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# The future of reference service

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*A panel discussion held at the University of Texas at Austin, Spring 1988.*

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**A** program on the future of reference work was held at the University of Texas at Austin General Libraries during the Spring of 1988. The promotional material for the program posed the following questions: Will there be any reference librarians in the future? Can a person's information needs be met by a computer program? Is the reference desk essential to providing reference services? Should there be multiple reference desks and should reference users be screened through various levels of reference staff before they are referred to or given an appointment with the appropriate reference specialist?

The program was sponsored by the Library's Reference and Information Services Committee.

The attendees included academic and special librarians from the central Texas area, library school faculty and students, paraprofessionals, and general faculty.

The keynote address was given by Barbara Ford, the associate director of the Trinity University Library. Her talk was followed by responses from Goldia Hester, reference librarian, and Larayne Dallas, engineering reference librarian, both from the University of Texas at Austin. Their presentations were then followed by a lively discussion both among members of the audience and between the audience members and the panel. Their addresses and a summary of the audience comment by Dennis Dillon are presented here.

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## Reference service: Past, present, and future

**By Barbara J. Ford**

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### History and background

In 1876 Samuel Green, a public librarian, stated in *American Library Journal* that "personal intercourse and relations between librarians and readers are useful in all libraries."<sup>1</sup> This was the first explicit proposal for a program of personal assistance

to readers. Initially, personal assistance was regarded as primarily useful to create a better impression on the library's users.<sup>2</sup> Objections to per-

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel S. Green, "Personal Relations between Librarians and Readers," *American Library Journal* 1 (November 30, 1876):79.

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<sup>2</sup>The volume by Samuel Rothstein, *The Development of Reference Services through Academic Traditions, Public Library Practice and Special Librarianship* (Chicago: ALA/Association of College & Research Libraries, 1955), ACRL Monographs, no. 14, was the basis for much of the information in this paper on the origin and development of reference services.

sonal assistance were raised by librarians skeptical of answering frivolous questions or who felt a reliance on catalogs and book lists by users was more appropriate, and that librarians should spend their time developing such tools rather than personally assisting users. A growing interest in the educational role of the library in the academic setting brought additional emphasis to assistance to readers. Melvil Dewey at Columbia College acted on his belief that personal assistance was central, not peripheral, to library service and established a reference department in the 1880s with personnel assigned to assist readers. By 1891 the term "reference work" replaced other less specific terms, an article on reference work was published in *Library Journal*, and the term appeared for the first time in the index to that journal.

By the early 1900s, the information or reference desk was a well-established feature in large libraries of America. The principal function of reference librarians was explaining use of the bibliographic apparatus; close knowledge of reference books and special competence in preparation of bibliographies were seen as distinctive professional accomplishments of reference librarians. Some writers spoke of the chief art of the desk assistant or reference librarian as the ability to know by long experience what was actually wanted by inquirers. Bibliographic instruction had begun as early as the 1820s when the librarian at Harvard College occasionally lectured on the library's rare and valuable works. It placed personal assistance within an educational framework. In the early 1900s, the instructional model of earlier practice was codified and the theoretical basis for indirect, minimal reference service was developed. Subject specialization for reference began in some settings; in the early 1900s, the growth of special libraries offering additional services also began.

The central issue of reference service policy—the nature and extent of assistance to be offered—has continued as a subject of lively debate. The instructional and information approach were both strongly based in libraries. In the 1930s and 1940s, so much attention was given to inputs or reference sources that products and services needed to satisfy readers were not well understood. The future of reference was seen as the direct provision of information to satisfy users while also instructing users in techniques of finding information. Interpersonal dimensions of the reference interview with an emphasis on psychological and communications factors appeared in the literature of the 1960s and 1970s in reaction to the emphasis on information sources in earlier times. Measurement and evaluation of reference service and the lack of standards and guidelines began to be discussed. More recent concerns relating to reference service include the reports that many questions are not answered correctly, the apparent decline in job satisfaction for reference librarians, the increasing number of activities for which reference librarians are responsi-

ble, the role of computers in the reference process, and a questioning of the traditional service patterns and reference desk role.

### Current reference service

Does present reference service hinder the development of true client-professional relationships? Some recent authors have provided insights into current reference services. Charles Martell recommends restructuring the academic library into a number of client-centered functional work groups (perhaps similar to departmental libraries).<sup>3</sup> Other authors write that libraries should take a proactive role and be sure what business they are in—book delivery or the provision of information. Brian Nielsen asks whether reference librarians are teachers or intermediaries and says librarians should work with the user as an equal partner and share knowledge to move away from a relationship of dependency.<sup>4</sup> Stephen Stoa writes that library skills and research skills are different things often learned in isolation from one another.<sup>5</sup> Joan Bechtel proposes conversation as a new paradigm of librarianship; she says libraries are committed to bringing together in conversation and dialogue voices from the past found in library materials and the present in library users—the academic library provides access to conversations and librarians participate in discussions.<sup>6</sup>

Most authors support Patricia Swanson's viewpoint that "the reference desk represents the critical mass of resources—human, printed, and now electronic, so configured for a convenient and predictable location so that library patrons can find the service and can find someone to help them."<sup>7</sup> The reference desk appears to be a sacred library tradition. Other writers speak of the need to examine current services. Patricia Battin says that the "weight of our historic traditions is such that we tend to find it very difficult to look at the future in terms of vastly changed organizational structure."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Charles R. Martell, *The Client-Centered Academic Library: An Organizational Model* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1983).

<sup>4</sup>Brian Nielsen, "Teacher or Intermediary: Alternative Professional Models in the Information Age," *College & Research Libraries* 43 (May 1982): 183-91.

<sup>5</sup>Stephen K. Stoa, "Research and Library Skills: An Analysis and Interpretation," *College & Research Libraries* 45 (March 1984): 99-109.

<sup>6</sup>Joan M. Bechtel, "Conversation: A New Paradigm for Librarianship?" *College & Research Libraries* 47 (May 1986): 219-24.

<sup>7</sup>Patricia K. Swanson, "Traditional Models: Myths and Realities," in *Academic Libraries: Myths and Realities*. Proceedings, Third National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, Seattle, April 4-7, 1984. (Chicago: ALA/Association of College & Research Libraries, 1984), 89.

<sup>8</sup>Patricia Battin, "The Library: Center of the Restructured University," *College & Research Li-*

Richard De Gennaro writes that “libraries need to develop new goals and new strategies based on new technologies...or risk becoming mere symbols of culture and museums of the book.”<sup>9</sup>

The reference desk, as the center and given of reference service, is one of the traditions that should be examined. Libraries have changed dramatically in collection size, physical space, and the heterogeneous nature of collections and library users since the time in the late 1800s when the reference desk became a common fixture in libraries. The tension between the general desk and subject specialization continues. William Miller says “the cost of pretending that we can continue to do everything for everybody, and do it well...is an organizational fiction which needs to be discarded.”<sup>10</sup> Thelma Friedes says the reference desk “conveys an implicit promise never to let the reader go unserved, but it also pegs the service at a low level...it is not well designed for dealing with questions requiring interpretation or exploration...users indeed perceive the reference service as intended for simple questions and quick replies...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.”<sup>11</sup> A survey of the literature indicates that reference service has seen almost no design change since its origin in the late 19th century. Most writers seem to accept that reference service is useful to anyone, at least potentially.

Renaissance reference librarians serving all comers at a reference desk may no longer be a realistic solution for providing public services for patrons.<sup>12</sup> Has what happens at the reference desk made general users less self-sufficient and more dependent on library staff? The historic tradition of the reference desk makes it difficult for reference librarians and those studying and discussing reference to think of library services without the reference desk as a given for providing service and user interface. On the other hand, much that is written indicates that the reference desk does not provide the most

effective and efficient service, and therefore we must consider alternatives. Academic librarians must ask whether their clientele really need a reference desk or whether other services would meet their needs in a more effective manner. Without spending so much time and energy providing service from a reference desk could we as librarians devote our efforts more effectively to developing more appropriate and useful services for our primary clientele? The reference desk in academic libraries needs evaluation based on new technologies and changes in the way people find and use information and the role of libraries in this process.

A theoretical model for future reference service might replace the desk and librarian with a computer terminal where users could log requests and receive answers and appropriate printed handouts. Many questions answered at reference desks could be programmed for quick response; other questions might require interaction with the user, either in person, by telephone, or through the computer terminal. For frequently asked questions, annotations and suggestions could be provided on a terminal; and if assistance is still required, the office hours of a librarian with expertise on the subject could be provided. Librarians could be available much like teaching faculty, by appointment, for certain hours each week in their office.

If reference desks were closed, librarians might be astonished at either how little people missed the service or how terribly frustrated patrons would be in trying to use the library. Faculty accustomed to a traditional library setting would probably be disturbed, as most people are by changes, but librarians working with faculty in other ways could fill those needs. Librarians could be available for classroom presentations and collaboration with faculty to integrate library use into instructional programs. Students who have grown up playing computer games and solving problems with computers might find new services and models more to their liking. In the academic setting, librarians could work with faculty and provide assistance and guidance for students on which sources and approaches are most useful. In short, they could use to their advantage, and their clientele's, the structure inherent in the academic environment. With more time librarians could seriously address new ways to meet the needs of the primary clientele that may not necessarily be effectively served at a reference desk.

As long as the reference desk model is uncritically accepted, librarians are not challenged to respond creatively to changes in materials, formats, and research opportunities for our users, and users are not challenged to use any of a variety of printed or computerized sources or aids. Librarians must come to grips with these disturbing notions, question their basic assumptions and begin to think about alternatives to the reference desk as the center of reference service. Various models and possible alternatives are needed to explore the energies for transition to new service patterns beyond and

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*braries* 45 (May 1984): 171.

<sup>9</sup>Richard De Gennaro, “Libraries & Networks in Transition: Problems and Perspectives for the 1980's,” *Library Journal* 106 (May 15, 1981): 1049.

<sup>10</sup>William Miller, “What's Wrong with Reference: Coping with Success and Failure at the Reference Desk,” *American Libraries* 15 (May 1984): 322.

<sup>11</sup>Thelma Friedes, “Current Trends in Academic Libraries,” *Library Trends* 31 (Winter 1983): 466-67.

<sup>12</sup>Much of the information in this section was originally presented in Barbara J. Ford, “Reference Beyond (and Without) the Reference Desk,” *College & Research Libraries* 47 (September 1986): 491-94.

perhaps without the reference desk.

Too much attention is being focused on trying to fix what exists rather than thinking about the future. The attention of practicing reference librarians is on the nitty-gritty day-to-day rather than long-range planning. The design of the reference area and fast fact drop-in reference versus gourmet service have been discussed in the literature.<sup>13</sup> At Michigan State, Beth Shapiro tells how library entrances and service points were redesigned.<sup>14</sup> Reference departments and librarians have taken on new services but not given up or revamped old ones. What should the role of libraries and of librarians be and how should we relate to users? Reference librarians will need to continue to be advocates to other librarians for library users. Questions of the quality of reference service will need to be addressed since there is often not enough time for collection development and familiarity with materials and to stay abreast of new technological developments. There is a proliferation of services such as database searching and library instruction, expansion of library handout programs, and increased demands for reference service.

### Future factors

The changing user population and information environment will continue to have an impact on reference services. Changes in scale and the knowledge explosion make it difficult to know the clientele and sources. A heterogeneous group of users with a wider disparity in background will continue. Librarians will continue to struggle with how to educate users to be independent. How to balance service to a wide range of users with the needs of the primary clientele and how much time to spend with each user will continue to be discussed. The needs of a variety of clientele must be considered and attempts to analyze current service patterns and identify ways to serve users must expand.

Fees for services and access to information for a variety of clienteles in a variety of formats will continue to be a difficult issue. Librarians must continue to be the advocates and activists for library users as questions of access, censorship, and the storage and preservation of knowledge all become more complex and threatening issues. Libraries must continue to be leaders in the collection and maintenance of knowledge and in the protection of its integrity.

Changing technology and computers have led to new approaches. As early as 1965 Jesse Shera wrote

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<sup>13</sup>Mary Biggs, "Replacing the Fast Fact Drop-in with Gourmet Information Service: A Symposium," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 11 (May 1985): 68-78.

<sup>14</sup>Beth J. Shapiro, "Trying to Fix 'What's Wrong with Reference,'" *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 13 (November 1987): 286-91.

about automation and the reference librarian: "we can now build the machines...but do not know how to use them intelligently in the reference library environment."<sup>15</sup> Often new technologies transform the uses of old ones but they do not replace them. We have begun to see the use of micro-computer programs including expert systems to provide reference service. New technologies in-

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## *Online database searching has already changed librarian/patron relations.*

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cluding CD-ROM have begun to have an impact on reference. Amid this proliferation of glamorous and expensive new hardware and software, the quality of some of the databases has been questioned. Sometimes new technologies can make old services work better and often are not radical changes but allow librarians to do what they have wanted to do better.

Campus information policy and the relationship of the various campus units with information functions has become an issue. Computers have led to the potential of decentralization of services through electronic mail. Researchers using library resources through remote access will make new and different demands on reference service. Online catalogs and machine-readable databases have led to the potential of integrating access to information including tables of contents and periodical articles. Bibliographic instruction for sophisticated researchers will probably evolve to emphasize the selection of databases and the interpretation of results, rather than the mechanics of online searching. The more complicated universe of information resources makes it possible to assume a greater teaching role, helping students and researchers to master the skills of electronic data retrieval. Online database searching has already changed librarian/patron relations from the reference desk, walk-in transaction model to by-appointment interviews.

What impact will these changes have on staffing for reference? How can we use technology to make people resources go as far as possible? What level of personnel with what types of background will be needed for reference? Are professional librarians needed for the general reference desk? Should appointments become the standard mode of interaction with library users? Some say the status of the information provider is immaterial if there are colleagues to turn to. Job enrichment and dealing

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<sup>15</sup>Jesse Shera, "Automation and the Reference Librarians," *RQ* 3 (July 1964): 7.

with burnout must also be addressed. How does and should a librarian spend time when not on the desk? Is there a morale problem in most reference departments and are opportunities needed for personal growth? Is there a growth of specialization of reference service and reference librarians, with more traditional reference desk service being handled by students and clerical or paraprofessional staff? Should there be?

What will the role of the reference librarian be

in this changing environment? What will the future be? Will the traditional reference desk pattern continue? Should it continue? The years ahead in reference service will be challenging and require the courage to try new approaches while defending old approaches that meet the needs of library users. Reference librarians must serve as advocates for library users to be certain that needs are met and responded to in the most appropriate manner possible.

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## The future of reference service: A response

**By Larayne Dallas**

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For a reference librarian a natural corollary to the question, "What is the future of reference service?" is "What is the future of reference librarians?" With so much change in our recent pasts and with everyone expecting much more of the same, we justifiably wonder what will happen to us. My answer is that, at least for the intermediate future, reference librarians—and a need for them—will continue.

When considering research libraries and the future, despite the difficulty of predicting what will come, at least one possible scenario comes easily to mind. That is the vision of former library users working at their computer work stations, able to retrieve what they need from that location, and not having to go near a library. This is not a scenario that bodes particularly well for librarians, but I have to wonder about the likelihood of this vision coming true very soon.

For one thing, I have trouble seeing the producers of the various computer files getting together to offer their information compatibly. Only a few years ago the Wilson Company decided to go its own way in making available the computer-database version of its indexes. They did this instead of making it easier for us by offering the files through BRS or DIALOG. Also, what about the limitations of current computer equipment, and the interest of users in seeing graphics and advertisements?

Additionally, there is the question of money. Much concern has been expressed in recent years about the future and equal access to information. Usually we think of this concern as it relates to the poor, but it will be a problem extending to the middle class. Will students or even researchers be able to afford to subscribe to all the services they may need? Will students know which files they are go-

ing to need for their general-requirement courses or even for their major courses? There may eventually be networks or package deals available—perhaps through arrangements made by universities—but again I think that we are a long way from it.

And what about older materials...old journal runs, for example, and NTIS technical reports? In the library where I work, we have at least 400,000 NTIS reports on microfiche and that is, of course, only a partial set of the total available. Who is going to go to the effort of putting all those into machine-readable form? Who is going to pay for it? Even science and technology people do not ignore the past.

So it is appropriate to think of future libraries as warehouses for the materials and as an increasingly important source of computer-based files. And, librarians will still be needed to help guide users through the mists. It seems some time distant when computers can answer questions. So-called "expert systems" answer only in the sense that the questions are already known. Changes do seem inevitable—we have seen too many to think otherwise—but no matter the new formats and new materials, guidance will still be needed. Which index, which computer database, what source for materials not held are questions which will remain.

I am concerned, though, about reference librarians gaining more things to do and know, without giving up—or perhaps without being able to give up—the old. I like to think that librarians are renaissance women and men, but I do worry about quality and sanity. There are the latest DIALOG changes, those new directories, the recent developments at the main library, and that something new with the document delivery service. Sometimes I think that we are apt to get users to an answer be-