Reference with a Gimmick: A Pilot Program to Promote Library Services

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Abstract: During the academic year 2018-2019, Yale University's Bass Library piloted a reference program called Latte with a Librarian. The impetus for the pilot stemmed from a need for Yale librarians to engage more with students in-person and to market the remote research services that the library offered. A pilot project was developed to test a method for increasing in-person reference services. The pilot consisted of three librarians setting up a temporary reference desk at a popular student café. Students were offered a free library-branded mug as an incentive for posing a reference question. The success behind Latte with a Librarian can be attributed to the marketing and outreach efforts, as well as the location that was chosen for the pop-up reference outlet outside Bass library.

Keywords: Off-site reference, roving reference, library renovation, online library services, personal librarian, incentives, library swag

Introduction to Bass Library

Cross Campus Library, one of more than a dozen libraries at Yale University, opened in 1971. After a major renovation in 2007, the renamed Bass Library reopened as a two-story underground building with a collection of approximately 150,000 items, including graphic novels, a DVD collection, and a reserve collection (Baker, 2007). Commonly referred to as

the "undergraduate library," this colloquialism does not adequately characterize the total population that the library serves. Bass Library is a popular destination for students, undergraduates, and graduates alike, both to study and to socialize. Contributing to the social atmosphere surrounding Bass Library is Thain Family Café. Located immediately adjacent to the library, students consider Thain to be, "A great place to study and be seen" (McCarthy & Nitecki, 2010, p. 95).

Bass has been a central hub for many standard library services at Yale, such as circulation, information services, and course reserves. When the library reopened post-renovation, Bass introduced a *Personal Librarian Program* in which each undergraduate student was paired with a librarian for individualized research assistance. Today, each first-year student is introduced to their "personal librarian" via email during their first week on campus and is encouraged to set up in-person consultations as needed. Total participation in the program includes 48 librarians serving 3,200 first- and second-year undergraduate students.

In collaboration with Yale Information Technology Services, Bass Library began allowing students, staff, and faculty to borrow media equipment in 2009. Established in 2012 as a central point of contact for Yale University Library, the *Ask Yale Library* virtual reference service allows patrons to find information about the library through a searchable knowledge base as well as via chat and email. Administration of the *Ask Yale Library* service is overseen jointly by the Frontline Services Librarian at Sterling Memorial Library and Bass with the majority of inquiries fielded by Bass Library staff.

Over the last few years, librarians have expanded Bass' offerings beyond traditional library services in favor of more creative and trendier student wellness and academic preparedness programs. Examples of these types of initiatives include the *Long Night Against Procrastination* (an all-night group study session moderated by librarians held at various campus locations), study breaks in the library with coffee and snacks, fitness classes, therapy dogs, and research workshops.

In fall 2018, librarians from Bass Library decided to pilot an off-site reference program called *Latte with a Librarian*. The idea for the initiative came from a presentation made by Gettysburg College librarians during the 2018 Personal Librarian Conference at Case Western University (Moore & Smith, 2018). The *Latte* program was seen as a reasonable solution to a perceived need for increased in-person library services at Yale. Having eliminated the traditional reference desk in 2008, a single service point remains, offering

circulation, library privileges, and information services at Bass Library (Sider, 2016, p. 92). Both the popular *Personal Librarian Program* and *Ask Yale Library* services require that students make the first point of contact via email or chat. This is seen as a potential deterrent, discouraging some students from utilizing the services.

Bass Library's second major renovation, scheduled for May through October 2019, would increase the library's study space to accommodate a commensurate rise in undergraduate students, from 5,400 to 6,200, the largest undergraduate expansion since women were first admitted to Yale in 1969 (Office of Public Affairs and Communications, 2017). A *Latte with a Librarian* pilot at Bass Library would establish a physical presence of library services outside of the library walls, test the feasibility of providing roving or off-site reference services post-renovation, and increase awareness of both the *Personal Librarian Program* and *Ask Yale Library*.

Environmental Scan

Before designing the *Latte with a Librarian* pilot, librarians at Bass Library conducted an environmental scan to identify libraries that offered events similar to those envisioned. Even though off-site reference, roving or roaming reference, and pop-up reference are likely more ubiquitous than events called *Latte with a Librarian*, searching online for libraries that utilize this specific nomenclature helped in designing the pilot. The environmental scan identified four libraries and campus centers as having recent and reoccurring *Latte with a Librarian* events. Notably, while these events shared the same title, each institution structured and promoted its program uniquely.

- At Gettysburg College's Musselman Library, *Lattes with a Librarian* are off-site events scheduled on specific days in the College Union Building. The *Lattes* were developed and are offered in collaboration with the Office of Multicultural Engagement to reach historically underrepresented student groups, including first-generation students (Moore & Smith, 2018).

- The Center for Chicanx and Latinx Academic Student Success at the University of California at Davis promotes *Latte with a Librarian* as scheduled events with the specific research purpose of helping students "navigate databases and find empirical research studies for [their] research papers and projects" (CCLASS: Center for Chicanx and Latinx Academic Success, n.d.).

- Lynn Public Library (Lynn, MA) offers *Latte with a Librarian* as on-site scheduled events, promoting them as opportunities to learn a new language, download e-books, and learn about free library services ("Latte with a Librarian," 2018).

In these three instances, the *Latte with a Librarian* program is used as a marketing device designed to attract an audience that might otherwise overlook library services. None of these events require pre-registration. At the John F. Moss Library at Texas A&M University, however, the *Latte with a Librarian* model is used to promote, "[o]ne on one personalized assistance focused on student need – limited to one hour." Individual meetings are booked through LibCal from Springshare ("Latte with a Librarian -Jennifer Tique," 2019). The Texas A&M version of the event seems to use the light-hearted *Latte with a Librarian* marketing as a mechanism for reducing student anxiety when requesting a meeting (or needing to meet) with a librarian.

Based on the events uncovered through the environmental scan, Bass Library decided to offer *Latte with a Librarian* as individually-scheduled events that would not require registration. The events would be promoted utilizing various in-person and online methods, including flyers, LibCal events, and social media posts. The scheduled event model worked best for Bass Library. With only three librarians available to participate in the pilot, individual student consultations would be difficult to execute. Also, individual student consultations are already a key element of the *Personal Librarian Program*.

Pilot Design

Even though the catalyst for the *Latte with a Librarian* pilot was a desire to increase awareness of reference services in advance of Bass Library's upcoming renovations, *Latte with a Librarian* also had the potential of helping to evaluate student research needs relative to other library services, specifically *Ask Yale Library* and the *Personal Librarian Program*, as well as the need for reference services in general. Additionally, increasing in-person student engagement is something that libraries throughout the Yale Library system aspire to each academic year.

Yale University students are overcommitted with academics and extracurricular activities. The library is seen as a place to get work done as well as being a good place to socialize. The goal of this specific in-person engagement pilot was to increase awareness as to how librarians can be a part of or enhance the academic process, either through a single

interaction during *Latte with a Librarian* or by increasing awareness of *Ask Yale Library* and the *Personal Librarian Program* during the *Lattes*. Yale students already see the library as a place; the goal of this pilot was to increase awareness of the library as a service.

Yale's *Latte with a Librarian* pilot took place during the academic year 2018-2019 with eight scheduled events. At each event, three librarians were stationed with laptops at central high-top tables in Thain Family Café. A stack of mugs advertised that any student who asked a reference or library-related question would receive a free mug (Figures 1 and 2). The specific location of Thain Family Café was chosen because it is outside of the library, but close by, approximately 50 feet from the single point of service desk. This popular lunchtime destination is used regularly to promote student campus clubs and events. The location enabled librarians to be "present," even passively, to several students at once.

Figure 1. Kelly Blanchat, Undergraduate Teaching and Outreach Librarian, working with a student during *Latte with a Librarian* in Thain Family Café.

Figure 2. Laura Sider, Associate Director for Frontline Services, working with a student during *Latte with a Librarian* in Thain Family Café.

To ensure that in-person student engagement would be meaningful, the eight events were scheduled during high-impact times: before midterms and finals each semester and during peak transition times on campus, such as after dining halls closed and between classes. While the pilot was intended to attract the attention of students already present in Thain Family Café, many of whom were there to study with friends or on their way to Bass Library, events were also advertised through campus flyers and social media, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to entice students to make a specific trip to the Café (Figures 3 and 4). One student attendee shared that she sent her friend the Instagram post so that they could come to participate.

Figure 3. Example of an Instagram post advertising *Latte with a Librarian*.

Figure 4. Example of a flyer advertising *Latte with a Librarian*.

The free mug incentive helped market both Bass Library and the *Ask Yale Library* chat service (Figure 5). Intended to be a passive library marketing vehicle, the mug served another important purpose: to heighten awareness of remote services given the library's upcoming renovations and displaced library services. The mug depicts an 8-bit T-Rex (a recurring marketing icon for Bass Library) with a coffee cup, along with the URL for *Ask Yale Library* (ask.library.yale.edu). As there are more than a dozen libraries at Yale University, it was very important to include Bass Library's name in connection with the *Ask Yale Library* service. Anecdotally, students loved the mug design and some even approached the Bass Library circulation desk to ask about future events because they saw the mug and wanted one for themselves.

Each participating librarian emphasized that if students needed further assistance, they could contact their Personal Librarian. Additional cross-marketing efforts included the distribution of bookmarks and stickers containing information about the *Personal Librarian Program*, *Ask Yale Library*, and information about how to access JSTOR and the *New York Times*.

After the initial round of events in fall 2018, one change was made for spring 2019: the inclusion of referral cards for other librarians – either a Personal Librarian or a librarian with subject expertise – or to another department at Yale that might be able to assist a student with his or her inquiry. Even though stacks of note cards were available at the first four events, students used their phones to take pictures of the library website for research follow-up. The use of referral cards was an opportunity to continue building relationships, whether between students and librarians or between librarians and other departments. The cards also served as an additional way to remind students of the event after they left. For spring 2019 events, librarian referral cards were employed to record the purpose of the referral, the librarian, archivist or department name, contact information, and the name of the person who made the referral. The referral cards were branded with the same imagery as the mug in the hope that it would help students find the card again later, as well as alert other librarians as to the origin of the referral (Figure 6). This change was as easy as ordering business cards and did not significantly increase the cost of the pilot.

Figure 5. The front and back of the incentive mug offered for a research or reference question during *Latte with a Librarian*.

Figure 6. The front and back of the referral cards introduced to the pilot in spring 2019.

Assessment

To gather data for quantitative assessment, librarians recorded the question posed, the length of the interaction, and the requester's status (undergraduate or graduate student) using LibInsight from Springshare. "Reference" was used to code questions related to wayfinding, library services, and general information; "research" was used to code questions specific to students' research or coursework. Longer in duration, research questions often required a follow-up or a referral to a subject specialist librarian.

Librarians received 74 questions (27 reference questions and 47 research questions) over a total of 6.5 hours during the four events held in the fall 2018 term. In spring 2019, librarians answered 78 questions over 6.5 hours in four events; 29 were reference questions and 49 were research questions (Figures 7 through 10). A total of 152 students were assisted over the two semesters. The majority of questions asked – 64% during fall 2019 and 63% in spring 2019 – were research questions.

Examining the fall and spring events side-by-side, the recorded statistics demonstrate consistent – almost mirroring – total student participation and types of questions asked. The similarities of the breakdown between undergraduate and graduate student engagement may be a result of the event location, as Bass Library is known colloquially as the "undergraduate library" and is close to undergraduate student housing.

Only five of the reference questions were considered to be "mug grabs," that is, when a student made it clear that they had asked a question only to receive a free mug. These quick interactions were considered successes as even blatant "mug grab" questions allowed librarians to ask students if they knew about particular library services, such as *Ask Yale Library* and online research guides, as well as research techniques, including methods for article discovery. The mug served its purpose: marketing the library and its services while providing opportunities for students to interact with a librarian.

Sometimes a simple question would lead to subsequent student inquiries. For example, in spring 2019, a student began by asking the popular and well-advertised question, "Do I have access to the *New York Times*?" Such a question typically resulted in a "mug-grab" and a quick exit. Instead, after the answer was provided, the student continued to ask questions about access to other resources, such as JSTOR and other major databases available through the library. This type of interaction – where one basic question led to additional questions – was the most rewarding. During these interactions, the librarians staffing the

event established themselves as knowledgeable and approachable. The student recognized the value of the librarian in this simple interaction and took the opportunity (and the time!) to learn more about the library and its offerings.
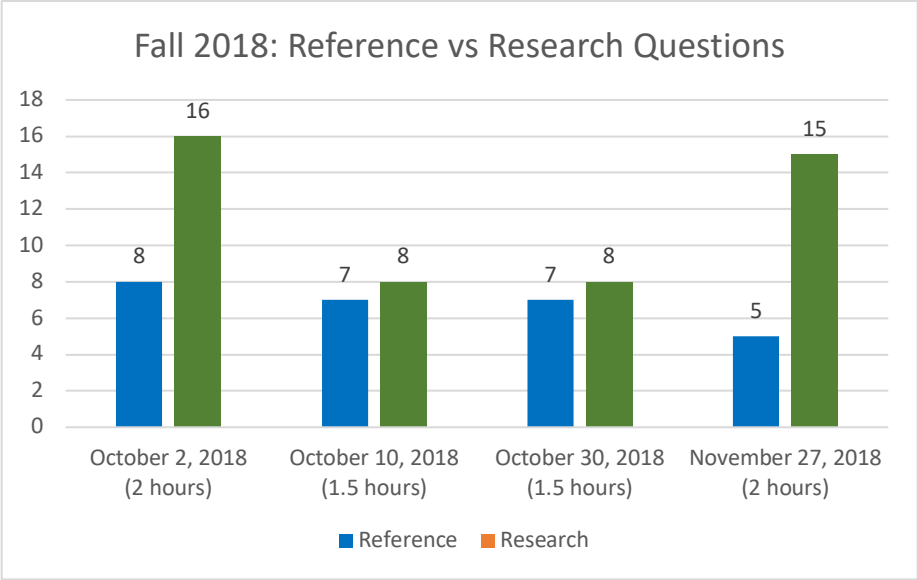

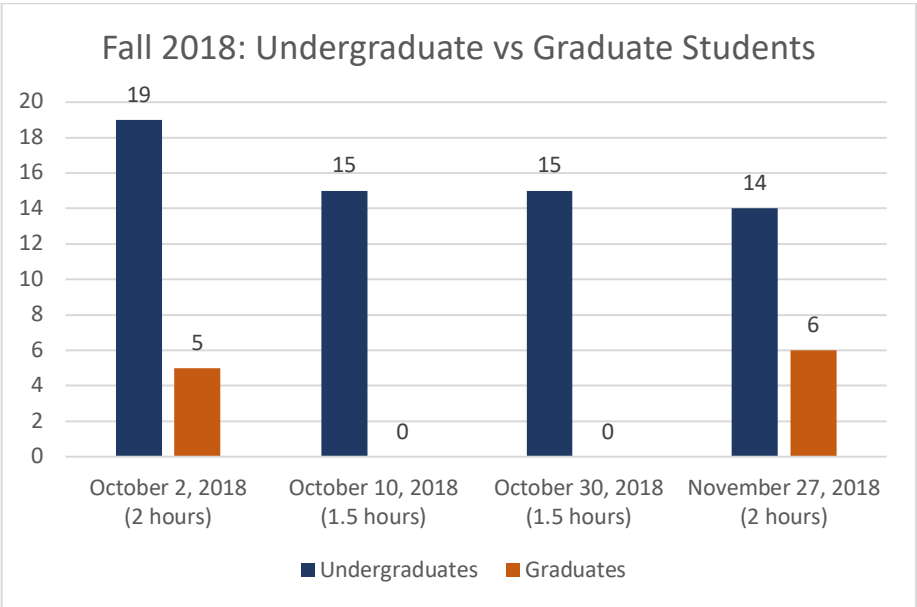*Figure 7.* Breakdown of the reference and research questions received at each event during fall 2018.

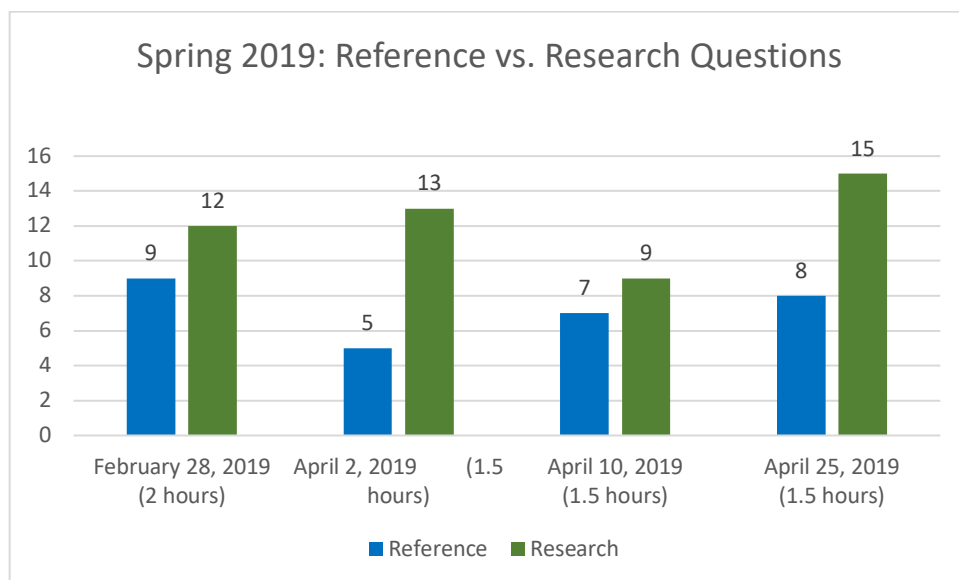*Figure 8.* Breakdown of the student demographic during each event during fall 2018.

Spring 2019: Reference vs. Research Questions

Figure 9. Breakdown of the reference and research questions received at each event during spring 2019.

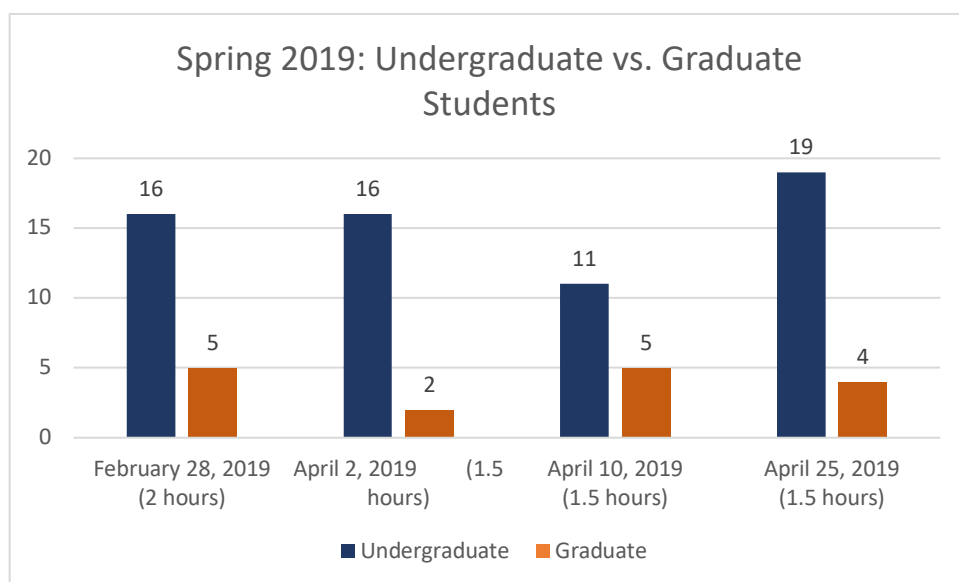**Spring 2019: Undergraduate vs. Graduate Students**

Figure 10. Breakdown of the student demographic during each event during spring 2019.

In short, the *Latte with a Librarian* pilot in Thain Family Café during the academic year 2018-2019 was a success! When reflecting on the goals developed at the start of the pop-up reference events, the pilot addressed two of the three goals and presented an opportunity to further explore the third:

1)	Though a traditional reference desk was eliminated in 2008 due to lack of traffic and true reference questions, the quantitative data collected from the *Latte with a Librarian* pilot showed that there is still a very real need for in-person reference assistance. Reaching students in need of reference help simply required a change in approach; in this case, librarians located in a high-traffic area attracted student attention.

2)	The second factor was a desire to promote services like the *Personal Librarian Program* and *Ask Yale Library* to the undergraduate population. As 82% of the 152 students assisted by librarians were undergraduates, librarians had ample opportunities to introduce these services directly to their target audience.

3)	Based on the success of the first two goals, the third objective of the pilot – testing a way to reach additional students in light of the newly-renovated library – demonstrated that this outreach effort has great promise.

Bass continues to offer the *Latte with a Librarian* program, exploring new locations both inside and outside of the library. With the high volume of requests from two semesters of the pilot, the next phase will involve getting more colleagues involved in events.

Cost Breakdown

Unlike a traditional reference desk, where the services rendered occur at no additional cost to the library (excluding salaries and building operating costs), the *Latte with a Librarian* pilot required additional funds as we wanted to offer a free mug as an incentive for participation. Costs were kept to a minimum by designing the mug in-house (by Bass' Undergraduate Teaching and Outreach Librarian, Kelly Marie Blanchat) and purchased through DiscountMugs (www.discountmugs.com).

For fall 2018 events, 100 mugs were ordered for a total of $330 (including shipping); for spring 2019 events a re-order of 100 more mugs came to $200 (including shipping) as a result of a discount offered by the manufacturer. Bookmarks and stickers distributed at events came at no additional cost as they were already in use for other library marketing purposes and events. (Their addition to the *Latte with a Librarian* pilot was a bonus rather than a planned aspect.) The addition of 250 referral cards in spring 2019, however, added another $56.22 to project costs. There was no additional cost accrued for the event space, as no room set-up or custodial assistance was required.

The total cost for the *Latte with a Librarian* project was $586.22, or approximately $3.85 per interaction, for this academic year-long pilot. However, this figure does not account for any passive interactions as a result of the pilot, such as when a student uses the mug and is reminded of Bass Library services. While the full impact of this passive metric will never be known, it should not be discounted when factoring in the cost of the pilot and its overall success. While these events have a high overhead cost compared to other student wellness and research support services, the added benefit of marketing so many of the library's services at once outweighed the cost.

For libraries considering implementing a similar program, this model could be modified to include a cheaper incentive, or even no incentive at all, as there was evidence during the pilot that the proximity factor played a key role in attracting student attention. Some students declined to take the mug, preferring a bookmark or a sticker, especially at the events that were toward the end of the academic year (presumably because students were preparing to pack and leave campus). If funding is not available for future events, an alternative model could be to hold *Latte with a Librarian* events at dining halls and coffee shops around campus, where the "latte" portion of the event would simply be a gimmick – and not an added prize – alluding to the location.

Applications for the Future

Now that *Latte with a Librarian* has both quantitative and qualitative evidence of success, there is an increased opportunity to host events even farther away from the library, such as at student centers, residential colleges, and cultural centers, similar to the model seen at the University of California at Davis. The high attendance and enthusiasm for the event also demonstrated the need for more frequent pop-up reference events on campus.

Bass Library's traditional reference desk was eliminated, in part, because of a lack of true reference questions. The *Lattes* pilot demonstrated that there was a need for both reference and research assistance (Figures 7 and 9). The data collected during this pilot can be presented to library stakeholders, opening a dialogue about establishing permanent in-person reference services in the future. At the very least, the evidence gathered during the 2018-2019 *Latte with a Librarian* pilot demonstrated sufficient success for Bass Library to decide to continue the program, thereby offering opportunities to collect additional data concerning student research support.

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