

The Circulation Department: It Makes the Library Run

Doris Hulbert

Do all circulation librarians hesitate when asked, "What do you do?" I have been responsible for circulation service in academic libraries since 1971, and I have grown accustomed, after telling people that I am the head of a circulation department, to facing courteous but blank stares. What can one say, after all, to a person who checks out books for a living? "What kind of charge cards do you prefer?" "How much do you charge in fines?" Or the more familiar, "Oh. I just love books." In frustration, I finally responded to an aunt who asked what it was that I *really* did, "I manage the department which makes the library run." At least this elicited a ripple of excitement rather than a polite smile. Self-important? Perhaps. Inaccurate? Let's see.

What are the responsibilities of the major traditional divisions in an academic library? Acquisitions and Serials, in a sense, gather materials and make a library grow. Cataloging makes a library behave; it imposes order by organizing holdings. Reference makes a library respond; it takes or leads people to the materials which will answer their questions. And Circulation? Circulation makes the library run.

Most people demand of a library that it (1) keep its doors open; (2) lend books; (3) keep books on the shelves where they are supposed to be; and (4) account for those books which are not on the shelves. Since the Circulation Desk is usually the only point in a library which is staffed during all the hours the library is open, it keeps the doors open. The last three demands constitute the daily routines of circulation work. Thus, it would appear to most people that the Circulation Department does make the library run.

Circulation Responsibilities

What specifically does the circulation department do to make a library run? The functions of most departments may be grouped into two major categories: (1) keeping records and controlling the movement of materials and (2) providing services to the public. The ability to balance harmoniously these two categories of functions is the mark of an efficient and effective circulation staff.

Recordkeeping and Control Functions. Only after we started unchaining books were circulation departments necessary. As Barbara Evans Markuson points out, "Chaining books provided integrity of inventory control, guaranteed on-premise accessibility, eliminated overdue, and, in general, contributed to the well-being of the public service staff. Once the chain was severed, we began ever

so imperceptibly to meet more and more user demands."¹

Since we no longer chain books, it has been necessary to devise specialized recordkeeping systems to keep accurate track of materials removed from the collection and to ensure their return so that they may be used again. The aim of any circulation system should be to maximize availability and to minimize complications. Behind every system should be clear and consistent policies free of bureaucratic jargon.

No one should feel uncomfortable with the idea of "controlling" users of materials. This is "control" in the sense of regulating and guiding, not ruling. In spite of all the protestations about rules and regulations, no one really would be happy with a library run on the honor system. Even though an individual may want to be an exception to the regulations, he or she still wants them to apply to everyone else. Short of reverting to chained books or, less drastically, closed stacks, we must of necessity keep records and establish regulations. Care must be taken, however, that the recordkeeping system be accurate, easy to use, clear, and as free of red tape as possible. Few library experiences can do more to affect adversely an individual's lifelong perceptions of libraries than encountering a senseless maze of restrictions justified with meaningless jargon.

The activities representing the recordkeeping or control functions of most circulation departments include:

Materials—

- ascertaining and assigning appropriate loan periods;
- checking out and recording those materials on loan;
- checking in and clearing records of those materials returned;
- returning materials as quickly as possible to the shelves;
- determining fines or bills owed;
- taking inventory and weeding the collection;
- shifting the collection and planning for growth;
- selecting low- or no-use materials for compact shelving or remote storage;
- controlling book loss by visual inspection or through use of a security gate or detection system;
- shelfreading;
- assisting in conservation and preservation by identifying mutilated books or those in need of repair;
- assisting in collection development by maintaining statistics on use by classification;
- maintaining statistics on building use and loans;
- monitoring heavily used books to consider ordering additional copies

Users—

- determining eligibility of potential borrowers;
- securing and maintaining accurate and current borrower information;
- issuing borrowers' cards;

- maintaining records of books checked out, overdue, or lost by each borrower;
- maintaining lists of desired materials which cannot be located or which are charged out to others;
- securing the return of requested materials;
- notifying users that requested materials are now available;
- notifying users of fines, overdues, or bills;
- accepting and recording payments of fines and bills;
- maintaining statistics of use by user category;
- undertaking user surveys;
- searching for materials not located;
- reordering missing books.

Most circulation recordkeeping revolves around accounting for books which are not where they are supposed to be—linking books with individuals or locations other than their normal place on the shelves. This link may be accomplished by filling out and filing charge cards or by reading punched cards, OCR labels, or bar codes for both book and borrower identification. Whichever linking method is used, it is crucial that information be kept current and accurate. One of the greatest benefits of an on-line circulation system is that borrower and location information can be updated immediately and “stops” placed on both individuals and books until correct information can be secured.

Public Service Functions. Circulation activities which may be considered more public service than recordkeeping (although keeping track of thousands of borrowers and books is certainly a public service of the highest order) include:

- explaining and enforcing policies and procedures;
- answering questions, both informational and directional;
- assisting people in the use of the catalog;
- acting as readers’ advisers;
- providing class reserve reading services;
- ensuring confidentiality of records;
- maintaining a browsing collection;
- assisting users with equipment;
- providing special services and equipment for senior citizens and the handicapped;
- providing lockers, carrels, faculty studies;
- mounting displays;
- providing pens, pencils, paper, calculators, typewriters, etc.;
- promoting special services;
- providing feedback on collections, services, personnel, equipment, and environment to library administrators;
- overseeing the building;
- maintaining security and handling emergencies;

- reporting equipment malfunctions and maintenance problems;
- providing photocopying services;
- providing change;
- lending art work and audiovisual equipment and materials;
- reserving special rooms.

Training Circulation Staff

Wise staff selection is the foundation upon which an effective training program is built. A circulation department does not need someone who already knows the distinctions between a serial and a periodical so much as it needs an individual who is willing to learn, who is untroubled by hearing the same question several times a day, and who is enthusiastic about answering the question every time it is asked. It is easier to train staff members to perform the recordkeeping and preservation functions than it is to teach them the interpersonal skills essential for the proper service orientation.

Qualifications. To fulfill their recordkeeping or control and public service functions, staff members must possess a unique combination of clerical and interpersonal skills. Good circulation staff members should be:

- knowledgeable and enthusiastic about books and materials;
- approachable, personable, sympathetic, and helpful;
- systematic and organized yet adaptable;
- highly accurate;
- willing to accept some repetitious tasks;
- tactful;
- capable of getting along with a wide range of people;
- self-controlled, calm, and patient;
- capable of coping with problems and stress;
- willing to ask questions and to interact;
- willing to learn and willing to instruct;
- good at listening, explaining, and interpreting;
- conscientious;
- totally familiar with policies and procedures;
- firm yet flexible;
- assertive, not aggressive or passive;
- willing to refer to a higher authority.

The head of a circulation department must be adept at promoting harmonious staff operations and at coping with an infinite variety of problems and a broad range of individuals. When challenged or questioned, good department heads should also be able to project themselves into the minds of their interrogators to acquire a perspective and provide sympathy.² Department heads must be diplomatic and must be able to defuse someone filled with righteous or unrighteous wrath. The department head's ability to perform and manage well directly affects users' frustration levels.

Recordkeeping. As with any training program, preliminaries should include instruction about the policies of the organization as a whole, the purpose and place of the department within the organization, the relationship of the department to other departments, the duties and significance of the particular position, and the relationship of this position to others in the department. Training cannot be effective without this understanding.

Recordkeeping procedures performed in a circulation department are unique and vary from library to library. The best training consists of individual instruction and step-by-step explanations and demonstrations, with special attention paid to ensuring that the peculiar jargon of libraries is clear from the outset. New staff should perform routines under close but congenial supervision, with ample time provided for questions, review, and discussions of the consequences of and methods for correcting errors. Manuals and simple, clear instruction sheets should be available for review and reinforcement.

Preservation. In addition to the clerical and technical matters related to circulation functions, staff will also need instruction in the nature of books and other materials and the care necessary for their preservation. They need to be alert to problems with bindings and paper and be aware of proper handling and shelving techniques. Because the staff sees all books going out of the library and coming back, it can play a vital role in the protection and preservation of disintegrating collections.

Service Orientation. While proficiency and accuracy in recordkeeping and technical routines are required, in the most effective circulation department these should be as unobtrusive as possible. What should be obvious is the presence of a group of enthusiastic, intelligent people who are there to help and who do. People who need books or information do not care whether we file according to AACR 2 or 22. Most come to the desk with the unspoken attitude, "Where's my book? If it's not here, where is it? When can I have it?" The reputation of an entire library can hinge on an inefficient, surly, or unknowledgeable desk assistant.

Absolutely devastating to good public service is the attitude that anyone can work in a circulation department—that it should function as the training ground for new library employees, with the implication that the better staff members will soon move on or up to "real" library work. There is no more important work in a library than helping the public, and no one in a library has more contact with the public than members of the circulation staff.

Training for proper service orientation should consist of instruction in and constant demonstration of several principles:

1. There is truly no such thing as a stupid question at a public service desk. People who must ask questions are defensive to begin with. No one wants to appear stupid, and if a staff member reveals even the slightest hint of a sneer or a patronizing attitude, the department, the library, and perhaps even libraries in general may have made an enemy for life.

2. People do not always know how to ask for what they want. "Negotiating" is frequently necessary to determine what is really being asked. Libraries are foreign territory to most of the population; and the language spoken, equally foreign. In explanations, oral and written, care must be taken to avoid jargon. What does "main entry" mean to someone using a card catalog for the first time? What does "classed separately" mean? For that matter, what is a book truck and what are stacks? While such terms are the requisite shorthand of any profession, the circulation staff must be skilled enough in interpersonal communication to sense difficulties and to offer clear, concise, nontechnical explanations.

3. Users of libraries want immediate help and expect immediate results. Lines in banks and supermarkets are expected and accepted; yet the prevailing attitude in libraries is that they are an anathema. While it is not feasible to satisfy all requests for service instantly, people should feel that everything possible is being done to help them when they request help. Staff should be delivery oriented.

4. Staff must be approachable. People are hesitant about interrupting staff members with their heads buried in books or those busily engaged in apparently complicated tasks or less complicated socializing. Body language, non-verbal behavior, can turn people away. No matter how busy a staff member is, time should be taken at least to make eye contact and acknowledge the person's presence or, better yet, to tell a waiting individual, "I'll be right with you."

5. Staff attitude should be positive, not negative; assertive, not aggressive or passive. We may not be able to satisfy all users' requests, but we need not send users away angry. Even if we cannot accede, we can be sympathetic and provide clear reasons for our actions. The way we answer questions can also affect a user's perceptions of service. Instead of saying, "Go look it up in the catalog," a more positive response would be, "The catalog will list the book by author's name, title, or subject." Instead of turning someone away with, "The book is missing," we can say, "Perhaps the Reference staff can help you locate an alternative source of information."

6. Information is only as valuable as it is accessible. There should be no trace of a proprietary attitude in the minds of the staff. Staff members are not employed to protect materials, to save books from the ravaging hoarders. They must not take too literally the description of a library as a "fortress of knowledge." A library should not be viewed as a place to be defended against the attacks of users, and users should not feel they need to storm the walls. Books and other materials are costly and should not be abused, but they are of no value unless they are used. Restrictions on use should be kept to an absolutely necessary minimum.

7. There is a difference between a rule and a policy. A rule is a *prescribed guide* for conduct or action; a policy is an *overall plan* embracing goals and acceptable procedures. Both are established to provide for the general and not the specific; they are not carved in stone. Judicious interpretations and exceptions are to be expected. As Guy Lyle states, "Regulations must be tempered with consultation and common sense."³

8. Staff members must be willing to refer without feeling threatened. They must understand that policies stand despite exceptions, and they must understand that not everyone has authority to make exceptions. The role of the circulation staff is often difficult. They interact most with the public and must answer most of the public's questions. Thus, they frequently find themselves faced with having to state rules and policies which they have not made. Staff naturally resent it when a user with a special problem wants to talk to "someone in charge." If a staff member has explained the policy "by the book" and the department head makes the requested exception, staff may feel as if their authority has been eroded or their roles diminished. The department head should spend considerable time in developing the proper public service orientation so that this attitude does not prevail. It can be extremely destructive to morale. Staff should expect support from management but must understand



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that exceptions do not really challenge policy—these are individual cases to which policies are not applied because of managerial decisions. There is nothing threatening about someone's asking for special attention. We all do it—claim that our circumstances are unusual and deserve consideration. What could be more natural than a faculty member's saying that he or she is the only one who ever uses an esoteric journal written in Polish and should be allowed to take it to an office for several months? Or a student's swearing that reserve material is late because of car trouble?

A staff which understands, accepts, and puts into practice these principles will have the right attitude for providing good public service.

Running Well

Circulation departments fulfill numerous recordkeeping or control and public service functions. The most efficient and effective departments are those which can maintain a balance between these two categories of responsibilities, with emphasis on providing user satisfaction. Circulation departments should be staffed by individuals who possess both clerical and interpersonal skills and who are well-schooled in principles which foster high-level service. If a circulation department can satisfy users most—if not all—of the time, then truly it can be said to make the library run—and run well.

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