

Chapter 2

Reference in the 21st Century

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The development of broad public internet access and user friendly interfaces to bibliographic databases carried with it significant changes in the modes of providing reference services in academic libraries. Internet access also spurred the growth of other communication technology innovations that have been adapted for use in academic libraries.

The array of reference services offered in academic libraries in the 21st century is vast and may seem overwhelming to librarians struggling to keep up with the latest technologies and demands made upon their time. Choosing an appropriate selection of services to offer may be best done by returning to the institution's and the library's mission statements, from which the reference department can evaluate the appropriate philosophy and modes of reference service for its own users.

INTRODUCTION

If it is indeed true that “the [information] highway represents the most significant change in communication since Gutenberg invented movable type in the mid-fifteenth century,” (Katz, 2002, p. 81), then it comes as no surprise that a profession at the center of the information industry, serving as a mediator between the vast landscape of information and the naive user, would be greatly affected by the revolution in information technology and access. Standard sources, publishers, formats, search strategies, types of services, philosophies, required skills, terminology, reference desk duties, user expectations, and the need for vigilance in

information evaluation all changed quickly and drastically with the advent of the easily accessible World Wide Web.

So many changes occurred in librarianship and information retrieval in the late 20th and early 21st centuries that the very definition of reference service seemed to have changed. The knowledge and skills necessary to provide robust support to users' research activities were greatly expanded and refined, but in 2013 reference departments still exist in most libraries, and reference librarians are still called upon to assist users. Rather than eliminate the need for reference services, technology has broadened the scope of modes by which those services can be offered, and the

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scope of questions that might be asked. Academic librarians have adapted and made reference services evolve to meet the new challenges users and librarians face.

SERVICES

In the 19th and the 20th centuries, academic reference librarians provided very personal services to graduate students and faculty, if not to undergraduates. Checking citations, creating bibliographies, and searching databases or print sources were services that continued long after librarians were granted faculty rank or status, and thus, had their own research to conduct. However, blossoming student populations, increasing expectations for publishing and presenting at professional venues, and changes in technology ultimately required that some traditional services provided by reference departments have become less important and, in some cases, have been dropped altogether. In the 21st century, services making use of new technologies have been added to the arsenal of ways of serving and educating the public at a greater pace than ever before seen in academic libraries. The association with academic institutions has given academic libraries access to better technological networks and support than many other types of libraries have enjoyed, creating an environment in which innovation is highly regarded. Contrary to popular expectations, the rise of the internet and new technologies have made reference service more, not less, necessary. Service remains central to library functions; it is only the *way* that such service is provided that has changed (Cassell, 2009, p. 3).

Academic libraries now assert their role as “teaching libraries” (Ellis, 2004, p. 103), which affects both the types of services offered and the manner in which user needs are met. The role of librarians as teachers and the vast array of tech-

nologies from which to choose and with which to cope has led academic libraries “toward a more deliberate blending of the conservative and liberal philosophies of reference” (Fritch, 2001, p. 286) that were first described in the nineteenth century by Samuel S. Green. Academic librarians have become adept at teaching users (particularly, but not exclusively, students) how to determine their information needs; search for information using a deliberate strategy; retrieve, evaluate and use appropriately the information found; all while the librarian is ensuring that the user is, in fact, satisfied with the results. Green’s philosophies are not mutually exclusive, and addressing user needs effectively actually requires librarians to keep multiple purposes in mind. The multi-tasking required of librarians made the gradual drops in the number of reference transactions barely perceptible as they juggled sources, technologies, and service points.

The environment in which librarians work today includes these characteristics described by Fritch and Mandernack in 2001 (p. 290):

- Computer use has become ubiquitous.
- The Internet allows any computer workstation to become an access point to vast electronic resources.
- A multitude of information formats exist.
- The Internet enables anyone to “publish” information on any topic to the entire world.
- Web sites are more ephemeral than print resources and can change or disappear at any time.
- The Internet and the World Wide Web constitute a vast, chaotic reservoir of content, some accurate and some inaccurate.
- Uniform classification of Web sites is not universally applied.
- Many dissimilar search engines and methods promote access to information.

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