Public Services Discussion Group
ALA Annual Meeting 2011
New Orleans, Louisiana
Saturday, 25 June 2011
1:30 – 3:30 pm

Notes

In attendance: Susan Walker, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale; Eva Guggemos, Beinecke Library, Yale; Margaret Tenney, Harry Ransom Center, UT; JoEllen Dickie, Newberry Library; Larry Mitchell, Texas A&M; Julia Gardner, University of Chicago; April Brewer; Lois Fischer Black, Lehigh University; Jeffrey Marshall, University of Vermont; Tim Murray, University of Delaware; James Capobianco, Houghton Library, Harvard; Daryl Morrison, University of California, Davis; Lois White, Getty Research Library; Andy Huse, University of South Florida; Maggie Kopp, Brigham Young University; Kathryn Brooks, American Heritage Center, UW; Christian Dupont, Atlas Systems; Mark H. Danley, University of Memphis; Charlotte B. Brown, UCLA; Moira Fitzgerald, Beinecke Library, Yale.

Introductions and Announcements:
During announcements and introductions, we learned that the Harry Ransom Center has begun to allow readers to do photography in the reading room. A brief discussion followed.

Other announcements included several job openings as well as positions recently filled, some libraries experiencing remodeling or reorganization, and a number of new initiatives in reader services, teaching, and outreach. One announcement, that the Harry Ransom Center was now allowing photography in the reading room led us to take a few minutes before diving into the topics of the day to hear more about this from Margaret Tenney. She explained that the HRC's policy, which is posted on their website, is based on the Houghton policy and covers copyright, requires that the readers must give the citation and get permission, and stipulates that photos be only for research use—if the readers want to publish it, the HRC does a scan. The readers doing the photography sign a policy form and the staff mark in Aeon that they've signed, but the HRC does not track the specific items photographed. This has greatly reduced the number of photoduplication and scanning requests and has cut back on low-resolution scans. They've been offering this since mid-May, and they have said it was an experiment so they can stop it at any time. A brief discussion followed.

Discussion topic: What role do public service librarians and staff currently play in assisting varying levels of researchers both onsite and off-site?
We turned our attention to the first topic on the agenda. The relative merits of in-person, chat, phone calls, and email were explored. It seems that not many participate in chat reference; while it may be popular for general reference, it does not seem to work as well for special collections, especially if the person answering is also on the reference desk answering in-person inquiries. It was suggested that texting is more popular now. The time commitment and extent of effort made in answering reference questions was also addressed. The amount of time phone reference can take and the lack of clarity of the questions are problematic, but at one institution it was noted that about half of telephone contacts result in donations. Some observed that emails allow more time for answering and forces the person asking to clarify their questions. A number of people commented on the extent of the information needs of genealogists. Several institutions triage questions with priority given to those of certain constituents, such as students, faculty, administration, alumni, before those from others. Some institutions set a limit to the length of time staff will spend in answering, typically half an hour, and some offer a proxy-list of researchers, such as information studies students at a local Library school, who will do research for a fee.

We looked at the challenges posed by different levels of expertise and training among the people staffing the reference desk and the variety of assistance available to users. Successful initiatives reported included providing templates for staff answering questions, having personal librarians assigned

to Fellows, and having Fellows give presentations to the staff. Several people agreed that there had been a change in the nature of assistance needed by researchers as resources such as subject guides, finding aids, tutorials using static screen capture images, and interactive tutorials designed for different learning styles had an impact on reader preparation and ability to discover materials themselves. The importance of engaging in the reference interview, finding the teachable moment, pointing to key resources, helping users frame their questions, and getting them to feel comfortable in using the collection were discussed. The value of the targeting faculty, integrating special collections into the curriculum, and preparing students to use the collections were also mentioned.

Discussion topic: How are individual institutions handling archiving their reference questions?
We then addressed the topic of archiving reference questions. There were a wide variety of responses to whether and how people archive reference questions. For those who do, systems ranged from low-tech solutions, like printing the exchange on paper and filing it or bccing all reference questions to a gmail account, to using electronic tools like Knowledge Tracker, Request Tracker, and LibAnswers. Knowledge Tracker was reported to keep everything, be fully searchable, and available to the whole campus, if wanted. Lib Answers was not felt to be well-suited to special collections but rather more for general library reference. Issues of privacy and sharing, record retention requirements, retaining questions for which answers haven't been found, and the benefits of building a bank of known answers to repeat questions were talked about. It was reported that the Monticello library has built a wiki-library of faqs with authoritative answers by answering reference questions and tagging the answer with the question. At another institution the archivist keeps a blog and will post where to find more about an item or topic.

Finally, as a result of part of this discussion session, the suggestion was made that the topic of genealogy and user services would be worth exploring further, perhaps at a pre-conference as a discussion session, and that genealogists already in Minneapolis might be called upon to participate.

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and

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Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library (in absentia)
Co-chairs