
Access Services— Check Us Out!

In recent years, academic libraries have seen a shift in their bread and butter operations. No longer are they primarily destinations for mediated, on-site use of collections. More and more, library users demand content when and where they can access it conveniently and most efficiently. To that end, the demand for effective access services has eclipsed reliance on most other public services functions. Managing user expectations by providing just-in-time content is no mean feat. But while appreciated by library users, access services continue to perplex many other library staff. In this column, Beth Clausen sings the praises of access services and describes strategies for promoting it and raising awareness of its value to library colleagues.—*Editor*

Beth E. Clausen, Guest Columnist

Beth E. Clausen is Head of Access Services, Northwestern University Library, Evanston, Illinois.

Correspondence concerning this column should be addressed to **Marianne Ryan**, Associate University Librarian for Public Services, Northwestern University, 1970 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208; email: marianne-ryan@northwestern.edu.

MY PATH TO ACCESS SERVICES

When I became a librarian, I expected to happily spend my career as a reference and instruction librarian with some liaison, technology, and collection responsibilities. I also chose, or answered the calling, to specialize in US government information and depository libraries. My career path went as expected for my first three positions. There were differences in each one, but the above description applied to them all. The third of these was as federal documents librarian in the Northwestern University Library's (NUL) Government Publications and Maps Department. The departure of the department head provided the opportunity to lead the department, and I did for about five years. Then something even more disruptive (and fantastic!) happened, and I became the acting manager for interlibrary loan while maintaining my other responsibilities. To my surprise, and to the surprise of others, I fell in love with ILL and other aspects of access services. One thing led to another, and I became the head of Resource Sharing and Reserve Collections at NUL.

It has been five years since I transitioned to a permanent access services position, and such an anniversary provides an excellent opportunity or excuse to reflect on the original occasion being marked as well as on associated changes, observations, and experiences. These years were characterized by great transformation, including at least three different organization charts reflecting staff and responsibility changes, culminating with adoption of Access Services as the department name in 2011; the addition and enhancement of services; and significant consolidation of work and service delivery in the name of patron convenience. Among all the change and other happenings, the most interesting aspects may have to do with

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the relationships between some other user services staff in the library and our department and their perceptions of us. I've been thinking particularly about how these have evolved this past five years and the efforts to encourage that movement.

PERCEPTIONS OF ACCESS SERVICES

I have had experiences that I attribute to an outdated notion still held by some staff in libraries that access services functions and services are somehow “lesser than” those of other library areas and departments. This is not across the board, of course, but there have been enough situations that lead me to logically conclude this. It was in evidence from the start of my move to access services when I was asked “Why would you do that?” by colleagues, and I have been consciously trying to change this perspective and show that it is rooted in a bygone era. I think my efforts, as well as those of the department's customer-service oriented staff that offers so much to the library and user community, are counteracting this perception to render it obsolete sooner rather than later.

My pre-access services days seem far away, but I have asked myself how or what I thought about it and its providers before joining the ranks. I wish I could claim that I was enlightened as to the value of all types of library work, but I must admit that I may not have held circulation, interlibrary loan, and associated services in the same high regard that I do now that I have experienced them from the inside as a contributor and manager. I don't think I had a negative view, but rather I took access services work for granted and saw it as task oriented. This was different from how I viewed my own responsibilities or those of librarians in technical or collection services.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACCESS SERVICES

About twenty years ago, a collection of articles was published in an attempt to bring together a fairly comprehensive look at the practical and theoretical aspects of the then-nascent concept of access services. The writers explored various topics ranging from the effect of technology, quality management of services, organizational challenges, the expected rapid adoption of access services by libraries, policies, and much more.¹ Many of the predictions as to how this trend in organizations and services would develop did not hold exactly true, but many have.

I find Carver's look at the full-circle development of circulation, the core of access services, in academic library organizations over the twentieth century notable. She traces the arc, from circulation or the loan librarian being the center of library services fulfilling a suite of needs until about World War II; to circulation becoming clerical and narrow and performing only book check out and associated repetitive tasks until the late 1980s; to the relatively recent circling back to the complete, complex full services of circulation and access services in academic libraries. She also notes that the staffing pattern went from professional librarian, to primarily clerical

staff, and back to more librarian staffing again.²

Access services encompasses various functions and roles, and its organizational home can be in any sector of a library's organization including technical services, public services, information technology, or as its own cluster, depending on the library's needs and other factors. As we know, there is not one prototype for the range of services provided by these departments, but some core services such as circulation and reserve are considered traditional access services.³ At NUL, Access Services resides in the Public Services Division and is made up of three units: Circulation Services; Resource Sharing and Reserve Services; and Microforms, Periodicals and Multimedia Services. There are now four professionals including three librarians in the department, sixteen non-exempt staff, and about seventy student assistants to get everything done. This is no small task, as the services and responsibilities offered are numerous. We provide material and equipment (including iPads, chargers, and umbrellas) checkout and return, location and paging services, microforms, newspapers, the video resources collection, video presentation rooms, print and electronic reserve, food-for-fines programs, copyright guidance, interlibrary loan, document delivery, library privileges, reciprocal agreements, carrel assignments, and more.

While diverse in activities, a single Get It For Them (GIFT) philosophy, regardless of the format, location, or ownership of a resource, unites us and has been embraced by the department. The result is a patron-focused team to provide seamless, convenient services to the Northwestern community and beyond. It also means that as we consider innovations, new services, and other changes, we have at least one overarching value by which to measure desirability and priority. The results of this philosophy also serve as an effective tool to help others in the library see us differently.

The move toward a philosophy of access services at NUL, regardless of the name of the department providing the range of services, should have naturally brought along a universal corresponding change in perception by others in the library regarding it. However, my experience indicates that this change in perception has lagged somewhat behind the organizational service offerings and enhancements. The reasons the change in mindset has been slow to come may be many, and I expect that part of it is due to the services and processes seeming so simple while in reality they are often complex. This underscores the beauty of these library staff and the services they provide so well, since it appears easy to the customer and to their library colleagues. But probably more important is that others in the library have not been fully or directly exposed to how the services provided through circulation and interlibrary loan have been enhanced, have become more responsive, and are more integral to facilitating the work of our patrons.

EXPERIENCE INFORMS MY ASSERTION

Over the past five years there have been regular incidents and interactions with other library staff that have made me think

that they don't "get us" or understand what we are all about. I am happy to report that these occasions are becoming less frequent. I would like to take all the credit, but it is most likely attributable to the excellent services provided by the department's customer-focused, intelligent, committed staff as well as to their contributions to the work of the library as a whole.

One typical occurrence that supports my belief of how we are sometimes viewed is when a librarian who has been working with a student or faculty member sends to me, a unit supervisor, or another member of the department's staff information about a patron's "special, complex, unusual" request for which we should be on the lookout. The warning that this extraordinary case is coming is conveyed with urgency. Usually, the request has already been submitted through our convenient, integrated systems by the patron, processed by the staff member (or processed without human intervention), and the material is on its way from the storage facility, the stacks, or another library. While I never have done it, I have been tempted to reply in ALL CAPS that the staff has already routinely handled more than 200 similar requests today with a high success rate. I would then want to add that it is also not that extraordinary. Even if it were unusual or complex, there is no need for concern, as the staff counts crack bibliographic detective work among its basic skill set. I have seen some incredibly skimpy or questionable citations submitted for reserve, interlibrary loan, and document delivery requests that staff have been able to complete, verify, and match with the desired item. These pursuits can be lengthy and arduous, but the staff are up to the challenge.

My experience indicates that some service providers in the library expect us to say no and look to access services to convey that message, since it's not an easy thing to do. I don't think this comes out of the blue because access services enforces rules and regulations and adheres to them strictly and without exception. Or at least we used to. On several occasions, librarians have referred patrons to me with a note added to the email to the effect of "I'm sure we cannot do this, but I thought you could let them know that," and expect me to respond with that message. On the other hand, it is less common to receive referral emails with a note indicating something like "I'm sure that your group provides this service and can easily help them." When the referring staff member thinks the latter, they tend to ask the question without providing patron contact information so they can communicate the good news. I admit to a bit of satisfaction when I am able to email the patron with an affirmative answer in the former situation. This is the bulk of the time and helps change the perception of what we do as we apply the GIFT philosophy and provide the desired resource. The truth is, access services staff on the whole are customer service stars focused on getting to yes. Of course we have policies and procedures (how could we not given the volume of work?), but we regularly interpret the situation based on the case at hand and make a judgment to figure out a way to make it work. This is likely why I would bet we get thanked in as many book and dissertation acknowledgements as any library group.

Something else that has happened multiple times, but with less frequency lately, is that a decision is made outside of the department that will affect our operations, including procedures and training, but we will not be consulted at concept or planning stages. This is a shame since when we are brought in at any point, planning and implementation can usually benefit greatly with input from access services staff that on the whole is expert at efficiency, effectiveness, and problem solving. These skills are not applied exclusively to new initiatives; we always seek better ways to accomplish any task. Different staff often surprise me and improve something that has been done well for years.

You may be wondering how access services staff themselves respond or feel about how they are perceived by some of their colleagues. I think the following illustrates this. Several months ago, in response to a decision made by powers that be externally to our department that would significantly affect operations and training at the circulation desk, a staff member quoted Marilyn Monroe's character in *Some Like it Hot* by saying Access Services seems to get the "fuzzy end of the lollipop." It was said with a radiant customer-service smile and followed by her figuring out how to solve the problem. I think it's fair to say that staff can be aware of what sometimes happens, but they don't let it curb their enthusiasm for patron services.

SHAMELESS PROMOTION OF ACCESS SERVICES TO LIBRARY STAFF

In addition to facilitating excellent services, relying on the staff to do the same, and demonstrating GIFT at every opportunity, I brag about the blockbuster-level of business Access Services staff handle, even as some services elsewhere in the library are on the wane. I share our astounding, in terms of volume and success rates, statistics (video collection with the highest rate of circulation in the library and the record-breaking ILL requests), as well as the growth in service use (ranging from 20–72 percent this year over the previous one) with my public services department head colleagues, the dean of the library, and others whenever I can. Frankly, if anyone gives me an opening, I will share a jaw-dropping statistic or two. We are also starting to gather patron satisfaction information, and that is certain to enhance my bragging.

In addition to citing statistics, I also talk about new or improved services at various meetings and gatherings. I have partnered with liaisons to attend faculty meetings, led technology talks, and spoken at subjects specialist meetings. These are all excellent opportunities to integrate an awareness of our services into the broader organization's mindset and educate those in the room about the work we do for them and for patrons. In addition to those in the room being better able to describe the services and expectations to users, they themselves often become users of our services and appreciate us more. A recent example is U Borrow, the consortial borrowing program of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation

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(CIC). Within a week of talking about it in a subject specialists meeting, I had several staff tell me they tried it and were impressed with how quickly they got a book.

The services themselves are great, but not as impressive as the talented and intelligent staff. They are instrumental in positively affecting the perceptions of us held by some in the library. In addition to providing services to other library staff, access services staff members contribute to the work of various library committees and groups. At first, it was up to me to provide representation to committees, but now more members of the department are sought out for these opportunities as their skills, perspectives, and knowledge are recognized for their high, distinctive value.

CONCLUSION

I am proud of how the department develops and leads in efforts to provide modern, responsive, needed services to

the Northwestern University community and beyond. I am also pleased that there is evidence that the tide is turning and the perceptions of some in the library are more positive about us than they used to be. I know that we have a ways to go in changing the hearts, minds, and perceptions of our colleagues. But I also know that these staff are up to it. This is important not only for greater collegiality, but for better understanding that in turn positively affects services and the experience of our users. That is what ultimately matters.

References

1. Gregg Sapp, *Access Services in Libraries: New Solutions for Collection Management* (New York: Haworth, 1992).
2. Deborah Carver, "From Circulation to Access Services: The Shift in Academic Library Organization," in *Access Services in Libraries: New Solutions for Collection Management*, ed. Gregg Sapp (New York: Haworth, 1992), 23–36.
3. Access Services: SPEC Kit 290 (Washington DC: Office of Leadership and Management Services, Association of Research Libraries, 2005), 11.