Volunteers in Libraries

Program Structure, Evaluation, and Theoretical Analysis

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Volunteers have had a major impact on libraries throughout U.S. history. The rapid changes in the information world of the last decade serve as a catalyst for evaluation of library programs including those for volunteers. This article offers a brief history of volunteers in libraries and discusses some of the advantages and disadvantages of instituting a volunteer program as well as implications based on library implementation of new computer technologies. The authors argue that a robust volunteer program will help a library in developing a consultation model of communication, thus providing more effective public services.

The library belongs to our community and everyone in it. The chance for people to contribute their time and interest as volunteers is a way the library acknowledges that this is the community's library."[1] Volunteers have experienced a long and fruitful tenure serving American libraries. Their roles and responsibilities have been as diverse as the volunteers themselves. As society continues to experience an information revolution, it is important to reevaluate the role of volunteers in libraries. Libraries must reassess whether it is advantageous to incorporate volunteer programs at all and address issues such as volunteer demographics, motivation, management, work tasks, and reward and recognition. Two things are central in this process: the commitment to synchronizing the volunteer program philosophy with the overarching library mission, and grounding volunteer program structure in solid information and library science theory. Existing technological changes and forecasts for the future must both be taken in account as libraries make judgments about volunteer program structure. As the information services world continues to move toward practice based on users' needs and the importance of community networking, society will see libraries incorporating more vibrant and expansive volunteer programs.

THE HISTORY OF VOLUNTEERS IN LIBRARIES

Volunteer efforts are often characterized as the historical cornerstone of library advancement.[2] Prior to the 1930s, volunteers provided many lending services, especially to homesteaders in the west. Starting nationwide in the 1930s, professional staff coordinated services but volunteers widely operated libraries, and in every community there were many people interested enough in the library movement to devote a considerable

amount of their personal time and effort.[3]

The 1970s marked the union movement in libraries. In the early union movements the main issues of conflict were salary, fringe benefits, grievance procedures, and working conditions. The unions later targeted volunteers, claiming that they usurp paid library positions and serve as replacement workers during strikes.[4] In 1975, unions rejected the policy of using New York volunteers at circulation desks so libraries could be open on weekends. Soon union contracts forbade the use of volunteers in the New York Public Library system.[5] The American Library Association (ALA) reacted to the conflicts between employees and volunteers by passing a series of guidelines. The two central principles emanating from these guidelines were that any volunteer program must have the prior approval of the staff and governing body of the library, and that volunteers should not supplant or displace established staff. The problem was (and continues to be) that the guidelines did not specifically address any duties or responsibilities where volunteers may likely violate the guidelines.[6] Despite this potential barrier erected by ALA, the number of volunteers in libraries ballooned throughout the 1970s, and "volunteer programs were firmly established as a part of the American public library scene by 1980."[7]

The passage of time has produced great changes in the groups of Americans who participate as volunteers but has not diminished the importance of volunteers in libraries. As recently as twenty-five years ago, volunteers were largely unemployed, middle-class housewives who volunteered during the day and were willing to do mundane tasks. As society changed, this type of volunteer has disappeared. Only about ten percent of the population now fits this traditional volunteer stereotype.[8] As of the year 2000, 82 percent of all women in the U.S. between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four were in the workforce.[9] Yet as characteristics of the library volunteers change, the total numbers of volunteers continue to climb. Alexis de Tocqueville is famous for calling Americans a peculiar people because of their overwhelming willingness to volunteer.[10] The future is sure to contain more and more volunteer service from these "peculiar" Americans.

VOLUNTEERS AND THE USE OF LIBRARY COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY

If libraries are to continue in their role as powerful information brokers, they must embrace and augment information technology. The libraries competitive niche should be characterized as a hybrid institution containing both books and digital sources.[11] However, while staying comfortably abreast of technological developments, libraries need to note that frequent library users say libraries should not be on the cutting edge of technology but just behind in order to help most people. The rapidly changing digital age has in many ways created more confusion than clarity for the average information seeker.[12] Librarians must continue to step forward and engage in understanding technology while also serving as information searching instructors.

This paradigm shift has multiple implications for libraries. Innovative learning programs, such as Helen Blowers's "Learning 2.0" (designed so that staff at the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County could learn Web 2.0 skills in only fifteen minutes a day) are now available.[13] However, even with programs like these, taking on technology still requires time and funding. Learning new technologies and providing quality online service through websites and online reference have become commonplace in many libraries, but finding the funding and time needed to properly support these services might mean that other library services suffer.

Libraries' efforts to provide online services are recognized as valuable and have a history of being supported by the public. Results of a nationwide survey conducted in the mid-1990s asking Americans about the future of libraries indicate that the majority would rather spend $20 in taxes helping develop a library information service than buy computer disks for home use. Part of the reason for the public support of libraries' online services is that the business world does not provide easy-to-use and effective services. The help sources of big corporations are often slow, unfriendly, and overused. Increasingly private companies like Columbia House are getting people to browse by not providing categorization and indexing. Business strategies such as this, driven by the idea that the more people browse, the more they buy, highlight the need for libraries to continue developing themselves as a reliable human intermediary for information retrieval.[14] Libraries can stress to their users that they are not profit driven and thus provide necessary information in an objective and efficient manner.[15]

One striking example of how libraries' online services can benefit users is the Internet Public Library (ILP), started in 1995 as a class project through the University of Michigan's School of Information. The site works as follows: Questions are sent to the site and volunteers tag the ones they want to answer. The questions that are left are called "sludge" and professionals tackle these

queries. It is the goal of the library to have all questions answered within one week.[16] Positive results of this program include the following: the chance for librarians to explore the Internet as a reference tool and to share that experience; the image of libraries is boosted as the library reaches out to those who do not normally use the library or are not close to a library; and the IPL serves as an important resource where people can ask questions too private to ask in person.[17] The merits of the third result cannot be understated. Elfreda Chatman has conducted a study where she determined that elderly women will refrain from asking vital medical questions if they fear transfer from an assisted-living setting to a nursing home.[18]

How do volunteers fit into this picture? The Michigan project illustrates a useful example. Almost all of the people working on this project are volunteers. They love this type of volunteer library work because they choose what questions they want to address and for which they have time. Volunteers can also work from home, which is an important consideration for many.[19] The librarians involved in this project report that the diversity in the backgrounds of participating volunteers is remarkable.[20]

The diversity provided by volunteers will also be an important asset as online communities (which continue to become more interest-based than geography-based) proliferate. Virtual volunteering, which allows volunteers to offer services from their own home computers, can be used to call upon local and nonlocal volunteers for services such as website design and maintenance and "virtual librarian duties."[21] As libraries begin to participate in virtual environments such as Second Life, more opportunities for nonlocal volunteers can be made available. Even as it becomes more possible for distant volunteers to offer their expertise to libraries in need, volunteers from the local community can augment the development of library websites as community information centers. Volunteers simply provide more eyes and ears in the community.

There are many other ways volunteers can help as libraries implement new technologies. Helen R. Tibbo predicts that if greater involvement in online librarianship results in more reference inquiries, libraries "are going to have to develop strategies to deal with the likely increase in usage and the new demands posed by an increasingly networked environment."[22] Additional personnel will likely be required as "increased usage can really place stress on small staffs."[23] As library budgets decline or stay stagnant, volunteers will be needed.

While libraries may be happy to take advantage of tech-savvy volunteers in the digital age, it is not essential that volunteers be technology experts. Tibbo claims that setting the tone across distances is central to success. Having more people is critical when it is a priority to tell a patron that "the inquiry has been received and that someone will be in contact with them very shortly."[24] Volunteers can help solve another problem created by the electronic age: the uninformed belief people have that electronic sources are superior to print sources. "Libraries already see this with students who will wait for hours to use a CD-ROM index when they could have immediate access to a paper version of the same tool."[25] Volunteers can easily be taught which print sources are analogous to the electronic sources and prevent long lines and patron frustration by directing them to appropriate print sources.

Volunteers can also help libraries continue to provide a human touch that library users continue to need when using libraries' information retrieval systems. Stephen Harter and Nicholas Belkin both outline theoretical constructs that promote the use of volunteers in conjunction with library computer technology. Harter's development of the connection between information retrieval (IR) systems and relevance reveals a golden opportunity for using volunteers beneficially. As Harter posits, one of the difficulties searchers have with IR systems is that the systems only know relevance through topic (a matching of keywords or phrases). In reality, people base relevance largely on the matter at hand. For a search to be successful, the IR system must take the situational and dynamic effects of the search into account. Since IR systems are still incapable of accomplishing this task, human intermediaries are critical to the search process. Volunteers can be trained to help library computer users get the most out of the IR systems by focusing primarily on context.[26]

Belkin, who has done extensive research on IR systems, claims that most information retrieval systems (and studies about them) unfortunately focus on the technical properties of the IR system while neglecting the needs of the information seeker. He states that what people really need is a way to deal with their Anomalous States of Knowledge (ASKs). The best way to deal with ASKs is to have the IR system pose questions to the information seeker to establish cognitive proficiency with the topic and to develop an idea of the nature of the ASKs. Usually the information seeker not only needs to pose the questions to the IR system but also must find a "best match" to existing information, which means that the seeker must already have an understanding of the topic. Since people

do not always know what they want to know, they frequently need human intervention to deal appropriately with their ASKs. Computers are rarely able to dialog effectively with a person by initially asking the questions. Volunteers can be trained to conduct these dialogs. Information seekers will then have the confidence to use electronic IR systems to continue their searches.[27]

Mary Culnan is another information scientist who studies the interaction of information systems and users. She feels that accessibility is key to information seeking and use. Culnan says that prior research in commercial settings has proven that people prefer interpersonal sources to database systems. In addition, her study shows that people feel there are few problems with the interface with interpersonal contacts.[28] When people use computers, they often try to impose human characteristics and personalities on them. Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass have written an entire book, *The Media Question*, describing how people humanize machines to better relate to them.[29] Why not provide both the human and the machine? The Pittsford Community Library reported great success with using "teen tutors" to provide "individualized assistance to patrons."[30] Examples like this show how volunteers can provide the human touch, making people feel they have better accessibility to information in libraries. Volunteers clearly have the potential to become a key factor in the library world's movement toward greater technological incorporation.

THE DISADVANTAGES OF USING VOLUNTEERS

Many library professionals are opposed to the use of volunteers. The only official edicts from ALA concerning volunteers can be summed up as a list of guidelines to follow in order to avoid conflict within a volunteer program. One of the unfortunate reasons volunteer programs often get a bad name is that they are started in times of financial difficulty.[31] When librarian positions are cut and volunteers are used to fill the gaps, library services suffer. The recent experiences of the libraries of Des Moines public schools show that librarians cannot be replaced by volunteers without adversely impacting services. The Des Moines public school libraries noted that checkout rates "plummeted by 31 percent in the middle schools" when the library positions were filled by parent volunteers.[32]

The most common reproach of library volunteer programs is their threat to paid staff when used as a substitute. Volunteer program advocates assert that the highest quality and most successful volunteer programs are those where volunteers are treated more like employees. However, this condition also creates the most alarm among anti-volunteer stalwarts. According to Karp, all successful programs advocate writing job descriptions for volunteers and creating job titles that sound professional.[33] A 1980 evaluation of volunteers in the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped showed that 73 percent of the 144 libraries surveyed used volunteers and that in more than half of these agencies ALA standards for volunteer programs were not being met. The main problems were that the libraries had volunteers perform essential services and that volunteer and paid staff duties overlapped.[34] This kind of situation is exactly what opponents of volunteer programs fear.

Many libraries initiate volunteer programs because they feel the benefit–cost ratio is heavily weighted toward the benefits, but those who critique volunteer programs point to some of the high costs involved. In 1975, Tom Genson conducted a survey for the reference section of the Michigan Library Association to measure characteristics of volunteer use in Michigan. He learned that the institutions that did not have volunteer programs (46 percent of the libraries surveyed) lacked a volunteer program because they simply did not have the resources to maintain a quality program.[35] A quality volunteer program requires special coordination. Recruitment, training, supervision, and recognition are all essential components of a volunteer system. Often an additional part- or full-time manager is needed.[36] In short, "libraries must be willing to invest in their volunteers," and the costs can be high.[37]

Some librarians claim that volunteers require a disproportionate amount of time to train and supervise compared to salaried staff. There are also material concerns. Orientation space, parking space, staff lounge space—these are all considerations. Most volunteer program advocates proclaim the idea that volunteers should, as much as possible, be treated like staff. The problem is that volunteers may suddenly need a parking space, a mailbox, maybe even a desk.[38] Some say volunteers should participate in staff meetings. Opponents to volunteer programs wonder where the influence and costs end.

Unforeseen costs of volunteer programs could also include negative political and budgetary consequences of having a successful volunteer program. Boards often see that volunteers can do jobs and then question why they should pay staff to do it.[39] The following statement characterizes

the views of many volunteer program opponents: "If volunteers did not leap into the breach created by failure to fund essential services, or if agencies refused to accept volunteers and fought for paid positions, eventually the doors would not open and then funding for paid workers would be found."[40]

One of the top reasons people volunteer is to fulfill a desire to manage a project, and one common way to reward volunteers is to give them more control over their activities.[41] In addition to managing a project, many volunteers come to libraries to get other job skills and expand career options. One Colorado library provides general computer training to anyone willing to volunteer a minimum number of hours.[42] Many librarians are concerned about libraries becoming job training centers. Baltimore County Public Libraries have not had to advertise for jobs in years—they just promote volunteers to paid positions.[43] This practice is seen as harmful by many employees. Toni Goodale, a nationally known fundraising consultant, says that it is critical to the success of any volunteer program to let volunteers be involved in as much decision making as they want to partake in.[44] This type of practice could give volunteers an undue amount of influence. Chatman did an in-depth study of the information worlds of some CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) women and a group of janitors. She learned with both groups that if competition for jobs was an issue, communication among the group broke down.[45] If volunteers are seen as competition for employment advancement, the staff may become closed mouthed and a resulting breakdown in communication may occur. This lack of communication will hurt the library.

Another area of concern is the ethics and legality of volunteer programs. The philosophy of volunteerism may not only be damaging to libraries but also to volunteers themselves. Many claim that volunteerism exploits women as it is an extension of unpaid housework. Further, it can be argued that volunteer programs not only discriminate against women but also against the poor when volunteers who are financially secure take paid jobs away from those who are not.[46] Legally, volunteers can be a potential liability. Since "currently, no federal law exists regarding liability for volunteers," libraries with volunteer programs may be open to lawsuits.[47] As Rashelle S. Karp notes, "State legislatures often equate volunteers with paid employees for such issues as workman's compensation and liability."[48] In other words, libraries may need to pay for volunteer injuries in the workplace. Finally, volunteers can present a confidentiality problem for libraries because they often have access to patrons' records.

The desire to volunteer is an admirable one. However, while volunteers frequently possess many fine qualities and abilities, they also have needs and goals of their own. Meeting these needs and goals can present difficulties for libraries. Volunteer unreliability is often cited as a criticism of library volunteer programs. Volunteers are often busy people and may see other commitments as a higher priority and not show up, leaving work undone that is important to the overall health of the library. Morris claims that the best way to avoid this problem is to do daily reminder calls, but this can be very time-consuming. Many volunteers find it hard to observe schedules, while librarians claim that adherence to schedules is key to smooth library function.[49] Many libraries report that volunteers cannot commit enough time to learn the new automated systems that they are asked to use and can cause more catastrophic damage when they "push the wrong buttons."[50]

While many librarians see a volunteer program as a way to make a positive impact on the community, others forecast a real potential for bad publicity. Most of this bad press will come from the volunteer "hiring and firing" process. Miriam Pineo, volunteer coordinator for the American Museum of Natural History, advises librarians not to take everyone who asks to volunteer.[51] In addition, Karp states, "Selecting only the most qualified volunteers tells everyone that the volunteer program is important and the jobs volunteers do are important."[52] Volunteer coordinators agree that it is very important to evaluate and fire volunteers as necessary. However, turning away willing volunteers and telling them they are unqualified creates the likelihood for bad feelings, which can often result in negative publicity. Volunteers may also become turned off when treated too much like employees, and a dismissed volunteer could become a source of unfavorable publicity for a library.

THE ADVANTAGES OF USING VOLUNTEERS

While arguments against volunteer programs can be compelling, there are myriad reasons to support volunteer involvement in libraries. One of the most simple yet powerful factors bolstering the use of volunteers is their long experience and proven track record as library workers. Bonnie Taylor notes that in the San Juan Library District (which has a long and vigorous history of volunteering) volunteers regularly donate a wide variety of services that allow the library to provide quality

services to patrons. Volunteer services at San Juan include "circulation and shelving," "cataloging 200 newspapers and magazines," "keeping the library open seven days a week," "reading to preschoolers and children after school," and "offering home services."[53] In small libraries, volunteers are often the only people who operate the system. If people discourage the use of volunteers in general, they are in effect discouraging the institution of small libraries. Certainly volunteers are capable participants in library work. Using the American Library Directory database, it was determined that almost three-fourths of one south Atlantic state's libraries do not employ anyone with a graduate degree in library science. Most libraries operate with combinations of paraprofessionals and volunteers. Again, it is clear that volunteers play a vital role in the health of libraries.

Volunteers bring fresh ideas. "A volunteer might have suggestions which could increase the library's effectiveness or which could improve programming and services."[54] Volunteers always provide something extra, even if it is simply more personal contact. While printed and online guides help patrons orient themselves in a library, the human touch of a personal tour is the best route to future success for patrons; after such a tour, they are more likely in the future to ask for help.[55] Gary Marchionini notes, "It is well known that information seekers prefer colleagues or human sources to formal sources and then proximate sources of information and easy-to-use systems. These preferences are powerful factors in information seeking and reflect natural human efforts to minimize costs, especially to seek the path of least cognitive resistance."[56] The incorporation of volunteers will help the library information seekers because it provides human peers who bring information systems closer and make them easier to use. Finally, volunteers enhance decision-making processes of the staff by preventing groupthink. According to Gregory Moorhead, who coined the term, groupthink is when a group makes costly choices because of an inadequate consideration of alternatives. Groupthink is most likely to happen in settings where a highly cohesive group acts without qualified outside opinions.[57] By providing an outside point of view, volunteers can serve as devil's advocates and prevent groupthink.

Volunteer systems are advantageous because they prompt libraries to contemplate and articulate their mission. The process of recruitment demands that the library carefully assess its status and goals for the future. Not only is a focus on the mission critical in the development stages of a volunteer program, it is also central in volunteer retention. According to Goodale, the most important way

to keep volunteers motivated is for the librarians to stay excited about the mission of the library. It is critical that they understand the mission statement and how their work contributes to enhance the mission.[58]

Unlike volunteer program opponents, the advocates of such programs say that the presence of volunteers does not threaten the employment status of staff members. Most volunteers today are largely retired persons, homemakers, students, and convicts. In most cases, they are not even looking for jobs. Quite to the contrary, current volunteers positively diversify the whole organization. Instead of taking jobs, volunteers often create them, acting as agents of change to establish new services that are later funded.[59] Mary Jo Detweiler put it this way: "Volunteers are our allies—they want to expand community services, not take our jobs."[60] In New York, some 70 percent of the volunteers are employed elsewhere; they are not an employment threat to established staff.[61]

Volunteering in the library can also be considered a way for volunteers to gain a new appreciation for the work librarians do. Sarah Bolten, president of the Hanawalt Elementary School's PTA, noted that when parents began volunteering to provide services normally provided by librarians in the Des Moines public schools, they began "seeing all the things that a librarian does and can do," leading to conclude that "volunteers can't take the place of a library professional."[62] A study of fifty-two Illinois public libraries concluded that libraries with volunteer programs have larger staffs and spend a larger percentage of their overall budget on staff salaries than do libraries without volunteer programs.[63] Finally, volunteer contingents can help the library through lean budget times without permanent staffing decreases.[64]

Library volunteers are a potential legal liability but no more so than library employees. If library personnel take the time to provide safety training for volunteers and have volunteers sign a form that outlines library policies, risks can be minimized. In addition, libraries can purchase special volunteer insurance and have volunteers sign agreements that waive and release the library in the event of a problem.[65]

Instead of being a drain on staff time and energy, volunteers often enhance the performance of paid staff.[66] A Colorado librarian, Susan Clarke, stresses that the most important element of any volunteer program is to listen to the volunteers themselves, to make their experiences as fruitful and satisfying as possible.[67] Working to make volunteers' experiences good ones is a useful training ground for staff. As they work with beginning volunteers, they

hone the very skills that are so vitally important in working with library patrons. "A side benefit of the volunteer program is that it gives an opportunity to supervise to some staff members who would never have this experience otherwise."[68] Finally, volunteer programs free staff to do more public speaking and community service.[69]

Another benefit of volunteers is that they provide an essential connection to the community. According to a 1975 study issued by the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, "The single most important reason for a volunteer program is public relations."[70] Quality volunteer programs involve making lots of personal contact with the community, especially during the recruiting process.[71] Recommended contact areas include "service club meetings, parent teacher organization meetings, religious organizations, and local Chamber of Commerce meetings."[72] In Washington State's King County libraries volunteers "make an enormous contribution" by offering computer classes in addition to playing key roles in "adult literacy programs, teens tutoring citizenship classes, many children's projects, the Traveling Library Center . . . and a slew of special projects."[73] Successful volunteer programs such as the ones in King County create collaborative ties with the community. As the library staff reaches out to the community, the community becomes intimately aware of their library's needs and goals.

Volunteers are often seen as more accessible than experts. Many would say that librarians have an image problem, with librarians seen as overzealous and intimidating. Librarians are often viewed as having know-it-all attitudes. Harris claims that librarians have more breadth of knowledge, which could add to the "more is better" fallacy.[74] Morris submits that "being an expert, however, also seems to limit one's ability to transmit information to others."[75] Experts see a search as common and easy, a complex process as straightforward, and this can limit the expert's effectiveness. Unfortunately, information insiders (like librarians) often claim privileged access and shield it from others; they believe they are the only ones capable of understanding.[76] Volunteers can help bridge the gap between insiders and outsiders, helping each to understand the other better.

A volunteer's nonexpert status can actually serve them well as they work with the public. Marchionini says that intermediaries (volunteers) often provide better service than domain experts (librarians) because the domain experts often only envision an answer and often the search is open-ended.[77] Volunteers identify with a customer's point of view, an invaluable perspective.[78] Pierce submits that communication takes place between those with whom we have common problems or the same interests; this is more important even than common language.[79] How the help-seeker sees the helper is key, as demonstrated by the infamous "55 percent rule."[80] Since people equate satisfaction with the friendliness of the librarian, not reception of the correct answer, clearly the demeanor and customer-service skills of the library staff are just as important, if not more important, than a librarian's subject expertise. Volunteers, who are not experts but who are more concerned with customer service than informational expertise, have high potential for success in the library setting.

Volunteers can also make information more accessible to patrons. A lack of easy access to materials is a problem that has plagued libraries. This is an important concern to address because, as Culnan attests, access to information may be more critical to the user than the quality of the information itself. Culnan's 1985 study of college students reveals that they struggled most with obtaining information in the library.[81] Volunteers can be instrumental in dealing with heavily used materials, providing faster reshelving, making more copies, and monitoring the whereabouts of materials. Another common library problem poses the opposite extreme to a lack of locating materials: With the implementation of advanced information technology, many library patrons are now experiencing information overload. Kwasnik says that one of the common problems in searching today is people are retrieving more than they can use.[82] Marchionini adds that most people just simply do not have the skills to search electronic sources with precision.[83] Through simple training, volunteers can be taught the Boolean Logic and search strategies necessary to help today's public. Too much information can often include questionable information, and volunteers can assist patrons in evaluating sources.

Perhaps the most persuasive pro-volunteer argument is that volunteers can free skilled staff to learn new skills and perform other duties. If volunteers take on some of the workload in libraries, it is easier for the staff to get out from behind the desk and engage patrons.[84] Robert Taylor explains that general instruction concerning libraries and how to use their systems is almost always at the library's specified times. The user wants to learn the system when they come in with an inquiry.[85] Librarians do not have time to teach a course for every patron, but with volunteers a general preliminary overview could be accomplished. Culnan also says that the role of the librarian has increased with more computer technology, and more training is needed as new technology systems are introduced.[86]

Volunteers are needed to free time for librarians to learn and teach new technologies.

One of the greatest criticisms of library staff is that they do not provide enough follow-up to see if the patron was completely satisfied. Marchionini explains, "Most outcomes are intermediate stages in the information-seeking process that provide information to further the overall process."[87] Frustration can occur when librarians exit during the intermediate stages. "It is time for the archivist (librarian) to ensure that the client's information needs have been satisfied. The reference transaction all too often ends after the client has received some information but has not had his or her total information needs met. Frequently, clients feel that they have 'bothered' the reference archivist enough and that they should not ask for more time or attention."[88] Volunteers can help solve this problem. Having more people in the reference area will allow more time to monitor the progress of the patron and provide follow-up and closure.

THE CONSULTATION MODEL AND VOLUNTEERS

The most powerful reason to support volunteer programs is that they provide resources that enable libraries to move toward a consultation model of communication. Many libraries operate under the "fast-food" system of customer service. Librarians sit behind counters and look to handle each patron's query quickly and efficiently. The relationship between librarian and patron is temporal and functional. The librarian's involvement is light, meaning they only help the user get started on a search. The consultation model, on the other hand, implies sitting down with the patron and engaging in an in-depth discussion of the patron's needs. Taylor says that information centers must see beyond the limited role of exclusively providing access to information. Facilitating problem solving is a far better paradigm, implying more direct involvement in the process of understanding that occurs in users.[89]

Marchionini supports the consultation model, asserting that information specialists need to teach people how to fish, instead of simply giving them the fish. He adds that, unfortunately, information brokers are so worried about privacy issues that they do not ask patrons about the "why" of their searching.[90] Moving to the "why" is bound to bring emotion in the reference interview. Another factor to consider is the "uncertainty principle," which Carol C. Kuhlthau describes as the cognitive and affective state at the beginning of the search process where there is uncertainty and lack of clarity.[91] Kuhlthau claims that people are seeking meaning

rather than answers in their searching and that personal involvement in the search process increases positive feelings and produces meaningful searches. This is a compelling argument for library systems that encourage library staff to take the time needed to work closely with users, treating patrons as clients who are searching for meaning and can experience affective changes.

The research of Robert Taylor and Brenda Dervin also supports the consultation model. Taylor introduces the idea that libraries should be "retailers" and not "wholesalers" of information.[92] The main difference between the two is that the retailer takes pride in serving each customer. Dervin and Nila believe that people in the information field need to focus on the user's needs rather than on collection management in both research and practice.[93] Librarians must take the time to learn the specific situations and knowledge gaps of their clients. Only then will they bridge knowledge gaps and provide completely effective, user-centered service. Commitment to the consultation model is needed because it takes time and resources to build long-term relationships with clients. Volunteers open time for professionals to do consultation, and they could certainly be trained to provide the listening ear patrons desire.

FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Anecdotes and informal reports about library volunteer programs and their successes and failures are fairly common, but studies on these programs are few and far between. While it seems clear that changes in libraries will lead to changes in how volunteers are used, further research on library volunteers is needed. As libraries offer more online services and participate in the virtual world, opportunities for virtual volunteers are likely to grow. Research on how libraries engage volunteers whose main connections to the library are online has yet to be done, but starting points for such research, such as the Internet Public Library's use of volunteers, certainly exists.

More research on the policies and practices of libraries that use volunteer programs both successfully and unsuccessfully could go a long way toward answering questions raised in the debate about whether the benefits of volunteers outweigh the detriments. Informal reports of both success and failure exist. An exploration into what makes volunteer programs successful could be a great benefit to libraries considering the implementation of volunteer programs, as well as to libraries struggling with volunteer programs that seem to be more trouble than they are worth.

In conducting a survey of available literature on volunteers in libraries, it quickly became apparent that most of the conversation about volunteers is centered on their use in public libraries, but this does not mean that academic and special libraries do not use volunteers, or that they cannot benefit from volunteer programs. One of the reported benefits of volunteer programs is a better connection between libraries and the communities they serve, and a 2002 study showed that volunteer programs are an effective means of involving young adults in library systems.[94] This research raises the question of whether or not college and university students would be similarly responsive to volunteer programs. If so, college and university libraries would find a powerful outreach tool sitting under their very noses.

CONCLUSION

Volunteers have been active in American libraries from their earliest days. Even with a strong historical precedence of volunteer commitment to libraries, there is still much debate over the costs and benefits of volunteer programs. The use of nonprofessional staff in libraries has been called "one of the hottest topics of debate in the literature of librarianship."[95] Those opposed to volunteer programs are concerned with a decline in professionalism in libraries, threats to staff employment, and a decreased probability for adequate public funding. So far, it appears that some of these concerns are unfounded, and the remainder does not offset the benefits of volunteer programs, although further research into volunteerism in libraries is needed to see how volunteers best fit into libraries. Volunteers provide an important community connection and enhance the work of library staff. Volunteers can help combat the elitist stereotypes that plague librarians and may be instrumental in incorporating technological advances. Most importantly, volunteer programs will help facilitate a transformation from the library-collection and systems-management paradigm to the user-centered consultation paradigm. This direction for librarianship has the support of key theorists in the library and information science field and will help in the future success of American libraries as they strive to provide vital and relevant services for their patrons.

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