



Administration of Circulation Services

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THE CIRCULATION DEPARTMENT'S primary function is to supply the library user the books, pamphlets, serials, and other materials wanted. Jennie M. Flexner¹ reports that four major functions comprise circulation work: the staff must have a familiarity with the holdings of the library, a knowledge of the needs and interests of the users, an appreciation of the techniques employed in carrying out the service policies of the institution, and a willingness to cooperate with the other departments of the library.

In many respects, the circulation desk is the library's reception room as well as its book distribution and information center. Indeed the users frequently judge the library and its administration by the general atmosphere and level of service at the circulation desk. It is curious that, despite its nerve center role, the circulation desk has been accorded relatively little attention by writers on library techniques. The lack of information regarding the service requirements of students and faculty members in colleges and universities has been noted by L. W. Dunlap.² Circulation work is discussed in one chapter in G. R. Lyle,³ while L. R. Wilson and M. F. Tauber⁴ use a single section to treat reference, circulation, stack, extension, and other services. *Technical Services in Libraries*⁵ devotes but three out of twenty-two chapters to circulation work.

The circulation department, being responsible for loan services, usually maintains a record of all loans, keeps a file of registered borrowers, provides machinery for the recall of overdue items and for reserving titles in demand, supervises the shelving of material in the stacks, and arranges extension, interlibrary, and public relations services.

The organization of the circulation department depends upon the size of the library, the scope of its work and the degree of departmentalization. Each type of library—public, college, university and special—has particular needs and the organization must reflect these

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needs. While every circulation department must be organized to give speedy and efficient service, this goal must be regarded as a means rather than an end in itself. In the college and university, the end is to advance the instructional and research programs; in the special library it is to further the successful operation of the business or profession; in the public library field:

- To facilitate informal self-education of all people in the community
- To enrich and further develop the subjects on which individuals are undertaking formal education
- To meet the informational needs of all
- To support the educational, civic, and cultural activities of groups and organizations
- To encourage wholesome recreation and constructive use of leisure time.⁶

In small libraries all the administrative duties, including those of the circulation department, are assumed by the librarian. He selects and organizes the staff, establishes the policies, outlines procedures and routines, and supervises the work of the staff. In larger libraries a department head, responsible to the librarian, assumes these administrative duties. In the very large libraries the circulation chief may report to an assistant librarian or a division supervisor, representing the circulation staff in dealing with the public and with higher library authorities.

The traditional library, with its large central stack, has a central circulation desk which takes care of most circulation routines. The college or university library in this type of organization usually has supplementary service points including a periodical room, reserve desk, and departmental libraries. The large public library has its branches, deposit stations, and bookmobile service. The divisional type of library has major service posts in each division as well as a central loan desk for general circulation. Whatever the type of library there should be a centralized organization to provide uniform loan and public service practices in all parts of the library system.

The librarian in charge of the circulation department, no matter what the size or type of organization, must be aware of the latest ideas and techniques employed in this field. He must constantly examine the methods used in his own library, in relation to new developments and to the quality of service called for in his particular situation. Indeed the entire circulation staff should be encouraged

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to make recommendations for simplifying records and operations. The layout of the department—lighting, furniture, supplies, and equipment—will demand the attention of the department head.

Policies regarding service to users, including hours of opening, borrowers' privileges, interlibrary loan privileges, fines, lost books, and similar factors should be set down in writing. The department head should be thoroughly conversant with the basic aims of the library as well as with the community or institution it serves. Changes in methods or policies should be made with the help of the best advice within the department. At all times he must consider the effect of proposed changes on interdepartmental relations and on the basic aims of the library as a whole. Internal department rulings should be made after appropriate staff conferences, but changes affecting other departments or the library as a whole should not take place until there has been full discussion by all the staff members involved and until the new policies have been approved by the librarian.

While the importance of circulation work and its role in influencing the users' opinion regarding the quality of the library's service has been acknowledged by writers from Melvil Dewey⁷ to Bernard Berelson,⁸ there is need for the circulation chief to organize the work of the department so that the professional and clerical aspects of the work are kept separate. The routine work of charging and cancelling books, filing cards, shelving books, as well as the handling of reserves, overdues, and renewals can best be assigned to the clerical staff. The professional staff should be engaged in establishing policies, working with and advising the users, improving relations with the public or, in the case of the college or university, with the faculty and departments. The supervision of the staff and the maintenance of good interdepartmental relations within the library are key responsibilities of the professional worker.

The qualifications necessary for the department head and the other professional members of the staff will vary depending upon the size and type of library. Standards for college and university libraries are noted in *Classification and Pay Plans for Libraries in Institutions of Higher Education*.⁹ The new public library guide sets forth principles and standards of service. The clerical and part-time workers of a loan department should be selected for their ability to get along with people as well as for their competence in performing the necessary routine tasks. The public relations function of people working at service points must constantly be kept in mind.

There should be active cooperation between the members of the

circulation staff and the other units of the library system. Each person on the staff should be given an opportunity to get a good over-all picture of the workings of the entire library. A training program should be arranged to broaden the experience of the staff so as to insure maximum flexibility. Some libraries arrange for a regular interchange of staff between departments. Because the circulation staff represents the library to the users from whom it receives complaints and suggestions, it can be helpful to other units in the library's organization. In a well integrated library the members of the circulation staff will regularly lend assistance to the reference, acquisition, and catalog departments. Well-trained clerical and professional assistants can take care of the quick reference, informational, and directional service, thus relieving the reference staff so that it can devote its time to the more serious and time-consuming questions. Such cooperation will also eliminate to some degree the all-too-frequent complaints of library users who dislike being shunted back and forth between service units to get answers to simple requests.

The circulation department workers can assist the acquisition department by sending along promptly the titles of new books recommended by the borrowers. In the course of readers' advisory work, formal or informal, the circulation staff learns of new areas of subject interest which might not be covered adequately by the library's holdings. Prompt referral of these deficiencies to the acquisition staff and fast action in supplying these lacks result not only in good service but also in doing much to increase the library's prestige. In the public library field these requests can come from individual citizens, organized clubs, or from the needs of a vigorous adult education program. In the college and specialized libraries similar requests come from new course and research needs as well as from individuals.

The public service person is in a very good position to help the library to interpret the catalog. If the problems and difficulties encountered in the day-to-day use of this important bibliographical tool are passed along to the catalog department, adjustments and improvements can be made. An integrated approach to better service might well produce suggestions for new subject headings and references.

The chief administrator in the department must see that sufficient instruction is given to accomplish the tasks outlined above. The achieving of this goal requires a careful analysis not only of duties but of personnel if satisfactory assignments are to be made. Each new staff member must be given a clear understanding of working conditions, work week, weekly schedules, vacation and sick-leave benefits, regula-

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tions regarding time lost by tardiness and other causes, social security, and the availability of hospital and surgical benefit plans. The level of public service depends upon the punctuality of staff members and their careful carrying out of all assignments. Attendance records should be kept for tax as well as for administrative purposes. Staff morale will depend upon the fair and equal enforcement of all rules and regulations. Each employee should be made aware of the proper channels for making complaints and criticisms.

In addition to the initial instruction and in-service practice, the use of a staff manual is recommended. Here one finds outlined the circulation procedures, samples of all forms used, as well as a record of decisions made. Staff meetings should be held regularly to discuss problems and matters of policy. In larger libraries it might be desirable to have meetings of section heads in addition to meetings of the entire professional staff. Separate meetings of the clerical staff and of the section staffs can also be useful to administrators. In every size library, benefits can be derived from general meetings of the entire circulation staff especially if everyone is encouraged to comment freely.

Statistics play an important part in helping the administrator, governing board, or appropriating body to measure the success of the library. While librarians stress the fact that quantitative statistics of transactions, books, periodicals, records, and microfilms, tell only a partial story of circulation operations, nevertheless it is frequently the only method of demonstrating the library functioning to the general public. Regular review of the types of statistics kept should be made to ensure that they serve a clear and useful purpose. Spot checks can be made for information not needed regularly. In addition, libraries should be prepared to gather and report statistics on circulation services to recognized statistics gathering agencies.

Data recorded by the circulation department should include controlled studies to provide unit costs for the various activities in the department. For example in the college and university field one might want to know what it costs to circulate a reserve book; in another library the comparative costs of servicing different types of materials, books, periodicals, and recordings, could be found useful. Basic work statistics are useful in charting the flow of work; a word of caution is always in order regarding the danger of valuing statistics for their own sake, a costly and time-consuming occupation.

If comparatively little has been written about the circulation desk itself, less has been done concerning the role of the staff as public relations representatives for the library. Quite apart from the normal

courtesy, tact, and service, we must accept the fact that all library users are public relations conscious whether they are aware of it or not. A faintly cynical article, "Public Relations—the Invisible Sell" ¹⁰ should serve to remove the blinders from even the most naïve librarians. In the public service area the problems of overdue books, fines, lost books, and mutilation afford many opportunities for the staff to concern itself with the library's public relations. It requires patience, undoubtedly, to explain to the borrower that fines are not money-making schemes, that lost books must be replaced, that mutilation (if detected) is the equivalent of a lost book. It requires even more patience to explain to an interested borrower that his recommendation for a book must be denied. The careful explanation for the denial, whether verbally or in writing, is the library's responsibility to itself; a peremptory "no" is a loss in good public relations, a failure on the part of the library to make known its needs and its problems.

Fines are considered by some librarians as a source of income but generally the purpose of a fine system is to ensure the prompt return of books by the end of loan period. The non-return of books when due interferes with the right of other borrowers and results in a poorer level of service. There is no standard fine schedule in use in public libraries. A rate of from two to five cents per volume per day (holidays and Sundays generally excluded) has been generally adopted, and many libraries establish a maximum fine. Children are frequently assessed a smaller fine, and some communities have experimented with grace periods during which overdue books may be returned without penalty.

The administrator of the public service unit must have the training and experience necessary to evaluate the latest technical advances, to establish satisfactory policies for the use and the care of the book collections, and to select and supervise the staff required for this job. Above all he must have the ability to instill in his staff those qualities which make the library a dynamic institution. Much of his concern will involve him in the supervision of routine; it may be even more difficult for him to preserve his sense of the human equation. He would do well to remember that: "The only excuse for the perfection of routine processes is that they shall contribute to a fuller and better development of the library's essential services." This means not the custodianship of books nor the mere providing of books as they are wanted but also, as noted by Justin Winsor,¹¹ ". . . in inducing an improvement in the kind of reading."

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