
Guidelines for Cooperative Reference Services

Prepared by the Cooperative Reference Service Committee, Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), American Library Association. Approved by RUSA Board of Directors, January 1998. Revised by the Cooperative Reference Service Committee, Reference Services Section, November 2005. Approved by the RUSA Board of Directors, June 2006.

The Cooperative Reference Service Committee has developed this document to assist institutions in establishing and evaluating cooperative reference services. Cooperative reference service is a process through which information assistance is provided by referring the user, or the user's queries, to staff at another institution according to a system of established procedures. Cooperative reference is understood to mean any type of cooperation through any modes of communication.

This is the first revision of the 1998 guidelines, which were adapted from a model outline created for cooperative reference service policy manuals in 1995.¹

These guidelines are organized into sections on Purpose of Services, Administration Structure, Delivery of Services, and Evaluation of Services. They are not meant to be comprehensive, but rather provide a framework for the development of policies and procedures. Please use these guidelines in conjunction with other existing relevant RUSA documents.

1.0 PURPOSE OF SERVICES

1.1 Mission Statement

The service mission statement should state basic service goals and philosophy. The statement should be succinct and simply worded. The cooperating libraries should be able to measure all future goals and objectives according to how well these goals and objectives align with the mission of the service.

1.2 Purpose and Definition

The cooperating libraries should define what is meant by cooperating service, articulate why a cooperative service is being created, and detail its specific objectives.

1.3 Scope of Services

Clearly state the scope and range of services provided, taking into account administration, funding, and staffing. The scope of service will figure in its evaluation.

1.4 Statement of Service Level

Include a statement of professional ethics that indicates this service will not discriminate on the basis of age, race, gender, sexual preference, or disability. Also include in this statement a summary of all methods a user may use to submit queries to the service.

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Outline a privacy policy that explains how the libraries will use and archive questions, answers, and transcripts.

1.5 Review of Statement

Indicate how often a review of the policy will take place, describe the review procedure, and designate responsibility for the review.

2.0 ADMINISTRATION

2.1 Structure and Organization

Create an organizational model of the participating institutions, describing interrelationships, responsibilities, and communication patterns. Describe referral patterns between cooperative institutions as well as within each institution. Identify any needed centralized administrative or staff positions.

2.1.1 Specify the cooperative service area (e.g., geographic, kinds of institutions, other).

2.1.2 Determine the contractual agreements to be entered into by member institutions and determine relationships to existing contractual agreements.

2.1.3 Determine a procedure for addressing legal issues (e.g., copyright compliance, use of subscription databases, and limits of liability). Provide for compliance with copyright and all other applicable legal restrictions. Provide a disclaimer if needed that replies on legal, medical, and business topics cannot be interpreted as professional advice.

2.1.4 Set standards for compliance and for possible sanctions in the event of noncompliance.

2.2 Membership

2.2.1 Describe membership benefits and responsibilities.

2.2.2 Specify membership requirements indicating membership eligibility, categories of membership, and levels of service such as hours, staffing, equipment, collections, etc.

2.2.3 Describe procedures for joining. List charter member institutions and define procedures for joining at a later time.

2.2.4 List any associated membership fees.

2.2.5 Establish procedures for membership renewal, withdrawal, and reinstatement, and for changing membership category.

2.2.6 Adopt a policy regarding cooperation with nonmember institutions.

2.2.7 State the preferred methods by which staff providing the service can communicate with one another and with the cooperating libraries.

2.3 Funding

2.3.1 Determine direct and indirect costs of services offered as well as sources of funding such as fees, federal or state grants, revenue sharing plans, grants by other institutions, etc.

2.3.2 Specify any member fees or in-kind services offered by each institution.

2.3.3 Specify any user fees to be charged and policies for charging member institutions, nonmember institutions, or individual users.

2.3.4 Establish a mechanism for reviewing fee schedules and determining responsibility for assessing and collecting any fees.

2.4 Documentation of Activities

2.4.1 Identify the records, reports, and statistics needed for evaluation activities (e.g., determining fees and costs, use patterns, response times, transmission methods and costs, questions referred). Give the format to be used.

2.4.2 Determine institution or individual responsible for maintaining records and reports as well as the length of time this information is to be retained.

2.5 Promotion of Services

2.5.1 Specify services to be promoted and establish a marketing schedule. Determine responsibility for creating and disseminating publicity or promotional materials. Identify formats to be used. Create a budget and determine person accountable.

2.5.2 Evaluate the effectiveness of promotional activities. Determine those responsible for performing evaluations, establish a regular schedule for evaluation, and specify methods and instruments to be used.

2.6 Training

2.6.1 Establish procedures and methods for training members of the cooperative.

2.6.2 Develop a training manual for member institutions.

2.6.3 Determine minimum standards and competencies for staff providing service.

3.0 DELIVERY OF SERVICES

3.1 Services Provided and Methods of Transmission

Define clientele, eligibility, services provided, and methods of transmission. Establish evaluation procedures and methods for maintaining statistics.

3.1.1 Specify eligibility for cooperative privileges. Define eligible users of a requesting institution (primary clientele or others), procedures for verification of eligibility, and available services of responding institution.

3.1.2 Specify available cooperative services (e.g., manual or computer searching, telephone service, etc.). State extent of service provided (e.g., ready reference or research requests, reference service only or reference service combined with other services such as interlibrary loan, photocopying, scanning, file attachments, etc.).

3.1.3 State any exceptions to delivery of service (e.g., no provision of information from subscription databases, no provision of medical or legal information).

3.1.4 Specify services available for users with special needs and priorities in provision of service. Specify whether user is provided with a bibliographic citation or actual information; and state limits, if any, on amount of information provided.

3.1.5 State means by which service is provided (e.g., referral of user to another institution or user's request sent to another institution). Specify format (i.e., print or electronic) and method of transmitting request and response.

3.1.6 Specify responsibility for ensuring delivery by each method. Determine costs involved, responsibility for paying costs, and schedule of delivery or transmission.

3.2 Responsibility of Requesting Institution

Define staffing/personnel responsibilities, establish protocols, describe referral mechanism, and identify evaluation and statistical procedures.

3.2.1 Assign staff responsibility for referral activities (e.g., screening and forwarding requests, processing and review of responses, and notifying users). Specify staff training and continuing education responsibilities.

3.2.2 Establish guidelines for referring users or questions to cooperating institutions, establish priorities in relationship to other library activities, and establish protocols for checking request against resources held by requesting institution.

3.2.3 Communicate to users any guidelines that apply when

using referral services. This should include target turn-around times and how priorities are assigned to incoming requests. It should also note that the service and its staff respect the confidentiality of users and their requests.

3.2.4 Specify format (e.g., print or electronic) and method of transmitting request, and the time frame for referral and response.

3.3 Responsibility of Responding Institution

Define staffing/personnel responsibilities, establish protocols, describe response mechanisms, and identify evaluation and statistical procedures.

3.3.1 Assign staff responsibility for responding to reference referrals (e.g., monitoring reference referrals, researching and responding to reference referrals, and transmitting response to requesting institution). Specify staff training and continuing education.

3.3.2 Establish guidelines for responding to reference referrals, establish priority in relationship with other library activities, and establish protocols for checking request against resources held by responding institution.

3.3.3 Explain guidelines and restrictions that apply when using referral services; determine acceptable turn-around times and assign priority of handling requests. Respect the confidentiality of users and their requests.

3.3.4 Specify format (i.e., print or electronic) and method of transmitting response. Specify format and method of transmitting response to users with special needs.

4.0 EVALUATION

Establish evaluation procedures for services, activities, and personnel. Outline methods of determining and penalizing noncompliance with the cooperative reference agreement. Establish statistical procedures.

4.1 Specify services and personnel to be evaluated, and designate responsibility for performing evaluation. Establish a schedule for evaluation and specify criteria, methods, and instruments to be used.

4.2 Assign responsibility for determining compliance with the cooperative agreement. Establish penalties and enforcement methods for noncompliance. Specify procedure for determining that evaluation issues have been addressed.

4.3 Specify statistics needed for evaluation. Determine format and frequency for collecting statistics. Assign responsibility for recording and compiling statistics. Specify where statistical records will be maintained, who has access to them,

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how they will be disseminated, and how long they will be retained. agreement.

4.4 Establish who has the power to make organization decisions regarding the viability of the cooperative reference

Reference

1. "From Committees of RASD," *RQ* 35 (Winter 1995): 195–202.