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Jon Dillon
Oregon State University

Cindy Skinner
Oregon State University

Mary Swanson
Oregon State University

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Sharing the Wealth: Paraprofessionals at Oregon State University's Valley Library

by Jon Dillon, Cindy Skinner, Mary Swanson
Oregon State University

At the beginning of fall term 1997, Oregon State University's Valley Library incorporated paraprofessionals into the reference desk staffing equation. Three Valley Library paraprofessionals describe the circumstances leading to their assignment to the reference desk and their experiences as reference paraprofessionals.

Two and a half years ago, life at the Valley Library reference desk was different. Reference services at what was then known as the Kerr Library were based on a three-tiered model: a first-point-of-contact information desk staffed by students and classified staff; a second-tier reference desk, inconspicuously hidden behind the information desk and staffed by rotation of approximately 15 subject specialists; and a final level of expert consultation by appointment and referral, also provided by the subject specialists.

In theory, our three-tiered model was efficient and cost effective. Patrons were well-served, with access to a professional librarian when necessary. The lower paid, less-knowledgeable workers could field the routine questions, answer phones, assist with basic online-catalog and database searching, and troubleshoot simple printer, photocopier, and computer problems. Professionals could spend their time in activities requiring a higher level of education and expertise.

However, when we looked at how we actually provided services, we found that the practice was a lot different than the theory. Although separated by about six feet of floor space, the information and reference desks were usually a world apart, with limited intercommunication and no coordination of schedules or supervision. During busy hours, however, the demarcation between first and second tier reference blurred. The reference librarian would come forward to the information desk to fill in to whatever extent was needed. And when the reference librarian was busy, first tier staff would often move into second tier mode, so a patron wouldn't have to wait for reference assistance.

Many members of the reference team believed that a more ideal model of our service was one of librarians, paraprofessionals, and student assistants working side by side at a single desk. It seemed likely that our reference service would be improved by closer contact between librarians, paraprofessionals, and students. On-the-job training opportunities would arise when librarians could observe nonprofessionals interacting with patrons; librarians would model interview and consulting techniques; and all reference staff would take ownership of reference's public service. Also, students and paraprofessionals would add to the reference desk's collective knowledge and experience through their familiarity with departmental requirements, classes and assignments, facility with technology, subject knowledge outside of on-duty librarian's expertise, and special knowledge of aspects of the library's collection or services. Merging the two public service desks appeared to have many advantages.

Unrelated to any service model, other forces were pushing consolidation of reference desks. Subject librarians were expected to spend more time providing liaison and instructional services. Adding extra staff members to the reference desk rotation would provide librarians with more time for those activities. Also, because of a major addition to the Valley Library, the reference desk would move first to cramped temporary quarters, then to a vast, computer-laden "Information Commons," where patrons would expect to access information with the mere click of a mouse button. Finally, an unexpected budget shortfall required us to cut student assistant hours by 60%. There was no way we could continue to provide reference services under our existing model!

Paraprofessionals were first placed at the reference desk in the spring of 1997. Two paraprofessionals already had extensive experience at the information desk; two others worked in "nonranked faculty" positions in other library departments but were interested in being trained to work at the reference desk. For spring and summer terms, each paraprofessional was scheduled with a librarian. The intention was that the paraprofessional could shadow the professional as he or she worked with patrons. As the paraprofessional gained confidence and experience, the professional would do the shadowing and provide support when the paraprofessional needed it.

On the first day of fall term 1997, paraprofessionals were fully integrated into the desk staffing schedule, with most librarians and paraprofessionals spending an average of eight to 10 hours a week at the reference desk. Today, three reference paraprofessionals and one "nonranked" faculty are working regular shifts at the reference desk, covering about 35 of the approximately 139 weekly desk hours.

Library professionals undoubtedly have legitimate concerns about whether or not paraprofessionals can offer the level of service provided by trained librarians. Admittedly, there are situations requiring expert reference assistance. But most of the work done at the desk is routine — checking the online catalog for library holdings, assisting undergraduates in locating journal and magazine articles, answering directional questions, and describing the basics of locating materials in our library. In these cases, service quality is based more on a friendly, eager-to-be-of-service attitude than on educational background.

Library paraprofessionals bring a set of skills and experience to the desk that do not include completion of an MLS but, nonetheless, contributes to the level of service a reference team provides. At the Valley Library, reference paraprofessionals' off-desk duties include managing the reference collection; supervising and managing the reference, circulation and reserves desks; providing technical support for the electronic reference collection; creating and maintaining the Web interface to the electronic collection; and providing interim service for the Valley LINK Reference Referral Center. Thus, each paraprofessional possesses a mastery of at least some aspect of the Valley Library's collection and processes that enhances reference desk service.

A paraprofessional's reference desk experiences are probably not significantly different from a librarian's. They have a common commitment to provide patrons with the best possible service and similar joys and frustrations in dealing with patrons of diverse backgrounds and personalities. Two paraprofessionals' experiences are detailed below.

Are You a Librarian?

Jon Dillon

When asked to describe my experience working at the reference desk as a nonlibrarian, my immediate response is to say it feels much like I imagine it feels for a librarian working at the desk. And I would say this is how it should be. Because when it comes to breaking down the barriers between librarians and nonlibrarians, I think the Valley Library at Oregon State University is moving in the right direction.

Most of the time my shifts go amazingly well. The people I help seem eager to learn and they value my concern for delivering answers to their questions with as few problems as possible. On good days library users seem to recognize and appreciate that there are sometimes barriers to getting what they want. They see me as someone who understands and anticipates what is needed to provide them with a successful reference experience. I rarely have the question that always requires a difficult and wordy explanation: "Are you a librarian?"

On good days my confidence builds, and I start thinking that a healthy customer service attitude might be just as important as a background in reference. Listening to what a person wants, making sure the request is understood by repeating the question, delivering the "product," and following up the transaction by asking if the question was answered, all seem to be critical to reference. Often it seems my background in the medical and restaurant fields, both of which are service-driven industries, provide me with the skills necessary to survive in the library user's world of challenging, sometimes unrealistic, and always exceptionally high hopes.

Some days I see clearly the ways in which I understand and anticipate what is needed for library users to succeed. These success factors include knowing the collections (both print and electronic), knowing how the overall library functions, and feeling comfortable working with computers.

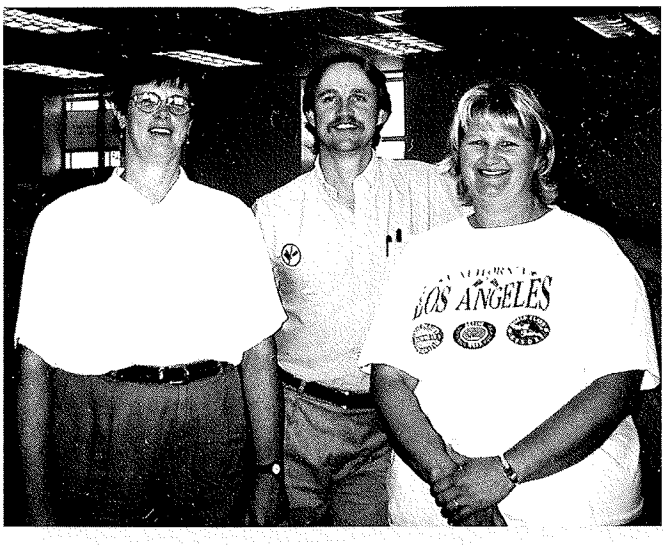
And then there are the bad days. Every once in awhile, a whopper question hits the desk with a thud that sends me reeling. In a panic flash I realize I'm completely ignorant about what the person in front of me wants, and I wonder how I ever got myself into this. Like the woman who wanted articles about treating blood disease in penicillin allergic adults. She wasn't finding anything in Medline. After a bout of "dueling search strategies," I convinced her to consult with the subject librarian and was able to help her with another topic.

When I think back on this experience, I am more concerned about my interaction with her than I am about my lack of knowledge relating to blood disease. After all, no one can know everything. It was difficult to convince her that I couldn't find what she wanted in Medline, and I couldn't offer her any additional sources. She wanted an answer "now" and because I couldn't deliver, she became very frustrated. I think the greatest challenge working in reference is knowing what to do in these moments of frustration. How to say no? How to refer gracefully?

As my experience level grows, and as I talk to more librarians about similar experiences, I understand the value of the referral process. Working in close proximity with librarians also offers opportunities to share moments of vulnerability and anxiousness with them. This helps in the overall process because it feels safe to admit that sometimes I do not know. All of this brings us closer together. And together we hope for the good days.

See **Sharing the Wealth** *page 19*

Mary Swanson, Jon Dillon, and Cindy Skinner



Sharing the Wealth

(continued from page 9)

No, I'm Not a Librarian— But Yes, I Can Help You

Cindy Skinner

When I was first hired in the library 11 years ago as a clerical specialist, I never imagined that I would end up working as a paraprofessional "librarian" at the reference desk. Working at the reference desk without an MLS is challenging, in that it is hard to know where I fit in with my colleagues. Each of us brings different experiences with us to the desk. The librarians, of course, have their library education, and I have many years of experience.

When I started working in the library, I managed the reference collection. At first it was just my job, but soon I became very interested in the books. I'd find myself looking forward to processing them to see what we were adding to the collection. That experience has helped me a great deal in my work at the reference desk.

This past year I had the opportunity to work with the NW LINK Program, a statewide program providing reference service to community colleges, schools, and public libraries across Oregon. This was a whole new learning experience for me. I received the questions by mail, phone calls, and faxes. There was no interview to conduct, no body language to read—just the question. What did they really want? What were they going to use the information for? Did what I sent them really help or just confuse them? The questions I received were totally different than the ones I would get at OSU's reference desk. The majority of the questions were referred by public libraries, and no two questions were alike. Some of them were downright funny! I'd have to rely on the groundwork of the staff person who had sent the question to me.

When our service desks merged and I began hearing the librarians interview the patrons, I realized that I, too, could help find the answers. Finding out what the patron really wants to know takes good listening skills, patience, and experience. I have that! Often I recognize what book the patron is asking for, and I know just where it is. Well, this seems easy. But sometimes I don't have a clue what a patron is asking. Nothing sounds familiar at all. How do the librarians know what the patron wants? Is this what they learn in library school? Maybe I can't do this after all! And then I remember: Ask questions. Many times patrons don't know exactly what they want, hence, the valuable reference interview. Sometimes I still have trouble figuring out what the question really is, but once I start asking questions, the barrier between patrons and me seems to break down and together we find what they want.

Oregon Reference Link

(continued from page 12)

- A nursing home volunteer needed the words to the song "Where the Morning Glories Twine Around the Door."
- A home mechanic needed a clutch diagram (and instructions) for a 1941 Ford 9N tractor.

None of these questions could be answered at their local libraries, but because they were referred to a regional center, local librarians were able to deliver the answers, and patrons were well served.

Future of Oregon Reference Link

As we know, "nothing stays the same," and this is especially true in the world of information. The Internet and other online resources are expanding the "walls" of libraries. While basic information needs have not changed (there will always be a broken car or a report on capital punishment), access to information is changing. What does this mean for regional reference service? Will our patrons be able to access the information sources without reference assistance? Are our libraries funded and open to provide this access? Perhaps extended reference service will be more important than ever as information sources expand, and citizens' demands for immediate service grow. Questions regarding the future of reference service are the same everywhere. This fall, Oregon Reference LINK services and performance will be evaluated by an independent consultant, and it is hoped that information from this process will help determine how Oregon Reference LINK is structured in the future. Comments on this future and the delivery of Reference LINK services in general are most welcome and encouraged. Send them to Rushton Brandis, Oregon State Library, State Library Building, Salem, OR 97310.

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