



INNOVATIONS



Some small ideas

By Ellen Metter

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Does your library have major CD-ROM holdings? Has it become an Electronic Library? Has it sprouted wings and done a dance yet? Not every noteworthy endeavor in your library need be of mythical proportions. Small ideas and changes often significantly enhance service to patrons. Small ideas may not make it to the evening news or even be terribly noticeable . . . unless they're not there anymore.

I used to feel confident walking into a library. Having worked as a reference librarian in a number of colleges and universities, I figured I could navigate just about any library with little difficulty. Well, a bit of library-hopping proved my ignorance. Every library had its quirks. I experienced frustration after facing problems I knew could have been avoided with easy, inexpensive solutions.

The ideas listed below are now in use at Montclair State College's Harry A. Sprague Library, a medium-sized college library. They're written from a reference librarian's perspective. Some are so simple that it may seem ludicrous to mention them. Many of the ideas are not original but, for every one listed, there exists a few libraries that have caused patrons discomfort by not using them. The following ideas help lower the user frustration level and answer some common patron questions, (usually asked with a slight whine:)

"But how do I get there?"

Though it is occasionally a temptation, we don't try to get rid of our patrons. However, if they're not willing to wait for ILL service, they must travel to another library to get what they need. Having an OCLC terminal at the reference desk, Sprague librarians first recommend local libraries that have the needed material. Then we hand them direc-

tions, phone number and usually a map of the library they're going to. The directions were obtained by phoning area libraries. College librarians mailed maps copied from their school's catalog; public librarians simply recited travel instructions for us. Copies of the directions, at least two for each library, are kept in a loose-leaf notebook at the reference desk. They're filed alphabetically, and a table of contents quickly identifies which libraries are included. The master copies are kept by one person who also updates the notebook. (A very non-work-intensive task.) Why do we simply give out copies, not point to the nearest duplicating machine? Well, the patron already has to go to another library. If he's an undergraduate, he's pouting. The students are surprised and immediately less irked when handed the information.¹

"Where are these books? Do we own them?"

Oh the thrill of writing in books . . . when it serves a good purpose of course. I'm talking about indexes such as *Granger's Index to Poetry*, *Ottomiller's Index to Plays in Collections* and the *Biography & Genealogy Master Index*. Writing in the call numbers next to the names of the collections cited saves patrons from having to plow through the card catalog. This also makes them feel more amiably toward the library. Admittedly, the writing-in process can be quite time-consuming. Sprague is lucky to have a work-study student who has done several for us. Perhaps you have library volunteers who could be sold on the merits of the project. Other-

¹The Passaic County Library System puts out a directory that includes maps and directions to their county's libraries; that is also kept on the desk.

wise, get down to it yourself, a little at a time, as a project. I personally added the call numbers to Ottemiller's throughout last summer. It was useful in several ways: I ordered play collections, became familiar with some new play titles, and had fun finding an error or two you'd never see through regular use of the index.

"You're holding my book hostage?"

Often, when libraries have displays or exhibits, the books in the cases are unavailable to patrons. I say, "Let my display books go!" There are several reasons displays are created: to celebrate an occasion, acknowledge a person, vent creative impulses, or to gather together and present, in an interesting manner, library books of a similar type. Look at the last reason, probably one of the most common. Hopefully, such a display is presented to alert the public to the varied components of the library holdings and to encourage borrowing of the books. A bin of similar books may even be kept near the display, ready to be borrowed. If a patron really wants to take out a book from the exhibit case, why not let them?

Common arguments librarians cite against letting the books circulate include, "But I spent hours making the display look just right!" or "There are plenty of books like that one, why not let them get a similar one?" or "It's such a pain to open the case and then find a suitable replacement." I am not swayed. The artistic creator of the display may indeed feel pride in their creation; they should, an attractive display is a boon to the library. But let's be realistic, we're not an art museum. Slight changes will not ruin the exhibit. Sending patrons to find similar books is just adding to the renowned frustration level. If the patron sees a book that looks useful and pleasing, let them have it, rather than having them spend time digging up a second choice. Some may see this as adding to a librarian's already significant workload—yet another example of our inability to say "no." Choosing to let patrons take display books has not proven to be an unduly cumbersome task at Montclair. True, some very popular displays look a bit empty for a day or so, but the satisfaction the patrons express is gratifying. We realize that a request for a display book should be counted as the mark of a successful display.

"Do you have any scrap paper?"

Perhaps I *should* always carry paper with me when I go to a library. But I don't. Or else I leave my notebook and papers on a distant floor. I think my actions represent the majority and am surprised when I can't find paper near a card or online catalog. Other times, it's under my nose, but because it is comprised of old ripped up flyers, I don't

realize it's what I'm looking for. Scrap paper should be everywhere it might be useful in a container clearly labeled "scrap paper."

"I called five hours ago but you never called back."

This one is specifically for reference librarians. Patrons call on the phone and you cannot always answer their question right away. If it is the policy of your department to make a return call to the patron, cover yourself by saying, "if you haven't heard from me in an hour, call me back." Why? Because you may misplace their number. You may get caught up with an eager crowd of patrons. You may have a personal crisis. After finding the phone numbers to unanswered patrons in places such as my laundry and my pocketbook, I am very conscious of leaving that message.

"The catalog says you own this book, but it's not on the shelf!"

Many libraries seem to harbor the mistaken impression that patrons will be able to psychically locate the whereabouts of books kept permanently in unusual places. Not true. If a book is not on the shelf where it is supposed to be, many assume that the book is missing and give up looking. Others guess that someone else is using the book. They will wander the library to locate the user. After some excellent exercise they might go to a reference or circulation desk to ask where the book is. Some common answers are: "Oh that's 1) on reserve, 2) behind the reference desk, 3) on the ready reference shelf, 4) back in cataloging, or my favorite, 5) in Sheila's office, she uses it a lot." If a book is kept for long periods of time somewhere other than in call number order on the shelf, put a labeled dummy where the book should be and/or place some indication in the public circulation catalog about its whereabouts. And please, put the full title of the book on the dummy; browsers should know that the book exists too. Simple, yes? Always done? No.

"Where are the instructions?"

I actually wish this question were asked more often. Unfortunately, patrons often overlook the most obvious instructional sheets, books, or screens. Nonetheless, if you have written instructions (for instance, by CD-ROM stations or online catalog terminals) there's an easy way to make them simple to look at, fingerprint free, and always where they are supposed to be: cover them with plastic laminate, punch a hole in a corner, get string and tie the thing on to a table leg. Leave enough play in the string so that users can easily lift and

move the directions comfortably. Unlaminated directions inevitably get ripped, blackened or written on, and unanchored instructions may disappear. Instructions in notebooks are simply not as obvious.

Perhaps I haven't moved the earth with any of these revelations. However, even in a complex information age, simple ideas can continue to be expressed . . . and found to work.



Employing library student assistants as student supervisors

By F. Jay Fuller

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As college and research libraries enter the decade of the nineties, we are confronted with numerous challenges. How do we manage the newest information technologies, which are becoming increasingly global in reach and ever more intricate in nature? How do we answer the complex questions concerning copyright and privacy laws, which are no longer raised as issues of black and white, but as controversies in charcoal and gray? And how are we going to increase, or even maintain, the required levels of library service our academic communities demand, when we find that our operating budgets no longer stretch as far as they once did to meet such demands?

How we will deal with our new technologies will depend on the impacts that occur as we use them, and certainly the large, theoretical issues, such as the public's right to know versus the individual's right to privacy, will take much debate, if not litigation. These questions will all take time; however, for many of us, our problems concerning essential library service are urgent, and time will only increase our difficulties if we don't make the necessary adjustments.

At the Meriam Library on the campus of California State University, Chico, we have attempted, quite successfully, to meet this question of service through our unique Student Supervisor program, and we have found that instituting it was one of the best decisions we have ever made.

Starting in 1970, we shifted responsibility for the evening and night supervision of student assistants in our stacking operations from a regular staff employee to two experienced student assistants. These student assistants were given the title "student supervisor," and were given a slightly higher wage than that of their peers. Initially the duties performed by these individuals were limited in

scope, and amounted to very little more than occasionally checking to make sure that the other student workers on their shifts were present, and that they were completing the tasks assigned to them in a reasonable and timely manner.

The manager of student personnel monitored and scrutinized the progress of the program at this initial stage for an entire year. The results were quite positive. After two semesters, it was decided to expand the program to five individuals and to have them work all shifts, day and night, to give them more training in basic personnel management, and to give them slightly more latitude in supervising and training the student assistants in the stacking unit. After the second year, it was found that the level of service in the stacking unit had improved significantly, as had overall efficiency and morale, without increasing funding or the total number of individuals employed. The following year, the third in the program's history, the program was further expanded to include some of the other service units, and today student supervisors are to be found in nearly every department in the Meriam Library, public and technical.

The successful results of this program have been twofold. With the complexities inherent in some of our unit's operations with regard to procedures and computerized records, it would be extremely difficult to train rookie student assistants in every detail of that unit's daily routines, in a reasonable period of time, and expect them to function as supervisors of other student workers within that department as well. Therefore, all the individuals chosen for this program have been experienced library workers. On average, student assistants selected have been in their respective departments for at least two semesters, have proven to be proficient in their unit's operations, and have received outstanding