

One-on-One: Term Paper Assistance Programs

Many academic libraries offer individualized term paper consultations to their students. While librarians intuitively recognize the merits of such sessions, which blend elements of both bibliographic instruction and reference, there has been limited analysis of the nature of research consultations for undergraduates and precisely why or if they work. A review of existing programs along with a study of motivating factors and a statistical analysis of user characteristics all provide a context for demonstrating potential user need. Taken in aggregate, the evidence offers a challenge to academic institutions to consider such a program even in libraries faced with hard choices in professional resource allocation.

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While reference and bibliographic instruction seem to divide the world of user assistance between them, programs blending elements of both services are beginning to emerge in their own right. Term paper assistance, term paper counseling, individualized consultations, reference assistance programs, tutorials, and research consultations: all refer to a form of library service—the individualized term paper assistance program. Such one-on-one programs are hardly new. A 1977 ACRL Bibliographic Instruction Task Force study listed no fewer than 133 academic institutions offering some programmatic version of such a service to their students.¹ While the number of programs indicates that librarians hold at least an a priori acceptance of individualized term paper assistance programs, the form has seldom been discussed in library literature.

Two concerns may account for the dearth of literature: first, the variance as to what actually constitutes term paper assistance (as distinguished from “ordinary”

reference or bibliographic instruction), and second, the lack of a sound theoretical basis to substantiate “perceived” benefits. An investigation of the nature of term paper assistance programs and an analysis of a number of complex factors causing the service to be mutually beneficial to both students and librarians can provide a framework for a new perspective on the essence of reference and user education in the academic library.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TERM PAPER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Regardless of actual program mechanics, several elements uniformly characterize the single term paper assistance session. First, the session (often referred to as a “consultation”) involves one-to-one interaction between librarian and student. Second, the consultation is tailored exactly to the student’s research topic. Finally, the interaction is an in-depth one, in which the librarian provides substantially more time

and specific courses of action than possible in the normal reference desk encounter. These three features place term paper assistance squarely in the middle between general reference service and classroom bibliographic instruction. The standard reference encounter usually precludes a librarian spending the amount of uninterrupted time provided in a term paper consultation, and the typical class in bibliographic instruction is generally geared toward a nonspecific orientation to the library and the concept of search strategy, rather than a student's specific and immediate research needs.

Beyond these three uniform characteristics, the several descriptions of extant term paper assistance programs mentioned in the literature show a wide range in their program activities. Most commonly, as descriptions available from LOEX indicate, the program is part of an overall user education program, as in those functioning at Boston College, Northwestern University, Columbia University, and the Universities of British Columbia, Michigan, Ottawa, Georgia, and Illinois.

In the case of Columbia University, librarian Frederick Byrne writes that "a third element in Columbia's instruction program for undergraduates is a consultation service offered by the assistant college librarian . . . any undergraduate with specific research problems may discuss these problems with the librarian who subsequently provides whatever help the student needs."²

At Berea College, the range has even been extended successfully to a full-scale freshman tutorial program in which all students, in lieu of a class in library research, are given two or three individualized counseling sessions with librarians or trained teaching assistants.³

The time of year term paper assistance service is offered proves to be another interesting difference among the various programs. Some programs, such as the University of Michigan's, are offered on a year-round, impromptu, sign-up basis; while others, such as those at the Universities of Illinois and Ottawa, are concentrated into defined time periods during the semester. Indeed, the variety is evident, yet basically these programs simply involve having a student with a specific re-

search need make an appointment in advance with a designated librarian. During the consultation specific tools and strategies are presented by the librarian who concomitantly attempts to relate them to the more general principles of search strategy and organization. It should be noted that all of these programs are to be distinguished from the concept of term paper clinics in which students either sign up for or arrive at a preannounced time for group sessions designed to provide term paper assistance.

THE RATIONALE FOR INDIVIDUAL CONSULTATIONS

Term paper assistance programs are a response by academic libraries to meet an apparent need of students. Such programs endeavor to reach students who need more than ten minutes at the reference desk or generic classroom instruction. Several assumptions about student response to library instruction influence librarian's perceptions of the benefits of individualized and in-depth term paper assistance for their student researchers. These assumptions, elaborated below, define an ideal library learning situation that incorporates specificity and immediacy, depth of information, cognitive reinforcement, and psychological appeal.

It is generally assumed that students prosper most from any form of library instruction when it comes at a time of greatest need and relevance to their academic work. Hughes and Flandreau indicate: "To be most effective, library instruction must occur at the time the student has a specific need for such instruction."⁴ Schobert confirms the appeal for specificity: "Because [term paper counseling] is specifically related to their topic, it has an appeal that other types of instruction do not have."⁵ While other forms of classroom instruction may provide excellent general guidelines for library use and research strategies, term paper assistance is tailored to the students' actual topic at the time of need.

The guarantee of in-depth help also contributes to its attraction. The librarian time available to a student at the average busy academic reference desk is usually not sufficient to provide the significant degree of instruction in search strategy nec-

essary for the student with a major research assignment. At such a busy reference desk, the student's needs may be attended to, at best, in a piecemeal fashion, interspersed with the demands of other students. For a complex research topic requiring a multisource approach and analysis, or for a student lacking certain basic fundamentals in library use, the reference desk encounter is inadequate. And, unless a library has a user education program that reaches every student, substantial numbers may never have classroom instruction. A term paper assistance program offers students the opportunity to avail themselves at their own initiative of in-depth and uninterrupted assistance.

Such assistance can greatly reinforce students' comprehension of search strategy and the rudiments of library research. Library research strategy involves effective identification and use of the various resources available. Instruction librarians would generally agree that "to the greatest extent possible, if not exclusively, library instruction should take place in the library and in a hands-on mode. Learning should most effectively occur directly and actively with the library tools to be manipulated rather than indirectly and passively in the classroom and/or with media substitutes."⁶ Because of the nature of the term paper assistance program, this preference is made possible. The reinforcement by the immediate use of specific resources and strategies aids a student's retention of the general principles involved if they are so stressed.

Beyond the reasons described above lie possibly less obvious, but no less influential, arguments for the success of these programs. These arguments involve the psychological or social appeal of one-to-one assistance. In her provocative article on librarian anonymity, Joan Durrance makes a persuasive case for more personal and less anonymous interaction between librarian and user. Her evidence suggests that users who identify "their" librarian by name are twice as likely to have a high success rate, five times more inclined to be heavy library users, and, due to an established trust, much more effective in the reference interaction.⁷ Durrance argues that

trust is an essential part of the reference interview.

As if the negotiation process weren't difficult enough, librarianship adds a handicap by withholding the professional's name. The development of trust that comes as the questioner's guard is lowered is one of the elements of the successful reference interview. Unless the identity of the librarian is known, however, the trust that has been built up cannot be maintained.⁸

And again, in citing social psychologist Erving Goffman, Durrance attributes such intrinsic lack of trust in the average reference encounter as the reasons for users' failure to share actual needs with a librarian. Clearly, when a student has the opportunity to make an appointment with a known librarian and spend one-half hour or more consulting on a specific research assignment, anonymity and the sense of impersonality is diminished and a greater sense of psychological safety is experienced on the part of the student. The one-to-one personalized nature of term paper consultation can help both the student and librarian come to a more trusting and comfortable basis of social interaction.

BENEFITS TO LIBRARIANS: FANTASY, COMPETENCE, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

It is not difficult, then, to maintain that student researchers benefit from term paper assistance programs in a number of ways. Indeed, the nature of public service programs, and particularly user education programs, requires design with the benefits to the recipient in mind. However, while it would be ludicrous for librarians to tailor the programs they offer to meet their *own* needs, it is reasonable to consider the possibility that certain elements of a program may enhance a librarian's ability to provide better service.

In terms of practical utility, it has been suggested that term paper assistance sessions make librarians better reference librarians. There is the opportunity to work through search strategies and resource possibilities on a more thorough level than in the normal reference encounter. And, further, since librarians generally examine a number of sources before the actual appointment, they often have the chance to become more familiar with less frequently used or more specialized sources.

Also, as in the discussion of user advan-

tages, there are other, more subtle reasons why such individualized consulting is beneficial to the librarian. The personal degree of interaction with a student in a one-to-one "consultation" is intrinsically more satisfying to most librarians than the more ephemeral and anonymous reference encounter. Joan Durrance expounds these ideas at length in her analysis of reference librarian anonymity, which has been shown to reduce professional accountability as well as job satisfaction. The chance to become more involved with a student's research problem and to serve as an identifiable resource person for additional consultation enhances not only the efficient flow of information between librarian and student, but increases the professional visibility of the librarian as an individual. In some ways a term paper counseling session can seem like a reference librarian's fantasy: in the context of a mutually agreeable personal interaction, a research topic is pursued thoroughly by both student and librarian while creating a more sophisticated library user and drawing upon the full extent of the librarian's professional competencies.

Like all "fantasies," term paper assistance programs are ultimately subject to the test of certain practical realities. Can any institution implement such individualized services, or are the costs in librarian time too high to make such a venture truly feasible? Reference librarians at the University of Michigan Undergraduate Library have successfully maintained a term paper assistance program since 1979. A description and analysis of this experience can help form a set of general characteristics for a workable program and put to rest certain justifiable reservations.

TERM PAPER ASSISTANCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

In the fall of 1979, reference staff of the Undergraduate Library at the University of Michigan began planning a program that would allow students to make an appointment with a librarian to gain special assistance for their term paper research. Christened "TAP" (term paper assistance program), the service began in November of 1979 with minimal publicity. A bulletin board, fliers that doubled as

posters, and announcement of the service in bibliographic instruction classes constituted the efforts at generating a clientele. In addition, librarians found that the service was a valuable option they could suggest to students encountered at the reference desk who had research needs beyond the time afforded by the brief assistance.

PROGRAM OPERATION

In brief the process works as follows: a student requesting a TAP appointment fills out a form requiring the following information: name; course; telephone number; length of paper; due date; topic description; description of any research already done for this paper; description of limitations placed by the instructor as to types of materials that may be used for the paper (see appendix A). The form is returned to the reference desk, where the librarian schedules an appointment for the student. Appointments can last for one-half hour or longer, depending on the time needed, and generally the librarian will have verified a few sources of information in preparation for the appointment. This may include a check of pertinent periodical indexes or bibliographies, and, not infrequently with particularly "thorny" questions, a quick database search. During the course of the meeting, students are led through the search procedure specific to their topic, and during this process general correlations to library search strategy and organization principles are stressed whenever possible. Students are usually expected to track down material themselves, but individual librarians involved will encourage the student to contact them if there are any difficulties in the search. The entire process, insofar as possible, involves the student with the actual sources in the library.

Initial reaction to the program was, without exception, extremely positive on the part of both reference staff and students. Librarians were delighted with the opportunity to meet students in this kind of framework, and they were overwhelmed with positive responses from the students, who were generally hardworking and extremely grateful for this new "extraordinary" service. Several of the librarians who had more than ten years of reference

experience with undergraduates felt that the appointments created an enormous sense of satisfaction and personal reward.

THE TAP EXPERIENCE AND PROGRAM GUIDELINES

Several conclusions were made apparent through assessment of the program, particularly when compared with other programs described in the literature. First, there seem to be characteristics that successful programs have in common. *Successful* is used here to indicate the degree to which the programs are felt by the participating staff to enhance user education in the library. Essential elements include

- Screening. Not all students requesting an appointment really need the extensive assistance that such a service provides. In the experience at Michigan, the reference desk librarian always reads over the request form and may suggest some on-the-spot assistance to get students started on their research. Often this results in satisfying students' needs and eliminating the need for a later appointment. (However, this transpires by mutual agreement of student and librarian—no student is *refused* an appointment.)
- Active student participation. It is essential that students not only do the actual legwork of physically retrieving materials, but that they also perform most or all of the actual search themselves. TAP has been open to charges of "spoon-feeding";⁹ while the participating librarian may and should isolate specific indexes or headings beforehand, the process of searching these sources beyond the initial explanation of their use and existence should be left to the student.
- Education in the principles of search strategy. While helping a student with the specific topic at hand is a viable "hook" to capture student interest, as a process it is meaningless for the larger context of real user education unless the student leaves with some greater understanding of search strategy in general. This is readily accomplished by making the student aware at each stage of the interaction

that both the process and sources can be extrapolated to a general process and general categories of materials for other topics and subject disciplines.

A USER PROFILE AND THE SELF-LIMITING NATURE OF TAP

Any institution considering inaugurating TAP, even if it accepts the concept on principle, must harbor serious reservations about the practical feasibility of such a personalized service. The following questions should be considered:

1. Does the reference staff have time for this program without jeopardizing other services, such as reference and classroom bibliographic instruction?
2. How would such a program mesh with reference and classroom library instruction, and would interest in these services decrease among users?
3. Even if staff were able to begin such a program, what would happen if every student wanted an individual appointment? In large academic institutions, which may have even a freshman enrollment of several thousand, is such a service prohibited from the start?

Reference staff at Michigan began their program with just these concerns, all of which turned out to be unfounded. Neither reference nor the demand for classroom instruction decreased, and most surprisingly, demand for TAP appointments seemed to level off at approximately 100 to 150 requests per year. This latter phenomenon intrigued librarians who had, naturally, worried that they might have to limit appointments on a first-come, first-served basis. Why didn't the entire undergraduate term paper population demand this service? In the spring of 1983, reference librarians at the Undergraduate Library decided to analyze TAP forms to see if there was a pattern that could identify a profile of a typical TAP user. Data were gathered from a sample of 116 forms from appointments held from November 1982 to April 1983 (see tables 1-5).

While results of such an informal sampling are only preliminary, they indicate several interesting patterns. Women use the service in substantially greater num-

TABLE 1
Sex of Students

SEX	PERCENT
Male	37.4
Female	62.6

TABLE 2
Level of Courses

LEVEL	PERCENT
Freshman/Sophomore	68.1
Junior or above	31.9

TABLE 3
Subject Area of Paper Topics

SUBJECT	PERCENT
Social Sciences	83.4
Humanities	9.6
Sciences	7.0

TABLE 4
Length of Papers

LENGTH (IN PAGES)	PERCENT
1-3	2.9
4-6	16.2
7-10	39.0
11-20	35.2
21 or more	6.7

TABLE 5
Amount of Prior Research
Done on Paper

AMOUNT	PERCENT
Some	48.3
None	48.3
Much	3.4

bers than men, and users are more likely to be freshmen/sophomores than juniors/seniors. Writing term papers on topics predominantly in the social sciences, students are just as likely to have done some research on their own as to have done none at all.

It is evident from these generalizations that there is an identifiable portion of library users who find TAP appointments particularly suited to their needs. Apart from sex-related data, students in the social sciences who are writing longer (ten to twenty pages) papers clearly seem to have a need for this in-depth consultation. The length of their papers and the need to rely

heavily on periodical literature, and therefore unfamiliar indexes, abstracts, or annual reviews, may account for this. However, the ability to form this kind of profile provides a clue to the self-limiting nature of TAP. Not every student needs this kind of help. Most students continue to have their library use problems solved either by reference service or receive adequate training through the bibliographic instruction program.

Conversely, if most students don't need this at Michigan, there seems to be a category of students who *do*. In other words, the profile of typical student TAP users suggests an identifiable group who appear to have special need for research consultation and/or personalized assistance that extends beyond the existing services of both reference and classroom bibliographic instruction. If such generalizations hold true for one institution, what are the implications for public service and user education planning in other academic libraries?

ONE-ON-ONE: A TREND IN LIBRARY SERVICE?

The inclusion of TAP in a library public service plan meets the needs of students by providing a comprehensive "three-pronged" approach: reference, TAP, and bibliographic instruction. As a timely analogy, these three service components could be paralleled with emerging online-database-searching setups. Like traditional reference, many brief searches can be done extemporaneously at the reference desk; and at the other end of the spectrum, and comparable with bibliographic instruction, facilitating interfaces are beginning to permit instruction in end-user searching. However (and most similar to the TAP approach), the complex extended search requires that the librarian searcher and patron consult and work together when preparing, and often when executing, the successful search. In both cases the three components work together to provide for the full range of service needs. Indeed, with the demand for TAP, the rapid increase of extended online searching, and the call for less anonymity, one-on-one consultations are a notable and growing trend in library services.

Providing one-on-one consultations in academic situations can be surprisingly straightforward to implement. As an additional encouragement, it should be noted that after the initial trial of TAP in Michigan's Undergraduate Library, several other units, including the Engineering Library and Graduate Library Reference Department, went on to establish their own successful one-on-one programs. Therefore libraries desiring to implement such a service, but hesitating due to concern for an "overwhelming" response by students or apprehension of programming complexities, should realize that in all three Michigan cases these concerns have proven to be unfounded.

As demonstrated earlier, most potential users are either "screened out" by staff or

intuitively weed themselves out, leaving the space for students who truly *do* need the service. Similarly, program requirements are extremely basic. They include a sign-up form to be filled out by students, minimal publicity, and most importantly, enthusiasm and willingness on the part of reference librarians to exercise their experience and personal expertise in guiding student researchers within a comfortable and personalized one-on-one framework. As such, perhaps an individualized TAP can add a contemporary twist to Ranganathan's famous maxim (the right book to the right patron at the right time) by assuming: the right patron to the right librarian at the right time—and for the right amount of time. ■■

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A: TERM PAPER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

What is it?

It's an opportunity to sign up for an appointment with a librarian for assistance in *library research*. The librarian will spend time with you talking about how the research might best be approached and will then show you some possible sources and explain how to use them.

What isn't it?

It isn't help on the actual mechanics of writing a paper. That assistance is available elsewhere, particularly through the English Composition Board. We focus on the library research.

How much time does it take?

We're figuring on spending up to half an hour with a student. We'll spend longer, though, if needed.

**What's the difference between
this and the assistance
given at the reference desk?**

This gives us a chance to handle one student's questions without interruption. We also ask for advance warning so we can think about the topic a bit before going to work on it. If you don't want to take the time for this appointment system, though, come to the Reference Desk and ask for help; we're glad to give it.

How do I sign up?

Fill out the TAP form (available at the UGL Reference Desk) and give it to the reference librarian. The librarian will schedule your appointment.

What have I got to lose?

Nothing that we can think of.

Date _____

Time _____

UNDERGRADUATE LIBRARY TERM PAPER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Name _____ Phone No. _____

Course _____ Length of paper _____ Due Date _____

1. What is the topic of your paper? Please state it in as much detail as you can. If you are still deciding between several options, list them.
2. If you have already started your research, what have you done so far?
3. Are there limitations put on by the instructor (e.g., you can only use journal articles, you must use four different kinds of sources, you may use only primary sources)?

Time of appointment:

Librarian:

Take this form to the UGL Reference Desk. The librarian will schedule your appointment.