

Letters

To the Editor: I read with great interest Barbara J. Ford's "Reference beyond (and without) the Reference Desk" (*C&RL*, September 1986) about complements and alternatives to traditionally designed and located reference desks. She is right in suggesting that reference desks ought not be a "sacred tradition," one "uncritically accepted." I did not realize that anyone regarded the tradition in question as sacred; still, there may be some who do so and many who accept it uncritically. She is also right in observing that conventional reference desks are unsuitable for extended consultation; and while I don't mind reference librarians being desk-linked I certainly do not want them desk-bound. And I rejoice in her emphasis on the idea that as user needs and expectations change so must we review our notions concerning facilities and equipment.

I should like, however, to suggest a few possibilities which I offer to some extent as alternatives but mainly as complements to what Ford says. (1) Despite our orientation and training programs, is there not likely to be, in all but very small, remote, and/or closed institutions, a significant number of "walk-in" patrons, e.g., visiting scholars, not familiar with our collections and services, hence a need for fairly conspicuous inquiry-reception points? To have librarians out "on the floor" may not be enough in libraries serving adults, unless they wear identifying uniforms. (2) Some librarians have compromised, I gather, by stationing aides at "information desks" and more or less secluding their reference librarians. Reports on how well this works vary. In any event, let us not overstate the triviality of questions received at such service points: they can call for translation not only instant but sensitive, and your best reference librarian may therefore be the one most needed at your information desk. (3) Ford suggests some decentralization of reference service within reference areas: assuming that this is desirable and on the whole feasible, may not there still be a need for inquiry points or switching centers, e.g., places to go to ask for particular places of software, to pick up handouts, and to make appointments to see reference librarians? (4) As someone, I forget who, has pointed out, hi-tech needs to be supplemented by hi-touch. Ford is right in noting that today's students are increasingly at home with computers and therefore accustomed to working through problems without incessant association with directive adults; and I for one do not want any perpetuation of the sort of reference service that encourages helplessness on the part of inquirers. Still, does not experience suggest that in many academic settings student-teacher relationships are very impersonal?—and that in such situations reference librarians—friendly, helpful, shock-proof, non-threatening, and seemingly omnipresent—may be just about the only such adults in young persons' everyday experience? I suggest, too, that although most student questions may be related to academic objectives, some may not be—and may be unlikely to be anticipated in orientation/training programs. For a complementary picture of academic life, see Kathleen Dunn's article in the same issue as Ford's. I suspect, from reading Dunn, that an important variable may be how much teachers are perceived as valuing the concerns and aspirations of young people and willing to mix with them in the extra-curriculum.

After reading Ford, I found it helpful to reread Joan C. Durrance's and Constance A. Mellon's articles in the January and March 1986 issues and to read Mark Schumacher's and Connie Miller's September 1986 responses—with special reference to the questions (1) What help do students need and/or want? (2) How can we make best use of staff time? and (3) How available must reference librarians seem to be in order not to seem remote or to be offering their services grudgingly?

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