

Core Services

There are a number of issues to be addressed when organizing a center's user services. In brief, these entail assembling the necessary tools, becoming familiar and skilled in their use, and devising efficient and easily followed systems to organize the center staff (one or many) so they can effectively respond to the needs of center users.

How to Serve Users

First and foremost an information center is a service organization. It's *raison d'être* is to provide information to end users. The center's business is to collect and disseminate information as well as to preserve it for future users. The tools the center uses to make information available are important, but they are only a means to an end. By far, the center's most important business is the dissemination of information. In the long run, the considered value of the center as well as its continued existence and funding will be based primarily upon its level of success in disseminating information.

With the arrival of computers in the center, the center not only has the ability to deliver traditional user services more efficiently and effectively, but it also has the opportunity to discover different and better ways of serving its clientele by using the new technology to its fullest potential. For example, the on-line catalog was a large step forward, but the fact that users can now use it from home, or from half-way around the world, has dramatically changed the ways in which we use libraries. Today, we can often "use" the library without actually going there. Likewise, the availability of videotapes has made it easier and less expensive for libraries to offer audiovisual materials. Centers today have the opportunity to discover new ways of using technology to better serve their users.

In fact, it is actually the staff within the center who determine how effectively the technology is used, as well as the level of service center users can obtain. The first requirement in serving users is to *want* to serve users – to view user service and care as the most important function of the center. If the staff adopt this attitude, then other issues almost automatically fall into place. To the center user, the initial response to a request, along with the way in which the request is handled and the ultimate results, form the basis upon which the center's service is measured.

Providing Reference Services

Basic Considerations. If the center's primary purpose is to provide information to users, then helping users find answers to questions is the most important service the center offers. This can be accomplished in several ways,

depending upon the needs of the user and the priorities of the center.

Technology has changed the ways in which librarians assist users. It has sparked new demands from some users for informal help in using the on-line public access catalog, guidance on searching “free” databases found on the Internet, or mediated searching of distant commercial databases. Users may also require help in using CD-ROMs and printed reference tools in the center as well as guidance in selecting appropriate organizations to contact. Technology has also led to the formation of higher expectations. For example, administrators of the host organization and other primary users may always expect the center to find an answer for them within hours, intensifying the librarian’s need to keep current with new materials, as well as the latest issues.

When responding to a specific request, it is important that the staff determine the kind of assistance that is required so that those who wish to learn how to use reference tools and locate information themselves have the opportunity, and those who just need answers on their desks within hours are accommodated as well. Responses to all users should include an explanation of how and where the answer was found to allow appropriate attribution as well as to increase users’ independence.

First the librarian must determine the question that is being asked, and, only then, can s/he decide where to look. S/he might start with a reference book on the shelves or in the index of the center’s on-line catalog. Is there an organization to contact? If an adequate answer cannot be found using the center’s resources, an on-line database search may be a good next step. Depending upon the decisions the center has made about on-line searching as discussed in *Section 3*, the librarian will use the center’s equipment to search or will contact a colleague to request the search. In either case the librarian must accurately match the information needs with appropriate databases. Even if the option of using another librarian to conduct the search has been chosen, the center’s librarian needs to be knowledgeable enough about the scope and sources of each on-line database to understand what is and is not being searched. The on-line search may result in identification of materials only available through interlibrary loan. If time is a factor, it is up to the ingenuity of the librarian to determine the fastest way to bring the client and the information together.

Quick Responses to Frequently Asked Questions. There will be some questions that are repeated regularly. Responses to these questions can be kept accessible in several ways. One solution is to record the question, a brief answer, the source of the answer and the date the question was asked in a notebook. Include questions for which no answer was found and record the sources searched. This will avoid duplication of effort. This information can also be stored on index cards or in a separate computer database. Both of the latter ways allow subject indexing for easy retrieval.

Format of Responses. In providing responses, it is important to tell the patron where the answer was found. Information that is considered to be *general knowledge* and cannot be attributed to any *one* source may be used without offering a source. However, ideas that originate with one particular source must always be appropriately attributed before distributing them. The librarian should *always* include a full bibliographic citation and leave the decision to the user as to whether or not that citation is useful for future needs.

Quality of Information. The center has a responsibility to provide the best available information to each user. An important qualification of center staff is their familiarity with sources in a subject area and with the authority given different sources by those working in the area. Sometimes there does not appear to be one absolute, definitive answer. In such cases, it is important that the all the information gleaned in the center be provided, along with the qualifications known to the staff.

If an information center chooses to provide only selected information on a subject, that may be acceptable as long as the user is clearly told there is more information on a topic available elsewhere. A good example might be a sponsoring agency's unwillingness to distribute information about treatment methods of which it does not approve.

Policies. The center's director needs to establish policies to identify the user group(s) who will be offered reference services and what level of service they will be offered. Levels of service can range from walk-in access without borrowing privileges to full reference services and document delivery for phone requests. Sometimes the staff require only a few minutes to locate an answer. On the other hand, the better part of a week might be required to identify and gather documents, as well as summarize the key findings in response to another request.

Conducting a Reference Interview

For most librarians, conducting a reference interview is an acquired skill – one acquired through both training and experience.

Preliminaries. A reference question should be presented directly to the person who will search for the information. It is important that the staff speak with the individual to find out what it is s/he *really* wants to know. Suffice it to say that what people say they want and what they *really* want may be quite different. At the most basic level, there are issues of terminology. Are you and the patron using words to mean the same thing? Reference questions should preferably not be left as phone messages. For convenience and economy, phone messages may be adequate if the center uses a special reference form which queries the user in detail about the question and requires a phone number for additional information if needed. In schools of library and information science, major focus is devoted to developing skills in conducting a reference interview. Users are often intimidated by the information center and not able

to adequately describe the information sought until set at ease by the librarian's tact, patience, and interest.

After the question has been presented, the librarian should rephrase and repeat it to clarify any misunderstanding. Next, ask some open-ended questions to encourage the client to narrow the scope of the question to the information which s/he is really seeking. Relax and pretend that time is not a priority. Do not try to hurry the client. A few minutes spent now might save many minutes later. Take time to think about the question. Be certain you understand the quantity and quality of information needed. If you are not certain, ask. If you are certain, confirm with a statement of your understanding. Is there a deadline beyond which the information will not be as valuable to the client? Think about which descriptors are used to express the concept in the databases (yours or others) that you search. Try a search with those descriptors and ask the client if any of the citations are relevant.

If the client is not available for an interactive interview, try to avoid sending irrelevant information. Select what appears to be the most relevant citation found and send it along with a note asking if it is "on the right track?" Most often the response will be "No!" followed by an explanation of why. The explanation elicited is often the most helpful in helping the librarian to identify exactly what information is being sought.

Circulating Collection

A circulating collection is a convenience service to users. Many librarians, if given the opportunity, would declare their collections to be non-circulating. There is an inherent conflict in allowing books to be removed from the center when one also expects to have full resources with which to respond to queries. However, the value of circulating collections is well recognized and it is possible to accommodate the user and the librarian too.

The loan period for different groups of users can be set with both the center and the user in mind. A large academic library may find it satisfactory to loan books to faculty for an entire year while a small special library may have difficulty loaning books even for a week. In selecting a loan period for a given group of users consider how important those users are to the center and whether the books can be quickly and easily recalled. If there are a few books that seem to be needed for reference in the center as well as on loan, consider purchasing a second copy to circulate. Some reference books can be allowed to circulate overnight to staff who work on-site. Basically any circulation policy that works for the users and for the staff should be tried. The success of a circulation policy, of course, is dependent upon the circulation system's ability to generate timely and accurate information to allow for the rapid location of a book that is not on the shelf.

Document Delivery

Document delivery service means the center provides personal copies

of requested materials to those who are off-site. The user need not come to the center. The document may be delivered by fax, mail, or courier. Most libraries that have interlibrary loan (ILL) agreements, in fact, fulfill requests for journal articles by sending a photocopy or fax, not the journal itself.

When an information center receives an ILL photocopy or fax it requested for a client, the center should consider retaining a copy of the document to process for the center's reprint file. When the same question is asked in the future, the request will then be easy to fulfill. In addition, this is an easy, cost-effective way of strengthening the center's collection in areas of interest to users.

Policy. The decision to provide document delivery raises a number of questions with staffing and budgetary implications. Will the center respond to phone requests as well as requests from "walk-ins?" Will the center limit the groups to which the service is provided with and without fees? Will the center limit the size of documents it is willing to duplicate?

Fair Use. Copyright law limits the number of copies that a center can make for users. However, each user may use the machine to make his/her own copy under the law. In general, an individual may make one copy of a document for scholarly (non-commercial) use. Permission must be obtained from the copyright holder if the individual or center wants to make more copies. Centers that routinely make numerous copies contract with the Copyright Clearinghouse (*Appendix A*) to arrange for payments.

Kinds of Documents. Multiple copies of many pamphlets can be obtained from federal agencies or clearinghouses for free or low-cost distribution. Journal articles and short reports can be photocopied multiple times with permission and appropriate payments (see *Legal Issues* below and *Appendix A – Organizations, Copyright Clearinghouse Center*). The information center can create its own handouts. Books that will be used often can be purchased to *give* (not lend) to users who are important to the center.

Mail and Fax Service. The center can send pamphlets and photocopies in response to mail, e-mail, fax, or phone requests. There may well be different policies for different groups, e.g. the general public versus agency staff, or professionals versus lay persons, or those within the targeted geographical area versus those at a distance. The access of users to other information centers may also be a reasonable consideration.

The level of service offered should be determined by the director according to the staff, equipment, and funding available as well as the needs of important users.

Fees. Another consideration is determining an appropriate fee schedule. Will the center charge for duplication, postage, and/or staff time? While every center needs to think about cost recovery, it is possible to lose money trying to

make money. It may well be more costly to charge than to provide materials free. This determination will be dependent upon the volume of requests, the cost of maintaining records, generating invoices, and billing. Many information centers offer one copy of each pamphlet free and charge for multiple copies.

Alternatives to Document Delivery. There are several alternative ways of providing materials to users. For one, the center may decide to develop a series of handouts incorporating frequently requested information. These may include pamphlets or photocopied articles and can be partially pre-packaged, with the final contents tailored to a specific request. The center may purchase copies of important reports and distribute them to targeted users.

Ethical Considerations

Charged with the task of drafting a code of ethics for Health Sciences Librarians, members of the Ethics Task Force of the Medical Library Association started out by describing their understanding of the nature of a code of ethics.

“It is important to consider the nature of what we mean by a code of ethics. Many of the difficulties we encounter with other codes of ethics is that they are not. Rather, they are an assortment of edicts and guidelines and random rules which often tend to be diluted by exceptions and qualifying phrases. They seem to lack commitment.

“A starting point for dealing with this involves the distinction between ethics and morality. Morality derives from the Latin word ‘moralis’ which means ‘custom.’ Anthropologists and sociologists use the word ‘mores’ which derives etymologically from the same Latin word. Morality and mores refer to the principles and guidelines posited by custom (society, its institutions, legal system, traditions, etc.) governing behavior. As we all know, mores (customs, morality) differ, not only from one society to another, but also from one social group to another within the same society.

“Ethics is often confused with morality, and the words are often used interchangeably. But, in fact, ethics means something a little different. Ethics derives etymologically from the Greek ‘ethikos.’ The word became the Latin ‘ethice’ and expressed a different concept from ‘moralis.’ Ethics involves the essential distinction between right and wrong, good and bad, virtuous behavior, etc. Ethics has to do with basic principles of duty, obligation, and responsibility. Ethics transcends morality; morality is a part of ethics, but they also sometimes conflict. Ethics refers to more universal and timeless principles.”¹

The *Code* that evolved in 1994 is reprinted below as one example of a code that addresses the ethical issues for information professionals working with health information. Most health science libraries and alcohol and drug

¹Medical Library Association, Ethics Task Force. “Draft Code of Ethics for Health Sciences Librarians: Introduction.” Presented for discussion at an open forum at the MLA Annual Meeting” Cincinnati OH, June 5-10, 1993.

information centers are integral parts of other organizations. As such, they are bound by the code of ethics adopted by their parent organization. As information professionals, there are areas of conduct specific to the management of an information center that require professional decisions with ethical overtones.

**CODE OF ETHICS FOR
HEALTH SCIENCES LIBRARIANSHIP**

GOALS AND PRINCIPLES FOR ETHICAL CONDUCT

“The health sciences librarian believes that knowledge is the *sine qua non* of informed decisions in health care, education, and research and the health sciences librarian serves society, clients, and the institution by working to ensure that informed decisions can be made.”

Society: The health sciences librarian promotes access to health information for all and creates and maintains conditions of freedom of inquiry, thought, and expression that facilitate informed health care decisions.

Clients: The health sciences librarian works without prejudice to meet the client’s information needs. The health sciences librarian respects the privacy of clients and protects the confidentiality of the client relationship. The health sciences librarian ensures that the best available information is provided to the client.

Institution: The health sciences librarian provides leadership and expertise in the design, development, and ethical management of knowledge-based information systems that meet the information needs and obligations of the institution.

Profession: The health sciences librarian advances and upholds the philosophy and ideals of the profession. The health sciences librarian advocates and advances the knowledge and standards of the profession. The health sciences librarian conducts all professional relationships with courtesy and respect. The health sciences librarian maintains high standards of professional integrity.

Self: The health sciences librarian assumes personal responsibility for developing and maintaining professional excellence.

Medical Library Association. Code of Ethics for Health Sciences Librarianship, Chicago, IL : MLA, 1994.

“Although no professional code of ethics can provide absolutes for every situation, the librarian’s code can perform two valuable functions. First, it’s

very existence informs the profession itself and those it serves of the core values of its practitioners. Second, it creates a presumption in favor of certain values that must be consciously overcome if library policy is made to the contrary.”²

The Special Libraries Association (SLA) has addressed the issue also, but has agreed *not* to adopt a code. Their lack of agreement was not about the obligations of an information professional, but rather about possible legal implications for some members. The PREPS Commission of the SLA in 1992 summarized the ethical issues facing information professionals and proposed that members agree to be bound by the following obligations of professional conduct³:

- * To provide users with the most current, accurate and relevant information, regardless of personal beliefs or the possible uses to which the information might be put.
- * To protect the confidentiality and privacy of individuals requesting information.
- * To select and organize information resources responsibly to support the highest quality information services for the organization, consistent with the mission of the organization.
- * To avoid misrepresentation of the purpose for gathering information or the use to which it will be put, in order to gain information which might otherwise be withheld.
- * To uphold and actively advise others to uphold all laws governing the creation, reproduction and dissemination of information.
- * To abide by the legalities governing the employing corporate structure.

“Special librarians have a dual identity arising from their work in libraries which support the goals of another profession or organization. They may find their professional values in conflict with institutional ones. The 1939 code of ethics for librarians recognized these sometimes competing obligations to institution, governing authority, users, the profession, and society. The 1981 code identified core values of the profession, including the highest level of service, confidentiality, access to information and avoidance of conflict of interest. Starting with a presumption in favor of each of these values, Jean Preer in an article based on a presentation at the Washington DC Chapter of the SLA in April 1991, proposes a two-part test for approaching the ethical dilemmas arising in special libraries.”⁴

Copyright Law

An area of law that has particular significance for information centers is copyright law, intended to protect the rights of authors and publish-

²Preer, Jean. “Special ethics for special librarians?” *Special Libraries* 82 (1):13, 1991.

³“Recommendations of the PREPS Commission. *Special Libraries* 83(4), 242-243, 1992.

⁴Preer, Jean. “Special ethics for special librarians?” *Special Libraries* 82 (1):12, 1991.

ers. Of special concern are the rules which govern the conditions under which it is permissible to photocopy published materials. This is significant in determining what users can and cannot duplicate and for what purposes. Although the center is not legally liable for multiple copies that users make on the center's self-service copy machine, the center is responsible for posting a notice near the machine notifying users of the copyright law. The box on the left lists the guidelines for determining *fair use*. In brief, *fair use* law attempts to allow public access while preventing substantial economic loss to authors.

Arrangements have been put in place for situations in which multiple copies are required and for circumstances which exceed what is permissible under the *fair use* provisions. The Copyright Clearinghouse Center, Inc. (CCC) helps organizations, academic institutions and government agencies make authorized photocopies without the burden of obtaining photocopy permissions themselves. It covers more than 1.5 million publications worldwide including scholarly and technical journals, magazines, newsletters, books, and more. An information center can send just one payment to the Copyright Clearinghouse for all titles copied and then the Clearinghouse Center distributes the fees to the copyright holders. See *Appendix A – Organizations* for more information about the CCC.

The information center's director has a responsibility to be familiar with copyright law and the center's compliance with it. In addition to photocopying, in-house databases are another area that may be impacted by copyright law especially if the center wishes to include author abstracts. In addition, audiovisual materials that are loaned for use other than in individual homes are subject to rather complex copyright laws. See *Appendix D* for a discussion. The information center should also be prepared to help patrons understand what is and is not permissible, and where to get further information.

Suggested Reading

Reference

Wynar BS ; Patterson AG (eds.). *Recommended Reference Books for Small & Medium-Sized Libraries & Media Centers*. Englewood, CO : Libraries Unlimited, 1993. 300 pp. \$39.50. ISBN 1 56308 155 5.

Copyright

Gasaway LN ; Wiant SK. *Librarians and Copyright Law in the 1990s*. Washington, D.C. : Special Libraries Association, 1994. ISBN 0 87111 407 0.

Offers practical solutions to copyright issues in libraries in addition to theoretical discussions of library and user's rights in copyright. Includes the basics of copyright law, fair use, reproduction of copyrighted works under the section 108 exemption for libraries, audiovisual and other non-print works, computer software and electronic databases.

Valauskas EJ. "Copyright: Know your electronic rights." *Library Journal* August 1992: 40-43.

Citing electronic information

Crane N; Li X. *Electronic Style: A Guide to Citing Electronic Information*. Westport, CT : Mecklermedia Co., 1993. 65pp. ISBN 088736909X

Ethics

Hauptman, R. *Ethical challenges in Librarianship*. New York : Oryx Press, 1988.

Medical Library Association. *Code of Ethics for Health Sciences Librarianship*. Chicago, IL : MLA, 1994.

Medical Library Association, Ethics Task Force. "Draft Code of Ethics for Health Sciences Librarians." Presented for discussion at an open forum at the MLA Annual Meeting. Cincinnati, OH, June 5-10, 1993.

Mintz, AP. *Information Ethics: Concerns for Librarianship and the Information Industry*. Proceedings of the 27th Annual Symposium of the Graduate Alumni and Faculty of the Rutgers School of Communication, Information and Library Studies, 14 April 1989. Jefferson, NC : McFarland & Co., Inc.

Preer, J. "Special ethics for special librarians?" *Special Libraries* 1991; 82(1): 12-18.

Special Libraries Association. "Recommendations of the PREPS Commissions." *Special Libraries* 1992; 83(4): 242-243.