

Chapter 1

Reference: A Short History

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reference services in libraries in the United States were first described and organized in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. However, these first attempts at formalizing “reader’s assistance” were in public libraries. Academic libraries lagged behind public libraries in the appointment of reference librarians and in the recognition of the need for reference services for their library users. The appointment of academic librarians became more common in the first quarter of the twentieth century. As academic library faculty and staff increased, so too did the use of technologies for reference services. The digitization of reference sources ushered in an era of re-evaluation and revitalization of reference services, as well as the transition to online sources and virtual services.

INTRODUCTION

In one sense, reference services have been provided to library users for as long as libraries have existed, as users would have needed assistance in finding the information or sources (in whatever format) they sought. Nonetheless, reference departments within the organizational structure of libraries and an attitude of personal user assistance and instruction as essential to academic library reference service were slow to develop and took much of the twentieth century to become common elements of academic librarianship. That academic

library users—professors, graduate students, and undergraduate students—might need to be taught which sources were most appropriate for their research and how to use particular sources is not a frame of mind that seemed to come easily to the academic community. Indeed, the need for such assistance was probably less when relatively little was published in the United States. Changes in the publishing industry, the academic environment and research, and the understanding of potential roles of librarians in higher education gradually influenced the development of formal reference services in academic libraries.

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REFERENCE SERVICE IS DEFINED

Reference as a formal and organized service in American libraries was first described in 1876 by Samuel S. Green of the Worcester Free Public Library in his essay in the second issue of *American Library Journal*, in which he suggested the manner in which a librarian may make “modest men in the humbler walks of life, and well-trained boys and girls...become ready to say freely what they want” because “persons who use a popular library for purposes of investigation generally need a great deal of assistance,” (p. 74). In describing the appropriate approach to reference work, Green states that “It is important to have a democratic spirit in dealing with readers in popular libraries...The superiority of the [librarian’s] culture will always enable him to secure the respectful treatment which belongs to him when confronted by impudence or conceit...What is needed in the librarian is a ready sympathy with rational curiosity, by whomsoever manifested, and a feeling of pleasure in brightening any glimmerings of desire that manifest themselves in lowly people to grow in culture or become better informed...” Further, a librarian should “be careful not to make inquirers dependent. Give them as much assistance as they need, but try at the same time to teach them to rely upon themselves and become independent,” (p. 80).

No such admonishments about being careful not to coddle library users appear in the literature for academic libraries. Green stated, “when scholars and persons of high social position come to a library, they have confidence enough...to make known their wishes without timidity or reserve,” (p. 74) although he admits that “it would be easy to show that scholars, as well as unlearned persons, receive much aid in pursuing their studies from an accomplished librarian, although he has not the knowledge of a specialist,” (p. 78). Green’s essay makes it clear that, by the date of his writing, reference services were widely offered in public libraries, but academic libraries expected their

users to be willing and able to ask for assistance in direct and confident ways, rather than waiting for a librarian to approach with an offer of assistance. The belief that scholars did not (and should not) need librarian assistance kept academic libraries decades behind public libraries in establishing departments whose purpose was helping patrons use the library.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century was revolutionary in the field of librarianship, with such developments as the training of reference assistants in public libraries beginning in 1883; the opening of the Columbia library school in 1887; the development of the card catalog (eventually replacing the published catalog); the replacement of broad classification and fixed location with close classification and relative location; the publication of such titles as the third edition of *Poole’s Index*, the *ALA General Literature Index* and *Index to Portraits*; and by 1893 one-third of the 200 largest colleges had appointed full time librarians to replace professors with part time responsibilities in the libraries. Reference rooms, separate from reading rooms, were being built, and reference collections were being placed on open shelves to encourage users to learn about and utilize these resources (Kaplan, 1964, p. 3-5). Nonetheless, academic libraries were slow to organize reference departments or hire full time reference librarians. Although head librarians at several large private colleges and universities voiced agreement with Green’s philosophy of service, reference service development in academic libraries was slow. Columbia University was one notable exception: in 1884 Melville Dewey proffered “aids to readers,” outlining in some detail the responsibilities of libraries for reference service, and he appointed librarians to a reference department. This departmental model and service philosophy continued under subsequent head librarians at Columbia but was not widespread (Rothstein, 1955, p. 28).

The use of the term “librarian” in early essays is ambiguous. Was the head librarian the only one trained in library science? Were “reference

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