

Standards for Reference Services

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REFERENCE STANDARDS AND measurements have been extensively written about since the development of a much more active information service program by libraries. There are significant reference studies by Bernard Berelson,¹ Margaret Hutchins,² Louis Shores,³ and Joseph Wheeler and Herbert Goldhor⁴ that brighten the library literature. But these studies do little in the way of focusing attention on the qualitative or quantitative factors in providing information services. Others such as Leon Carnovsky,⁵ Arnold Miles and Lowell Martin,⁶ and Samuel Rothstein⁷ wrote about the compelling need for quantitatively-based appraisals and offered some guidelines for measuring reference services. During the last decade the debate continued. Some of that discussion is described in this article and, it is hoped, the issues have sharpened the focus on basic standards of reference service on which these reference pioneers labored.

The efforts to develop practical methods of self-evaluation and to define reference services have been led by library administrators who have felt the budgetary importance of measuring the effectiveness of a library's services. But the task of evaluating public services has always been a difficult one for researchers. When compared with other library activities such as circulation, acquisitions, and technical services, reference services were always considered too difficult to quantify. In addition, there was little agreement as to what constituted reference services. Were they the same as the information services performed by information and referral centers or information brokers? Were interlibrary loan

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activities part of the library's reference department? Was formal instruction concerning reference tools part of reference work? If, after having finally decided what the reference librarian did, the question remained—how could anyone readily measure the impact or the effectiveness of such a service? It is apparent that there is some disagreement as to what reference services are in the context of present-day library operations. Nevertheless, there will be an attempt here to see if past experiences provide a legacy from which to set standards.

The library literature has many references to the importance of establishing quantitative and qualitative standards of service. A review of the various library standards reveals that they usually say little or nothing about standards for library reference services other than that there "should be such services available!" Someone has said that the evaluation of reference service can best be described as a "closed circle of futility." But in failing to act on the basis of some standard in performing their services, reference librarians run the risk of not having some accountable work measurements on which administrative decisions are increasingly made in the public sector today.

An Analysis of the Cautious Professional Response

In 1960 the American Library Association formed a new Committee on Standards in what was then named the Reference Services Division. Louis Shores, the Committee's chair, was given the charge to reexamine the nature of reference work and to use this as a base for developing reference service standards. All types of libraries were to be considered and examined. As a first step, the committee prepared a statement concerning the nature, scope and type of reference activity performed by libraries. It outlined components of reference service and gave a conceptual framework for such services in all types of libraries.

It was not until 1968 when the committee was reactivated that another attempt was made to look at this issue. The reconstituted Committee on Standards conducted a study to identify efforts to measure and evaluate reference services by libraries in one service area—the Atlanta metropolitan region.⁸

The study noted the use made of reference statistics, the levels of user satisfaction with the reference services available and attempted to determine the library interest in standards for reference services. Only one-third of those entering a library felt the need to ask the reference librarian for information. Two-thirds of those using reference services were doing so in connection with some organized study activity. Of the

Standards

users studied, 81 percent were twenty-five years of age or younger. The users were rather pleased with the established information services, but the academic library users were much more critical of the service patterns than were the public library users. The study was conducted in 108 libraries, half of which were open forty hours a week or less. Paraprofessional personnel were staffing the reference desk on weekends and during the late afternoon and evening hours in most of these libraries.

Reference statistics were kept by slightly more than 50 percent of the libraries, with most of these keeping simple counts, similar to circulation statistics. Interestingly, nearly 50 percent of the libraries participated in some cooperative program which provided a backup library resource for information services. On the other hand, only 18 percent of the libraries had ever completed any kind of user analysis of what materials or information was needed. Of these, only 10 percent of the libraries gathered specific information on user satisfaction.

The most clearly defined trend observed in most of the libraries was that there was no written institutional policy for reference service. Most institutions seemed to provide library information service without identifying or establishing what their institutional goals or objectives were.

On the basis of these findings, the committee appeared to endorse, somewhat hesitantly, further efforts to establish standards for reference service. The unvalidated observations were that:

1. Libraries needed to define and publish their service objectives so that the user would know the types of available service.
2. Most reference collections were developed with no selection policy to govern expenditures or, more basically, to reflect the user's needs.
3. Key to user satisfaction was the staffing existing at any one hour; weekend patterns of professional staffing were weak and correlated with higher user dissatisfaction.
4. User reaction to the library's reference service was very helpful, and indicated where alterations in existing patterns of service were desirable.
5. Based on user comments, the closer the reference desk was to the main flow of user traffic, the more effective the information service appeared to be.
6. Formal and informal instruction was clearly effective in increasing user satisfaction in the use of library materials and indexes.

The study does not give any prediction of the changes in reference service patterns, such as the availability of computer-based information retrieval systems, which might expand the parochial focus of a tradi-

tional reference department. In addition, hierarchical levels of reference services are now available to users through networks of cooperating libraries. Reference networks broaden the issue of the access to materials beyond the discussion of the best location for the reference desk! Also, very little was said about the combination of intuition and knowledge that a good reference librarian must have to negotiate the reference question answering process successfully. These issues could have sharpened the focus of subsequent efforts made by the Reference and Adult Services Division's Standards Committee.

“One Small Step for Standards”— The Analysis of the RASD Guidelines

As a result of the Atlanta study, a commitment was made by the American Library Association to develop standards emphasizing the need for libraries to develop a statement of a philosophy of service. The ALA Reference and Adult Services Division adopted guidelines in 1976 which outlined the general purposes of reference service.⁹ They were not standards since they gave little by the way of quantitative or qualitative measures by which libraries might evaluate their services.

The entire process of formulating these guidelines, required a decade of discussion and debate on reference standards. The guidelines sought to focus on the delivery of information services to all types of users. They addressed the performance of everyone involved in providing reference and information services, including the subject specialists, administrators, and trustees, along with the rank-and-file reference librarian. They required that there be a policy manual, or service code, so that librarians and users alike could be made aware of the services offered by the library.

By emphasizing personal assistance, library orientation and instruction, and the importance of library networks to a comprehensive reference service, the guidelines emphasized areas of reference service that were well established in practice. Moreover, the guidelines recommended user surveys to determine what spectrum of users was being served.

It was significant that the guidelines focused on the importance of selecting reference librarians who could communicate easily and promote the use of library services. This had been a continuing concern of the RASD throughout their deliberations in the 1960s and 1970s.

Two of the guidelines drew attention to the professional nature of the guidance given at the reference desk. They recommended that a

Standards

reference librarian should be available whenever the library is open and that continuing education for the librarian should be required by the library to assure the maintenance of high standards of reference services.

Another issue addressed by the guidelines was the lack of adequate evaluations. No longer content with proclaiming the centrality of reference in the library's operation, the guidelines specified that some evaluation of the reference services must be made, even though little guidance was given on conducting such an evaluation.

Descriptively, the guidelines defined what reference librarians and information specialists actually do. Words such as "intermediary or the negotiator for unlocking resources" and "facilitator" who is "impartial and nonjudgmental" were used.

The guidelines describing the nature of reference and information services were taken from the earlier work of the ALA Committee on Reference Standards of the 1960s. In addition, statements in support of library instruction, the development of library guides or aids, the use of databases, and the importance of access to the interlibrary network of resources were added to the original committee statement on reference services.

Clearly, there was nothing in the guidelines that would make the "giant leap" to quantitative standards such as the size of the staff, books, or budget, but the guidelines did reflect the wide range of information services provided by American libraries. Yet, they appeared to be only "one small step" toward the goal of quantitative and qualitative reference standards discussed so often in the literature.

Some Other Efforts by Type of Library

At another institutional level, many state libraries have developed reference and information service statements for public libraries under the requirements of the Federal Library Services and Construction Act. These statements are expressed in terms of providing public library users access to the state's library collections and become a service philosophy for libraries in the entire state.

At the 1982 Midwinter meeting of the American Library Association, the Public Library Association (PLA) gave its approval for the release of the long-awaited *Output Measures for Public Libraries: A Manual of Standardized Procedures*. Designed to supplement the PLA's *A Planning Process for Public Libraries*,¹⁰ or stand alone, the manual outlines procedures for collecting performance data, including reference transactions per capita and reference fill data. It is understood that

PLA hopes that these, as well as their other measures, will become a national standard.

The quantitative standards draft for two-year college libraries were completed in 1979 by the Junior College Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries.¹¹ These guidelines are used for evaluating the activities of the learning resource centers. The appendix to the Standards consists of nearly seventy users' services for which statistics might be collected.

In contrast to the *Standards for College Libraries*, the ARL-ACRL Standards for University Libraries offer the argument that a university library should be judged not by its size in collections or expenditures or staffing, but how well it serves students, faculty, and other academic staff.¹² Indeed, whether a student can find the information when it's needed is clearly the focus of this effort.

There have also been some recent efforts by an RASD committee to explore the feasibility and desirability of drafting standards and/or guidelines for online search services. Such an effort might cover the assessment of training, performance, and job descriptions for searchers; levels of service and access for different user groups; administrative and financial issues; hardware configuration and software database availability; document delivery, support services, and public relations; planning processes; and any ongoing evaluative methods used.

In a departure from the traditional view of standards, Charles Robinson, Baltimore County Public Librarian, notes that there may be some new ways of looking at public library "output" measurements: title fill rate; browsing fill rate; subject information fill rate; response time; reference/information service; circulation per capita and per registration; turnover; registration percentage of population; program attendance overall and attendance by program; phone and mail use; and circulation per staff member. The stress is on the importance of how the library uses its resources and how well the public library user is served.

Where Are We Going From Here?

In the final analysis, there may be little that can be done in standardizing the dynamics of the communications encounter which is so crucial to the reference dialogue. One could ask: How do standards measure this exchange?

It seems the most recent efforts by ALA's Reference and Adult Services Division have resulted in the profession's review of the quality of reference services provided and in the recommendation that there be a

Standards

service policy in written form. In effect, those who are involved in reference would be guided by the service policy much as the profession now accepts the written book selection policy for the library.

Described here are the attempts to put reference standards in writing after many decades of talk. One could argue that these efforts have put the cart before the horse because of the lack of adequate measurement and evaluation techniques for reference services. But one needs only to look at a century of professional debate about such standards to realize that it has not brought the profession very far in its quest for standards. The present guidelines, albeit quite imperfect, do provide the central focus for a philosophy of service that encompasses libraries at all levels of activities.

Bernard Vavrek, who worked on the RASD standards' efforts, has stated "that the evaluation of reference/information services can be accomplished without the availability of nationally produced standards."¹³ There has been a tendency by the profession to wait for the development of reference evaluation techniques before working out the policy framework under which reference librarians should work. On the other hand, Vavrek is correct in his assessment that "we have not utilized some basic notions...because of the felt attitude that leadership in evaluation techniques is the function and prime responsibility of a national organization rather than an individualized professional responsibility."¹⁴ Those techniques for evaluation of reference services, however, are described elsewhere in this issue of *Library Trends*. With these prescriptive techniques, the standards' efforts described here can only be strengthened.

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ROBERT KLASSEN

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