

Documents Bibliographic Instruction

Ridley R. Kessler

A good bibliographic instructional program (i.e., teaching users how to access library material through indexes, abstracts and other bibliographic tools) is essential to any aspect of public service work in a library. This is particularly true in documents depositories where the chief responsibility is to offer all citizens free and ready access to government information. There are few government document depository libraries in North Carolina without a bibliographic instruction program. However, many of these programs are disorganized, lack adequate planning and direction, and do not reach the patrons who need the information the most.

Some Problems

According to a compilation of the Superintendent of Documents Inspection Forms for 1978-79, one of the main reasons for these failures is the small size of most documents collections. In 1979, for example, 51 per cent of the depository libraries in North Carolina selected 24 per cent or less of the current available numbers on the *Classified List*. In fact, only five North Carolina depositories selected more than 75 per cent of the items.

The same forms reveal another factor which affects bibliographic instruction is staffing. The more staffing problems that exist in a documents collection, the more likely it is that instruction will suffer. In 1979, for example, 51 percent of the depository libraries in North Carolina needed additional professional staff and 72 percent needed additional support staff. Shortages in documents collections cause more problems in public services than any other factors. In such understaffed situations the documents people are overworked and hard pressed to keep up with the daily shipments. This is especially true when you realized that the majority of the depository libraries in the state use separate collections and/or are responsible for the technical processing, checking time lists, binding, shelving and the other varied tasks involved in even the smallest depository. If the library is short on staff, then either public or technical services must suffer. Usually, it is the former because the Government Printing Office puts more emphasis on speedy and efficient handling of depository shipments than on public service.

In some cases the regular library public service department handles bibliographic instruction for documents. In these cases documents are often only a part of a broader library-wide program. Many times documents suffer as a result because the regular staff is not well grounded in the fundamentals of

documents bibliography and is not cognizant of the changes that continuously occur in government organization. After all, one of the chief arguments for a separate collection is that it allows documents librarians to develop expertise in this highly specialized and complex area. To allow non-documents people to handle such an important aspect of the depository function defeats the purpose of a specialized documents staff. Remember that documents bibliography has absolutely exploded in the last ten years. New sources by private vendors like Congressional Information Service, Infodata International Inc. and Carrollton Press Inc. have increased dramatically and continue to grow each year. Patron interest in federal documents has also grown and depository libraries throughout the state report increased circulation and reference requests. During fiscal years 1977/78 and 1979/80 the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, as an example, experienced a 10 percent growth in circulation and 31 percent growth in documents reference.

Successful Instruction: Some Points to Remember

There are no secrets to a sound instruction program, and, unfortunately, there are no short cuts. In the first place such a program should exist, and, if it does not exist, it should be started as soon as possible. Such a program must have the support of the rest of the library staff and the library administration. Without support and encouragement, any worthwhile program will wither away and die from neglect and benign negativism.

A successful bibliographic instruction program should be planned, organized and run by the documents staff. They know more about the documents collection than any other members of the library staff. They are familiar with the types of publications that are coming in, understand the classification scheme, work with the many and varied bibliographic sources, and have developed a sense of government organization. At the very least, the documents staff should be involved in the planning of an instruction program, even where it is not possible for them to handle it personally.

A good documents instruction program should be simple. Very often, a program drowns in trivial and unnecessary information. This is probably the most important point to be made. Because of the complexity of documents organization and the tremendous range of the material available, there is a tendency for librarians in general, and documents librarians in particular, to overwhelm patrons with detail. The problems are often compounded because of the documents librarians' own enthusiasm and pride in their work. Most patrons want particular information and they want to know how to find it in the simplest and most straight-forward manner. They are for the most part not interested in the organization of the Government Printing Office, the history of the Superintendent of Documents classification system, or any sources that do not directly apply to their search. Keep to the basics. Save the rest for the proper time, if it should ever arise.

Be flexible. A good instruction program should be geared to the level and ability and suspected use patterns of the patrons it is meant to serve. Documents librarians must know and be able to react to the needs of their users. Do not design a program and expect it to serve all purposes. Academic libraries will have freshmen and other undergraduates, graduate students, faculty members,

and other library staff to serve. Public libraries, on the other hand, have even greater variety, ranging from professional people such as doctors and lawyers, to housewives and retired people. Be ready to vary the instruction to enable each to use the material to best advantage and in the most judicious manner.

When you have developed a program that you think will work, advertise it. Good public relations is a very necessary ingredient in the process. No one can take advantage of an opportunity if he does not know it exists. Too often we find documents existing in a vacuum. They will be stuck off in the basement or the 03back of the building, and patrons will not even know there is a collection, much less a service which will teach them how to access it. Put up signs. If your library has a newsletter, get information about your services in it. If a general orientation program already exists, be sure that you are included in it. Do not be passive—be aggressive. Do not rely totally on an orientation program. Such programs generally take place at set times of the year and often do not have the broad appeal that we think they do. Write letters to firms, organizations, and faculty members that you think would make use of documents. Call professors and offer your services. Information is needed year round by everyone and an instruction program that only occurs once or twice a year will miss a large segment of your users.

Having emphasized the significance of good public relations and orientation, it is not necessary to add a caution. Do not confuse orientation programs with bibliographic instruction. They are not the same. Many libraries make the mistake of substituting one for the other. Orientation is for familiarizing patrons with the kinds of materials that are available in a library and establishing locations. Orientations do not, as a rule, teach patrons how to use materials. Bibliographic instruction is for teaching people how to use specific tools such as indexes and abstracts. Both programs should exist together because they are mutually supporting.

Methodology is a popular subject, and library literature is full of creative and interesting ways to teach bibliography. Actually, we probably worry unnecessarily about techniques, and sometimes we spend so much time on gadgetry and creativity that we lose sight of our objective. A commonsense approach to methodology would be helpful, and that old education axiom "whatever works best" is a useful rule to follow. Librarians should take into consideration the funds that are available to them, the staff time and expertise that exist, and the kind of audio-visual equipment, if any, that can be used. If the instruction program is clear and to the point, any reasonable presentation will work. If you have specialized equipment and can do slide tape shows, transparencies, or other formats, then by all means use them. However, do not let lack of such sophisticated equipment keep you from your appointed task. The old lecture and show and tell methods still work. The main point to remember is not to be boring. Documents are a fascinating subject and should be presented in an enthusiastic and interesting manner, whatever the format.

To summarize briefly, it has been shown that a documents bibliographic instruction program should be well planned, well organized, and aimed at the needs of specific users. It should be simple and direct and not be mired down in unnecessary detail. It should be flexible enough to satisfy a wide variety of users. Finally, the program should be advertised through a variety of ways to allow patrons to take advantage of it.

What To Include

What to include in an instruction program can be a matter of great debate. In fact, no two documents librarians would ever be in complete agreement on the subject. However, in order to reduce this topic to manageable proportions and to stay with our original idea of simplicity, there are certain fundamentals which can be used as a starting place. A basic documents instruction program should cover the following sources:

1. *Monthly Catalog of United States Government Publications* (GP3.8:yr/no)
2. *Superintendent of Documents Subject Bibliographies* (GP3.22/2:)
3. *Index to U. S. Government Periodicals 1970—* . Infodata International Incorporated.
4. *Selected U. S. Government Publications*, GPO. (GP3.17:v/no)
5. *Cumulative Subject Index to the Monthly Catalog of United States Government Publications 1900-1971*. (15 vols.)
6. *Cumulative Title Index to United States Public Documents 1789-1976*. (16 vols.)
7. *CIS/Annual Index/Abstracts of Congressional Publications and Public*
8. *Laws 1970—* . Congressional Information Service.
American Statistics Index (ASI) 1974— Congressional Information Service.

Even these eight sources may be too many, and some smaller depository libraries may not have all of the commercials listed. However, we have emphasized flexibility, and each library is, of course, free to make up its own list of absolutes. The main point to remember is not to overload patrons. Too much information is as bad as too little. Documents are very confusing to persons who have never worked with them before, and especially to people who have truck loads of indexes and abstracts thrown at them all at once.

The most important tool is the *Monthly Catalog of U. S. Government Publications*. If this were the only source covered, a patron would have a good idea of the types of materials available from the federal government and would be able to start accessing them immediately. The *Monthly Catalog* is filled with strange and wondrous cabalistic numbers which all look alike to the uninitiated, so it must be presented in as simplified a manner as possible. The most important parts for beginners are the three basic indexes—author, title, and subject. The general arrangement of citation by Superintendent of Documents class system which follows an agency format should be covered also. the black dot indicating a depository publication is likewise important. Finally, the only numbers which should be emphasized for basic instruction are the entry number to enable the patron to get from the indexes to the main text and the Superintendent of Documents class number (when that system is used by the library) to enable the patron to retrieve the publication.

Another important detail to include in documents bibliographical lectures is the depository system in North Carolina. We now have thirty-five depositories, including the regional depository in Chapel Hill. This entire system is a network of documents cooperation, and a patron has the other depositories at his

disposal through interlibrary loan. The regional at the top of the pyramid attempts to supply, where needed, any of the other depositories with items they do not select.

The atmosphere created during a documents bibliographic instruction program is the last point to discuss, but certainly not the least important. In fact, it is the most important part of the program. If the documents staff prove themselves to be friendly and cooperative, patrons will come back often. A helpful and understanding librarian does more to encourage use than all the gimmicks and fancy methods ever created. This attitude is an absolute necessity in any outreach endeavor. It is the keystone upon which all else depends.

Cover the basics, keep it simple, direct and uncomplicated, create in impression of eager and friendly helpfulness, and users will come back again and again. Your job will be easier, the patrons will have been well served, and the system created out of tax dollars for the use of the citizens will work better.

Ridley R. Kessler, Jr. is Federal Documents Librarian, Wilson Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

Personalized Subscription Service From **MCGREGOR**

In today's computer world, it is nice to know librarians communicate with their own McGregor "home office" representative.

Title changes, research, additions, cancellations or plain problems are handled promptly by a simple phone call or letter.

This saves librarians time, while keeping their subscription portfolio current at all times.

McGregor serves libraries large and small with all American and foreign titles.

Our prepayment plan, collective single invoicing and automatic renewal option makes library management easier and more efficient.

Write for your free McGregor service brochure today.

**Serving Libraries
—Since 1933**


MCGREGOR
Magazine Agency
Mt. Morris, Illinois 61054