cause of the sheer bulk of materials available, but that means we have more to forget to mention. I am much taken with a phrase that Herbert White used in a recent letter to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. He used it in a different context; he was speaking of the weight of pressures that are being felt especially in large libraries as staff members try to have everything on site for everybody and "feed the dinosaurs."[16] It seems that in reference we have like problems; we try to take on the present and future but still have to feed the dinosaurs of the past.

The suggestion that departmental-library-like work groups might improve reference service has the appeal of possibly improving staff and user interaction. As a librarian currently employed in a departmental library, I know that this sort of arrangement encourages regular contact and getting to know faces. On the other hand, I know that it often seems that departmental library staff members have to know about everything—what to do when the ceiling leaks, how to put paper in the reader-printers, circulation policies, demonstrating the fax machine, and so on. Librarian overload is not helped by a departmental arrangement.

[16]Herbert S. White, "Librarians, Not Users, Should Identify Needs," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 34, no.23 (February 17, 1988): B3.

But, though I find it easy to criticize the suggestions of others, I do not know what the answer is to the question to how we can best do our jobs and work out current problems.

Scheduling appointments with librarians may be a helpful device, but this would require a lot of adjustments on both sides. When I worked at the Douglas-Cook Library at Rutgers University, we did this in a limited way by making appointments with students to assist them in beginning research for term papers or other such projects. The arrangement worked well in its context. But, I do want a reference desk or some sort of desk to go to for short answers and for referral to appointments. When I was a student, the undergraduate library at the university I attended had no reference desk. I understand that the director thought reference staff members should be roaming the reference area waiting for questions, but the problem for me was that there was not a designated place to go for assistance.

I end with no firm conclusion except to note that we have a lot of possibilities. With all the work that needs to be done and all those users to serve, maybe not only will there be reference librarians in the future, but we will even find that a lot more of us are needed!

# The future of reference service: A response

**By Goldia Hester**

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In a time of great nostalgia for the book, it is worth remembering that both libraries and librarians existed before books, before paper, and even before red tape. Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* depicts an elaborate library with librarians a century before Gutenberg. The fact that reference librarians of all sorts have from the beginning maintained files of information, not available in book, or in some cases print, form indicates that reference librarians have seen beyond the container to the information. While the demise of the book like that of Mark Twain has been greatly exaggerated, reference librarians would do well to remember that their destiny is tied to the book only if they are inflexible.

An anonymous user sent a message through the comment screen of the UT Online Catalog the last week of February 1988: "The computer system is very helpful, but it can't compare to the reference desk. Let's try and do something about that." It's always nice to receive a compliment, but it would be interesting to know what additional features are needed to bring UTCAT up to the user's standard of the reference desk.

The Perry-Castañeda Library reference desk is one of the pulse points of this campus. Time at the reference desk can be both informative and energizing for the reference librarians, but there are more important reasons for the reference librarians to be there on a regular basis. Let's examine what goes on at the reference desk, not at the level of interview and search strategy, but in a wider context.

The reference librarian's time at the reference desk provides feedback for bibliographic instruction and printed materials. At the same time the reference librarians at the reference desk properly are answering questions on two levels: the immediate questions from the individuals at the desk, and the larger question, the metaquestions, that can be answered before the public asks:

What signs and point-of-use aids are needed?

What obstacles are in the way of the public?

What classes have been given assignments that should have had library information included?

What other services are needed?

What are the repeating questions that signal that the reference librarian needs to take action, such as consultation with the professor or changes needed in the catalog format—whether paper or electronic?

Repetitive questions are important for two reasons. First, even the most challenging question ceases to be fun for staff on any level after it is asked for the 25th time in two days. Second, if everyone in the class needs the information, it should be in the course syllabus or library handout.

What reference titles need to be purchased for the questions that weren't being asked three years ago?

What new reference titles or databases need to be developed?

What changes need to be requested from the vendors of CD-ROM databases to make them easier for the public to learn?

What can be done to improve the accuracy of the answers of the reference desk staff?

Are questions being referred unnecessarily to branches or special collections of other libraries?

What training needs to be provided for reference desk staff, both new and experienced?

Maybe the metaphor needed is that a reference librarian's time at the desk should include "preventive medicine."

A busy reference desk is no place for extended interviews for database searching, a lengthy explanation of how to do a literature search, or sensitive questions (i.e., those questions that the public feels are sensitive). It never was. Therefore, reference librarians, in fairness to the public and to colleagues, need to keep "office hours" or to make individual appointments.

An intense concern with reference statistics, measurement, and evaluation has marked the last twenty years. It is well to remember that statistics have to be interpreted. When the reference librarians are doing their best work, the result may, even should be, a drop in the number of transactions at the reference desk because the clients know the answer from signs or handouts or bibliographic instruction, or because the faculty includes the information in the course. And conversely, an increase in reference statistics does not necessarily indicate more or better work.

Technology today offers to librarians opportunities to retry some good ideas from the past for which the technical capability was inadequate; a lessening of time and space constraints on the librarian; opportunities to deal with clients who are too shy, too immobile, or too busy to come to the reference desk; and the possibility of freeing people from dull, repetitive tasks.

What do reference librarians need to be, what do reference librarians need to know to deal with the future? A solid concept of what kind of business reference is and an openness to rethinking reference functions in view of the new technology. Sensitivity to local conditions; in reference services, there are very few programs, ideas, and systems that are effective without careful local modifications. Ability to manage the human aspects and the technical aspects of change. Ability to document the needs and expectations of our clients for the library and university administrations and for designers of new products and systems. The judgment, the ability, and the courage to say "yes" to the new which benefits the library's clientele and "no" to the new which offers only novelty.

What a time to dream things that never were and say "Why not?" What an exciting time to be librarians!

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# The future of reference service: Discussion summary

**By Dennis Dillon**

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The ensuing discussion focused primarily on three issues: technology, identifying reference problems, and the pros and cons of the reference desk. The following summary synthesizes audience and panelists' comments on these subjects.

## Technology

Discussion began with several people focusing on the incompatibility, expense, and amount of specialized knowledge needed to operate and maintain the various electronic information systems. This prompted the observation that libraries have never made the best or most innovative use of existing technologies and that we could do more, especially in the area of electronic mail.

One member of the audience responded that we need to look more closely at the high technology of the recent past such as the telephone and the tele-