

Creating Our Roles as Reference Librarians of the Future: Choice or Fate?

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During our lifetimes, new technologies have changed the roles of many individuals: supermarket clerks now scan groceries for speedier checkout service, doctors employ MIR or CAT scans to help diagnose patients, telephone operators at financial services assist callers with paying bills or transferring funds. Most of these changes, I believe, are generally considered by all (providers and consumers or clients alike) to be beneficial and are regarded as signs of progress. Can we say the same thing about all the new technologies in the library? Has the increase in new technologies added to the stress of playing multiple roles, or lessened it? Has our fundamental role as reference librarians really changed, or rather only the tools and methods we employ to carry out our mission? Should user expectations, or perhaps what is really our perception of user expectations, define our role, or should we be more proactive in directing our own mission, our own futures as professionals?

In my time with you this morning, during one of the opening sessions of this conference titled “Racing Toward Tomorrow,” I plan to explore the issue of our

roles as reference librarians of the future—and suggest that our professional futures, no less than our personal lives, might best be served by another image than that of a race. I will at times refer to some of the literature that has addressed these issues, and will also discuss how we approach them in the Reference Services Division of Olin•Kroch•Uris (OKU) Libraries at Cornell University.¹

It may be useful for you to know that I came to Cornell 20 years ago as a Reference and Instruction Librarian at what was then called the Uris Undergraduate Library. About three years later, I moved a building away to become a Reference Librarian at the John M. Olin Graduate Research Library (you may note here that “instruction” geared towards graduate students and faculty was not in favor yet in the early 1980s, at least not in the Cornell Library). Olin Library is the largest library at Cornell, and is sometimes referred to as the main library, a distinction it held with more prominence when we had the only so-called “union” card catalog on campus. For those of you who became librarians only since the ad-

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vent of online catalogs, this meant that Olin was the only library, of 17 on campus, whose card catalog contained records not only for its own holdings, but for all of the other 16 libraries as well.

Approximately five years ago, the reference departments in Olin and Uris were administratively merged to form one division. While we maintain two reference desks (a third if we include the Map Division which is also now part of Reference); we have combined our staffs (9 Reference Librarians, 1 Map Librarian, 6 Reference Assistants, 2 office support staff, and the Head of the Division); and we continue to offer cross-training for both the librarians and the paraprofessionals (we call them Reference Assistants). All of today's professional staff except for the Head of the Division were here before the merger; in fact, I believe the most "junior" librarian has been in the Division nearly ten years. Needless to say, turnover among the Reference Assistants has been much higher, although we have a few loyal veterans.

As for the scope of our services, Olin and Uris are essentially Social Sciences and Humanities collections, and while Uris is no longer formally referred to as the Undergraduate Library, it continues to house a college-level stack collection, the largest reserve collection on campus, and most recently, two electronic labs (one of which we use for classroom instruction). The Division also serves as the *de facto* government documents department, providing reference service for United States, United Nations, and European Union documents, for each of which we are official depositories. And speaking personally of multiple roles, I serve as bibliographer for the Olin and Uris reference collections as well as for the Uris stacks; I am the resident documents "expert" in the Division; I teach both lower and upper division course-related instruction sessions as well as Internet classes; and last, but sometimes not least, I schedule the librarians' hours of service at the Olin and Uris reference desks.

We at Cornell may serve as an example of one institution's approach to the issues facing our profession, but I do not want to suggest we have created the perfect model for any or all of you to adapt to your own institutional settings. I would also be remiss if I led you to believe my colleagues and I always agree among ourselves on these issues. Most important, I want to stress overall that as we address the issues facing our roles as reference librarians of the future we do something that

may seem totally at odds with our tendency to pride ourselves on answering questions. None of us, myself included, has the answers to the questions I am raising today. However, as the great German poet Rainer Maria Rilke said:

Do not now seek the answers, that cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.²

I believe we would all agree that the core mission of reference librarians in academic libraries today is to provide service to students and faculty as integral members of the learning process; that our overall primary function is to support the curriculum of the students and the research of the faculty. I would further suggest that everyone in academia—both we the providers, as well as students and faculty, the clients—take reference service for granted. Don't get me wrong. I don't mean this in a pejorative sense. I mean only that we accept it as a core service, indeed a core commodity. We do not need to justify our existence. Yet it is worth reflecting that reference service has neither a very lengthy, nor a very universal, history.

The very concept of reference service—librarians eagerly and willingly available to answer patrons' queries—is a very American idea. And even in this country, the prevailing notion in the mid-1800s was that "helping readers represented a distraction from the librarian's important duties... ."³ One of the earliest descriptions of the role of a reference librarian is described in an 1876 article by Samuel Green, aptly titled, "Personal Relations Between Librarians and Readers."⁴ A decade and a half later William Child, then a reference librarian at Columbia University, offered the following definition of reference work, still useful today:

By reference work is meant simply the assistance given by a librarian to readers in acquainting them with the intricacies of the catalogue, in answering questions, and, in short, doing anything and everything in his power to facilitate access to the resources of the library....⁵

University libraries were slower to accept the importance of reference service than public libraries. Ac-

ording to one historian of librarianship, "...with the exception of Cornell and Columbia, the private universities were still without reference librarians specifically so titled in 1896."⁶ Not until the early 1900s—not yet a hundred years ago—did reference service take hold as an integral function in academic libraries. To those who are thinking a hundred years is substantial, "...the history of reference is much shorter than that of the two other primary functions of the library, collection development (which dates back thousands of years) and collection organization (which dates back at least 400 years)."⁷

It seems that throughout this brief history, debate has continued to ensue as to the scope of reference and the responsibilities of reference librarians. For the most part, this self examination has, and continues to be, a good thing for the profession. But as we approach the next hundred years, I would suggest not that we stifle the debate, but that we not get caught up in it either. That we not spend so much time on self reflection that we lose sight of our core mission—serving others.

With this in mind, let us examine the place of the reference desk in the provision of reference service. The desk is now an entity at once as seemingly essential to what we do as the courtroom is to a trial lawyer, and yet its importance is regularly being called into question. One of the first apparently successful efforts to eliminate the general reference desk is described by Virginia Massey-Burzio, who did this in the early 1990s at Brandeis University.⁸ Brandeis has gone to a model where most questions are filtered by paraprofessionals, with professional librarians acting as consultants. In his controversial article, "Shaking the Conceptual Foundations of Reference," Jerry Campbell argues more radically that we not only remove the reference desk, but that we remove most of the human interface altogether. In his view, the notion of reference *desk* service "... is a building-centered, old style, 'make them come to us' model [which] cannot survive in the information age."⁹ He suggests that "we should set ourselves the goal of answering no less than 75 percent of the questions that currently come to our reference desks using computers and yes, without human intervention."¹⁰

Yet it seems this revolutionary idea of eliminating the desk only skirts the issue of what *service* reference librarians can and should provide. Does it really matter whether we do it at a formally designated, and at least to some also a familiar, spot in the library? If the issue is

helping patrons find the information they need and assisting with their research, if we aren't at a desk, where should we be? Tucked away in our offices, harder to find than at present, in effect coming to resemble European libraries where patrons have to ferret out human help.

Two things are troublesome about the view, strongly held by some, that we do away with the desk. The first may sound trite, but to paraphrase the notion about baseball spectators from the movie "Field of Dreams"—if you build it, they will come—isn't it all too likely that when it comes to reference desk patrons, "if we take it down, they will go away"? And if they go away, where will they go? To the Internet? Or ironically, to Barnes & Noble, as described by Renee Feinberg in a 1998 issue of *Library Journal*. She surveyed patrons in a Manhattan Barnes & Noble, many of whom were area college students, for an explanation of why they weren't using their college libraries. No, it's not simply that B&N serves coffee (which some libraries actually do now as well). It is because, as one interviewee expressed, "The library has information, but B&N has books' [suggesting] that patrons may have been turned off by libraries that emphasize electronic information."¹¹

The decline in desk statistics at many college and university libraries might be playing into the notion that we are needed less. But we need to be careful about confusing quantity with quality. I suspect that most people go inside banks less frequently than a decade ago, thanks to ATM machines. But I would argue that when you need a banking service that the ATM cannot provide, you want to go inside the bank and easily find a knowledgeable employee available to help you. Simply put, the increasing presence and ease of technology in our lives does not eliminate the need for human assistance, it heightens it—if not in the frequency with which we seek out that human assistance then in the intensity for it when needed. If we keep this distinction in mind, we will be able to more clearly see technology as a tool, as something we choose how to employ, rather than as a force driving what services we should provide.

To me, there is another curiosity about the eliminate-the-desk theory of the future of reference. It is puzzling how this theory relates to a generally agreed upon presumption of user behavior in libraries—that many, if not most, patrons are hesitant to approach the desk for help. This may result from a kind of basic human nature that people don't like to ask for help because they don't want to admit their lack of knowledge

(and I'm not just referring to the stereotypical view of men not being able to ask for driving directions). Think here of the number of times, even during only one short shift on the desk, that someone comes up to you and says, "I'm sorry, but I have a really stupid question." Or, "I'm sorry to bother you." What makes us think that patrons who feel this way when they enter the library—either the unsophisticated undergraduate with a term paper to write or the professor with a complex reference she cannot decipher—will feel better when we are even harder to find? What will make them seek us out when we are farther away?

I would suggest that the undergraduate will conclude the library is not a place that offers help and the professor will conclude that we have made things too complicated for them to understand. Or perhaps more important, we will have lost the opportunity to intercept that hesitant undergraduate and take his intimidation of his assignment to do a term paper and turn it into curiosity and excitement about a new topic to explore. Similarly for the professor, we will have lost the opportunity not only to show her that we have skills that can help untangle that thorny citation, but also to talk to her about her research needs in general. In both cases, by distancing ourselves from the patrons we send the message that the user is not our primary focus anymore. At an institutional level, we also weaken our connections to the teaching and research missions of the university as a whole. Rather than working towards greater involvement with the educational mission of our institutions, we marginalize ourselves. Rather than emphasizing the value of human interaction in this era of technology, we make it easier for our patrons to find a computer than a librarian.

I would argue that rather than eliminating desk service we need to enhance it. As one librarian has noted, "we first need ... to cure ourselves of the suicidal notion that has taken hold of the library profession's soul in the last decade, that providing service within our walls is our primary weakness when in fact it is precisely our primary strength."¹² One way to build on this primary strength is to offer to meet with patrons by appointment as an extension of the routine service provided at the desk. This allows for patrons, again either the beginning undergraduate or the senior faculty member, to meet individually with a librarian and discuss in private his or her needs. Maintaining desk service alongside this consultation service supports the majority of users who don't

need in depth assistance, and will be put off by any extra effort required to get help. In addition, routine traffic at the desk allows, perhaps only for now, a familiar and easy mechanism both for us to advertise this additional level of service, and a place from which patrons can be efficiently referred—either by a librarian who would like to spend more uninterrupted time with the patron than can often be done at the desk, or by a paraprofessional who might help the patron get started because she is the only person on duty at the time and then refer the patron to a librarian for a follow up appointment.

Although we have been taking referrals at the desk informally for as long as I can remember, in the last year we have formalized this into an additional service. We have a flyer advertising our "consultation" service that we keep in handout racks near the desk; we list it as a service on our Division web-site; and we also keep all the librarians' business cards at the desk which we regularly hand out. By this I don't simply mean that we hand out our own cards, but that we (and the paraprofessionals) also hand out each others' cards as we think appropriate based on the patron's needs and our individual areas of expertise. We also keep on hand the business cards for our colleagues in Collection Development, and hand those out as well, either when the patron's needs are in a subject area outside those covered in the Division, or more often when the patron has a specific question about obtaining material for the library's stack collection.

As I have alluded, one motivation for removing the reference desk may be what I would call a "defensive strike." If our statistics are going down, and our administrators judge our performance by our statistics, it's not good if we are less busy. Worse yet, the very idea of us "sitting there" is perceived as not a good use of our time. The difficulty lies again in whom we are ultimately serving. Administrators may want to see the desk busy, with lines of people waiting; but patrons want prompt service without waiting in a long line to get it. Administrators see the same phenomenon as overstaffed; patrons see it as well staffed.

I have said here that the library's administration is judging our performance, if not our essential value, by our numbers because I think that is how most of us tend to view this issue. But perhaps we have created this problem ourselves by fostering a quantitative method of evaluating reference service, and consistently failing

to develop qualitative methods to evaluate what we do. It is not simply that we should reject the notion of “more is better.” But only if we attempt to measure what we do qualitatively can we learn the true strengths and weaknesses of the services we provide. To put it differently, measuring the number of questions we answer may help us better manage our staffing patterns, our hours of service, but it won’t tell us what kinds of questions are being asked, by whom, and how well our staff are answering these questions. As one writer noted nearly a decade ago:

Reference service is too complex and too important to be judged simply on the basis of how many reference questions any group of people answers. At some point, we have to deal with the quality of that service. If we don’t know what quality we have, we have no way to determine if we’re improving or getting worse, what kind of training for the reference desk works, and whether or not individual reference librarians are doing a good job.¹³

Perhaps less extreme than removing the desk is the proposal that we should at least be getting up from it more and seeking patrons out in the reference area. Generally called “roving” or “roving” it has been compared to the concept of “Management by Wandering Around.”¹⁴ To the degree that we do this in order to be proactive, I would agree that it is indeed helpful, although I would again suggest that like private consultations, it functions best as an extension of traditional desk service. Roving might help us connect with some users who are hesitant to come to the desk, but others might also find it intrusive. To the degree that we hope to teach patrons over time to be as independent researchers as possible, roving may send an opposite, “in your face” sort of message.

I would suggest that the concept of roving is not all that new: we were very much encouraged to do this when I worked at the Undergraduate Library, on the assumption that the value of capturing the more helpless user outweighed the potential of our being intrusive. But I’m also reminded in this context of a story a colleague once told about one roving experience, back in the card catalog only days: He went up to a student who appeared to be confused and inquired if he needed any help. The patron turned to my librarian colleague and said, “Yeah, you can put these drawers away for me,” and walked

away. In today’s library, will our implied offers of help in the research process be met with requests to unjam a printer or format a disk for downloading? We have tried to adapt to this new era by adding another level of staffing to assist in the roving: Students, whom we call “database assistants” move about the area where the bulk of our computer terminals are clustered, looking precisely for this kind of non-research problem. They not only help with the mechanics of the computers, but they are also trained in the basics of searching the major databases we support. So if a patron is having trouble distinguishing an abstract from an image in *Periodical Abstracts*, or can’t figure out how to email the full text of an article from it, the database assistant can help. But if the patron then says, “I’m really not finding very much on my topic, can you help me?,” the database assistant refers the patron to the librarian on the desk.

If roving is not as new as some suggest, it may be that it does require a fresh examination for a different reason: When we are at the desk now, we *sit* there much more than we used to, because we tend to spend more time helping patrons find electronic resources, which we can do without ever getting up. When we had to leave the desk to consult the print collection with patrons, we routinely got up and moved around the room thereby encountering other patrons attempting to use those collections. To the degree that we have ourselves become too glued to the computer, either when helping a patron or during quiet moments in between patrons, we do have a problem. But the problem may be more fundamental: Has the computer at our reference desks, our electronic gateway to the world, in fact made us less approachable and narrowed our methods of answering questions? If so, getting up and walking around may or may not be the only appropriate remedy.

Getting rid of the desk, keeping it, sitting or moving around, all still beg the questions: What are we doing and what should we be doing in the future? In the last year alone, two conferences have been held where the future of reference or the future of librarianship generally has taken center stage: Last spring, a conference was convened at Harvard around the theme “Finding Common Ground,” the title alone conveying the message that we are not always moving forward together on these issues. In July of 1998, the Library of Congress held a two-day “institute” on “Reference Service in a Digital Age.” The major issues addressed at the institute were as follows:

I. Skills and personality attributes—how do we personally prepare/react to technology changes?

II. Definition of core service—how do we define those we serve?

III. Philosophy of service to the digital researcher versus the traditional in-person or telephone researcher—how do we provide service to those we serve.

IV. And finally: What, if anything, can reference librarians **stop** doing as we enter the digital age?¹⁵

And in 1996, an entire issue of *The Reference Librarian* was devoted to the theme “The Roles of Reference Librarians: Today and Tomorrow.”¹⁶

One underlying theme raised at these conferences and in the literature centers around the so-called skills reference librarians of the future will need. I say so-called, because we seem to be falling into a way of speaking about what we do that belittles it. It is also the language of technology. Master these skills and, voila, you are a reference librarian, or as one article describes it a “master reference librarian.”¹⁷ We speak of training today (or retraining or cross-training) as though what we do can be found in a user manual—absorb the contents and go. Even the way we approach new electronic resources being added to our reference collections has seemingly changed the way we, ourselves, describe what we need to know. We spend more time learning the intricacies of each new database than we ever did about even the most sophisticated print tool, and as a consequence, I believe we are spending less time continuously honing the *process* of doing reference. We emphasize now, more than we ever did with print resources, actually knowing *how* to use a resource, rather than *when* to use it. This is, of course, a futile exercise with electronic sources, especially those on the Internet, which is a seemingly infinite universe. For example, “From some 130 Web sites in mid-1993, the Web grew to over 646,000 sites by January 1997, with an estimated net gain of 1200 sites being added each day!”¹⁸ But how many of us work (or ever did) in libraries where one could really “master” the print reference collection, never mind the print collections of our libraries’ stacks? “Mastery” is the wrong goal.

I am not suggesting that content is not important. But just as we have confused mastery of sources with the process of doing reference, so too do we confuse the value of format with the value of content. And so we focus more on the so-called retraining of “older” reference librarians in how to use particular sources, in how to adapt to the new formats technology has brought

us, rather than on training (perhaps we should call it teaching) “younger” reference librarians the content of our collections, the process of attempting to answer questions about which one knows very little. Perhaps the problem does lie in our language of “training”: one can train someone to use the *MLA Bibliography*; but that is not the same as knowing something about 19th century literature. I still believe part of the challenge and thrill of reference work is being able to approach questions about which one knows very little, maybe even nothing at all. This is why we sometimes call ourselves generalists. But we mustn’t confuse the impossibility of our knowing everything about all subjects with the notion that all content knowledge is irrelevant. Or worse, that technology has made the value of this content knowledge less necessary for us as reference librarians. As the late John Swan noted a decade ago,

... librarians, and not only academic librarians, have an essentially external relationship to knowledge. Our role is to provide access to information, not to master that information ourselves. ... [But] the simple fact is that the more a librarian knows about a particular topic, the better access she or he is able to provide to information about it.¹⁹

We have all heard the phrase “techno-stress,” and while it refers to a wide range of aspects in the digital library, it is commonly invoked by reference librarians regarding the proliferation of different electronic resources, with many different interfaces.²⁰ To my best recollection, I have never heard a colleague of mine say he or she was suffering from “print-stress” or “microform-stress”—despite the fact that our reference collection alone has over 20,000 volumes and the library has over 6 million pieces of microform, most of which are not analyzed in the catalog. Our “stress” comes from the notion that we need to “know” (master) each new electronic resource inside out, before we can help our patrons use it, rather than learning how to approach a new, unfamiliar source, sometimes for the first time with a patron. We expect our users to admit their lack of knowledge and approach us with their questions; we need to be equally vulnerable with our patrons, and admit that we don’t always know everything—particular when it’s the “mechanics” of knowing, not the substance or content. We need to re-emphasize for ourselves the process

of reference, something on which we used to pride ourselves.

At the same time, we need to encourage librarians not simply to learn new skills (which is really a euphemism for becoming more computer literate), but to learn more content, to attempt to have some specialization, some knowledge base. New technologies are indeed exciting tools that can enhance what we do. But without that knowledge base, we risk being “content with showing people which keys to push when.”²¹ I’m not suggesting that using electronic resources is exactly the same as using print resources. But teaching someone how to construct a search statement is one thing; trying to remember whether the truncation symbol is an asterisk or a plus sign is not useful. It’s information, not knowledge, and we should be leery of “. . . the current obsession with delivery systems that many equate with information, research, and knowledge itself.”²²

Why do I think electronic access to information isn’t a substitute for content knowledge? Why do I think learning the reference process is not about mastering a body of electronic sources? Let me give you an example from my experience providing reference service for government documents within a general reference department. These functions have been combined in our division at least since Olin opened in the early 1960s, an unusual consolidation of services at that time. When I began working in Olin, a core level of knowledge in these materials was expected, even among the paraprofessionals. What was “core”? I can’t tell you precisely, but I can tell you that everyone was expected to be able to tell the difference between a Congressional Report and a Public Law, and be able to retrieve these documents from the current paper collection we housed. Most everyone could also track the status of a current federal bill, thanks to the one print resource that provided this information, *Congressional Index*. And while, as I mentioned, I have been the resident “expert” on documents, I frankly didn’t get many referrals, or only very thorny ones. Today, we not only have access to what everyone with a computer has—*Thomas*—we also subscribe to *Congressional Universe* and *Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe*.

Have these tools made it easier for patrons to be self sufficient? More important here, have they made my colleagues more knowledgeable about the legislative process? It might surprise you to hear that while these tools have helped *me* immensely—I can certainly answer the same kinds of questions much more quickly than I

used to—they have not raised the level of core competency in these materials among my colleagues. I get more referrals now than I used to, for many less complicated documents questions. I believe there are two possible explanations for this: The first, that my colleagues believe the hype that because it’s now available electronically, patrons don’t need our assistance as much; the second, that my colleagues no longer take the time to refresh their knowledge of the *content* of these materials, regardless of their format.

It may also surprise you to hear that while it is easier for me to answer this type of question today, it is not easier for me to teach legislative research to patrons, as I do both in course-related instruction sessions and in specialized workshops. Why? The explanations may be similar to those about my colleagues. Patrons often presume that it’s all much easier than it used to be, and are frustrated when it isn’t as simple as pushing the right buttons. And for those who start with very little knowledge of the legislative process, explaining the relationship of one piece (say a Bill) to another (say a Public Law) is more difficult where both documents appear as nothing but text on a computer screen. Explaining the context, the hierarchy, the relationship of these distinct items is still necessary for truly helping the patron do his or her research. It is no less important in the electronic era, but it is seemingly more elusive.

So why are many of my colleagues no longer spending their time building their knowledge base in government documents, or for that matter in subject areas in the Social Sciences and Humanities? I would suggest that despite the glitz of electronic access not only to government documents but to other categories of materials, the provision of traditional reference service (and I hesitate to even use that phrase) in all subject areas, is seen as something we need to move away from. Instead of focusing on what I believe are our unique skills and services—those areas of expertise that we alone can provide in academic libraries—we have been seduced by the new electronic technologies into completely changing our vision. We hear more and more talk about distance learning, and it often sounds as though we are more concerned about making sure those distance learners have reference service than we are about those on our own campuses. Many of us spend more time creating web pages than we ever did typing or word processing. And now, at least in OKU Reference, we actually teach classes on HTML, Endnote, and are contemplat-

ing offering classes on Word—all of which could be offered by other units on campus (and sometimes are), outside the library.

All this seems to have led us a long way from our mission of helping patrons find the information they need, to simply processing results. It almost makes me want to agree with Terry Ann Mood, who suggests that reference librarians actually *do* the research for patrons, even students, rather than simply guiding them towards the right sources, always in an effort to teach the patron to be self-sufficient: “No more library instruction in the guise of reference help, no more explaining, no more wandering the library in tandem with a user.”²³ While I confess this idea at first made me cringe, compared to the way we seem to be going, Mood’s suggestion at least keeps us centered in our core mission of providing research assistance, and requires us to maintain that knowledge base I think is essential. Perhaps more important, it may serve our patrons better because, as she puts it: “The result: users who can spend their time reading, absorbing, and applying the information provided. . . .”²⁴

Could it be, sadly, that librarians of the future (if not of the present) have lost their interest in the mysteries and wonders of the research process, be it “traditional” or “digital”? Two short quotes from two articles in the same 1997 issue of *Collection Management* are revealing in this connection. The first reads: “For the researcher, the curse of the Web is that it’s spontaneous, uncontrolled and unorganized, one can slog from irrelevant link to irrelevant link finding nothing useful and wasting vast amounts of time.”²⁵ The second reads: “Of course, librarians have been assisting users in finding information and answers to questions all along, but slogging through countless print sources, following leads, has little of the flash and dash of sitting at a computer terminal and bringing things up on a screen for the users to see.”²⁶ The problem with both these attitudes, one towards print the other towards electronic, is that it reduces the research process to the very negative concept of “slogging.” I would suggest that you take these words to heart—whichever format you more closely identify with—and ask whether you have lost our interest in what reference librarians claim to be all about.

Think for a moment about how you respond when a student asks, “do you have a database that does X?” Do you say “yes, here it is” or “no, I’m sorry, we don’t.” Or do you inquire into the student’s true question of substance, the subject of her pursuit? Why do we take,

without question, interlibrary loan requests from database searches for undergraduates—when we no doubt have sufficient resources in our libraries to serve their needs? Perhaps you scrutinize these requests more than we do at Cornell, but I confess it sometimes puzzles me why we do not, when we have one of the largest libraries in the country. Is it because we don’t want to pry? Or have we really given in to the notion that it’s easier to just take that request, attach that electronic printout, and send it off, than it is to pursue the underlying question? If the latter is true, we have given up our evaluative function in guiding students to the best sources available to them in the most efficient manner. For are we actually saving the student any time in this interaction? She will have to wait two weeks for the requested material to arrive, when more time on *our* part pursuing the deeper question—even just listening more closely to the question—might get the student something useful that very afternoon.

I believe, as one participant at the Finding Common Ground conference stated, that we need to re-find reference, not redefine it, to think more about “why” we do what we do rather than “how” we do it.²⁷ We need to re-commit to focusing on content, not on format, to process rather than mastery. We do need to be more proactive, but “. . . proactive does not necessarily mean standing up and talking instead of sitting down and listening.”²⁸ We need to reject the clever but meaningless suggestions to change our names to “librinformatist”²⁹ or “access engineer.”³⁰ We should “enhance the meaning of *librarian* and have it take on new meaning [rather] than abandon the term.”³¹

I’m not suggesting that we tear down the Information Superhighway with its ever growing valuable stops, but rather that we stay our course on the Research Road and steer carefully into the future. I’m not suggesting we choose between print and digital. But just as the old conflict between reference and instruction once consumed the profession and the two now seem reconciled into one mission, so too this new alleged conflict between print and electronic must be reconciled. They must be blended and balanced as we move forward. For if one or the other alone “wins,” we may all lose sight of our mission along the way.

Twenty years after becoming a librarian, I remain as excited and challenged by reference service as ever. Not by the new technologies, some of which surely enhance what I do and some of which I resist. But rather be-

cause I remain committed to my fundamental role of providing service to students and faculty, to being a part of what I believe we each sought when we chose to work in an academic library, "... to offer the opportunity for discovery, even at the cost of convenience; for depth, even in exchange for simplicity; for richness of perspective, even if it means the loss of precious seconds."³² We need to use every format and means possible to achieve this end, this goal. We need to take off our answering hats, and keep asking ourselves the questions asked of us.

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Notes

1. The Head of the Division, Paul J. Constantine, offers another view of the activities of the Reference Services Division in his, "Reference Service in a Large Research Library: Finding Common Ground in a Time of Change." *Finding Common Ground: Creating the Library of the Future without Diminishing the Library of the Past*. Eds. Cheryl LaGuardia and Barbara A. Mitchell. New York: Neal Schuman, 1998:121–23.
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1850–1900.” *The Reference Librarian* 25/26 (1989/90): 9.

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11. Feinberg, Renee. “B&N: The New College Library?” *Library Journal* (February 1, 1998): 50.

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13. Hansel, Patsy J. “Quantity is *Not* Necessarily Quality: A Challenge to Librarians to Develop Meaningful Standards of Performance for Library Reference Services.” *North Carolina Libraries* 48 (1990): 184. For a related discussion of the importance of a philosophy of service see also: Franks, Jeffrey A. “Forming a Reference Philosophy: The Role of Shared Values.” *The Reference Librarian* 59 (1997): 15–23.

14. Lorenzen, Michael. “Management by Wandering Around: Reference Rovering and Quality Reference Service.” *The Reference Librarian* 59 (1997): 51–57.

15. Taken from a handout distributed at the Institute. I did not attend, but obtained a copy from a colleague who did. For additional information on the Institute, see generally *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 38 (1998). Articles of particular relevance are included individually in the bibliography.

16. See issue no. 54 generally; articles of particular

relevance are included individually in the bibliography.

17. DeVries, JoAnn and Patricia M. Rodkewich. “Master Reference Librarians for a New Age: A Study of Characteristics and Traits.” *The Reference Librarian* 59 (1997): 203–14.

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19. Swan, John C. “Rehumanizing Information: An Alternative Future.” *Library Journal* (September 1, 1990): 179–80.

20. See, for example, Kupersmith, John J. “Technostress and the Reference Librarian.” *Reference Services Review* 20 (1992): 7–14+.

21. Swan, op. cit., 181.

22. LaGuardia, Cheryl. “Online Links: Users’ Needs, Librarians’ Roles.” *Library Journal*. (November 15, 1998): S10–S11. Online. Available: Proquest/Periodical Abstracts. 25 January 1999.

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24. Ibid.

25. Goding, op cit., 19.

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30. Campbell, op. cit.

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32. Swan, op. cit., 182.