



# Reference Service in Academic and Research Libraries

EVERETT T. MOORE

QUESTIONS OF SPECIALIZATION or non-specialization and of centralization or decentralization have dominated the thinking of reference librarians in academic and research libraries during the past several decades just as they have occupied the attention of general library administrators. Not every reference librarian has consciously faced these questions, of course, nor has had the opportunity to answer them; but in ways both seen and unseen, the questions have pervaded their thoughts. And, although the staffing of the smallest college library does not permit thoroughgoing specialization or decentralization in the organization of its services, even there the handling of specialized materials and the organizing of collections in subject fields will most likely call on particular talents of reference librarians.

In 1949, Frances Cheney looked carefully into the question of the future of the general reference librarian in her study of reference departments of all Southern college and university libraries holding 100,000 or more volumes.<sup>1</sup> She visited every library on which she reported. Although in a few of the larger schools, divisional reading rooms were beginning to appear, she found, in the main, reference service continued to be organized around a general reference department. The general reference librarian, she concluded, was not on the way out, although there would be more subject specialists as graduate work continued to expand and develop; certainly, she believed, in the smaller institutions they will be the only reference librarians. Her concern was that the general reference librarian not become completely involved with tasks that might better be performed by other staff members: that they not spend too much time on handling inter-library loans, checking lists, spoon-feeding students, and so forth. Her

---

The author is Assistant University Librarian, University of California, Los Angeles.

### *Reference Service in Academic and Research Libraries*

sensible observations are generally applicable to colleges and universities in all parts of the United States.

The question of specialization concerns reference librarians wherever programs of teaching and research are sufficiently broad and deep to place real demands on the "working" members of the library staff. Teaching methods of the college faculty help to determine the kind of library services that can be offered. The best intentions of librarians to extend their services actively to students are ineffectual if the students are not stimulated to explore the library's resources for themselves.

It is the *nature* of the materials themselves that demands the utmost resourcefulness of reference librarians in making them useful to students. This is most apparent in the fields of science and technology and in the social sciences, in which the production of books, periodicals, monographic studies, reports, and memoranda is great and is growing greater. Their variety is staggering. Adequate listing and indexing of many publications are not being accomplished, and bibliographies in subject fields must constantly be supplemented by resourceful assistance from reference librarians.

Organization of college and university libraries along divisional lines has offered the readiest opportunities to provide specialized reference services. As developed mainly in the 1940's and 1950's, this has meant that in one form or another of the humanities-social science-science and technology organization of library services, reference work has been one of the functional aspects of each division. In hurrying to join the trend toward divisionalism, a number of academic libraries disbanded their reference departments and declared that assistance to readers could be more efficiently and effectively provided at decentralized points in the library.

The divisional plan has been embraced by large and small libraries, in both colleges and universities.<sup>2</sup> In its most genuine form the scheme was fashioned to provide for real economies in facilities and services, to permit an orderly development and extension of services for broad subject areas, and to head off immoderate multiplication of separate library facilities in many subject fields. The audacious library plans developed by Ralph Ellsworth at the University of Colorado and by Henry B. Van Hoesen at Brown University, both in the late 1930's, were the prototypes of this organizational pattern, and the general scheme still exerts powerful influence over library planners.<sup>3</sup>

In some cases, a too imitative adaptation of the pattern has resulted

in a general weakening of reference services and sometimes in the virtual elimination of effective reference work. Uncritical imitators of the plan should, of course, study the recent modifications in the organization of services both at Colorado and Brown to meet changing needs at those universities.<sup>4, 5</sup>

Where a divisional plan has taken the form of a controlled decentralization of library services in specialized fields of the physical sciences and technology, results have often been gratifying, in enabling specialist reference librarians to serve an immediate clientele. "Reference" librarians may, indeed, have a variety of responsibilities as librarians in branch or divisional libraries in such specialized fields. It is here that the scheme seems to take its most appropriate and effective form. The larger the divisional library the greater the likelihood of the development of a competent reference staff; but quite without regard to staff alone, librarians in such "special" libraries are likely to develop reference capabilities through their work in the selection and organization of materials, as well as through constant close contact with the users of their collections. In a sensitive librarian, this goes far toward developing a sympathetic understanding of the needs of students and scholars in their specialized fields.

Attempts have been made to apply the same techniques of all-around responsibility to the staffing of more general library services—in divisions for the humanities and the social sciences, and sometimes for the practical and fine arts. The organization of services at the University of Nebraska Library is the most notable example of a thoroughgoing plan for decentralizing and regrouping of library functions.<sup>6</sup> The scheme has been found to work with great success in this relatively "uncomplicated" university, in which advanced graduate programs in many fields and in great coordinate "area" programs have not placed such extensive and specialized demands on the library as are experienced in a number of other universities. The plan has undoubtedly resulted in a broadening of the responsibilities of both public service and technical processes librarians. One of its objectives has been to give librarians engaged in reference work a better sense for the functions of book selection, acquisition, cataloging, and classification. Benefits have accrued from both directions, so that the technical processes personnel increase their effectiveness through their public service contacts, and vice versa.

In some applications of such schemes, however, the potential weaknesses of the divisional plan become most apparent. When complete

### *Reference Service in Academic and Research Libraries*

decentralization of reference services has been the objective, the result is likely to be an utter dispersal of reference responsibility.<sup>7</sup> Lack of a central reference service, situated close to the general card catalog of the library, where general information and guidance in the use of all of the library's resources may be provided, is an immediate cause of confusion for the student. Often a token information center, with a few standard reference books at hand, will be set up as a substitute for a general reference facility; this is usually done only after the absence of a general service becomes intolerable.

In a complete divisional plan in a general library, such divisions as humanities, social sciences, fine arts, education, physical sciences, and life sciences may be housed in quite separate facilities, perhaps even on separate floors. The problems of dividing a collection of reference and bibliographical works according to these fields is particularly difficult, except through wide and expensive duplication. The problem alone of access to the general catalog (assuming that most libraries will not yet have been able to reproduce it conveniently in book form) will create a completely inefficient arrangement of facilities. Yet this is the situation that more than one college or university library has built itself into in recent years, believing that it was achieving an advanced pattern of service.

Organization of general services has often been adapted to a building layout presumed to be desirable and "functional," rather than permitting the organization itself to determine the design of the building. Reconversion to a plan of centralized reference service can be difficult, or impossible, if the building seems to dictate a decentralized scheme.

More universal than this particular question of centralization or decentralization of services has been the question of how to organize effectively the greatly varied and specialized materials in a number of fields, particularly in the social sciences. Government publications, and all of those other document publications of international organizations and specialized agencies which appear under some kind of "official" auspices, have presented librarians with the greatest challenge of all in the organization of complicated and wide-ranging materials for use. No matter where the ultimate responsibilities for their organization have been placed in the library administrative scheme, the responsibilities for interpreting their bibliographic organization and assisting readers in their use have inevitably fallen to reference librarians.

One of the boldest steps taken to meet the problem of ever-increasing document publications in the research library was the establishment of the documents division in the Reference Department of the University of California Library, at Berkeley, in 1938, by Jerome K. Wilcox.<sup>8</sup> The scheme grew out of the publishing projects in which Mr. Wilcox had undertaken to list and describe the organization of government publications of the New Deal. It quickly became a useful and essential unit in the University Library at Berkeley, and ultimately was established as a separate department. The documents program, as it has developed on that campus, and, similarly, at the younger campus of the University at Los Angeles embraces the functions of acquisition, initial brief processing of materials, and reference service in the use of publications. Benefits of quick organization of materials for use, of the provision of expert specialized reference assistance, and of economical and efficient housing of the materials have all been pointed to by librarians of both campuses as evidence of success for this scheme.

Initial criticisms of this method of document organization have included objections to segregating collections according to form rather than subject content, to a cultivation of over-specialization by librarians who work with them, and to deficiencies in cataloging resulting from brief methods of recording acquisitions. Each library has had to decide for itself whether to adopt such a scheme, taking into account considerations of scope and kinds of service offered in one or a number of libraries within the institution, and other matters of basic economy. The specialized documents organization is, of course, appropriate only to the larger research-oriented institution, not to the general or liberal arts college.

Not every university library has rushed to establish a special service for documents. On the contrary, the scheme has been adopted completely in only a small number of universities. For quite sound reasons, many libraries have kept acquisitions and processing functions for documents in the departments generally responsible for those functions, and reference assistance has been provided through whatever pattern—centralized or divisionalized—the library has operated. Strong arguments have always been made for keeping documents together with other kinds of materials, according to subject. At Nebraska, for example, all aspects of the government publications program are integrated with the Library's divisionalized scheme for public services and technical processes, not under separate control.<sup>9</sup>

In recent years, however, an increasing number of university li-

### *Reference Service in Academic and Research Libraries*

libraries have shown renewed interest in establishing some kind of specialized documents service.<sup>10</sup> The enormous growth in the publishing programs of all governments and of international organizations and related bodies, the establishment by the federal government of such special services as the twelve Regional Technical Reports Centers (established by the United States Office of Technical Services), and the greatly increased use of document materials in study and research in the social sciences have necessitated a closer look at the question of organizing such materials.

George Caldwell, surveying in 1958 the organization of government publications in American university libraries,<sup>11</sup> found that of the twenty-three member libraries of the Association of Research Libraries which answered his questionnaire, eight maintained completely separate collections, four had predominantly separate collections, six handled most government publications like other publications, and five had mixed systems.

In the light of present needs, serious questions have lately arisen as to the adequacy of even this type of separate organization and service. The doubts are not about the necessity for the plan itself, but rather as to whether the scheme is being applied too narrowly and exclusively to the materials that can be defined as publications of "official" bodies. What of the vast quantity of "non-official" publications issued by semi-public or government-affiliated organizations, the reports and papers of research and development institutions, of institutes and laboratories, of universities and schools and academies? Some of them appear in series, perhaps even more are in ephemeral or insubstantial pamphlet form. All require special attention and skill in acquiring and organizing them for use.<sup>12</sup>

In some universities the specialists in political science and government have developed supplementary research centers in which many of these materials have been acquired and collected. Sometimes this activity has been carried on quite outside and beyond the library's organization. It is much to the credit of teachers and researchers in these fields that intensive collecting of such materials has been pursued—and not always to the credit of librarians who have been slow to find a place for this kind of special research service within their library organizations. Sooner or later, the skills of librarians have been employed to organize the materials which these bureaus and institutes have acquired. Often, however, this has happened too late to assure full integration of the special service with general library services.

A broader view of the opportunities that libraries have, to relate

this kind of special library function more closely to traditional services, is now being taken by some library administrators. And just as reference librarians have been called on to organize and administer such services as those with government publications, they will be needed to devise more efficient ways of organizing the special materials in the social sciences and to work out better ways to integrate them with documents.

Reference librarians are, therefore, increasingly engaged in a variety of specialized functions and responsibilities. With these responsibilities must necessarily go greater responsibility for collection building and selection of materials in specialized fields. Whatever organization of services in academic and research libraries brings these activities more fully into the area of reference work is likely to be a healthy one, for it combines the reference librarian's active functions of interpreting the library's services and collections with responsibilities for developing and extending its resources.

A challenging proposal for extending the scope of reference service was made by Samuel Rothstein, in 1960, when he addressed the Reference Services Division of the ALA.<sup>13</sup> He urged that reference librarians overcome their inhibitions against the *direct* provision of information (not just suggestion or instruction as to where or how the patron might find it for himself), and that they recognize information service as a principal and worthy obligation of the library. This "maximum" rather than "minimum" theory of reference work, he said, ". . . takes its stand on the twin tenets of faith and efficiency. Information, it contends, is of crucial concern to many people. For businessmen, legislators, researchers and scholars, it is more important that they have it than they learn how to acquire it, and extensive library assistance is therefore economical and worthwhile in any case where the time saved by the client is more valuable than the time spent by the librarian. The chemist no longer blows his own glassware and the doctor no longer takes temperatures; why should they not have the librarian conduct literature searches for them?"<sup>14</sup>

Rothstein's proposal holds a good deal of interest to all academic libraries in which specialized reference work is a significant part of their services. It is, of course, an extension of his concept of "amplified service" in special librarianship which he described in his study on *The Development of Reference Services*, published in 1955.<sup>15</sup> It was ". . . likely and proper," Rothstein thought, "that the librarians [in universities] should find methods and support for a program of ex-

*Reference Service in Academic and Research Libraries*

tensive assistance to research. The practical problems had not yet been worked out, but the case for an expanded reference service to university research personnel was plausible enough to indicate that the future development of reference service in university libraries would lie in the direction of greater responsibilities for the reference librarian." <sup>16</sup>

Specialization in a somewhat different sense enters into considerations of library services to undergraduates in the great universities which have extensive graduate programs. With the development since World War II of separate undergraduate or college libraries in a number of universities, duplication of both books and services has been undertaken, sometimes to considerable breadth and depth. Fears have often been expressed that segregation of library services to undergraduates is unwise because the students are thereby consigned to a second-class library status and are deprived of the advantages of exposure to the great resources of a general university library. Reference service to undergraduates, it is felt, from this viewpoint, will be less effective when it is supported by the relatively limited resources of an undergraduate library reference collection rather than by the full-scale reference and bibliography collection of a central university library.

The arguments *for* the separate services usually point out that provision of the undergraduate facility within the university is simply a means for giving the undergraduate something of the quality and convenience of a good college library—quite the equal of some of the better liberal arts college libraries—which is more appropriate to his use than the large and complicated university library in which he must compete for services and books with great numbers of graduate students, faculty members, and researchers, often without the advantage of going directly to the books on the shelves. Also generally accepted is the view that undergraduates, although they are furnished excellent facilities and collections of their own, should not be excluded from the general research library when they have need to use its resources. If such a scheme can be made to work successfully, the undergraduate then should enjoy the best of two worlds of library service. (He would not, presumably, have all of the advantages of the graduate student in the research library, as, for example, direct access to all book and periodical collections; the advantages to the graduate would thereby not be cancelled out.)

As for reference services in the undergraduate library itself, patterns

and precedents are not clear, for in many cases, over-all patterns of service are yet to be developed. At Harvard, where doubt has long been expressed about the need for extensive reference service to students, establishment of the Lamont Library for undergraduates has brought a new recognition of the appropriateness of direct assistance to students in the use of specialized materials. As reported by Edward P. Leavitt,<sup>17</sup> reference assistants there, for example, offer aid to undergraduates working on their required research papers for the Government 130 course, beginning with an orientation in the use of the *Monthly Catalog of U.S. Government Publications*, the *Government Organization Manual*, *Congressional Directory*, *Congressional Record*, *Supreme Court Reports*, and *United Nations Yearbooks*. "These constitute a beginning," he says, "and the reference assistant can refer them for other specific materials to Widener Library, the Law School Library, or the Library of the Graduate School of Public Administration."<sup>18</sup>

Even more useful as an example of the kind of reference service the larger universities may find appropriate for their great numbers of undergraduates is that at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor. There, in the most advanced facility of its kind in the country, the Undergraduate Library provides full-scale reference service as one of its major functions.<sup>19</sup>

With the development of the undergraduate library idea, a renewed hope has grown among reference librarians for a better solution than has yet been found in the large universities to the problem of instructing students in the use of books and libraries. Here, the liberal arts college librarians can perhaps offer the greatest assistance to the university undergraduate librarians in demonstrating how the student may be given a better insight into methods of study and research.

Particularly with students in honors programs such as many colleges and universities are undertaking, reference librarians should find themselves working closely and responsibly with teaching staffs in providing for the library needs of the ablest and most imaginative students. Librarians will perhaps be the ones to offer special instruction to these students in the most fruitful use of bibliographical resources. Library instruction, in this sense, will be much more than giving lessons in the use of the card catalog, periodical indexes, and encyclopedias—all of which should be pretty well mastered before students come to college.

Another major concern of reference librarians in academic and

### *Reference Service in Academic and Research Libraries*

research libraries—of supplementing library resources through inter-library cooperation—requires only passing mention here, as it is treated more fully in another chapter of this issue. Interlibrary loan service has long been one of the specialized functions of reference librarians; whether or not it is their immediate responsibility, it does require their skills and insights if the service is to be more than an extended circulation function. Now that there is stiff competition for research materials among colleges and universities and other research institutions, and it is no longer easy to borrow books and periodicals from each other, libraries are challenged to find new means for supplementing their resources. Reference librarians are looking to new opportunities for effecting wider exchange of information about library resources, through published catalogs or centralized listings, and perhaps for rapid transmission of materials.

Those who can grasp the meaning of such opportunities and can adapt library practices and services to take full advantage of them will play useful roles in tomorrow's libraries.

### *References*

1. Cheney, Frances N. "Whither the General Reference Librarian?" *South-eastern Librarian*, 2:25-34, Spring 1952.
2. Blanchard, J. R. "Departmental Libraries in Divisional Plan University Libraries," *College and Research Libraries*, 14:243-248, July 1953.
3. Ellsworth, R. E. "Colorado University's Divisional Reading Room Plan: Description and Evaluation," *College and Research Libraries*, 2:103-109+, March 1941.
4. Brock, Clifton. "Reference Service in the Divisional Plan Library: Some Tentative Questions," *College and Research Libraries*, 22:449-456, Nov. 1961.
5. McNeal, Archie L. "Divisional Organization in the University Library." In LaNelle Vandiver, ed., *University of Tennessee Library Lectures, numbers ten, eleven, and twelve, 1958-1960*, Knoxville, Tenn., The University of Tennessee, 1961, pp. 39-50.
6. Lundy, Frank A. "Library Service to Undergraduate College Students; the Divisional Plan Library," *College and Research Libraries*, 17:143-148, March 1956.
7. Brock, *op. cit.*, pp. 452-457.
8. Wilcox, Jerome K. "A Documents Division in World War II," *College and Research Libraries*, 6:108-111, March 1945.
9. Lundy, Frank A., and Johnson, Eugene M. "Documents in the Divisional Library," *College and Research Libraries*, 19:463-470, Nov. 1958.
10. Moll, Wilhelm. "A Fresh Look at the Treatment of Documents," *Library Resources and Technical Services*, 4:43-44, Winter 1960.
11. Caldwell, George. "University Libraries and Government Publications: A Survey," *College and Research Libraries*, 22:30-34, Jan. 1961.

EVERETT T. MOORE

12. Ennis, Phillip H. "The Social Sciences: Some Reflections for Librarians," *Bulletin of the Social Science Division, Special Libraries Association*, 5:1-2, Spring 1963.
13. Rothstein, Samuel. "Reference Service: The New Dimension in Librarianship," *College and Research Libraries*, 22:11-18, Jan. 1961.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
15. Rothstein, Samuel. *The Development of Reference Services through Academic Traditions, Library Practice and Special Librarianship* (ACRL Monographs, No. 14). Chicago, Association of College and Reference Libraries, June 1955.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
17. Leavitt, Edward P. "Government Publications in the University Library," *Library Journal*, 86:1741-1743, May 1, 1961.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 1742.
19. Wagman, Frederick H. "The Undergraduate Library of the University of Michigan," *College and Research Libraries*, 20:179-188, May 1959.