistake to an individual Research Assistant, but we mostly used this information to create follow-up training that would benefit all Research Assistants. During the mid-semester meeting, we selected one particularly good chat transcript and shared it with the group, and had Research Assistants identify the features that made it a quality reference interaction. We then shared a couple of fake chat transcripts that highlighted some of the problems we had occasionally noted and had students evaluate these as well. The problems we tried to feature included:

- A lack of professional language
- Not answering chat questions punctually
- Incorrect answers stemming from not getting enough information from the patron
- Just providing links without trying to teach the patron how to find things for themselves
- Not referring patrons with complex research questions to a librarian

During the second semester a similar transcript evaluation exercise was incorporated into the weekly training exercises and was assigned and completed using an online forum in our content management system.
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAM

The Van Wylen Library hires 11–12 Research Assistants to staff the research desk for all 94 hours that the Library is open. During this time, students are scheduled to work 90- to 120-minute shifts, and most students work eight to ten hours a week. The desk is located close to the main entry of the primary campus Library, making it an easy stop for patrons first entering the building with questions. Other service desks in the Library will refer questions to the Research Desk, depending on the nature of the inquiries.

Although the Research Desk and research librarian offices are in close physical proximity to each other, it is essential that communication continues to occur between the Research Assistant and the on-call librarian in order to maintain a supportive working environment as well as to encourage and foster consistent referrals during normal business hours. One way we work to accomplish this is by a greeting system during shift changes; when research librarians are scheduled to be on call at specific times during the week, at night, and on weekends, Research Assistants are instructed to locate the on-call librarian at the beginning of their shifts, and, in turn, librarians greet the student assistant upon their shift changes. In addition, librarian mentors sometimes work with the student assigned to them during the course of a shift as time permits.

The manner in which referrals happen will depend on the type of question as well as the time of day. Librarians are on call during business hours, three hours per evening, Monday through Thursday, and three hours on Sundays. If a research question comes to the desk when a librarian is on call but not at the Research Desk, then the Research Assistants are encouraged to ask the librarian to come out. The desk contains two stations with swiveling computers; the students sit at the computer closest to the door, and the on-call librarian can either take over a prestarted search on that terminal, work with the patron on the second terminal, or invite the patron back to her office for a consultation-style meeting. Generally, we encourage librarians to handle these questions on the desk, because this provides additional training opportunities for Research Assistants. If a research question occurs during a time when librarians are not in the building, Research Assistants work with the patron to try to meet their information need, and then they are responsible for documenting each research transaction by referring the patron to librarians via e-mail. In these e-mails, they provide the patron’s e-mail address, summarize the question and the help that they provided, and offer any suggestions on what additional assistance they think the patron might need.

In addition to answering patron questions, other duties on a given shift might include working on training exercises to either improve or refresh their knowledge of library tools and research skills or completing any long-term projects assigned to them by librarians. They also refill the lab printers and tidy and maintain the stapler and supply table. Research Assistants who work when the Library closes are also responsible for teaming with student workers from other areas of the Library to perform the closing sweep. When not assisting patrons or performing these additional duties, they are allowed to do their own homework or reading.

Initially there was some concern among Library staff members when the librarians decided to redirect their time by moving toward an on-call model at the Research Desk. With a little education and communication about the intention for serving the academic community in a more proactive approach as well as our confidence in the skills, intelligence, and character of our student workers, most Library staff understood the necessity
for the healthy evolution of our service model. We communicated through staff meetings how we envisioned the on-call model would work and encouraged colleagues to provide feedback on its impact as the semester progressed.

**EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM**

At the end of the fall semester we polled the Research Assistants to get their opinions and to assess the effectiveness of our training program and the on-call model in general as it related to their confidence levels as peer mentors. We asked them to rate their feelings on the helpfulness of various training components including the beginning of the semester orientation, our mid-semester meeting, the checklist, the weekly practice exercises, our mentor program, and the workshops we provided. In addition, we asked them to express their views of our on-call system, how well supported they felt by the on-call model, how our training program helped them, and in what areas the program could be stronger. We received an excellent response rate as 11 out of our 12 students completed the survey. From our results, we learned that, out of all the training components we offered, students valued both the beginning-of-the-semester orientation and our mentor programs most. Students also favorably ranked the checklist training and our mid-semester meeting, but had mixed opinions on the helpfulness of the weekly practice exercises. The librarian workshops were not scored as highly as these other components.

When asked about the adequacy of our training program, many students mentioned that, although they felt more confident about the research process, they would have benefited more if a librarian had spent some one-on-one time with them, especially during the beginning of the semester, to go over the specific exercises and to model a reference interaction. In the words of one assistant: “I feel that the first year employees are missing out on a critical piece of training when the librarians are not at the desk. While they are on call and accessible, it feels like the new students are being cheated out of the close mentorship with the librarians.” This demonstrated to us that perhaps the artificially created mentoring relationships were not as effective as the organic ones that had emerged when librarians staffed the desk. Some students mentioned that the training exercises were too extensive and could have been given during the workshops. In general, however, Research Assistants felt very supported by the librarians and that, aside from some students needing more one-on-one attention at the beginning of the semester, most students felt that the new on-call model worked very well.

One problem identified through the feedback we received from our Research Assistants was that they were confused about when to answer a question independently and when to refer a patron to a librarian. Ironically, the extensive level of training students received emerged as a contributing factor in the lack of referrals to on-call librarians. One student summed it up very well while answering the question—How comfortable do you feel reaching out to the on-call librarians during your shift?—to which they responded “Pretty comfortable about asking but still unsure of when they should be involved because sometimes I feel confident enough to answer the research question but then I reflect on the situation later and I can’t help wondering if I should have asked a librarian to help.” Other students shared that they felt concerned that they were “interrupting” the on-call librarian when they came to get us, so we had to continue to remind them that this wasn’t the case.

In our conversations about this issue both during the planning period and throughout the semester, we frequently described it as “having our cake and eating it too.” We
wanted to have excellently trained Research Assistants who felt comfortable and confident in their own research abilities, but we also wanted them to call on librarian expertise regularly so that patrons still had access to librarians via the Research Desk and not just through prescheduled appointments. We wanted Research Assistants who were always learning more about library-based research and eager to share this knowledge with their peers, while also realizing that they were not mini-librarians. We think this balance is important because our institution prides itself on having close engagement between students and faculty in the learning and research process, and this includes interactions between students and faculty librarians. Also, it has been shown through studies like Project Information Literacy that students sometimes think that librarians are only available to help with certain kinds of research problems and we want to be clear that we are there for all stages of research (Head, 2013). We want this outreach to occur at all of our access points, both course-based library instruction and the Research Desk. This concern for cultivating student assistant independence while maintaining a level of librarian oversight comes up regularly in libraries transitioning to a triage model (Miles, 2013; Sonntag & Palsson, 2007; Peters, 2015). Having just begun our transition to this new model, we are still learning, and in the future, we will continue to evaluate, assess, and adjust our structure to best serve our students, be they patrons or assistants.

One assessment that we had hoped to do was to send a survey to patrons who had been referred via e-mail to librarians during times when a librarian wasn’t in the building. This seemed to be an easy way to collect feedback on our Research Assistants’ performance when they weren’t collaborating directly with a librarian and to measure the success of the combined peer/librarian service offered through virtual referrals. However, we received very few desk referral e-mails from our Research Assistants, too few to warrant a survey. End-of-semester analysis of our desk statistics showed that during the night and weekend times, there were only 37 questions recorded as research-oriented, which is one explanation for the lack of referrals. A second reason is likely the uncertainty our Research Assistants felt when a question necessitated a referral. In the future, we need to decide if a more formal measure of patron satisfaction should be taken to assess all Research Desk encounters.

**IMPLICATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

Just as Hope College holds a high regard for close faculty–student collaboration along with the creation of independent lifelong learners, the Library staff also tries to create a balance between collaboration and leadership for our Research Assistants. Our recent attempts at increasing the responsibilities of our student workers through our on-call model have proved that our students are bright, capable, very willing to learn, and helpful in guiding their peers in their areas of research. The hiring criteria, and more specifically the essays we initiated, seem to have been a successful tool in weeding out those students who are only interested in working here on a superficial basis, ensuring a group of students who truly desire to help and educate their peers.

Our student assistants seem to be learning the triage model, responding favorably to our support of their efforts. Feedback we received from some included:

*Quote 1:* I feel really comfortable because I feel that the librarians are always there and willing to help.
Quote 2: Because of how accessible the librarians are, I am always comfortable asking for help. Also, I do know the extent to my knowledge and the scope of work, so if there is anything that is beyond me, I feel comfortable asking the librarian for assistance or explanation.

Moving forward, we think that the on-call model is a positive mechanism for helping our Research Assistants gain confidence in communicating with and assisting other students. It has also benefited Research and Instruction Librarians in giving them more flexible time to work on other outreach projects when the desk is quiet. The challenge we face is a continued desire to find balance between empowering our students to be confident and capable peer educators while keeping librarians an accessible part of "just in time" research support. For the institution contemplating this model, we encourage you to have conversations about what responsibilities you want your students to have, what the tipping point will be for a referral to a research librarian, and how you plan to train your students clearly in this model. This should include good training in the art of the reference interview and helping peer assistants ask good questions. One of the more challenging things for students to catch is that a complex need can be buried behind a simple patron question.

NEXT STEPS

By aligning the Research Desk’s goals with the missions of the Library and the College as well as with our strategic plan, we have developed an intensive and supportive structure that has nurtured and created a self-confident student work force. At the same time, we realize the necessity of balance, so in the future we plan to be more vigilant in our endeavors of providing a solid physical presence to encourage Research Assistants as well as to clarify the sometimes conspicuously hidden depths of inquiry that tend to dwell within a seemingly innocent research question. Our goals are really to elevate not only our patrons’ knowledge, but more so, to increase the curiosity and scope of our student assistants’ repertoire. This requires allowing them to tackle the kinds of advanced searching that teaches them these skills while reminding them that the burden of responsibility does not fall entirely on them. We intend on doing this by spending more individualized time with each of our Research Assistants in addition to the formalized training sessions and workshops. This will help them become increasing aware of the support we provide through this gentle guidance process so that they continue to thrive and grow as the intelligent young adults that they are. One way to achieve this is through the adaption of our on-call model to a slightly modified form. Librarians will be encouraged to not only check in at the beginning of each shift but to spend more time with each Research Assistant during their shifts in order to answer their questions, model reference interactions, and encourage increasing librarian referrals. They have the liberty to move back to the on-call model when there is less traffic in the Library.

We continue to fine-tune the training program, particularly the training exercises, to create a greater variety of assignments, some of which they will continue to do independently and some of which will require engaging with a librarian to complete. The hope is that this will both model what a good Research Assistant and librarian collaboration can look like and increase their information literacy skills in more nuanced ways. For example, they may dialogue about asking better questions or engage in a problem-based approach to learning how to construct effective searches. We are very dedicated in our commitment toward this end, and, more importantly, we are extremely proud of our capable Research Assistants who have time and time again helped to provide excellent service at Van Wylen Library.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX 14–1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why do you want to work at the Research Desk?
2. Tell us more about the research process you went through while doing the research example you provided us—what were your pitfalls/challenges and/or successes?
3. What do you consider your biggest research strengths? What about your research weaknesses?
4. Show us your favorite library resource tool. Demonstrate how it works and what you like about it (pretend that we don't know anything about this resource).
   • Ask follow-up questions about their activities and what they show us.
5. This job requires excellent customer service skills. Describe a situation in which you had to deal with a person who was difficult. How did you overcome the challenge (i.e., class project, job).
6. This job requires you to work closely with librarians. Can you describe a work or school experience in which you had to collaborate with others? Are you comfortable asking for help when you aren't sure how to proceed?
7. This job requires you to open/close the library on your own, requires you to be on time for shifts, and generally requires a lot of independent responsible work—could you tell us an example of having similar responsibilities in another setting?
8. Questions?
APPENDIX 14—2: RESEARCH DESK MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Research Help Desk is to provide access to relevant research materials and educate patrons on effective research processes in order to promote and facilitate the intellectual and cultural development of the Hope College community.

The goals of the Research Help Desk are:

1) Provide a helpful and friendly atmosphere to encourage open dialog about users' information needs.
2) Meet the information needs of users while empowering them to develop their own research skills and strategies.
3) Inspire curiosity about research both within and beyond the academic setting.
4) Work in close collaboration with each other as well as with other library staff to provide the best services to our patrons.
APPENDIX 14–3: ORIENTATION SCHEDULE

ORIENTATION

(Food and drinks provided at the beginning and throughout)

1) Team-building exercises—Have everyone share their favorite summer activity, favorite thing about the library, and what they are excited about this semester.

2) Mission statement review
   • Introduce library’s mission and the Research Desk mission and talk about them
   • Diagram of the library’s departments, their functions, and where we fit
   • Short video of library staff describing the value of student library employees
   • Break into small groups and ask each group to talk about the mission and what it means to be a student “ambassador” for the library
     BREAK—Also a chance for students to get their picture taken for the Research Assistant photo board

3) Research interview/referral training
   • Warm up with humorous video.
   • Describe the goals of this training—to be able to ask good questions and make referrals—specifics research skills will be taught later.
   • Go over a handout that summarizes the question types we receive at the desk, what types they will be trained to answer well, and what types they should refer to a librarian.
   • Describe what referrals will look like, depending on when a librarian is on call and when we are out of the building
   • Brainstorm on the board a list of good questions you can ask to conduct a good reference interview.
   • Jessica and Rachel model an example research question and reference interview. One plays the part of a patron and the other a research assistant.
   • Break into six pairs (trying to pair new students with an experienced one), give each pair a question and have them create a role play of a good reference interview and referral. Come back together and ask some groups to perform them.
     BREAK

4) Work policies
   • Time sheets, schedule, substitute requests
   • Dress code, etiquette
   • Chat etiquette, handout and summary of professional chat
   • Safety
   • Library closing training

5) Description of future training
   • On-desk training exercises
   • Checklist
   • Mentor assignments
   • Workshops
   • Team-building activities (mid and end of semester)
APPENDIX 14–4: CHAT REFERENCE TIPS FOR RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

Be more formal with your chat language.

- Remember, this is a stranger you are talking to, not a friend.
- You are representing the library, and those on the other end may assume they are talking to a staff member.

Remember to give a greeting and “sign off.”

- Avoid jumping right into answering the question without some kind of acknowledgment.
- Phrases to try:
  - **Best Practice!** Give your name: “Hi this is Jessica” (just first name is fine).
  - “Hi XX” (if they give their name).
  - “Thank you for your question.”
  - “I’m happy to help you with this.”
  - “Just a moment while I look up the answer to your question.”
  - “I’m happy to help you with this. Can you tell me a little more about your topic/the assignment/what you’re looking for?”

If it’s a really short question (like “what are the hours tonight?”), it can be tough to give a greeting. However, immediately follow up with a sign off, like;

- “Is there any other question I can help you with?”

Other sign-off phrases to try:

- “Let us know if there is anything else we can help you with.”
- “Feel free to follow up on chat, asklibrarian@hope.edu, or in person if you have more questions.”
- “You’re welcome!” (if they thank you).

Important! Try to avoid leaving a question unanswered.

- **It’s OK to not know the answer yourself!** We don’t expect you to know everything, but you should be able to point the patron toward additional help.
- Examples:
  - “I’m going to transfer you to a librarian for more help with your question. Just a moment.”
  - “I don’t have the answer to your question, and there is not a staff member available right now. If you give me your e-mail address, I’ll have a librarian follow up with the answer shortly” (then e-mail the transcript to asklibrarian).
  - “It looks like we have the article, but I’m not able to access it either. Could you give me your e-mail address? I’ll have a librarian double-check this citation and get back to you.”
  - “This sounds like an interesting and complex research question. I’m happy to try to get you started, but we could help you even more if you scheduled a research appointment with a librarian (http://www.hope.edu/lib/ask/consultation.php) or e-mailed your question to asklibrarian@hope.edu for more follow-up.”