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# The Reference Service at the Library

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## THE REFERENCE SERVICE AT THE LIBRARY

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By H. GLENN BROWN, Reference Librarian

“Reference work exists because it is not possible to organize books so mechanically, so perfectly, as to dispense with personal service in their use. Here is a service which defies and transcends machinery. It still is, and always will be, imperative to provide human beings as intermediaries between the reader and the right book. The utmost use of great libraries never can be attained by mechanics.”<sup>1</sup> These words, familiar to all students of library science, were written in 1930 by a noted librarian in his manual on reference work. They are appropriate here because they appeared in print only shortly after the establishment of a separate Reference Department at the University of Pennsylvania, and because the decade since their appearance has brought to libraries not only many helpful mechanical innovations, but along with them a decidedly increased demand for personal service.

Never in the history of academic libraries has there been such a demand for personal service as there is now. Current educational theory proclaims the library the center of educational activities, the “heart of the institution,” an active agent for the diffusion of knowledge. With this conception, librarians become teachers, interpreting the library’s resources to the students and faculty, and assisting in the formulation of curriculums, syllabuses, reading lists, and general educational policies. A decade ago the type of personal service implied by this conception was hardly dreamed of; today it is the sub-

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<sup>1</sup> James I. Wyer, *Reference work*, p. 5.

ject of an extensive study entitled *Teaching with Books*, published jointly by the Association of American Colleges and the American Library Association.<sup>2</sup>

It is not necessary here to evaluate this new idea of library service nor to examine its origin; it is sufficient to present it. But it is necessary to note another influence on the reference service of academic libraries, one of long standing and considerable effect. The service of the American public library has established a standard known and admired by almost everyone. The reference service of the public library is the finest public bibliographical and information service known, and it responds to the demands of the public which supports it with almost incredible services. The club woman is assisted in preparation of an essay, the business man gets a selected bibliography on the T. V. A., the child listens to stories and later may be guided in his reading by a Readers' Adviser, the chemist is provided with the literature of plastics, and the college graduate and the unemployed receive vocational guidance. The classic example of public library service concerns a milkman, who, while on his route, shouted through the door of his public library for "a book to cure my best cow" and who later gave the library \$70,000 because its personnel, instead of referring him politely to "Cows" in the card catalog, assembled material which helped him save his cow.<sup>3</sup>

Other examples, only slightly less extreme, could be obtained from the librarians of any large public library. The impact of such all-out service makes itself felt on libraries of all types, and it has definitely influenced the work of college and university library reference departments.

The Reference Department of the University of Pennsylvania Library, as many another might, defines its service in

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<sup>2</sup> B. Harvie Branscomb, *Teaching with books*, 1940.

<sup>3</sup> James I. Wyer, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

the words of a great librarian as "service rendered by a librarian *in aid* of some sort of study."<sup>4</sup> But careful examination of day by day work of the staff shows that the service is not so limited, that the ideal of public library service intrudes, so that the phrase "some sort of study" tends to lose precise meaning. Sometimes the service satisfies mere curiosity, sometimes a practical problem, great or small, and occasionally goes beyond "aid" to the actual working out of at least portions of a study. It is doubtful if any large university library can limit its reference service to that which librarians and scholars would define as ideal, for the universities themselves are not restricted communities of scholars.

Though the University of Pennsylvania, in 1939-40, counted a graduate student body of 2230 and a faculty of 1608, including all ranks, it counted undergraduates to the number of 5970.<sup>5</sup> A large percentage of these left high school or "prep" school only one or two years ago and are not prepared for scholarly research, and an even larger percentage never will do any real scholarly research. Yet it is these undergraduates who fill library reading rooms and bombard the reference staff with an infinite variety of inquiries. Whether or not the student's demand for the address of a chemical laboratory is for aid in some sort of study is not questioned, nor are the demands for sources of quotations, good novels to read, athletic records, articles on euthanasia, or New York telephone directories. Though it may be mere information he wants, the student feels he is entitled to it or at least to assistance in obtaining it. So also does the faculty member who wants to know the address of a colleague or a publisher, the author or price of a book, the location of an item not in the university library, or the date he neglected to include in a citation in his new book.

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<sup>4</sup> W. W. Bishop, "The theory of reference work," in: *The backs of books*, p. 151.

<sup>5</sup> These figures do not include the enrollment for the summer session.

The Reference Department at the University provides this information service as well as that which can more properly be called reference service. True aid to research may require only the establishment of a fact, sometimes a difficult matter, but it also goes beyond this to the suggestion of materials and sources, and sometimes to the actual gathering together of these. In the broadest sense, it means interpretation of the resources of libraries, especially of that one in which the scholar is working. It means knowing thoroughly the form and use of various catalogs, the intricacies of bibliographies, the fields of emphasis and the limitations of periodical indexes, the variations and distinctions of encyclopaedias and dictionaries, the representative scholarly journals, and both local and foreign special collections. And finally it means the judicious application of this knowledge to the needs of students, and of faculty members and independent scholars who, though usually knowing more of their own studies than librarians can hope to, nevertheless continue to acknowledge gratefully the assistance of librarians. Recently librarians were proud to see an important bibliography of American mathematics formally dedicated "To the American librarians and libraries whose devotion to scholarly enterprises has made possible the present work . . ." And no doubt Professor Karpinski was thinking not only of the informed personal service of librarians of great special collections, but also of many university Reference Librarians who assisted with suggestions, with loans of books, with verification of information, and in multitudinous other ways.

The variety and complexity of service can be realized only by concrete examples, for no amount of explanation can make clear the shifting demands, and the unforeseen developments of seemingly simple, casual requests. During a recent three days, requests came from undergraduate students for aid in finding

material on fish hooks (for archaeology), on the origin of zero, on the history of shaving, and on ministers' attitudes toward current United States foreign policy. All these requests except the one on the history of shaving deserved serious attention and required suggestion of various library resources, and methods of procedure. Among the demands of graduate students was one for assistance in determining whether the library had certain diplomatic dispatches between Paris and Rome in 1917, a request that led to a long search, in which the student took part, to find out if the dispatches had ever been printed. Another graduate student was interested in parliamentary debate on the suppression of parliamentary papers.

Besides assisting with these and other problems and carrying on the routine work at the desks, the staff members explained certain rules of entry in the card catalog for a faculty member, started the procedure for obtaining interlibrary loans for another, made a beginning toward answering a correspondent's seemingly simple request for the population of Philadelphia and New York in 1790, and finished the answer to a request from St. Louis for sources of biographical information about a person connected with the University's history. Relatives of the man's descendants, who were reached by telephone, graciously proffered information which would give the scholar direct contact with the family. Furthermore, he was informed of a work which he evidently did not know and which is available at the University Library.

As it is quite possible that he will not find the work in his own or a nearby library, he may ask his library to request our copy as an interlibrary loan. Such a request would bring into action the interlibrary loan service of the Reference Department, whereby our books are lent to other libraries and other libraries' books sent to us for the use of our faculty and students. This is a flourishing service, demanding over half

the time of one assistant, and is by no means entirely a mechanical or clerical process. The service is extended to graduate students and faculty members according to agreements among libraries recorded in a code approved by the American Library Association. Judgment must be exercised in granting a request and extensive bibliographical knowledge is required to meet the library's obligation to provide complete bibliographical information for every item requested from another library. Not infrequently the search for such information may require fifteen minutes to half an hour, and occasionally search is necessary to complete the bibliographical information sent by small, poorly equipped libraries which can send only the vague, mystifying reference someone has given them.

During the last few years interlibrary loan transactions have averaged about 1100 annually, the library borrowing about 400 volumes and lending about 700. The service covers the whole country and Canada, and in peaceful times, may extend abroad. Of the books lent, about 90% go out of the Philadelphia area, and about 70% of those borrowed come from outside. One interesting feature of the service is the extensive use made of it by the industrial organizations of Philadelphia, New Jersey and Delaware. Even though the large manufacturers maintain well-equipped technical libraries, they frequently turn to the University Library for important foreign journals to which they do not subscribe. More than ever, with the development of the Union Library Catalogue of the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area, the University Library is approached for such service, but on the other hand, this magnificent catalog has enabled the library to locate in the Philadelphia area a fourth of the items requested by the University faculty and students. Formerly, the library would have had to send many of these items to the Union Catalog

at the Library of Congress for location in libraries outside the area, perhaps as far distant as Texas and California.

However, the interlibrary loan service is not the only extra-mural service of the Reference Department. Students and scholars from all over the country write for various types of information. One of the banes of the reference librarian's days is the graduate student of another institution who wants the University Library to start his bibliography for him or to perform other services which are a part of his own work as a graduate student. But discounting the illegitimate requests of students, alumni, and others, there remained in 1940 some seventy letters deserving of sympathetic treatment and careful answers, requiring from a few minutes to several hours' time. The University Library, in the interest of universal scholarship, cannot refuse such assistance even though it places an increasing burden on a staff already carrying a heavy load.

These extra-mural services are an accepted and increasingly important part of the University Library's reference work, but the most important service occurs within the library itself, and though this has already been suggested in general outline and by examples, the true aid to research for students and faculty needs the emphasis of more exact description. Ideally the University Library would have a staff of subject specialists, experienced in research in given fields and trained in library science, but neither this university library nor any other known to the writer can afford such service. The best that can be done is to approach that ideal as closely as possible, without curtailing other services and without applying a disproportionate amount of the salary budget to the reference service.

At Pennsylvania the staff consists of the Reference Librarian, with an A.M. in English Literature, an A.M. in Library Science, and previous experience, three college graduates with degrees in Library Science, one having had three years' experi-

ence in other library systems, a half-time assistant with an A.B. degree, and a page. As this staff handles all types of reference work and also supervises the Periodical Room and the collection of current periodicals, it was not until last year, with the addition of the third trained assistant, that definite plans for improved aid to research could be realized. This assistant, though not to be considered a bibliographic expert, is well trained and has publications to his credit representing the type of research important in aid of scholars. Furthermore, he will have at least half his time free to examine and explore the library's collections and to confer with graduate students and faculty members whose reference problems can be assisted by consultation or by extensive examination of sources. As with all the other service of the department, his work is not to duplicate nor infringe on that of the professors, who are the students' first and foremost guides to the literature of their subjects; but rather to supplement and aid in implementing that guidance. For as scholars in related fields or periods can frequently be helpful to each other, so can the librarian, with specialized knowledge and training in bibliography, and with daily use of the tools of research, be helpful, to an extent too little realized.

This provision, then, represents Pennsylvania's progress toward the ideal of specialized personal aid to research. Much has been done by the former staff and done well, and all members of the staff will continue to employ their training and talents toward the best possible aid to study, but the addition of the new assistant, with free time, definitely committed to aid of advanced study, will promote a service hitherto limited by time and pressure of other duties.

Future developments are conjectural, but by no means utterly obscure. For several years now the Union Library Catalogue, which contains cards representing the titles in over 150 libra-

ries in the metropolitan area, has provided extraordinary service in locating materials for research. The Bibliographical Planning Committee has investigated the resources and facilities of Philadelphia libraries and reported its findings in such works as *A Faculty Survey of the University of Pennsylvania Libraries* and *Philadelphia Libraries and their Holdings*. Now that these organizations have moved from the central city district and united under one roof at the Fine Arts building of the University, their services are more easily available to the students and faculty at the University.

However, since the Union Library Catalogue is not a subject catalog, libraries and scholars can not turn to it for information on fish hooks and population. Furthermore, the Bibliographical Center, as it is now called, is a cooperative project, which receives assistance from many of the libraries in the area and provides service for all. For these reasons, the Center, although located on the campus of the University, supplements and assists the reference services of all cooperating libraries rather than attempting extensive reference service itself, or duplication of the work of the University Library's Reference Department. If the Bibliographical Center continues as a cooperative enterprise and if the Union Library Catalogue develops a thorough subject approach, the reference services of all large Philadelphia libraries will be changed considerably. But although these changes are unpredictable, it seems certain the evolution of the University Library's Reference Department toward separation of the information service and development of more specialized aid to research will proceed as fast as ingenuity devises and the budget allows.