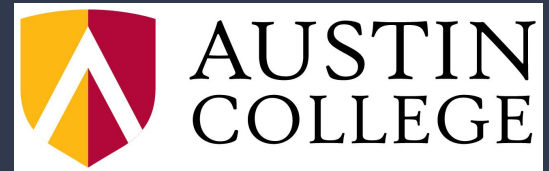# Reference Is Dead:
Piloting a Peer Research Assistant Program

Andrew Smith, Instruction & Research Services Librarian @ Austin College

CTLC Conference | August 10, 2018

AUSTIN COLLEGE

What *is* Reference?

Reference, defined:

Reference Transactions:

- ...*are* information consultations in which library staff recommend, interpret, evaluate, and/or use information resources to help others to meet particular information needs.

- ...*do not include* formal instruction or exchanges that provide assistance with location, schedules, equipment, supplies, or policy statements

Reference Work:

- ...*includes* reference transactions and other activities that involve the **creation**, **management**, and **assessment** of information or research resources, tools, and services

From Reference and User Services Association (RUSA): http://www.ala.org/rusa/guidelines/definitionsreference

Reference, interpreted (by students):

- "I need help finding stuff"

- "My professor...

    - ...told me to come to the library to get help from a *peer librarian*"

    - ...suggested this one article...I don't remember the title or author, or the publication it was in"

- "My paper's due tomorrow and I can't find anything in *the database*"

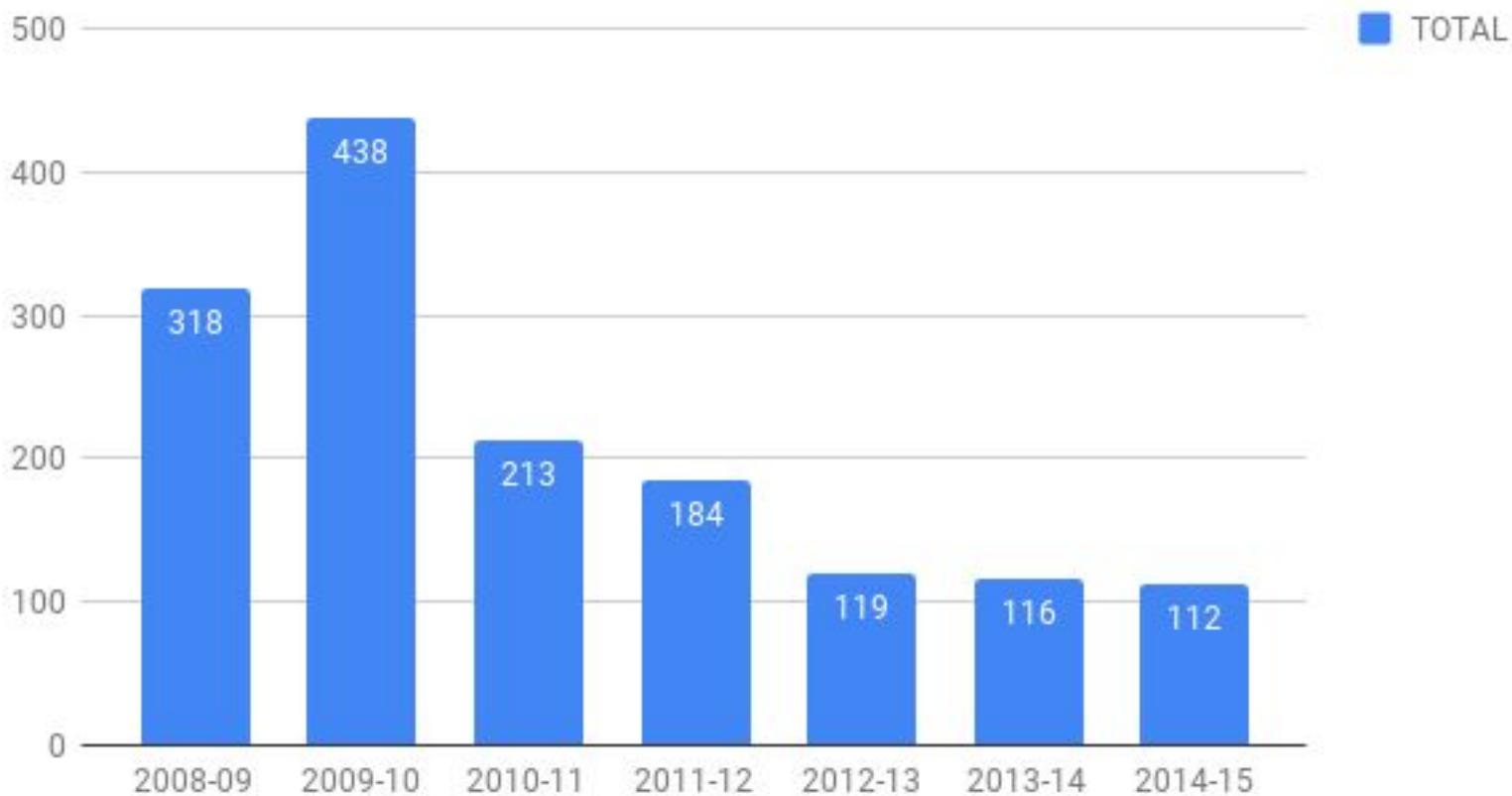# Reference at Austin College

Reference Service @ Austin College

thru 2015

- ❖ An actual reference desk!
- ❖ Staffed by librarians ~60 hrs/wk
- ❖ Issues/Concerns:
    - ➢ Staff Stretched Too Thin
    - ➢ Dwindling Numbers
    - ➢ Desire to Beautify 1st Floor

Reference Statistics by Academic Year (2008-2015)

Reference Desk at Abell Library – 1986 to 2015 (R.I.P.)

The "Ghosting" of Reference

2015–2017

- ❖ Librarians on-call during scheduled reference shifts
- ❖ Roughly same number of hours
- ❖ Issues/Concerns:
  - ➢ Lack of Visibility
  - ➢ Misconceptions of "Librarians"
  - ➢ No Dedicated Service Point
  - ➢ Reference Interactions Dropped Dramatically

Reference Statistics by Academic Year (2008-2017)
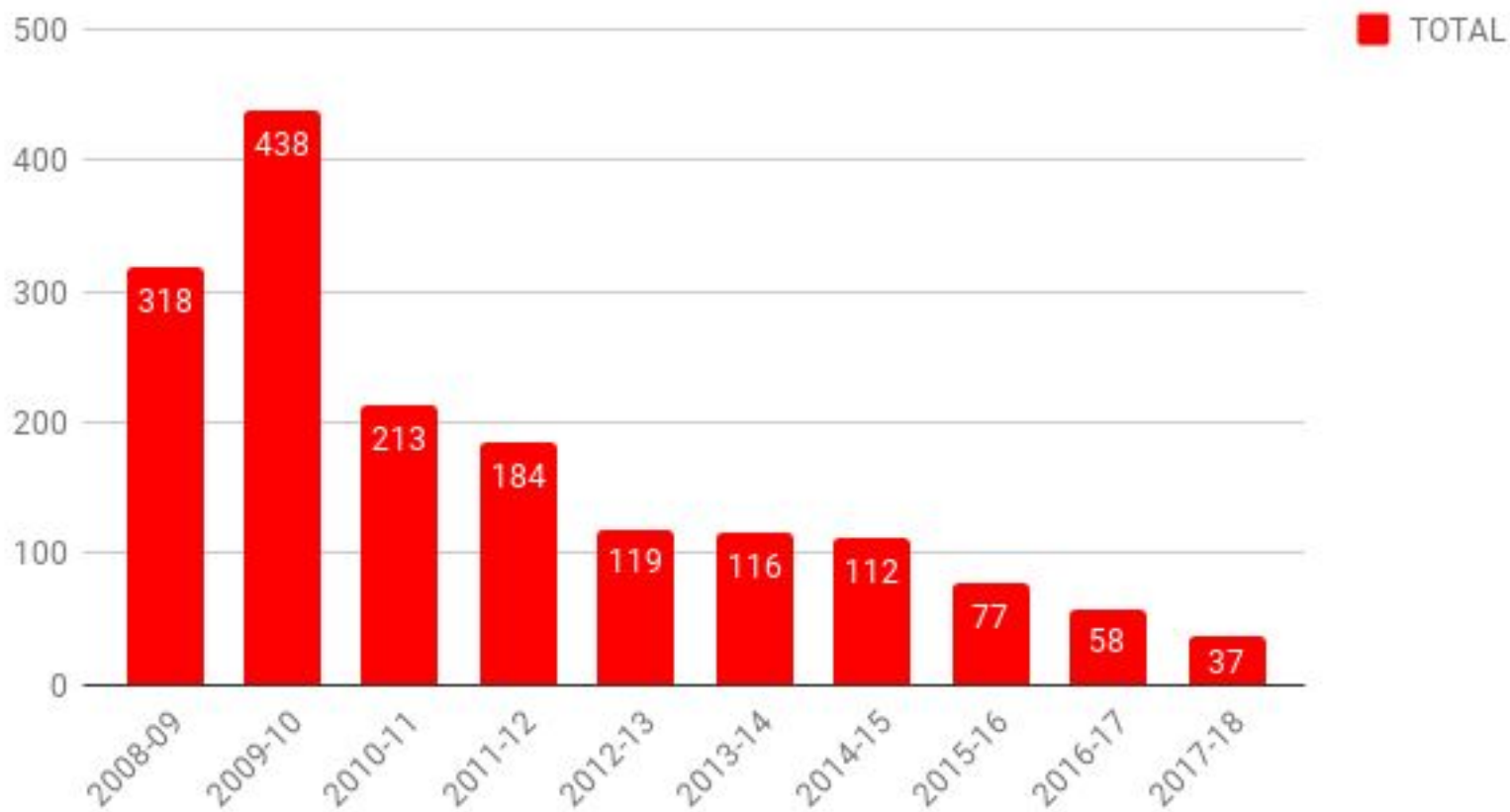
POOF! Reference Desk vanished, replaced by Large Presentation Area (2015)

Collaboration stations purchased for the new 1st floor Commons area (2015)

"Hackable" furniture purchased for the new 1st floor Commons area (2015)

So, reference...*dead?*

...not quite.

What We Did Next

Summer 2017

❖ Brought back the (er, *a*) desk!

❖ Colleague tasked with researching libraries using student workers as reference assistants

❖ Staffing originally planned as a mix of librarians and student workers

❖ Concerns:

➢ Hiring (Good) Students, and Training Them

➢ Marketing the Service

➢ Furniture/Equipment

The "New" Reference Desk placed in time for Fall 2017 semester.

Initial Proposal

Recommendations based on research & information culled from colleagues at other institutions via listservs, informal conference discussions, etc.

- ❖ Hold initial training of 1-2 sessions as a group
- ❖ Facilitate quizzes, and possibly create videos and other tutorials for review
- ❖ Create and maintain a manual for review and reference as needed (print and online)
- ❖ Have students shadow librarians at the reference desk for 2 1-hour session
- ❖ Check in with students at regular intervals throughout semester to ensure success
- ❖ As program progresses, identify those students who excel as "coaches" who may be utilized to train future peer research assistants

Revisions & Improvisations

Based on timeline and other limitations

- ❖ Students would solely staff the desk, serving as "frontline" research help, with librarians still "on-call" as backup
- ❖ Students were hired from work-study student worker pool; thus, we had little control over students hired
- ❖ Program had a delayed start (~4 weeks after semester began)
- ❖ Instead of students shadowing different librarians, bulk of on-desk training conducted by myself due to scheduling challenges
- ❖ Recurring training opportunities limited due to my instruction schedule and other responsibilities

Impact?

Image Credit: https://www.pexels.com/photo/brown-and-black-crater-87655/
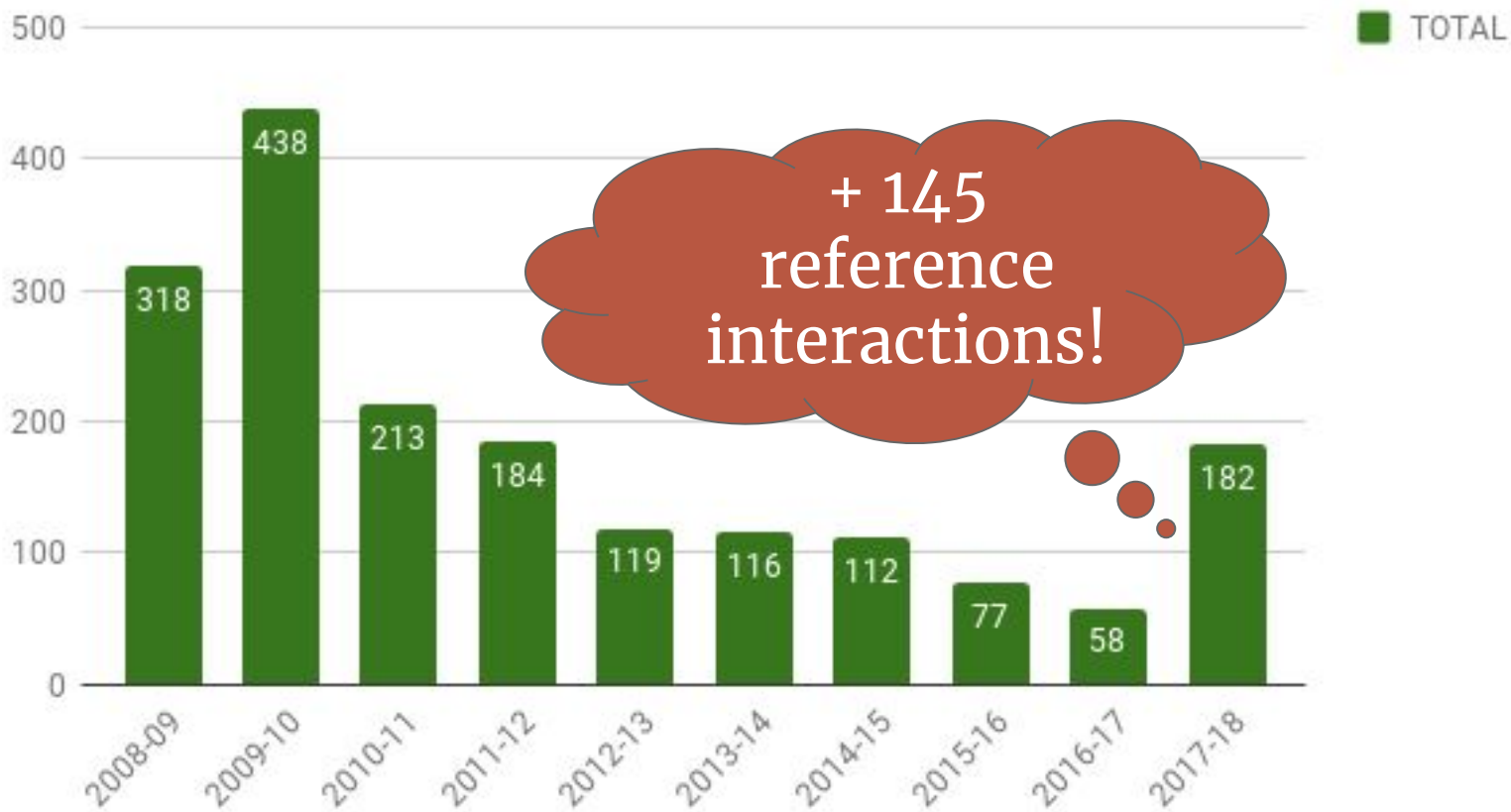
Lessons Learned & Future Implications

What We Learned

Best Practices

❖ Use mobile texting apps (GroupMe, WhatsApp) to communicate

❖ Email sparingly

❖ Go digital (use Google Forms to record interactions & shift reports; create a LibGuide to house documentation, FAQ's, etc.)

❖ Gain student worker buy-in by:

➢ Checking in regularly

➢ Seeking their feedback

What We Learned

Pitfalls & Takeaways

- ❖ Reliability - be prepared for illness, flakiness(!), and conflicts

- ❖ Policing - be prepared to talk "no friends or (disruptive) tech"

- ❖ Scheduling - look at data to determine if/when desk coverage is really needed

- ❖ Training - review types of questions being reported to evaluate and revise future/ongoing trainings

Looking Forward

Implications for Future

❖ Training - check-in more regularly; and, building off interactions reported, create tutorials & quizzes

❖ Promotion - conduct reviews at end of semester, identify potential leads or "coaches" as well as incentives

❖ Visibility & Marketing - purchasing dedicated "area-defining" desk and accompanying signage

❖ Buy-In - continue seeking input on the service from student workers

Questions?

Thanks!

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