

# Chapter 3

## A Short History of Instruction in the Use of Libraries

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Instruction in the use of academic libraries has a long history but was not well established as a permanent and formal part of academic libraries in the United States until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has taken many forms, but none are likely to be maintained as formal programs unless measures are taken to move them beyond the status of the efforts of single individuals. The development of information literacy as an area of study coincided with the institutionalization of instruction programs and has given academic context and form to the curricula for instruction in the use of academic libraries.*

### INTRODUCTION

Knowing our history allows us to see the long term developments in a context that helps us understand the significance of what we do on a daily basis. The history of reference services in American academic libraries seems to be well known, but the history of library instruction (by any of its many names) seems to be lost as it is continually reinvented. The lack of an understanding of the development of instruction programs may deny librarians of the knowledge of what has worked and what has failed, and why. It may also limit thinking about what forms instruction can take at

a time when libraries are called upon to reach out to and meet the needs of an increasingly diverse clientele.

### EARLY BEGINNINGS

Ewert has found evidence of instruction for students on the use of libraries in Germany as early as the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. She found records of lectures on study techniques, descriptions of important reference works, and suggestions on the use of libraries by Daniel Georg Morhof, Melchior Schmid, Georg Otho and Manzeln. Examples of

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publications on the literature and use of libraries in Germany were also found from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Many more examples of presentations on the use of libraries date from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reflecting a growing middle class entering German universities and needing such instruction (1986, pp. 178-179). These isolated cases might be viewed as historical curiosities, akin to finding drawings by Da Vinci of flying machines done centuries before airplanes were built, except that the German model of higher education was adopted in the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, about the time of the development of the first reference services and bibliographic instruction programs. The German model of academic scholarship, which introduced the Ph.D., added natural sciences to the curriculum, and utilized lectures and seminars as pedagogies, replaced the British tutorial model and required faculty and students alike to have access to far more materials than existed in faculty members' private collections (Smith, 2008, pp. 512-513). Although there is no evidence that early 19<sup>th</sup> century American library leaders were familiar with the work of their German predecessors, the change in curricula and scholarship expectations may well have been a common impetus for developing programs of instruction in the use of libraries.

In the 1820's Harvard College had occasional lectures on the library's rare books, but actual instruction in library use really began in the United States after the Civil War (Hernon, 1982, p. 18). Early programs developed by Raymond C. Davis at the University of Michigan in the 1870's (Davis, 1986), Otis Hall Robinson at the University of Rochester in the 1870's, Genevieve Walton at the Michigan State Normal College in the 1890's (Beck, 1989), Azariah Smith Root at Oberlin College in the 1890's, or any of several other institutions found by Hernon (pp. 20-21) were not so much experimental as model: that is, they were not unique, as they shared much of the same

content and arose from the same concerns about the preparedness of college students as expressed by Davis:

*I had not performed the duties of a librarian long before it became evident to me that many of my readers were working at a disadvantage. Their knowledge of books of common reference was very limited; they did not know of the existence of special bibliographies, and of indexes to serial publications; that they could help themselves in these matters by an intelligent exercise of their reasoning powers never occurred to them. They were, in short, running in a rut out of which it seemed impossible for them to get. In addition to this they made no effort, on coming into the library building for the first time, to learn what they might expect, or what was expected of them, or the whereabouts of anything. They were willing to leave all to chance. (1986, p. 36)*

Davis' dismay suggests that the common view of that time that scholars knew how to use libraries and needed little help was not actually the case. Even today, it often seems to be a surprise to academic librarians that students do not know how to use large academic libraries or scholarly materials when they come to college, but that has probably always been the case for the majority of students; the use of even large private collections or public libraries does not prepare students for the rigors of scholarly research required by post-secondary level coursework, and preparation for that level of research has never been a high priority in American secondary school curricula.

Library instruction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century included individual lectures, lecture series, and courses that were required or elective. The intended audiences varied from freshman to upperclassmen to graduate students, and the curricula now seems an odd mixture of the history of writing and publishing and practical lessons on how to access

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