Change in Public Services: Perspectives of Three North Carolina Librarians

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The forces of change in our libraries have never been more evident than in the decade now coming to a close. New philosophies of service, new techniques of handling library procedures, and new styles of management have been bursting upon the scene in rapid succession, with a dizzying rapidity that often makes one wonder how we seem to be able to keep up with the pace. The powerful wave of change has most clearly been diagnosed in the technical services sphere of librarianship, where procedural and management techniques are most visibly affected. We have tools to measure impacts of change in technical services, techniques which clearly relate to well-understood goals, such as cost-effectiveness, speed of cataloging, and the accuracy of bibliographic records.

This is not so with public services. Change in public services has also been occurring, but unlike the changes in technical services, development has come in a less orderly fashion, with new techniques tried here, abandoned, modified in another location, or even forgotten. The difficulty of assessing the changes that have taken place is compounded by a key characteristic of virtually all public service organizations, whether libraries, schools, or other agencies: the problematic nature of organizational goals. Who is the library to serve and in what ways? This is a question whose answer is as variable as a chameleon. The changing of definitions of goals is a function of changing personnel within the organization, changing social and economic conditions, and changing leadership. Thus a substantial part of assessment of our past in public services requires attention be paid to people involved in public services, their ideas and perceptions about service, and their experiences in providing service over the years.

In order to assess the changes in public services in North Carolina libraries over the past quarter-century, informal interviews were held with three administrators of public service departments in three different large libraries within the state, two academic and one public. Each administrator has had over 25 years of experience in reference and public services, and has been involved in state and national professional activity. Florence Blakely, chief collection development officer and formerly head of reference at Duke University Library, Louise Hall, Head of the Humanities Reference Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, and Mae Tucker, head of public services at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, all spoke of their experiences in reference and public services with candor, reflecting upon the changes that they have seen within their own libraries, as well as within the library world generally. The picture emerging of library public services in North Carolina from these three voices is admittedly partial, but, as the larger

libraries in the state provide a sort of bellwether for change in all the libraries, the experiences they tell reflect in some way the collective experience in public service and reference librarians in the state.

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Of all the issues that surfaced in conversations with the three public service leaders, growth in complexity best summarizes the experience of the past quarter century. Tremendous collection growth, increase in the level of sophistication of users, and new environmental pressures are just three aspects of this growing complexity. "The most striking change is in the complexity and number of reference tools," Florence Blakely remarked; "I have a sense of helplessness in the face of it all—you have no adequate subject control." For Louise Hall the change is seen in terms of increasing specialization and differentiation of services into more and more discrete categories, which makes problems for both librarian and user more difficult: "There has been an increase in complexity—there are more places for people to go to now." Mae Tucker sees the increasing sophistication of users putting new pressures on the reference staff: "Reference librarians here have had to become subject specialists, though they have to learn it on the job. We have more research questions, more detailed and technical questions." From the perspective of each of the three librarians aspects of the complexity issue shed light on more narrow points of concern to all reference librarians.

The requirements of collection development for reference collections have changed substantially over the years. "The collection has grown at a faster pace," Louise Hall remarked. "Our areas have expanded as the University's teaching and research programs have expanded. It means that there are more things that you have to be cognizant of. Some areas don't have adequate resources, or are so broad, such as American Studies." Florence Blakely is particularly concerned about what she perceives as the still very mixed quality of published reference tools, which, when coupled with increased publishing output, puts more strain on librarians who must select ever more carefully. "I think we have been fairly ineffectual as a profession in getting publishers to do good work—there is so much junk that comes out in new fields, whether it is women's studies, consumer information, or whatever. Our reference department has become increasingly selective," she noted. In the public library field, Mae Tucker observed that increasing demand from users has required expansion of government documents collections, tools to serve the business community, and materials for the college-bound and adult learners. "We also have collection development problems due to book theft and mutilation," she said.

User needs have proliferated almost beyond librarians' ability to handle them, in the eyes of two of the library leaders interviewed. "The social sciences have just been eating us up. The range and complexity of questions defies the

limited published information resources; it is just so difficult to keep up," Florence Blakely observed. "I would not like to be a young reference librarian starting out," she added. In the public library "we're getting more medical and legal questions—people wanting to try 'do-it-yourself' doctoring and lawyering —and more obscure fact questions of all types," remarked Mae Tucker. "More students are asking about college education, about getting grants and scholarships, too. The social emphasis on life-long learning, equivalency exams, and other forms of non-traditional education is really big now, more important for our patrons than in the past," she went on. "All this activity has had an impact on budgeting for staff, and so often in recent years we really feel 'pushed'; we don't seem to be able to do enough sustained one-to-one teaching with individual patrons as we did in the past."

Louise Hall has managed a reference department that has experienced a narrowing of user population focus. A shift from comprehensive reference delivery to a divisional system in the mid-1950's left service to social science users to another department, and the opening of a separately-housed undergraduate library in the late 1960's shifted many undergraduate users to that location. Even so, "the growth of research on this campus and of the library has meant that we don't have as much intimate contact with as great a percentage of faculty in the humanities as we once had." The organizational changes in the research library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have allowed the Humanities Department to concentrate services in specialized areas. "This has its advantages and its disadvantages," she noted. "The medieval and renaissance studies guide that we did several years ago (it was published first in 1967) could not have been done were we not so specialized. The creation of the Undergraduate Library has allowed us more specialization in services for graduate students and faculty. With increased paraprofessionals and student assistants, including a specialized training program for them, we have been able to a certain extent to do special staff projects, though it has also involved more time for training and supervision." As Miss Hall sees it, the information explosion has placed increasing responsibility on reference staffs: "With the growth of the library we have tried to develop means to access the whole collection through development of special tools, such as a listing of all the printed library catalogs on campus, and a file of newspaper holdings records arranged by location and by decade. We've also done a chronological list of early American periodicals, and a bibliography of linguistic atlases, besides all the subject field bibliographies we produce for many areas of study here. All these are in response to real user needs."

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Providing her own perspective on a general academic library reference service, Florence Blakely feels caught in a dilemma by the increasing specialization of user needs and abilities. "The sophistication, the level of work

that undergraduate students do today is light-years away from what it was in 1950. They are able to deal with complexity, with difficult library systems, and with new indexing formats as they never were in the past." This circumstance calls for a careful re-examination of the issue of direct information service versus instruction, so clearly delineated by Anita Schiller[1] and only recently reiterated in a paper Miss Blakely cited by Millicent Abell.[2] "We are confronted by a perpetual dilemma of when to instruct, when to provide the answers," Florence said. "As an occupational subgroup, we have not yet arrived at a cohesive philosophy of service. And this makes library chief administrators uneasy, because they don't know what reference people ought to be doing. I think this accounts for the wide range of activities you find going on in reference departments—our reference departments are catch-alls for all sorts of library jobs that need doing. One of the things that's even harder for a reference librarian to do than a cataloger is to explain to an outsider exactly what it is we do!" But the dilemma of whether to provide instruction or information holds within it great challenge as well: "To me the very essence of professional judgment lies in striking a balance between the two—you never make it in reference by going by the book."

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Mae Tucker

A different set of challenges posed by users of public libraries was described by Mae Tucker. "We see all sorts of users that were rare in the past but common today. We get serious researchers, people working on academic dissertations even, who come to the public library for service. We also are extensively involved in providing information on social agencies, and we must more and more confront today's social problems. Sometimes we feel more like social workers than librarians. We feel good about it—there is a real need for this kind of service—but it is certainly different than in the past." The range of user needs is clearly broader than in even the largest and most diverse university. "In recent years we have had to cope with the problem patron, too. Mental hospitals have released patients because of the availability of new drug therapies, and we seem to get many of these people coming into the public library. This has caused some problems in reference, and we have had social workers come into the library to train our reference librarians to handle difficult situations. The reference librarian today has to be part psychologist, part machine technician, part social worker, in addition to the responsibilities for which he was trained."

It is inevitable that the changing nature of the work of reference departments has brought changes in management within those departments. A large and growing body of research in the sociology of organizations and general management has shown that organizational arrangements such as specialization and communication lines are determined more by the nature of the work done than by conscious management decision,[3] and there is no

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reason why reference organizations would vary from this trend. So as the work has changed, one can expect management functions to change.

All three librarians interviewed touched on the difficult problem of staff training and continuing education. For Florence Blakely, who reflected on the future at the same time she spoke of the past, a concern for the training of new librarians was foremost in her mind. "How do we train librarians to cope with the burgeoning reference literature? There's more being published than any one person can keep track of, yet the kinds of questions coming in defy our efforts at specialization along traditional disciplinary lines. Somehow we need to develop better specialists, and at the same time better generalists." A related issue which she touched on was the growing trend to move toward utilizing more support staff for fielding questions at the reference desk. The complicated problem of how to insure quality service to every user has not been resolved. Keeping up her own skills in reference is one problem for Mae Tucker: "Much of my time that I would like to be helping in reference, unfortunately must be spent in other ways. I have had to spend time recently training security guards." Time requirements for training of staff in new technology has been of concern to Louise Hall, but this is seen as a wise investment in the future. "Our department has placed a great emphasis on staff development and participatory management. We feel it is important to have all the staff involved in decision making, in making contacts with faculty, and in work on special projects."

New political realities have forced many changes in the public library scene in recent years. "We are now quite concerned about accountability," said Mae Tucker. This has led to new efforts to refine techniques of reference measurement, and has also resulted in policy review in many areas. Service provision in the area of genealogy has been liberalized, and new procedures in interlibrary loan and at the reference desk have been developed to protect the privacy of users.

New technologies are just beginning to have an impact on reference functions in the libraries in which the three women interviewed work. And it is the academic libraries which most strongly feel the early tremors of change to come. "There are going to be so many changes," remarked Louise Hall, referring specifically to the growth in online bibliographic services. The technological advances of the *Pre-1956 Imprints*, of the microfilmed North Carolina Union Catalog, of the growth of microfiche publishing, and the availability of OCLC data for reference work have already made substantial impact on public services. "One of the things that is happening because of the computer is that we are no longer bound to a specific location for service," Florence Blakely noted in analyzing the likely long-term effects of online bibliographic services. With the portability of terminals and the proliferation of databases in so many academic fields being loaded onto vended online systems, the character of many reference services may change radically. Yet Miss Blakely cautions against the optimism of many high-technology

advocates: "I do not see a beefing up of staff in public services soon to come. I think this is some wishful thinking on the part of some public service people."

Whether reflecting on the past or looking to the future, those who have had long experience in public service delivery provide a useful perspective from which to view the work not only of reference librarians, but of the entire library. As one person said, "the role of the reference department is to be a liaison among the different departments of the library as a whole." Another noted the special responsibilities of this role in terms of library-wide effectiveness: "The reference department *has* to give consideration and feedback to the organization as a whole on *every* operation that affects the public in any way. This may be troublesome at times, since the reference department appears to be throwing sand in the wheels of the organization, but it is our proper role." Perhaps this is the only constant in an unfolding history of change.

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[1]Anita R. Schiller, "Reference Service: Instruction or Information," *Library Quarterly* 35 (January 1965): 52-60.
[2]Millicent D. Abell, "The Changing Role of the Academic Librarian: Drift and Mastery," *College and Research Libraries* 40 (March 1979): 154-164.
[3]Among the many writings in this area, known as socio-technical systems, are Joan Woodward, *Industrial Organization: Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965); James D. Thompson, *Organizations in Action* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967); Henry L. Tosi and W. Clay Hamner, eds., *Organizational Behavior and Management: A Contingency Approach*, Rev. Ed. (Chicago: St. Clair Press, 1977); and Michael L. Tushman, "Task Uncertainty and Subunit Communication Structure," *Academy of Management Proceedings* '78 (38th Annual Meeting, San Francisco, August 9-13, 1978): 190-194.

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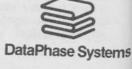# DataPhase thinks that good questions deserve good answers.

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