Current Trends in Academic Libraries

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IN THE LAST ISSUE of *Library Trends* devoted to reference services (Winter 1964), Everett Moore identified the chief concerns of academic reference librarians as specialization or nonspecialization, centralization or decentralization. He referred specifically to the organization of reference services in a general reference room or subject-specialized divisions, separate government documents departments or integration of documents into the library's general collections, and establishment of separate undergraduate libraries. He also considered the possibility that growing specialization would induce changes in academic library service patterns, from general reader guidance to direct provision of information.[1]

Nearly twenty years later there is a faintly archaic ring to some of this, but a little pondering suggests that key elements of the choices facing libraries then are still before us. Questions of subject specialization tend now to center on personnel rather than administrative structure, but delineation of the roles of the reference generalist and subject specialist is still an issue. The once spirited debate over separation or integration of documents collections seems to have languished, but it is worth noting that automation makes integration of catalog access at least, if not collections, a more feasible course than it was when the argument began. Even more interesting is the reappearance, in the new context of online searching, of many of the questions about the separation or integration of specialized services that once characterized the documents controversy.

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The undergraduate library apparently came and went as an issue with the 1960s explosion of college enrollment and institutional expansion, followed by the shrinkage of more recent times. Little enthusiasm for undergraduate libraries is visible now, and some have concluded that they did not achieve what was hoped for them.[2] The underlying issue of service to undergraduates, however, far from fading, has burgeoned into the most active area of the academic reference scene—bibliographic instruction.

Information versus instruction endures as a seemingly permanent dilemma. There is no sign that we are closer to resolution of the question now than in 1964 (or, for that matter, 1930, when publication of James Ingersoll Wyer's *Reference Work* more or less opened the debate)[3] but the dimensions of the question and the arguments brought to both sides are deeply affected by all the organizational, technological and ideological currents of the past two decades.

In an effort to identify more systematically the leading issues in academic reference service, I surveyed the literature published since Moore's article, with emphasis on the seventies and eighties. I attempted to identify all writings specifically addressing some aspect of reference service in academic libraries. Articles on general reference subjects such as online searching or question negotiation were included only when there was an overt academic library context. The search yielded 232 items, categorized (with each item assigned to only one category) as follows:

Bibliographic instruction	79
Computer-based reference and bibliographic services	34
Personnel-related topics: specialists and generalists, professional development, use of nonprofessionals in reference service	31
Measurement and evaluation, including statistics, user surveys, analyses of questions asked in reference departments	24
Scope and character of reference service, including information *v.* instruction, the place of reference in the academic library and academic program	18
Administration of reference departments: budgeting equipment, hours of service, promotion	10

Reference collection development, selection policies,
   special types of reference materials (documents,
   archives)   9

Miscellaneous services: current awareness, cooperative
   reference services, interlibrary loan   8

Question negotiation, interviewing techniques   7

Catalog-related questions: reference use of catalogs
   impact of cataloging developments on
   reference service   6

Reference service to special user groups: under-
   graduates, community colleges, disadvantaged, etc.   6

    Interesting questions arise in each of the categories, but the limited length of this paper, and the writer's endurance, impose limits on the scope that may be attempted. Attention in what follows centers on the first two categories and selected aspects of the following three, in part because they apparently comprise the topics of greatest interest, but mainly (perhaps it is the same thing) because it is in those areas, more than the others, that fundamental questions of reference service to academic users seem to arise.

Bibliographic Instruction

    Although a substantial body of professional opinion has long held that bibliographic instruction has no place in reference service, which ought to concern itself with supplying information rather than self-help advice, there is little doubt that in academic libraries, at least, the partisans of instruction are way ahead. The Library Instruction Round Table is the second largest in ALA,[4] and a brief trip through the profession's personnel advertising will establish that participation in instructional programs is a standard duty of academic reference librarians. The seventy-nine bibliographic instruction articles identified in the preparation of this paper do not compose anything approaching the total literature of the subject (Hannelore Rader's annual bibliography of instruction literature lists over sixty academic library items for 1980 alone)[5] but mainly consist of reviews of the literature, and contributions indexed under "Academic Libraries—Reference Services" and similar headings.

    Surveying this literature from the point of view of the relation between bibliographic instruction and the larger reference picture opens interesting questions about the purpose of instructional activity.

There is no clear professional consensus, but rather a range of spoken and implicit assumptions.

One approach regards bibliographic instruction as a practical means of coping with floods of students and a way to rescue reference librarians from endless wasteful and mind-deadening repetition of basic search procedures at the reference desk. At more advanced levels, instruction is seen as a way to improve the quality of students' work by introducing the specialized information resources of the scholarly disciplines as superior alternatives to the card catalog-*Reader's Guide* syndrome.[6] This is probably the most widespread general picture of instructional activity, clearly reflected in many published descriptions of institutional programs and in the ACRL Bibliographic Instruction Task Force's Model instructional objectives, which focus on student familiarity with library organization and the principal reference tools.[7] Supporting this approach is a sizable output of courses, workbooks and syllabi, and many evaluative studies confirming the success of instructional activities. However, through the generally enthusiastic literature runs a slim but continuous thread of complaint about the low-level, mechanistic, and boring quality of much of the material presented, and the questionable usefulness of evaluations that can show only absorption of what was taught, rather than its application.[8]

Another rationale for bibliographic instruction posits knowledge of libraries and how to use them as an essential attribute of the educated person, useful throughout life irrespective of college course requirements and therefore worthy of inclusion in the curriculum in its own right. This is a plausible proposition to most librarians, but the trouble with it is that no one has yet articulated the substance of library knowledge in terms that could supply the needed conceptual foundation for instructional programs. Describing the outstandingly successful instructional enterprise at Earlham College, Evan Farber expressed the hope that general ideas were conveyed along with information about reference sources, but acknowledged that "it *is* only a hope, because we are depending on students' abilities to draw inferences."[9] A "think tank" of accomplished bibliographic instruction librarians, assembled in 1981 under ACRL auspices to generate ideas for further progress in the field, recommended that librarians undertake research on information processes in order to produce the needed underpinnings for intellectually solid programs.[10]

Some librarians have attempted to anchor the description of bibliographic resources in the communication and epistemological patterns of the scholarly disciplines, so that bibliographic study becomes an

aspect, more or less, of the philosophy and sociology of science.[11] While attractive intellectually, the idea presents some sizable difficulties in practice. For one thing, bibliographic instruction in this framework requires a much larger investment of students' time and attention than the typical one-time presentation of major source materials, and therefore more interest and support than is apt to be forthcoming from the unfortunately typical professor "who casually assumes that anything worth teaching about the library can surely be accomplished in an hour's time."[12] Moreover, a bibliographic model built on patterns of scholarly communication is really only applicable to the work of graduate students and advanced undergraduates and has little to offer at freshman and sophomore levels of instruction. The concept of social epistemology, as sketched some thirty years ago by Margaret Egan and Jesse Shera,[13] is powerfully suggestive as a potential theoretical base for bibliographic instruction, but has never been worked out with enough specificity for practical use.

As matters stand now, therefore, the most solid rationale for bibliographic instruction is its efficiency as a means for imparting standard information about standard library procedures to large numbers of students. Commitment to this as a practical necessity is strong and growing, but the parallel growth of librarian-mediated online searching suggests that the old information/instruction battle may reopen on new ground as online searching becomes increasingly available to academic library users. The question will be further considered following discussion of some major issues in online services.

Online Services

The arrival of the computer as a reference tool confronts academic libraries with several intriguing problems concerning the place of the new resource in the existing spectrum. Should online searching be set up as a new organizational unit, or added to the activities of the existing reference department? If the latter, should all the reference librarians be expected to master the new techniques and utilize the new resources? Should users be charged? How does online searching executed by librarians affect traditional assumptions concerning user education and self-help?

A separate department for online searching promises efficiency and economy in the use of the automated systems, since librarians who are full-time searchers can be expected to become more adept at the terminals than those for whom searching is only one of a range of reference

duties. A corollary advantage is that reference librarians who shrink from contact with the new machines and associated new thought processes can continue undisturbed in their accustomed ways. Similar advantages of processing economy and specialized staff expertise were stressed in the choice, some decades back, of separate overintegrated government documents departments,[14] and the drawbacks of separation are likewise rather similar in both cases.

With both documents and computers it was probably too readily assumed that the librarians of the general and specialized information units would be able to make balanced judgments of the resources available in both locations and refer readers from one to the other as needed. The more natural outcome is for each group to focus primarily on its own service and send the reader elsewhere only as a secondary alternative or last resort. This means that the choice between one set of information resources and the other is effectively taken out of the hands of librarians, the presumed experts, and left to the reader, since his query will probably be accepted by whichever unit he chooses to approach. In the case of online versus manual searching this is apt to mean overemphasis on comprehensive searches of the journal literature in the database department, even in situations common in academic libraries, where a student's problem is more appropriately approached via a limited selection of key monographs and evaluative summaries, and, conversely, needlessly labored searching of comprehensive printed tools with less than optimal results in the "regular" reference department. It is also noteworthy that while separation may promote the development of specialized expertise in certain materials or techniques, it dilutes the advantages of subject specialization of the reference staff, since a given range of subject abilities will be divided between the automated and conventional services.

The matter of fees, on which so much argument has been heard, will not be considered here, on the assumption (or optimistic hope) that the issue may be disappearing. The ALA Research Office's recent survey of the financing of online services produced the interesting finding that charges are most characteristic of the longest established services, while libraries entering the online field more recently tend more to offer the service free.[15] This may be read as a sign that online searching is fairly well along in the transition from exotic "extra" to standard library activity. If so, that is all to the good as it reduces by one the number of problems to be grappled with in finding the computer's proper place on the reference landscape.

Perhaps the strongest argument for locating online searching within the established reference service, without fees or a separate

organizational structure, is the changed relationship between the librarian and the user in the online situation and the superior educational opportunities this offers. In the traditional academic reference situation the librarian's assistance to the literature searcher may range from suggesting several possibilities, to making specific, evaluative recommendations, to examining several sources with the reader and pointing out the differences and the approach that appears most promising. Although the extent of the librarian's participation will vary from case to case, depending on such factors as the complexity of the problem, the librarian's familiarity with the subject, and the reader's apparent ability and preference, at some point the operation is turned over to the reader, who may or may not follow the librarian's advice, and the librarian generally does not see the result of the search or have any other way of judging the ultimate value of his recommendations. The computerized reference situation, on the other hand, mandates the librarian's involvement at every stage, from formulating the question to evaluating the result. The student is obliged to define the problem with sufficient precision to yield a usable search strategy, and what is probably the most common, and most misguided, undergraduate "research" procedure—the stringing together of tenuously related items found under a common index heading—is effectively ruled out. If additional background reading would help to clarify the question, the librarian's urging of this on the student is likely to be more meaningful, and more readily acted on, than in the traditional reference relationship. If the search strategy fails, the librarian has both opportunity and motivation to correct it and to persist until a satisfactory outcome is achieved. The entire process shows the students what competent literature searching means, something which many students never learn through their own efforts. Libraries may feel that provision of online searching as a routine reference service is, despite everything, beyond their resources, but it should be recognized that online literature searching provides not just a measure of user convenience but an educational tool whose importance can scarcely be exaggerated.

The Online Challenge to Traditional Bibliographic Instruction

The educational benefits of online searching described in the preceding paragraphs derive from the tutorial relationship inherent in the librarian-mediated search, a situation that runs counter to traditional bibliographic instruction concepts stressing user self-help and independence. This observation raises the possibility that the two strongest developments in academic reference service in recent years

may actually be working at cross purposes. While a ceaseless flow of courses and instructional aids issues from the bibliographic instruction sector, expanding online services increasingly habituate readers to having their searches done for them by a librarian. Which way are we headed? Bibliographic instruction activists appear to skirt the dilemma by regarding it as merely the transfer to a new setting of prior arguments and positions on the information/instruction issue.[16] That is an illusion, however. The radically new conditions created by the computer warrant thorough reexamination of the instructional rationale.

For one thing, the computer's virtual elimination of searching tedium removes one of the major props of the instructional enterprise. Among the murkier elements of the venerable instruction/information debate is the true meaning of the word "service,"as in reference service. Does it designate a service akin to car washing or shoe shining—i.e., a task which most people can do for themselves though they may prefer not to—or something more like medical or legal service—i.e., tasks employing skills that only professionals possess? The key point is the substitutability of the user's labor for the librarian's. It is generally accepted that librarians will place their professional skills at the user's disposal by advising in the choice of bibliographic resources and index terms, but the burdensome task of examining and recording the listings involves a lot of brute labor to which the librarian's professional skills contribute little or nothing. If special librarians have accepted the whole job in the name of "maximum service," an important consideration is that a librarian's time normally costs the company less than an executive's or engineer's. In academic libraries it has seemed more economically rational to teach readers to do the job for themselves.

The computer turns all this around. Under present conditions, at least, each online search must be performed by a librarian and there is no possibility of substituting the user's labor for the librarian's to any appreciable degree. The drudgery is largely relegated to the machine in any case, and, far from feeling demeaned by unskilled labor, many librarians regard performance at the terminal as a welcome enhancement of professional prestige.[17] There is thus no economic incentive for the library to educate the user. On the contrary, the most economical course for the library is to deliver the search to the reader as expeditiously as possible. The librarian must discuss the problem with the user sufficiently to understand what is required, but anything done for the sake of user education per se simply runs up the cost without providing compensating savings elsewhere in the process.

Thus online searching brings into particularly sharp focus the question of the real purpose and educational value of bibliographic instruction. If the librarian is obliged to do the searching anyway, and the quality of the search product, therefore, does not depend upon the user's comprehension of the information system, what is gained from the added expense of user education? If reference librarians left over from precomputer days bristle at the idea that a student can simply ask for a list of citations and receive it, is that simply emotional resistance to change or, as has been suggested, misplaced schoolmarm moralizing,[18] or is something really wrong?

Something is indeed wrong if one considers that a bibliographic search is an intrinsic part of the research investigation it starts off, and therefore cannot be sliced away and contracted out. Advocates of the information-not-instruction position perennially point out that the lawyer does not expect you to research your own precedents, the dentist to fill your own teeth, etc., but academic librarians might find more enlightenment in analogies closer to home. A researcher does not arrive at a statistical lab with a request that some tests of significance be run on his data. He is expected to know the available tests and their characteristics, to make his own choices with or without expert advice, and to be ready to defend his procedures against methodological criticism. Similarly, a scholar whose work is criticized on the ground that he failed to consider some important contribution to the literature can hardly defend himself by blaming the librarian who failed to turn up the missing item in his bibliographic search, nor can the student who receives the same criticism from his teacher. Every bibliographic search entails choice of the universe of materials to be screened and the criteria to be used in selection, and no matter who pushes the buttons on the terminal, the choices and the responsibility for their consequences belong to the user. Therefore it is not only proper but essential for students to be instructed in databases, search logic, access points, controlled vocabularies and so forth. Granted it all costs money, but it is as legitimate an educational expense as anything else that occurs in classroom or laboratory.

A major difficulty with this viewpoint is that it is not widely appreciated in the academic world outside the library. Many teachers are simply indifferent to the quality of the bibliographies their students produce, and many others take care to steer students to outstanding works and authors out of personal knowledge, but are unfamiliar with, and indifferent to, the systematic methods advocated by librarians. Both groups are apt to applaud the librarian's performance at the terminal as

a new high in professional accomplishment, but that is really a small tribute and we should resist being seduced by it. To use our professional skills to grind out bibliographies that will impress students and satisfy teachers is easy—too easy. To use those same skills to bring students to an understanding of the bibliographic record and its meaning for scholarship is uphill all the way, as it has always been, but a more worthy undertaking.

This argument in support of bibliographic instruction rests on the value of bibliographic knowledge to the student, and not on the library's need to equip students to perform basic searching operations without assistance. As noted earlier, the latter is the firmest and most widespread rationale for existing instructional programs, while the former is in many respects a general conviction that has yet to be worked out in programmatic detail. The future of bibliographic instruction in the context of online reference services, then, may depend on the extent to which librarians succeed in replacing mechanistic, procedural routines as the focus of instruction with an intellectually coherent conception of information seeking that can explain what the process means. An alternative, more pessimistic prospect looks to the development (which is certainly coming) of "user-friendly," user-operated systems. At that point, the need for instruction in search mechanics will be exactly what it is now with regard to printed resources, and bibliographic instruction may thus continue to find its focus and raison d'être in "the typical 'bag of tricks' so prevalent in many instructional programs."[19]

Meanwhile, Back at the Reference Desk...

The surge of interest in the new areas of bibliographic instruction and online searching, as well as the earlier trend toward subject specialization, has given rise to concern that energy and attention may be drawn away from the mundane activity of answering questions at the reference desk, thus weakening reference service at the core while strengthening its offshoots.[20] This in turn opens some puzzling questions about priorities in reference work and the efficacy of traditional practices.

Despite complaints on the matter heard regularly through the years, academic reference librarians have never defined their goals or the scope of their work beyond a general intention to assist readers with whatever they might need to facilitate their use of the library. Equally unarticulated and unexamined is the assumption that the hub of this assistance is the reference desk, where a reference librarian, or surrogate,

is available to the reader at all times. The arrangement conveys an implicit promise never to let the reader go unserved, but it also pegs the service at a low level.

The reference desk works best for directional questions and requests for specific factual information. It is not well designed for dealing with questions requiring interpretation or exploration, including what is probably the most common, and most important, type of reference inquiry in academic libraries, the open-ended, "information about" request for assistance with term papers and other classroom assignments. Librarians suggest a professional style of interaction by placing a chair beside the desk, but the situation is otherwise unconducive to consultation. Discussion aimed at clarifying the reader's question is discouraged by other inquirers waiting in line or hovering around the desk, and the attention given one questioner, irrespective of his actual requirements, is almost inevitably curtailed when others are waiting. The librarians on the staff may have various subject specialties, but the person at the desk at a given time will generally attempt to deal with whatever is presented, especially if another librarian to whom the reader might be referred is not at that moment available. A reader may seek out the librarian who first helped him for repeated consultation as the search progresses, but the traditional pattern of staff rotation at the desk suggests that single encounters are the norm and anything else the exception.

Studies of user behavior indicate that users indeed perceive the reference service as intended for simple questions and quick replies. Seemingly low-status (young or female) employees are approached in preference to those (older or male) of presumed higher status; a staff member who is standing will be approached more readily than one who is seated; users will wait their turn at a counter rather than approach a librarian seated and unengaged at a desk.[21] The common practice of presenting substantive inquiries in the guise of simple requests for directions ("Where are the psychology books?") is another bit of evidence along this line.

These problems are, to be sure, met and overcome by reference librarians every day, but that does not alter the conclusion that in relation to high quality assistance extending beyond simple library routines the reference desk is more an impediment than a facilitator. By establishing the desk as the focal point of reader assistance, libraries not only expend professional time on trivial tasks, but also encourage the assumption that the low-level, undemanding type of question handled most easily and naturally at the desk is the service norm.

Many of the studies categorized as "measurement and evaluation" and "personnel issues" in the literature examined while preparing this paper are statistical counts of reference desk activity, and discuss the proportion of time at the desk occupied by professional-level tasks.[22] The reported figures, which estimate the professional component of desk work at anywhere between 10 and 40 percent, are difficult to interpret because the time between questions was generally, though not always, clocked in the nonprofessional category irrespective of how it was actually used, and because questions were generally, though not always, categorized in terms of what was initially asked, irrespective of where the inquiry may later have led. Nonetheless it is abundantly clear that a substantial portion of reference desk traffic could be handled by nonprofessionals, and that staffing the desk with support personnel, with provision for referring the difficult questions to a librarian, could release substantial amounts of professional time for truly professional work.

A great many academic libraries staff their reference desks with nonprofessionals, though more commonly as a stop-gap for evenings and weekends than as a consciously affirmed full-time policy.[23] The weakness of the arrangement is that while relieving the librarians' burdens, it almost certainly depresses the quality of the library's response to whatever proportion of questions it is that really needs professional attention. Such evidence as is available confirms what would be expected intuitively: nonprofessionals do not make as many referrals as they should, in part because of failure to recognize a question's underlying complexity, and in part because of a feeling, conscious or unconscious, that referral reflects unfavorably on their competence.[24] The latter problem is apt to be intensified if the nonprofessional works alone, as during evenings and weekends.[25]

Many librarians see this deterioration of service quality as too high a price to pay for time gained away from the desk, and object to reliance on nonprofessionals for information assistance.[26] But dissipation of professional time and energy on trivial and routine tasks is a high price, too, which suggests that seeking ways to improve the performance of nonprofessionals, especially in the matter of referrals, might offer the best prospects for overall service improvement.

Some, though by no means all, of the libraries using support personnel at reference desks provide some sort of formal training for the job,[27] but there is a striking lack of attention in the published reports to delimiting the kinds of questions the nonprofessionals may attempt, or confining them to the kinds of information covered in their training. Specifying in advance the questions to be answered and the questions to

be referred is not easy and can never anticipate every contingency. The goal, however, is not perfection, but only a greater exercise of professional concern and control over the reader's fate in the library, and on that basis there are possibilities worth considering.

One obvious move is to declare all "information about" questions off limits to the nonprofessional, on the ground that unlike factual questions whose answers are usually readily recognizable and the same no matter from which source derived, a question of how or where to find information on a subject has many "answers," and the choice among them should have the benefit of professional knowledge and judgment. This would mean, of course, that readers asking such questions at a time when no librarian was available would not be answered, but librarians who are disturbed by that must ask themselves whether they are willing, as the responsible officers of the library, to stand behind the assistance rendered by nonprofessional staff in those circumstances.

Another possibility might be to limit the nonprofessionals' search for answers to factual questions to the works specifically covered by their training, with any question whose answer is not found therein referred to a librarian. This would help to assure that the reader's time will not be wasted in pursuit of unlikely prospects, and that answers that approximate but do not hit their mark will not be proffered, and accepted, as the best the library can provide.

More effort might be made to reduce the reader's dependence on personal assistance by better provision of directional signs, library handbooks, printed or audiovisual point-of-use aids for catalogs and indexes, bibliographic guides to research fields, and the like. A few libraries have reported successful ventures in this vein, most notably MIT's Project Intrex, and it is regrettable that possibilities along this line have received so much less attention in the literature than the pros and cons of nonprofessional staffing.[28]

Simply for the purpose of presenting a welcoming and encouraging face to its users, and not appearing to be hoarding its mysteries to be doled out as favors from the reference desk, the academic library has strong motives for making its contents as self-evident and self-guiding as possible. Beyond that, well-designed user aids can enhance the effectiveness of nonprofessional reference staff. Printed aids can serve, in the first instance, as training materials. Many questions about library policies, procedures and holdings can be answered by referring readers to handbooks and user guides, and the reference assistants can be taught to explain and interpret the guides for readers who have difficulty proceeding on their own. Bibliographic guides to research resources, both library-produced handouts and more extensive publications in the

library's collection, can be offered to readers who ask for bibliographic guidance when a librarian is not available. This may disconcert readers who expect direct answers to "simple" questions rather than texts to study, but librarians should be more influenced by their own under-standing of what the situation requires than by readers' expectations. Much of what readers expect is, after all, what they have learned to expect from what librarians have done.

It should be noted that professional time released from routine question-answering at the reference desk does not necessarily become available for nondesk pursuits such as collection development or biblio-graphic instruction. A substantial portion must be turned back to the desk in the form of training, supervising and backstopping the nonpro-fessional desk assistants and creating the inanimate user aids that are their props. This suggests changes in the reference librarian's job struc-ture. Supervision, for example, hitherto virtually unknown in reference desk work on the premise (some would say rationalization) that a basic competence level is assured by the professional degree, would become an important concern requiring development of methods and standards that do not yet exist. Design of user aids would become a major, rather than ancillary, "as time permits" activity. In this framework, "general" reference becomes a specialty in its own right, involving more staff work and less direct public contact than is now customary.

Referrals from the nonprofessionals to librarians might more logi-cally be directed to specific individuals in terms of their competencies and specializations than to an undifferentiated roster of librarians rotat-ing coverage in the reference room. This would gain the advantage of dealing with each question at the highest level of competence available. Discussions of the reference activities of subject specialists tend to assume that their work is chiefly valuable to advanced students and faculty, but if it is seen as educationally desirable for senior professors to teach beginning as well as advanced courses, the same philosophy would suggest that bibliographic experts deal with novices as well as more experienced researchers.

Another possibility would be to make basic term paper advice, particularly for students in freshman writing classes, the province of the librarians presenting library instruction to those classes. In this way, assisting students with individual research problems becomes an occa-sion for reinforcement and amplification of ideas presented in class, as contrasted with rote guidance through rudimentary library procedures. All of the librarians on the reference staff might establish schedules of office hours when they are regularly available for consultation, and all would make use of both online and printed resources, as required.

Goals and Standards

The specific flaws and merits of these proposals are of less concern than the idea they are intended to illustrate. That is, reference service is not a reactive, global response to unspecified and unlimited users' needs, but an array of planned activities, each designed to serve some distinct purpose. The array of services offered by a library is the result of its choices among competing possibilities and its ranking of priorities, and it is not necessary to assume that the whole adds up to all the assistance users may require. More help is offered to some readers under some circumstances than others, and the particular form of assistance a reader needs may not be available at the time it is requested. The argument advanced here is that clear formulation of service dimensions, and frank acknowledgment of limits, permits a library to focus its energies where it considers they will do the most good, whereas papering over the lacunae with the unconsidered assumption that doing the best one can is always preferable to doing nothing impedes assessment of what is actually accomplished and recognition of possibilities for improvement.

Commentators and critics have repeatedly noted the reference profession's resistance to articulation of the goals and scope of reference service, and the deleterious consequences thereof. Mary Jo Lynch observed that the common lack of written service policies protects the myth that the library's policy is "to do as much for as many people as staff and time...permit" and obscures such awkward issues as inconsistencies in the attitudes and actions of different staff members, and the determination of priorities by happenstance rather than design.[29] Florence Blakely learned from her study of twelve major academic libraries that even where written service policies exist they do not in fact describe or determine the extent of service actually rendered, which again suggests that reference librarians are reluctant to say what they mean and commit themselves to conscious choices.[30] Vern Pings characterized as socially irresponsible the offering of a professional service with near-total unconcern for quality standards and performance monitoring.[31] Venable Lawson observed in two university libraries that fragmentation of reference work into a mélange of tasks from elementary to esoteric produces a downward drift to the level of the least common denominator, resulting in underutilization of reference capabilities and waste of staff expertise.[32] Several writers have asserted that introduction of meaningful standards would demand, first of all, clarification of service goals.[33]

It is noteworthy, and perhaps ironic, that the new reference activities sometimes viewed as threats to the vigor of traditional service may provide an impetus in the needed direction: that is, away from hazy intentions to do whatever is needed and toward planning and a semblance of quality control. Online searching introduces the idea of service by prearrangement, thus offering an alternative to the inconsistency and accidents of timing characteristic of traditional walk-in patterns. Bibliographic instruction has been observed to raise the level of students' reference requests,[34] and one result may be to induce more recognition of the need to distinguish between rudimentary and advanced levels of service. Changes in service patterns will surely occur during the coming years, whether deliberately engineered or brought on fortuitously by circumstance. Reference librarians should choose the course they wish to follow, unimpeded by ingrained tradition or attachment to unrealistic service goals.

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