

# Just What Is Reference Service?

Ilene Nelson, Guest Editor

One of my favorite fables is that of the blind men and the elephant. You may remember how the blind man holding the elephant's tail decided that the animal was very much like a piece of rope, while the blind man who had his arms around the elephant's leg was sure this creature was like a tree. Yet the blind man who felt the elephant's great side had evidence that an elephant most resembled a wall. Each man knew something about an elephant.

Describing reference service is as much a challenge as the one which confronted those blind men in describing their elephant. Reading "The Future of Reference Service" in the October 1988 issue of *College and Research Libraries News*, I was reminded that reference service has always defied a hard and fast definition. Not only is there variation in what constitutes reference service in different types of libraries, but the range of services offered by reference librarians in the same kind of library in the same community is also quite likely to exhibit as many unique features as similarities. Reference service is, in fact, the sum of all of its various and everchanging parts.

Several facets of reference service are examined in this issue of *North Carolina Libraries*. Each article conveys a piece of the whole picture. Plummer Jones considers the perceived quality of service in a college library, reminding us that reference service cannot be considered out of an institutional context. Nan McMurtry offers refreshing and practical suggestions for the beginning reference librarian. Sheila Intner discusses collection development, a topic which is always of interest to reference librarians. Elizabeth Dunn focuses on library instruction as it is being affected by changes in information delivery. Anna Donnelly, Marcia Clontz, and Coyle Barry give examples of reference service adapting to advances in technology and evolving client needs and expectations. Jeanie Welch and Lorraine Penninger challenge librarians in different types of libraries to cooperate in offering reference service

to their communities and to the state.

Now, close your eyes for a moment and conjure up your image of reference service. Which part of the elephant are you touching?

## Honorary and Life Membership in NCLA

The 1988-1989 Honorary and Life Membership Committee requests your recommendations for persons you consider worthy to be honorary or life members of NCLA. Suggestions should be accompanied by a biographical sketch, including contributions to libraries or librarianship. These suggestions should be sent to the Committee Chairperson by January 31, 1989.

The NCLA by-laws provide for the Honorary and Life Membership Committee to seek suggestions from all members and to recommend names for these honors to the Executive Board at the Spring Workshop prior to the Conference.

Criteria for selection are as follows:

1. Honorary memberships may be given to non-librarians in the State who have rendered important services to the library interests of North Carolina. Honorary memberships should be given at a time considered appropriate in relation to the contribution made.
2. Life memberships may be given to librarians who have served as members of the North Carolina Library Association and who have made noteworthy contributions to librarianship in the State. These memberships are limited to librarians who have retired.
3. Contributions of both groups should have been beyond the local level.

Please send your recommendations to:

Waltrene Canada, Chair  
Honorary and Life Membership Committee  
F. D. Bluford Library  
NC A&T State University  
1601 E. Market Street  
Greensboro, NC 27411

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