

Access services and RILI

Great partnership opportunities

by Cyril Oberlander

Ever notice that library users have a lot to say at the circulation or interlibrary loan counter about the challenges they encounter while looking for books or articles? How do we take advantage of this teachable moment? How often do we ask, "Did you find everything you were looking for?"

We may want to ask ourselves what role access services plays in the library's reference service and instruction or information literacy programs. The level of collaboration between these services is critical to the overall effectiveness of libraries. Although often an invisible partner, access services bundles reference and instruction in the teachable moments inherent to many of the service transactions of circulation, distance education library service, interlibrary loan, and reserves. Some examples include:

- circulation staff orients new users to the library;
- circulation staff teaches users how to look up, find, and retrieve library materials;
- interlibrary loan staff explains how to access a requested article using a full-text database;
- interlibrary loan staff helps users look up and retrieve difficult to find items in the library's collections, such as IEEE or ERIC documents;
- reserve staff explains some of the copyright provisions; and
- distance education library service often combines the function and roles of access ser-

vices with reference, information literacy, and instruction (RILI).

Although these examples teach users that instruction and reference services are not limited to the reference desk, libraries generally do not formally recognize this relationship. Consequently, libraries and library users often lack the benefits of collaboration, such as coordinated services, more effective referral, and an understanding of shared goals.

Once we recognize the strategic opportunity for collaboration, we see that the overall effectiveness of instruction and reference programs and services is enhanced by partnership with access services. Likewise, the effectiveness and even the future of access services depends on promoting joint developments with RILI. In short, instruction and reference services are more effective when integrated with related services to provide seamless access to information.

So, what are some specific benefits of collaboration between access services and RILI?

Benefits to reference services

Your library's reference service may already benefit from collaborating with access services as a result of cross-training, cross-functional staff meetings, or an integrated service desk. Some of the benefits to reference service include:

- Targeting reference services throughout the research process. The reference interview is rarely employed at the end of a day's research; however, while checking out books, a

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modified reference interview can assist library users with assessing their research outcomes and strategies, assist with problem solving, or determine next steps, such as scheduling reference consultations.

- Developing new reference services, such as desktop delivery of printed reference through collaboration with interlibrary loan (ILL), using ILL's desktop delivery and request management technology. This service could not only promote the use of printed reference sources on demand, but it could also be used in conjunction with Web courseware to strengthen the connections between reference and instruction.

Benefits to information literacy

Information literacy programs often focus on the collaboration between librarians and teaching faculty, resulting in library-enhanced coursework and instruction. Most programs do little to integrate access services, even though staff in access services often has effective and successful service relationships with teaching faculty and students. Some examples of how your library's information literacy program may benefit from collaborating with access services include:

- Strategic collaboration of instructional design and service. Promote effective integration of teaching, learning, reference, and support services by working closely together.

- Strategic surveying methods. Surveying techniques used for assessment and evaluation of an information literacy program or user needs rarely incorporate the opportunities inherent to access services. For example, interviews at the circulation counter can help assess students' learning, library collection, or service needs. In addition, written surveys can be a part of the checkout process, using a book strap or questionnaire that asks for feedback or answers to prepared questions.

Benefits to instruction

Even though bibliographic instruction often has little or no official role for access services, access services can support instruction. In fact, perhaps the best example of that support is seen in distance education library service, where the collaboration of access services and RILL is inherent. Examples of benefits from further collaboration may include:

- **Communicating with students.** The core support access services provides to instruction is communication. By understanding the instructional goals and services of the library, access services can participate in instructional opportunities at service points by offering better referrals or providing impromptu instruction. Referrals may consist of suggesting users talk with their subject librarian or asking if they found everything they were looking for.

- **Communicating with all users.** Access services can market a library's instruction program or resources through notification systems commonly used by circulation, reserve, and interlibrary loan. Making use of automated messaging systems, included in most OPAC and ILL management systems, is an effective means to communicate to our users about new resources and helpful hints, or even to encourage serendipitous connections to the library.

- **Communicating with teaching faculty.** Whether it is discussing the challenges of a particular ILL request or the location of a book, the service relationship at access services encourages rapport with faculty. This communication can help to promote library objectives, encourage library faculty collaborations, such as assessment of student and faculty needs, or let faculty know about new resources. In ILL, for example, it is common to show faculty the use of a full-text database in order to fill an ILL article request. Not surprisingly, that conversation may lead to important exchanges about library resources and the needs of the professor and students.

- **Communicating with instruction librarians.** Access services provides important information about user-collection characteristics, such as ILL users not locating full-text articles in the library's databases, or specific user feedback, such as a library user complaining to circulation that he or she couldn't find a book.

Should this user be referred to ILL to request materials from other libraries or be referred to the reference librarian to evaluate the search strategy? Or is this a unique situation where a professor has asked students to find all sources on a particular subject without ensuring the library has the collection to support the number of students? Communication between departments can help coordinate responses to these situations.

Benefits to access services

Many libraries report decreases in the use of circulation and reserve services and dramatic increases in the use of full-text databases and other electronic resources. Do these trends indicate a problematic future for access services? While users receive reference assistance from access services, increasingly, they are also getting access to full-text information at the reference desk; apparently the line between reference and access services is blurring. Looking at these trends as an opportunity to work together more effectively, libraries may see the following benefits:

- Development of new organizational partnerships and tools that secure seamless access to information.
- With more effective coordination or integration of these library and user services, the various desks can better meet the needs of users by creating comprehensive and seamless services at points of user needs.

Conclusion and next steps

The role of access services in RILI is significant because the overall effectiveness of library user services depends on the collaboration of library units that share common goals and related services. Forms of collaboration

or coordination differ at each library; however, to promote successful partnerships and organizational development with access services and RILI, libraries may want to consider a couple next steps:

- **Encourage discussion.** Discuss information literacy across library units. The kinds of collaboration discussed here may grow organically from simply talking about the goals, challenges, and evaluations of your library's information literacy programs and services. During these discussions, encouraging open communication and creative thinking are critical to promoting successful collaborations.
- **Include access services.** Invite representation from access services on reference and instruction committees, teams, or workshops.

The great partnership opportunity for access services and RILI is essential to promoting the organizational development required to maximize the usefulness of library user services. To accomplish this, collaborations must explore service relationships and technologies towards providing users with the comprehensive and seamless services they need. In the course of this collaboration, we will create lasting relationships with our users and strengthen the partnerships within our organization. ■



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