

*Practicing Reference . . .*

**What Do You Do All Day?\***

Mary Whisner\*\*

*When a patron assumes Ms. Whisner works part-time because she spends only a few hours a day in the reference office, she is inspired to examine the full range of duties and activities, many done away from the reference desk or office, that make up the job of the modern reference librarian.*

¶1 Do you ever get the feeling that people just don't understand what you do?

¶2 A regular patron recently commented that he hadn't seen me in the reference office for a while. I explained that I am usually only there a couple of hours a day. His response? "Oh, so you're just working part-time now. Cool." Well, not exactly.

¶3 It was not always that way for me. When I started working as a librarian, in 1988, the reference office was my only office. My fellow reference librarian and I were there forty hours a week, usually together, but spelling each other for lunch and other breaks. Our chief duty was to answer questions as they came in.

¶4 We did venture out of the reference office from time to time. My colleague was also the editor of the *Current Index to Legal Periodicals*, and sometimes he took a stack of journals to a quiet corner of the library to index. I had a summer project, sorting out the microfiche Supreme Court briefs, and spent hours kneeling by the microfiche cabinets. We went out into the reading room to shelve *Shepard's* supplements. I spent some time straightening out some horrible misfiling in the *Labor Relations Reporter* (and then maintaining the set for a year or so). We gave talks to the first-year legal research and writing students. But, most of the time, we sat in the office and responded to what came in.

¶5 Gradually our duties began to change. We were asked to give guest lectures in upper-level classes and this required some time to prepare notes and handouts. I began writing a library column for the law school's weekly newsletter. Once in a while a faculty member asked a question that developed into an involved research project for which we thought a cover memo would be appropriate.

¶6 I don't think I questioned the arrangement of being in the reference office all day, but when my supervisor found some space for us and began scheduling us

---

\* © Mary Whisner, 2002.

\*\* Assistant Librarian for Reference Services, Marian Gould Gallagher Law Library, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington.

for shifts in—and out—of the reference office, it made a big difference.<sup>1</sup> We continued to pick up duties in addition to answering the phone and talking to patrons who came in. One professor was pleased with a guest lecture and told a colleague, so we were asked to do another. We did a good job on one research project, so the professor asked more tough questions. We were invited to speak at CLEs. And so on. Having the office away from the reference office probably contributed to the ratcheting up of our duties, since it made it possible to work on the projects and classes that required some uninterrupted time. (Over the years, we also lost some duties. Reference librarians no longer shelve supplements in the reading room. I no longer file the *Labor Relations Reporter*. And the *Current Index to Legal Periodicals* is now edited by a part-time employee who is not part of the reference staff.)

¶7 We know that we are busy when we are not in the reference office. Why is it important to explain that to others? Does it really matter if a patron thinks I have switched to part-time work? Isn't it enough for my colleagues and me to know that we are working hard? No, it isn't. First, decision makers need to know. Otherwise, when budgets are tight (and it seems that they are always tight!), they will think that we are overstaffed and will cut accordingly. Moreover, if they do not understand the full range of what reference librarians do, they might not look for all the relevant skills in candidates.<sup>2</sup> And when they are setting our salaries or considering us for promotions or jobs at other institutions, they might discount the range of our experience. Second, we need our supervisors to know about the full range of our work, not just the front-line reference duties. If we are doing complex, demanding, creative work outside the reference office, then we should get credit for it—and have our schedules and workspaces set up so that we can do it. Third, our users—or at least some of them—need to know, so that they can make better use of our services. If professors think that our only role is to answer telephone questions, they will never think to request a bigger research project or a guest lecture. Fourth, *we* need to know. We need to be aware of what we are doing so we can take pride in our work, fight burnout, advocate for ourselves, and develop our talents.

¶8 There is another important audience for this information: people entering the profession. Each year, we have several law librarianship students working part-time in the reference office. (They also work part-time in circulation and technical services.) They face many challenges in trying to develop competence and confidence for just that part of reference work that takes place in the reference office. There is a lot to learn, and they get a very good exposure to that part of reference

- 
1. Thanks, Mary! (Mary A. Hotchkiss was assistant librarian for public services at the Gallagher Law Library from late 1989 to mid-1991. She is now a faculty member—and a library user—at our parent institution, the University of Washington School of Law.)
  2. Many job ads are asking for a wide range of experience and skills. Beatrice Tice, *Too Many Jobs, Too Few Job Seekers? A Study of Law Librarianship Job Data Samples, 1989–1999*, 93 LAW LIBR. J. 71, 80 tbls. 8–9, 85–87, 2001 LAW LIBR. J. 2, ¶ 19 tbls. 8–9, ¶¶ 29–33. It seems that most employers are well aware that reference librarians are asked to do much more than sit at a desk and respond to patrons who come in or call.

work. But often around the middle of the year, they begin to wonder what we full-time librarians do when we *aren't* in the reference office. They need to know so that they can shape their own careers—so they can decide what jobs to apply for and what professional activities to pursue.

¶9 The first step in explaining what we do is becoming aware of it ourselves. That is easier said than done. Some days I boot up my computer in the morning, check e-mail, and then look up and find it is a few hours later. Those hours might involve many different aspects of my job. “Checking e-mail” can be professional reading—keeping up with developments in the profession. It can also be a way of following the news of one’s own institution: it is the way I see notices to faculty, announcements of speakers, and so on. “Checking e-mail” often leads to tasks related to many different aspects of my job. Perhaps there is a message about an upcoming meeting; I need to check my calendar. A message about a project for an intern I supervise has me put on my middle manager’s hat. Messages about a research project from yesterday require more work or follow-up with a faculty member. Some messages spark ideas—I should let Prof. A. know about this; I wonder if that would make a good article for the law library column in the school newsletter; maybe I should raise this with the director. A message might remind me of an approaching deadline for a class or a project and lead me to open up several other applications—so, while I am ostensibly just checking e-mail, I am also running a Westlaw search, looking at a Web site, or editing a document.

¶10 Even though some days can get away from me like that, I—and the other librarians in my department—do quite consciously try to note what we are doing. Some of the motivation comes from above. Each summer, a few weeks after the end of our fiscal year on June 30, each department submits an annual report to the library director. As well as providing information to the boss, this is an opportunity for us to think about our year’s activities. Each of us has our own smaller annual report, too, because the library director asks for a statement of our accomplishments and goals before each annual evaluation.<sup>3</sup>

¶11 Generally, we do not look forward to writing either of these documents. They take work. We have to gather data and add up numbers (how many classes taught, how many hours spent on faculty projects, etc.). Some people find it vexing to go through calendars and notes to figure out what classes they spoke to and what professional workshops they attended. (Let’s not even talk about the challenge of coming up with goals or reflecting on our success with last year’s goals.)

¶12 Gradually, we have learned some ways to make gathering the data less of a bother. For example, we keep a list of our classes (with statistics about prepara-

---

3. In addition to these annual documents—a departmental report or a personal report—I have heard of librarians who keep diaries of what they do each day. They note the hours they are on duty at the reference desk and check off the various projects they work on. That is probably a constructive habit, but I do not happen to have it. For readers who are curious about the range of law librarians’ work, including reference librarians and others, at and away from the reference desk, I commend Frank G. Houdek, comp., “*A Day in My Law Library Life*,” *Circa 1997*, 89 *LAW LIBR. J.* 157 (1997).

tion time and student contacts) as we go along, and most of us keep a list of our publications as they appear. Sometimes we write up special events (for example, our National Library Week activities) when they are fresh, rather than waiting until the end of the fiscal year when our memories are dim.

¶13 Even though creating the documents is work, I do think the exercise is useful. I am generally quite impressed with what my department has done. It counteracts the feeling that reference librarians are sometimes prone to that we don't have anything to show for our work.<sup>4</sup> Developing a historical record is useful, too. When did we start our public KeyCite subscription? How many interns did we have three years ago? When did we start our Bridge-the-Gap program? Cross-year comparisons may let us know why we felt so busy—for instance, last year we learned that we had spent 65% more hours on faculty projects and had 67% more instructional contacts than the year before. (My guess is that we will see a drop when we tally the statistics for 2001–02. I don't think our upward trajectory has continued. Whew. But of course, we will do our tally to see.)

¶14 Now I would like to talk a little about what we do outside the reference office and why it fits with front-line reference work. Why are these outside tasks done by *reference* librarians?

¶15 I have not done a literature review to see how library science thinkers define “reference” these days. So let's start with a seat-of-the-pants sense that reference is about helping people find information. Broadly read, that definition can include almost everyone who works in a library—catalogers are helping people find information by creating good bibliographic records and a workable user interface; shelvers are helping people find information by putting the books in the right places. So we need to refine the definition somehow. Suppose we add the condition that reference work involves interacting with library users to show them how to use materials to find information. That is also not quite narrow enough, because it includes the student at the circulation desk who directs a patron to the catalog or library map. This business of definitions is harder than it looks. I am reminded of a recent faculty colloquium when a jurisprudentially minded professor asked the speaker what he meant by “law.” I had not been bothered by the speaker's failure to define the term—I knew he was not talking about art or cooking or astronomy. Even though I majored in philosophy, I don't think we need to go to first principles before we can have a conversation about anything. So maybe I will set aside this effort to pin down what “reference” work is. Instead, I will take the work at the reference desk—ready reference, instruction, direction, referral, and so on—as paradigmatic, and then show how our other duties are related to it.

¶16 Before I go too much further, I should say that I am well aware that our reference department may not be the same as your reference department, or that of someone else. Maybe reference librarians at another school spend more time

---

4. For a more in-depth exploration of this concern, see Mary Whisner, *Reference Librarians Do Not Work in Steel*, 92 LAW LIBR. J. 601, 2000 LAW LIBR. J. 44.

teaching first-year law students. Others do more with collection development. Others supervise staff in a computer lab. And, of course, there are reference librarians in all types of law libraries. A law firm librarian is less likely to give a guest lecture in a formal class—but more likely to train paralegals to use EDGAR. Maybe they work on projects for clients or in support of client work for which their time is billed. Maybe their other duties are cataloging or acquisitions. Or maybe they spend substantially all of their time at the reference desk. I am *not* saying that the particular balance of what my colleagues and I do is the only balance possible. I am just exploring how much the away-from-the-desk tasks are still “reference work.” The story will be different in different libraries, but I suspect that many reference librarians also have a cluster of duties that are similarly “reference work” even when they are away from the reference desk.

¶17 Looking at our annual report for last year, I see the first category is “departmental organization and staffing.” “Bureaucracy” is sometimes seen as a naughty word, but the fact is that having people working together in complex institutions is helped along by some organization and planning. When new interns start their school year, we train them. Planning the training sessions and updating the training materials takes time—away-from-the-desk time—and, of course, the training sessions take time too. Preparing a schedule that gives everyone a fair workload, good experience, breaks when needed, and so on also requires work. Meeting to discuss departmental problems, policies, and projects: off-desk time. Evaluating employees: more off-desk time. Writing the department’s annual report: more time. It all adds up—but these administrative tasks are important to the front-line work.

¶18 We devote a lot of time to faculty services. We do research projects that in some schools might be done by faculty research assistants. That is partly because our school tends not to hire many research assistants and partly because our faculty members have come to value the quality of the research they receive from us. Some of these projects are done while we are on duty in the reference office. Others might begin in the reference office but are finished in our own offices. I think this sort of research project grows naturally from direct reference. It is a short leap from a faculty member asking “Where can I find statistics on charitable giving?” to “Could you please provide me with statistics on charitable giving?”

¶19 Our next big category of off-desk work is instruction. When we give a talk to a law school class or other group, we are helping them find information by giving them the skills to research. Giving a tour to a paralegal class before the students start their homework is a way to make time at the reference desk more efficient.

¶20 In our department, one librarian, Nancy McMurrer, serves as the liaison to CALR services (chiefly LexisNexis and Westlaw but also Loislaw and VersusLaw). Some of the work she does is administrative—helping to coordinate the university and phone company staff to get a phone line for a stand-alone printer, for instance, or getting an LL.M. student’s password and ID extended because she did not graduate when originally planned. Other aspects are more closely tied to core reference functions. When she gets current documentation to

the other reference staff or arranges for the vendor representatives to train us, she is making it possible for us to provide better front-line service. When she sets up training for faculty and students (and even more so when she offers the classes herself), she is helping them find information by developing their research skills.

¶21 Another significant category of our away-from-the-reference-office work is writing. Here we include the “Law Library News” column in the *Condon Crier*, our weekly law school newsletter<sup>5</sup> (edited by Ann Hemmens), and our Web site<sup>6</sup> (edited by Cheryl Nyberg). In both of these forums, we are helping our patrons find information—by teaching them research skills, by providing them with research guides, and by giving them easy links to the sources we select as potentially most useful to the Washington legal researcher. This category also includes writing for an audience outside our own institution. Most of our professional writing relates to reference—from research guides<sup>7</sup> and reviews of reference books<sup>8</sup> to reference books themselves.<sup>9</sup>

¶22 Finally, we also spend time away from the reference office participating in our institutions and our profession. For example, reference librarians serve on library committees to help make decisions about automated systems, collection development, hiring, and, of course, parties. We also serve on law school committees. And we are active in professional associations—AALL, our AALL chapter, and sometimes a bar association or other group. Even when we are not explicitly participating, we are citizens, so to speak—that is, we read the newspaper that comes to all university staff, the weekly e-mail newsletter from the university library, the quarterly print newsletter from the health sciences library, the law school’s alumni magazine, and the state bar journal. We glance at publishers’ brochures, we read all kinds of newsletters and journals. Some of these activities may not seem directly tied to front-line reference—and, indeed, the activities are shared by our colleagues from other departments—but there may be fewer than six degrees of separation from reference.<sup>10</sup> In order to be prepared to do a good job in the reference office, we need to be aware of what is going on in our institutions and our profession.

¶23 We reference librarians are working even when we are away from the reference office. Managing our departments, doing research, coordinating CALR, teaching, and writing all contribute to our patrons’ ability to find information. Our away-from-the-desk work is valuable and challenging. And it is “reference work.”

---

5. For an archive of the columns that have appeared in the *Condon Crier*, see MARION GOULD GALLAGHER LAW LIBRARY, UNIV. OF WASH. SCH. OF LAW, LAW LIBRARY NEWS, at <http://lib.law.washington.edu/news/LawLibNews.html> (last visited May 31, 2002).

6. Marion Gould Gallagher Law Library, Univ. of Wash. Sch. of Law, at <http://lib.law.washington.edu> (last visited May 31, 2002).

7. *E.g.*, PENNY A. HAZELTON ET AL., WASHINGTON LEGAL RESEARCHER’S DESKBOOK 3D (2002).

8. *E.g.*, Nancy McMurrer, Book Review, LEGAL INFO. ALERT, Feb. 2001, at 8 (reviewing MEDICAL ETHICS: CODES, OPINIONS, AND STATEMENTS (2000)).

9. *E.g.*, CHERYL RAE NYBERG, STATE ADMINISTRATIVE LAW BIBLIOGRAPHY: PRINT AND ELECTRONIC SOURCES (2000).

10. See Ben Wildavsky, *Small World, Isn’t It?* U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., Apr. 1, 2002, at 68 (“University of Alaska-Fairbanks psychologist Judith Kleinfeld says the six-degrees concept may be ‘the academic equivalent of an urban myth.’”).