THE READ SCALE (REFERENCE EFFORT ASSESSMENT DATA)© STUDY: QUALITATIVE REFERENCE STATISTICS. A REPORT ON THE 2007 UNITED STATES NATIONAL STUDY WITH CURRENT EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

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Abstract

A 2002 ARL survey on reference statistics & assessments gives supporting evidence that many academic institutions are not completely satisfied with the usefulness of statistics gathered for reference services. The study revealed a situation in flux:

"The study reveals a lack of confidence in current data collection techniques. Some dissatisfaction may be due to the fact that 77% of responding libraries report that the number of reference transactions has decreased in the past three years. With many librarians feeling as busy as ever, some have concluded that the reference data collected does not accurately reflect librarian's level of activity". (ARL/SPEC/Kit268)

It was with this sentiment that the READ Scale was developed. The READ Scale (Reference Effort Assessment Data)© is a six-point scale tool for recording vital supplemental qualitative statistics gathered when reference staff assist users with their inquiries or research-related activities by placing an emphasis on recording the effort / knowledge / skills / teaching etc utilized by library staff during a reference transaction.

Institutional research grants enabled the authors to conduct a national study of the READ Scale at 14 diverse academic libraries and test its use as a tool for recording reference statistics. The study represents data collected from 170 individuals and 24 service points with over 22,000 transactions analyzed. There was a 60% return rate of an online survey of participants, with over 80% of respondents indicating they would recommend / adopt the Scale. The READ Scale has the potential to transform how reference statistics are gathered, interpreted and valued.

The paper proposed will introduce the READ Scale U.S. study in an international forum. Audience members will be invited to test the READ Scale at their own institutions, expanding the study of the Scale and reference assessment globally / culturally.

Examples from institutions currently using the READ Scale with also be shared.

Note: Select portions (such as the READ Scale©, concept, figures etc) of this paper have appeared in other publications in shorter, focused, introductory articles and conference proceedings. The 2007 READ Scale Study will be available in its entirety in the January 2010 issue of C&RL.

Keywords - Innovation, research projects, reference, academic libraries, statistics, qualitative, READ Scale.

1 RETHINKING TRADITIONAL REFERENCE STATISTICS

A 2002 ARL survey on reference statistics & assessments gives supporting evidence that many academic institutions are not completely satisfied with the usefulness of statistics gathered for reference services. The study revealed a lack of confidence in reference statistics data collection:

“With many librarians feeling as busy as ever, some have concluded that the reference data collected does not accurately reflect librarian's level of activity". *(ARL/SPEC/Kit268)*

Traditional data collection for reference statistics most often falls into categories and approach types:

Typical Categories – examples:

“Reference” question
“Directional” question
“Technical” question

Approach Type recorded – examples:

“Walk-up, or In-Person”
“Off-desk”
“Phone”
“Email”

These traditional reference statistics are usually recorded by a paper or electronic form, with a hash (/) mark. At the end of the day, these are tallied.

With the traditional method of recording reference statistics, there is no distinction made between transactions. For example, a simple ‘where is the bathroom?’ question and 30 second interaction is recorded by hash mark; however, so is the ‘I am researching John Q. Public’s writing and making comparisons with his contemporaries using religion as a reoccurring theme – where do I start?’, requiring much more intensive research skills, knowledge of subject matter and interaction with the patron.

Both users receive satisfactory assistance but the transactions are treated equally in the traditional reference data-gathering model, despite the obvious lop-sided efforts required by the librarian for the two very different inquiries. The hash mark does not recognize time, effort, knowledge, skill or teaching moments that are present in all reference transactions. The idea to create a new statistical model for reference that would recognize and record librarian efforts was formed, and the READ Scale was introduced by Bella Karr Gerlich in 2003 – 2004.

Fig. 1. The READ Scale (Reference Effort Assessment Data)© is a six-point scale tool developed for recording vital supplemental qualitative statistics gathered when reference staff assist users with their inquiries or research-related activities by placing an emphasis on recording the effort, knowledge, skills, teaching etc utilized by library staff during a reference transaction.

1 :

- Answers that require the least amount of effort;
- No specialized knowledge skills or expertise;
- No consultation of resources;
- Less than 5 minutes.

Examples:

- Directional inquiries;
- Library or service hours;
- Service point locations;
- Rudimentary machine assistance (locating/using copiers, how to print or supplying paper).

2:

- Answers given which require more effort;
- Require only minimal specific knowledge skills or expertise;
- Answers may need nominal resource consultation.

Examples:

- Call number inquiries;
- Item location;
- Minor machine & computer equipment assistance;
- General library or policy information;
- More complex machine assistance (how to save to a disk or email records, launching programs or re-booting).

3 :

- Answers in this category require some effort and time;
- Consultation of ready reference resource materials is needed;
- Minimal instruction of the user may be required;
- Reference knowledge and skills come into play.

Examples:

- Answers that require specific reference resources (encyclopedias or databases);
- Basic instruction on searching the online catalog;
- Direction to relevant subject databases;
- Introduction to web searching for a certain item;
- How to scan and save images;
- Increasingly complex technical problems (assistance with remote use).

4 :

- Answers or research requests require the consultation of multiple resources
- Subject specialists may need to be consulted and more thorough instruction and assistance occurs.
- Reference knowledge and skills needed.
- Efforts can be more supportive in nature for the user, or if searching for a finite answer, difficult to find.
- Exchanges can be more instruction based as staffs teach users more in-depth research skills.

Examples:

- Instructing users how to utilize complex search techniques for the online catalog, databases and the web;
- How to cross-reference resources and track related supporting materials;
- Services outside of reference become utilized (ILL, Tech services, etc), collegial consultation;
- Assisting users in focusing or broadening searches (helping to re-define or clarify a topic).

5 :

- More substantial effort and time spent assisting with research and finding information.
- On the high end of the scale, subject specialists need to be consulted.
- Consultation appointments with individuals might be scheduled.
- Efforts are cooperative in nature, between the user and librarian and or working with colleagues.
- Multiple resources used.
- Research, reference knowledge and skills needed.
- Dialogue between the user and librarian may take on a ‘back and forth question’ dimension.

Examples:

- False leads
- Interdisciplinary consultations / research;
- Question evolution;
- Expanding searches / resources beyond those locally available;
- Graduate research;
- Difficult outreach problems (access issues that need to be investigated).

6 :

- The most effort and time expended.
- Inquiries or requests for information can't be answered on the spot.
- At this level, staff may be providing in-depth research and services for specific needs of the clients.
- This category covers some 'special library' type research services.
- Primary (original documents) and secondary resource materials may be used.

Examples:

- Creating bibliographies and bibliographic education;
- In-depth faculty and PhD student research;
- Relaying specific answers and supplying supporting materials for publication, exhibits etc; working with outside vendors;
- Collaboration and on-going research.

Fig.1. The READ (Reference Effort Assessment Data) Scale© Bella Karr Gerlich - Bulleted Format

1.1 United States National Study 2007

In 2007, institutional grants funded the research collaboration between Georgia College & State University (GCSU) and Carnegie Mellon University to test the READ Scale. Dr. Gerlich (GCSU) and G. Lynn Berard (Carnegie Mellon) devised and conducted a national study of the READ Scale at 14 diverse academic libraries. The project collected individual data from 170 participants and 24 service points (or 'desks') and over 22,000 transactions were analyzed. An online survey of the participants had a 60% return rate, with over 80% of respondents indicating they would recommend and or adopt the Scale.

A. Research Objective

The ARL study suggested that traditional methodologies for data gathering of reference statistics do not adequately reflect the effort, knowledge, experience, and skill of reference staff in academic libraries. The READ Scale (Reference Effort Assessment Data) was developed in an attempt to gather unrecorded qualitative 'value-added' data associated with the reference transaction. The U.S. national study was conducted to test the Scale as an adaptable and adoptable tool at diverse institutions and to determine its effectiveness and practical applications in reference librarianship, and to acquire data to support or disprove to its use in the modern context of the statistics, assessment, measures and recognition of value-added service related to reference work.

B. Timeline

The recruitment of participants and preparation of the study occurred in the summer and fall of 2006, with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and pre-study exercises taking place between December and February.

The study duration was a pre-determined three-week period in winter 2007, and institutions could elect to test the Scale for an entire semester beyond that. All institutions were required to collect data during the three-week period.

C. Participants

- 14 Academic Libraries (minimum of 9 to maximum of 15 acceptable)
- Geographically diverse (12 states represented)
- Varied enrollment figures (grouped small, medium, large)
- Public and private representation

There were 170 individual participants total, with an on-site coordinator for each institution.

D. Pre-Study Training

Pre-study reference questions were developed for training and normalizing purposes. In addition to selecting from the study questions, on-site coordinators included local questions for librarians at that institution that reflected collection or curriculum strengths.

All participants were asked to answer and rank their effort for each of the sample questions, and on-site coordinators evaluated responses or broke ties, as needed. For all 14 institutions, the rating effort for transactions at 1, 2 or 6 levels were mostly unanimous, while the 3, 4, and 5 ratings revealed more differences between perceived rankings.

E. Collecting Data

The researchers developed a common table to compile data by Scale number and approach type and imported statistics from the institutions' various forms. Librarians were also asked to record data during 'off-desk' times to capture any higher-level efforts assisting patrons via direct email or set appointments. Statistics collected included data by institutions, by service point, off-desk comparisons, and approach types.

Table 1. Total transactions submitted, 3 week and semester long for 14 institutions, 24 service points and 170 participants:

READ Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	Totals
Service Points	9497	5622	3085	926	303	68	19501
Off-desk	658	635	565	295	117	53	2323
TOTALS	10155	6257	3650	1221	420	121	21824

F. Three-Week Collection Period

The cumulative number of transactions, READ Scale category assignment, question and approach type for all public service points and institutions totaled 8,439 transactions during the three-week collection period.

Table 2. Three-week data, all institutions:

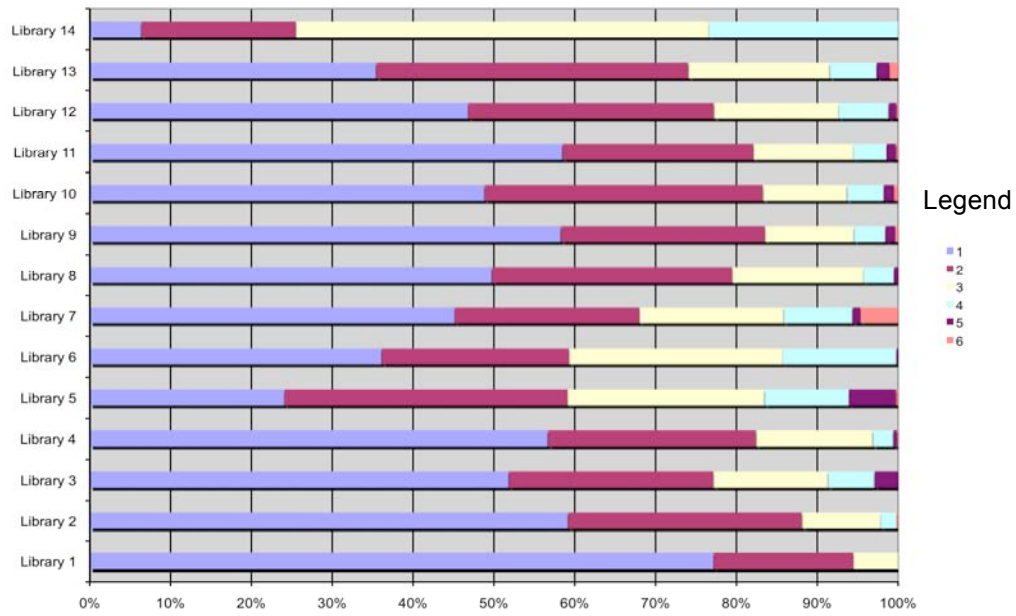
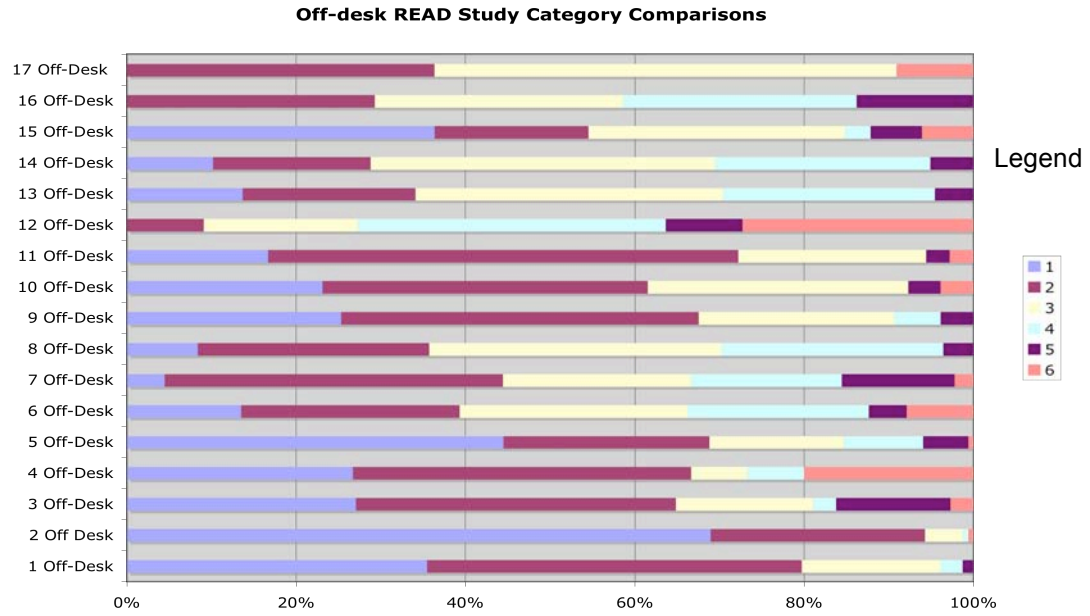


Table 3. Three-week off-desk statistics (17 individuals across 12 institutions) 1,531 transactions:

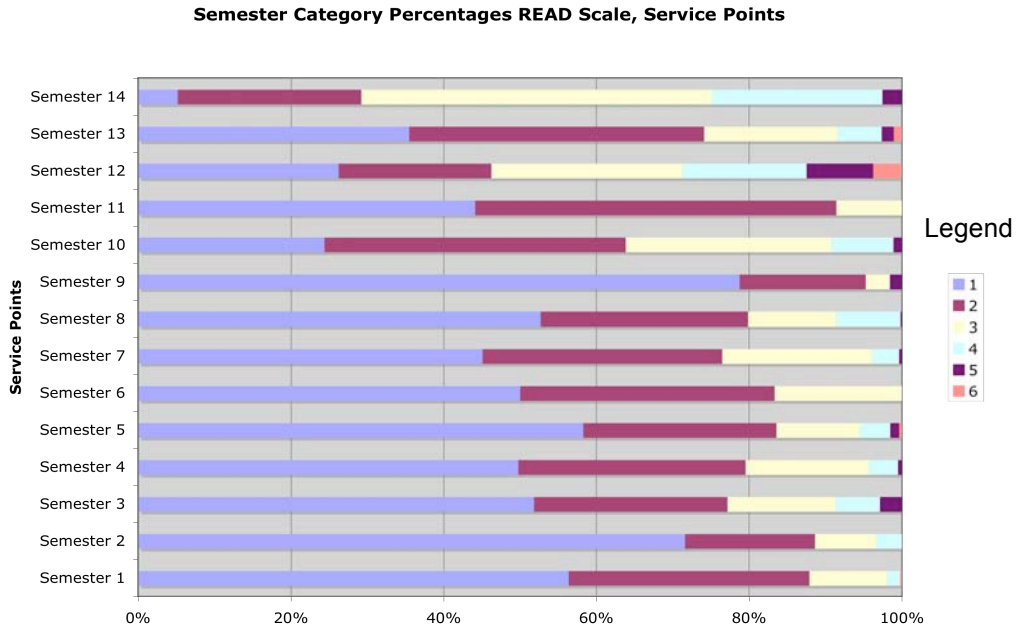


The off-desk comparisons provide evidence to support that a much higher level of effort, knowledge, and skills are needed from reference personnel than typically occur at the public service point.

G. Semester Long Data Collection

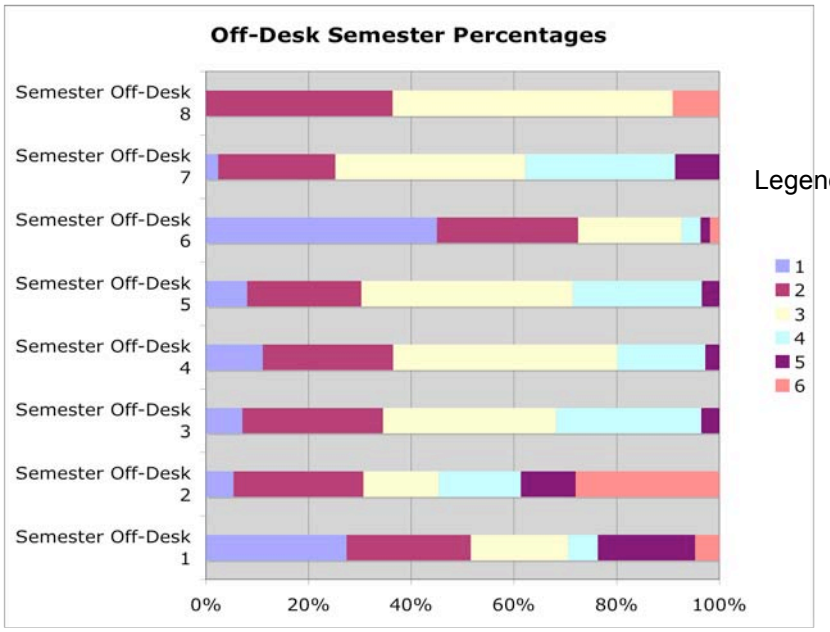
Seven institutions used the READ Scale all semester. Comparatively speaking, the data coincides with the three-week data set; most transactions occur at a category one of the Scale at service points, though there was a notable increase in categories two and three beyond the initial three-week period.

Table 4: Semester – long data set (7 institutions, 14 service points):



The following off-desk comparisons reveal the same pattern as the three-week data set – the semester participants off-desk transactions required a noticeably higher level of effort, knowledge and so on from reference personnel than the public service point.

Table 5. Off-desk, semester long data collection (8 individuals, 7 institutions):



H. Approach Types

Fig. 2 & 3. Approach types were also recorded, to study how users preferred interactions with librarians:

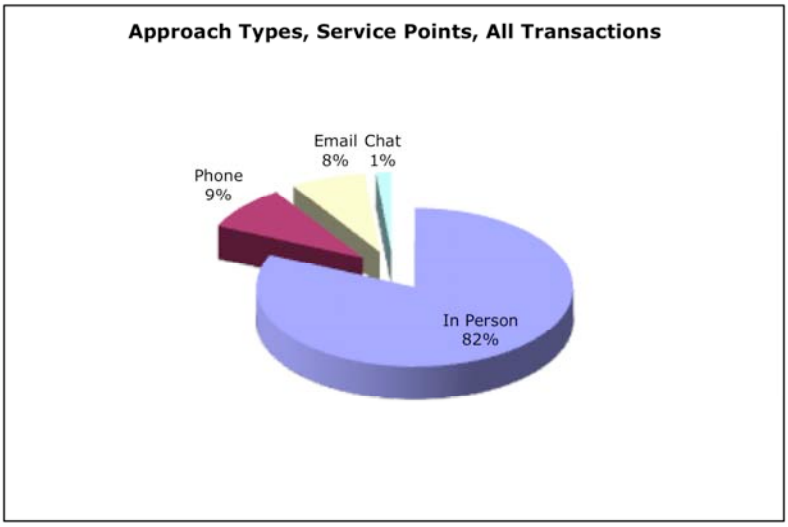


Figure 2. Approach types, service points

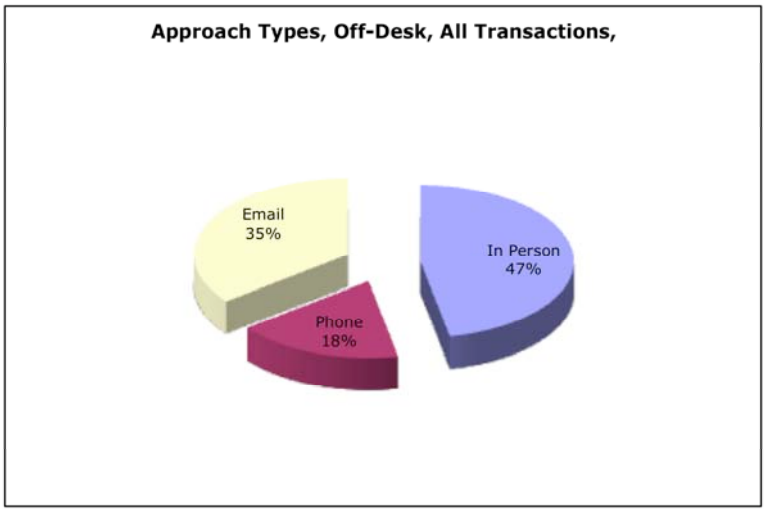


Figure 3. Approach type, off-desk

These results confirm that patrons continue to value predominantly face-to-face consultations; the higher concentration of email for off-desk transactions is also important to note as anecdotally, it is a potential reference statistic not traditionally recorded.

I. Survey Results

Individual participants were sent an online survey to complete. The response rate for the survey was high at 60%.

The majority indicated that using the Scale was 'not difficult' (51%), and 'easy' (38%) to 'moderately easy' (37%).

When asked to rank perceptions of added value to statistical data gathering, the majority of responses fell in the 'high value added' (46%) and 'moderate value added' (35%) categories. There was some difficulty recorded between rank three (3) and four (4) (29%), but participants felt overall 'very comfortable' evaluating their own efforts (50%).

67% of the study participants indicated they would recommend the READ Scale, with 50% responded affirmatively they would like to adopt the Scale, as is, with another 30% who would adopt with modifications.

The group was given an opportunity to suggest modifications, and two optional questions asked for specifics about what the study group liked and disliked about the READ Scale. The likes (40% answered) where coded into the six most common reoccurrences: Effort, Value; Approach to Evaluation; Types, Levels; Time; Staffing Levels; Reporting to Administration. Dislikes (37%) were likewise coded: Difficult to Apply and Subjectivity; Types, Levels; Approach to Evaluating; Knowledge of the Staff; Effort, Value.

Suggestions to modify the Scale (25 respondents) were categorized as Delivery Method/READ Scale Appearance; Time Element; Skill Level Element; Clarity of Categories; Discussion Component; Comments and Observations. The final question inquired if the approach to reference services changed in any way during study; 90% indicated 'no'.

J. The Next Phase and New Pilots

To date, the researchers have received over 40 inquiries for implementing the Scale at various institutions. Data from these libraries has begun to trickle in and comparison results compiled. A soon to be new website launched by the researchers with interactive capability will enable Scale adopters to talk with one another directly and discuss issues or resolve queries that arise with using a new tool. In addition, three online reference statistic collection tools, LibStats, Desk Tracker, and SiteScripter have included the READ Scale (with the creator's permission) as an option for data collection in their suite products.

A partial list of libraries using the Scale today include:

- University of Nebraska, Lincoln
- University of Nebraska,Omaha
- Kent State University
- Gettysburg College
- Northern Michigan University
- Sullivan University
- Western Michigan University
- University of New York, Albany
- Boise State
- Lawrence University
- Champlain CEGEP (Canada)
- Georgia College & State University
- Dominican University
- Carnegie Mellon University

All of these libraries report that the READ Scale brings value added quality to reference statistics gathering. In addition, they have shared their practical approaches to using the data derived from the READ Scale for both strategic planning and the assessment of reference services. Institutions use READ Scale statistics for staffing strategies; training & continuing education of library staff; renewed personal & professional interest in reference services; outreach to user groups; reports to administration; and normalizing reference amongst individuals and across service points. Some are even using the Scale at circulation points, using it as a gauge for referrals to the reference desk while acknowledging some service transactions should be given the same 'value-added' consideration when recorded statistics.

K. Conclusion

It appears from the survey results gathered during the 2007 study, increased inquiries from other institutions asking to use the READ Scale and growing audience numbers at conference presentations (ALA, ARCL, ARL) by the researchers that reference staffs are ready to try new methods for recording reference statistics. By continuing to gather data from other institutions that try the READ Scale, the researchers are amassing a large body of statistics to normalize the Scale even more, with an aim to creating a dialogue among professionals and recognize the value of our knowledge, skills, experience and teaching moments that occurs during reference.

The researchers hope to expand the READ Scale user groups globally and to interested libraries of all types with the intent to further study the scale and continue to normalize reference services, while recognizing the impact of the work librarians do.

If you are interested in trying the READ Scale, please contact Dr. Gerlich at bkarrgerlich@dom.edu.

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