

# Facing Reality: *The Death of the Reference Desk?*

## Quality Service and Accessibility Are Vital to Reference Services

by Mary K. Marzolla

It was the issue, rather than the catchy title, that drew a large audience to the AALL Annual Meeting and Conference program titled "Facing Reality: The Death of the Reference Desk" — although the title motivated a few wits to propose alternatives such as "As You Like It" and "All's Well That Ends Well." These titles were appropriate because the program centered on the best way of providing patrons the reference services they want and whether the reference desk is still needed to accomplish that end.

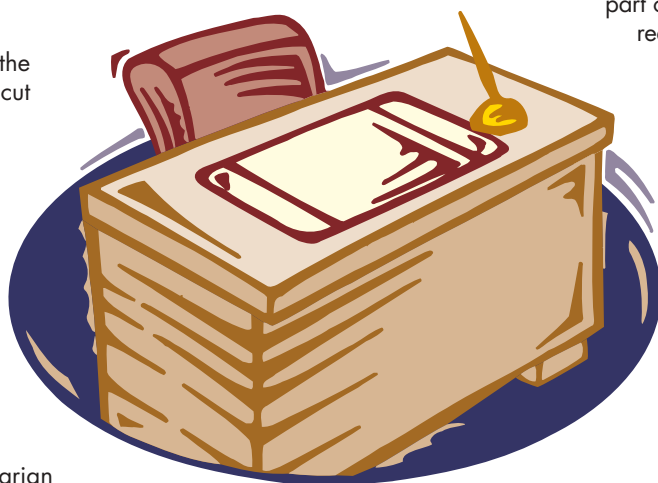
**Celeste Feather** of the University of Connecticut School of Law moderated the program by posing the following questions:

- Is the reference desk still needed or wanted?
- If the reference librarian isn't sitting out in the open, will patrons still ask questions?
- If there is no desk, how do you reach the patrons?
- Is the reference desk the cornerstone of good service?
- What are alternatives?
- What are the challenges?

To address those questions, the panel consisted of three law librarians with diverse patron bases: **Christine Ryan** of the Vermont Law School, an academic librarian who closed the desk the previous year; **Judith Meadows** of the State Law Library of Montana, a state librarian who has a reference desk and continues to advocate it; and **Susan P. Siebers** of Katten Muchin Zavis, a firm librarian, who does not use a reference desk.

In the academic library, Ryan closed the desk in anticipation of participating in this AALL panel. Traditionally the students tended to direct reference questions to the individual librarians who taught them legal research. This was reinforced once the desk was closed. Since the challenge was to continue to provide good reference service, the librarians carry out more roaming reference; conduct extensive training for circulation students, who can then distinguish which questions to answer — e.g., direction questions — and when to contact the reference staff for more in-depth questions; and provide more informational

brochures. Ryan pointed out that part of the reason



the closed desk has worked so well is that the school is relatively small and the librarians' offices are highly visible in the library. Ryan concluded that reference services did not suffer from the lack of a desk because the library staff has received several service awards.

The state library uses an "Information Desk." It has three basic types of patrons. The first, legal clientele, tend not to admit they don't know the answer. The second, teenagers and young adults, go directly to the computers and take the first answer they see. "To them, you're hiding" if you aren't out in the open for easy consultation, Meadows said. The third type is the hesitant patron who really does not want to bother the librarians but will approach them if they are out in the open. Meadows used the department store Nordstrom's as an example of how people like to be treated: Ultimately, the way librarians first greet and welcome patrons is what gives patrons a positive impression of the library and its staff.

The library at Katten Muchin Zavis is set up so that the attorneys have to pass the librarians' offices to get to the books. The staff offices have windows that overlook the library, so the librarians are visible to the staff. New attorneys and staff receive a library orientation because in this setting, Siebers said, "Anyone who looks like they work in the library will get a reference question; you don't need a desk!" Because attorneys are used to billable work being valued, they will find you, Siebers said. The big challenge is to get involved in projects early on. The librarians are proactively seeking ways to get involved, Siebers explained.

Although the three panelists differed on whether or not a desk was necessary for them, all promoted pro-activism, accessibility, approachability and quality service that are valued by both the patron and the librarian. So the reference desk does not necessarily have to die, for "All's Well That Ends Well."

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