

Letters

To the Editor:

It was both discouraging and encouraging to read David Kaser's article on academic library planning [C&RL July 1984]. Discouraging, because so many libraries have been—and continue to be—built with little, if any, consideration for their function, including the people who have to work in them every day. Encouraging, because he has again confirmed what many have known for many, many years, that the square or rectangle is still the most economical and functional shape for libraries.

I would suggest that library administrators are their own worst enemies for allowing themselves to be bullied into agreeing to architectural and design concepts which they, of all people, should know will not work. From long experience, I know you can have an esthetically pleasing, but still functionally efficient building.

The library administrator faced with planning a new building has a responsibility to educate academic administrators, fund-raisers, and architects. To put it bluntly, it is the library administrator who should tell the architect what kind of a building is needed, not *vice versa*.

Kaser's article should be required reading for all library planners and architects.

T. D. PHILLIPS

University Librarian

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To the Editor:

I read with great interest the article by Courtois and Goetsch "Use of Nonprofessionals at Reference Desks" (September 1984). The use of nonprofessionals in reference work is largely taboo in British academic libraries. When we introduced the practice into our library some five years ago, we were unaware of any other academic libraries here who were permitting their nonprofessionals to move into what was (and is) considered to be the territory of the professional.

Our experience has been wholly encouraging. Although one of our main reasons for having an information desk manned by nonprofessionals was a desire to ease pressure on the professional readers' advisers by siphoning off the more routine inquiries, the ensuing advantages lie elsewhere.

The study by Courtois and Goetsch did not seek to investigate the views of nonprofessionals on their reference work. If they had sought to do so I have no doubt that they would have discovered that the benefits to the individual are considerable. The addition of reference work to duties at the Issue Desk or in some back-room activity provides welcome variety. The training essential before undertaking reference work gives the nonprofessional a new perspective on the work which forms the major part of his or her duties. The acknowledgement that the nonprofessional is capable of more than the most routine duties is a great boost to morale and self-confidence.

N. J. RUSSELL

Pro-Librarian

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To the Editor:

I would like to thank you very much for the article by Martin P. Courtois and Lori A. Goetsch entitled "Use of Nonprofessionals at Reference Desks" in your September 1984 issue. My Director of Libraries, ever-concerned that I remain aware of currents in the library field, has your fine journal routed to me on a regular basis.

As a result of what I learned from that article, these changes have occurred at the University:

1. Since the use of nonprofessionals at the Reference Desk seems to be acceptable to many library directors, we have shifted responsibility for that function completely to nonprofessionals. We are not worried about a lack of preparedness on the part of these nonprofessionals since according to the study "few institutions reported having a systematic training program to prepare nonprofessionals for answering and referring questions." Moreover, since we treat our evening and weekend students the same as our day students, we see no reason for addressing such a distinction in our library service patterns.

2. Our public service librarians have now all been made part-time personnel since they have been relieved of their reference duties and there is no need for them to oversee the work of their nonprofessional colleagues. (From the study: "Nonprofessional staff and students at the reference/information desks frequently work alone, without a professional at the desk or on call.") The time of these librarians is now devoted entirely to collection development and library instruction.

3. We are hiring persons with a MLS and placing them in nonprofessional positions, thereby taking advantage of their knowledge but without having to pay them professional salaries. Courtois and Goetsch gave us that idea by indicating that "for purposes of this study nonprofessionals are defined as library workers who do not work in a librarian, professional or academic position. They may or may not hold a master's degree in library science."

4. We are excited about our new college graduates who are working at the Reference Desk (unsupervised, of course) while deciding whether or not to go on to library school. They are here as part of the University's new "Career Awareness Development" (C.A.D.) program.

5. Given these changes in our utilization of professionals, we have established a task force to examine long-term salary requirements in the library. It is possible that our librarians are overpaid for what they do, since replacing them with nonprofessionals seems to be no big deal. Parenthetically, I was reading the "Emperor's New Clothes" to my child when the MLS and its importance came to mind.

There may be additional opportunities for us suggested by your article; we are looking into that. In the meantime, thank you again and keep up the good work!

Sincerely, President, Day of Reckoning University

JOHN M. COHN

County College of Morris, Randolph, New Jersey

To the Editor:

Because the underlying tone of [Mr Cohn's] letter to the editor expresses concern about the results of a survey described in our article on the use of nonprofessionals at reference desks [C&RL Sept, 1984], we feel that it is important to respond to you.

The goal of the survey was to describe current staffing practices at the reference desk involving the use of nonprofessionals. In reporting the results, we, too, noticed several problem areas: lack of adequate training for nonprofessionals, poorly defined job roles for both professionals and nonprofessionals, and inadequate referral arrangements between professionals and nonprofessionals. These areas of concern need development, discussion, and experimentation to ensure both the effective integration of nonprofessionals into reference service and the professionalization of librarianship.

Despite these problems, our survey is only one of many in the literature demonstrating

that nonprofessionals are being used at reference desks and that the limited number of in-depth questions warrants this use. (Please see the sources listed in our "References" as well as Nancy J. Emmick and Luella B. Davis, "A Survey of Academic Library Reference Service Practices," *RQ* 24:67-81 [Fall 1984])

Satirizing these findings is not going to make this practice disappear. Rather, we hope that librarians will take a closer look at such problems as training and referral in order to develop more creative and effective roles for themselves and for nonprofessionals as well.

MARTIN P. COURTOIS and LORI A. GOETSCH

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