

# From Circulation to Access Services: The Shift in Academic Library Organization

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**SUMMARY.** This article traces the organizational shifts that have occurred in academic libraries with respect to the function of circulation. Up until WWII, the circulation department played a highly visible, central role in the mission of the academic library. The responsibilities assigned to the department were broad and included a variety of reader advisory services. Following WWII, the role of the department narrowed, and the work became mechanical and routine. The major forces affecting this change were the influence of scientific management, increasing specialization of labor, and the growing emphasis on unit efficiency. Since 1980, however, the function of the circulation department has begun to broaden once again. In many cases, new responsibilities have been added including interlibrary loan and document delivery. With the growth in the availability and cost of information and the decline in purchasing power, libraries have focused more intensely on broader goals and organizational effectiveness. Access services represents a renewed commitment to patron satisfaction and a willingness to experiment with different organizational structures to meet that primary goal.

## *INTRODUCTION*

In the past ten years, a noteworthy variation has emerged in library organization. This change has been more apt to occur in large academic libraries, and while its appearance is not yet prevalent, it has become an increasingly common organizational structure. At the nucleus of this new structure is the circulation depart-

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ment; the other components vary, but the most common elements are stack maintenance, reserve collections, interlibrary loans, current periodicals and document delivery. The term often used to describe this new structure is "access services," and in most cases, it represents an enlargement of circulation's responsibilities. From the perspective of private enterprise, this variation in organization may seem like another incremental change that determines the meager progress of public bureaucracies. But compared to the relative stagnation that has gripped library organizations during the past fifty years, this change may be one of the more significant attempts to refocus library services through internal restructuring.

A review of the literature on circulation and access services quickly reveals the lack of printed information on either topic. Most of the articles and books that deal with this aspect of library service are concerned with specific automated systems, statistics for collection development purposes, loan rules governing non-traditional formats, etc. Very little has been written on this unit's broader purpose and contribution to overall library goals. Fortunately, it is still possible to trace the evolution of the circulation unit by reviewing a few basic texts and thoughtful articles published since the 1930s.

Perhaps the most intriguing discovery gleaned from the literature is that the structure and scope of the circulation department in academic libraries has come nearly full circle in the past sixty years. From the turn of the century until WWII, the circulation department was at the core of library services. Its responsibilities were broad and its professional status was unquestioned. For the next thirty-five years, however, the unit's scope narrowed and its functions became highly routinized. Beginning in the 1980s, another shift occurred. Some circulation departments were renamed "access services" and reorganized around a larger purpose. This essay describes these organizational shifts that have occurred and explores some possible reasons behind the formation of access service departments.

### ***CIRCULATION: THE CORE OF LIBRARY SERVICES***

During most of the nineteenth century, academic libraries were primarily concerned with preservation. Undergraduate borrowing

was very restricted, and in many universities students were allowed to visit the library only once a week. The books were considered precious artifacts for a handful of privileged researchers; they were not necessary for a general education. Beginning in the late-1800s, some institutions began to loosen these restrictions, and the collections were viewed from a more practical and utilitarian perspective. Emphasis was placed not just on undergraduate teaching, but on undergraduate scholarship, which necessitated wider access to library materials.

This shift in higher educational theory and practice created an organizational change within academic libraries. The circulation or loan department took on greater responsibility and became the core of public services. The heyday of the circulation librarian is described in quaint detail by Brown and Bousfield in their classic 1933 text, *Circulation Work in College and University Libraries*.<sup>1</sup> Brown and Bousfield saw the loan department as the most important unit of the library. "Whatever the position of the library in the institution may be, the loan department should be the center of the activities of the library."<sup>2</sup>

The circulation or loan librarian was in the best position to know the students' needs and to recommend specific titles for their general edification. Circulating books and maintaining records was only an incidental part of the librarian's responsibility. Brown and Bousfield describe the department as much more than a passive agency. "Not only should it apply books wanted, it should stimulate, expand, and increase the intellectual needs of its readers."<sup>3</sup>

The loan librarian played an active role in library orientation. Reference staff worked primarily with graduate students, but in many colleges and universities, the loan librarian was responsible for instructing undergraduates. In most academic libraries, there was very little differentiation between the reference and the loan librarian. Another major function of the department was to track patrons' unsuccessful searches and analyze their causes. This responsibility put the loan librarian in a position to recommend specific remedies including the purchase of new titles, investigations into binding delays, and faster cataloging procedures.

Brown and Bousfield predicted that the role of the circulation department would expand further as a result of continued experiments in certain prestigious institutions such as the University of

Chicago, Harvard, and Johns Hopkins. Following the spirit of Bertrand Russell, who saw a regrettable tendency in newer universities to embrace the lecture method and insist on class attendance, these institutions were emphasizing the acquisition of knowledge through the wide use of books and research.<sup>4</sup> Brown and Bousfield expected these changes in teaching to have a profound impact on the library. The loan librarian would need to provide greater personalized service, more guidance, and intellectual discussion of the best books.

### *CIRCULATION: SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT AND ROUTINE LABOR*

Soon after Brown and Bousfield published their text, however, the function of the circulation department began to change. Frederick Taylor (1856-1915), whose ideas on scientific management had revolutionized private industry, was beginning to influence the service sector and public bureaucracies.<sup>5</sup> Brown and Bousfield recognized a certain division of labor between public services and cataloging, but they did not envision the dramatic growth in departmentalization based on the principles of scientific management that took place following WWII.

Prior to Taylor, few rational theories of management existed. The tremendous growth in manufacturing following the industrial revolution necessitated some form of managerial control to maximize output. The cornerstone of scientific management was the quest for efficiency. The techniques involved the separation of planning from the execution of tasks, close examination of discrete functions, and the application of minor adjustments to improve productivity. Advocates of this theory argued that both micro and macro management were necessary components, but it was not uncommon for only the micro aspects to receive attention. Although Taylor may not have advocated a hyper-subdivision of labor, his theories contributed to this development in many larger libraries.

In academic libraries, the interest in greater efficiency and at least some of the tenets of scientific management was fueled by two

major developments: the growth in collections and the shortage of trained professional staff. Although many libraries hired more employees following WWII, it was still difficult to handle the physical and intellectual problems associated with the tremendous increase in published material. As libraries continued to grow in size, they continued to departmentalize. In public services, reference and information services were separated from circulation, and in technical services, the acquisition process was split from cataloging. In larger organizations, divisions were also made according to format (microforms, serials) and subject.

The professional who performed an array of services from charging books to providing reader services was seen as an inefficient use of skilled and higher paid labor. Specialization and the division of work resulted in breaking down some library tasks into several basic parts, each of which could be rapidly handled by easily-trained, relatively inexpensive clerical assistants. In an effort toward greater efficiency, the circulation department was eventually relieved of all functions save those associated with the charging of books. By the end of WWII, a stripped-down, mechanized, clerically-staffed circulation department hand replaced the broader concept so fondly documented by Brown and Bousfield. The atmosphere became businesslike and impersonal. Patron questions were discouraged because the clerical staff were not equipped to answer even general inquiries. Critics argued that effective service had been sacrificed, and fragmentation was destroying the unity behind a common service philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Despite these concerns, many academic libraries continued their march toward efficiency through specialization and division of labor under the banner of scientific management.

The interest in efficient use of trained staff sparked a lively debate concerning the role of the professional librarian in circulation. Alarmed by the threat to the professional status of loan librarians, Bousfield wrote an impassioned essay in 1944 calling for a halt in the current trend of relying primarily on clerical staff.<sup>7</sup> Bousfield used the same arguments favoring the division of labor and specialization to make his point. Of course, there should be some distinction between clerical and professional tasks, but the need for a professional loan librarian still existed and would likely increase in

the future. Loan librarians should not be overly concerned with the routine procedures, but should concentrate on planning, supervising, and advising readers. Bousfield predicated that the post-war boom in college enrollments would intensify the need for professional assistance at the circulation desk and argued that the scope of the department needed to be broadened to meet the demands of more students. In an attempt to re-professionalize the department, Bousfield recommended that the circulation librarian advise on all reading assignments and recreational reading and keep in close contact with the collection and service needs of graduate students and faculty. The reference department, on the other hand, would maintain its usual passive function of "aiding persons who apply for information, but would not project itself into the teaching departments or student activities."<sup>8</sup> Bousfield advocated a new title to reflect these broader responsibilities. He suggested replacing "circulation department" with either "public service" or "public relations department."

Bousfield was unable to reverse the trend toward a narrower and more technical role in circulation. As the universe of published material continued to grow, library administrators became increasingly concerned with acquiring new titles, cataloging, and maintaining high production schedules. Budgets were relatively healthy, compared to present times, so the focus remained on collection building and efficient processing. Emphasis shifted from providing reader services to relying on the resourcefulness of patrons.<sup>9</sup> With some basic instruction, most students were expected to fend for themselves, and since a significant portion of retrievable information was locally-available, the task was less complex than it is today.

Several larger academic libraries retained at least one professional in circulation, but even this limited presence was increasingly criticized. Brown and Bousfield's earlier recommendation that all contacts with patrons in college and university libraries be handled by professionally trained librarians had been largely dismissed. E. W. McDiarmid, speaking at a University of Chicago Library Institute in 1948, considered this recommendation excessive and wasteful. McDiarmid believed that most public contact at the circulation desk consisted of simple clerical or directional questions. "In

the interest of efficiency, we should give up the idea of providing experts for every public contact," he told his audience.<sup>10</sup> In the same year, the ALA Descriptive List of Professional Duties in Libraries concluded that "registration and circulation is non-professional in nature, requiring first of all, familiarity with good clerical procedures."<sup>11</sup>

By the 1950s, most library administrators and educators recognized that a significant portion of circulation work was routine, yet some directors continued to see a need for a professional in the department. Advising and instructing patrons had become the exclusive role of the reference department, but a professional in circulation might still be necessary to supervise larger staffs, establish policies, and improve relations with the public.<sup>12</sup> Despite some attempts to maintain and enrich the role of the professional circulation librarian, the job became categorized as "the most uninspired, unprogressive, and unrewarding" position in public services.<sup>13</sup>

The goal of efficiency and the attraction to scientific management prevailed into the 1960s and 1970s. It is likely that the steady increase in library loans during the period perpetuated this trend and preserved the clerical role of the department. Circulation staff had difficulty keeping up with the labor-intensive procedures of filing cards, typing notices, and reshelving books.<sup>14</sup> It did not seem practical or necessary to assign the department additional duties and more professional responsibilities.

During the 1970s, many academic libraries introduced some form of automation to their circulation procedures. The literature began to describe the application of systems analysis to circulation routines, but little attention was given to changes in staffing or functions as a result of automation. In a 1973 article, Laurence Miller attempted to answer some new concerns regarding the purpose, function, and staffing patterns of circulation departments by conducting a survey of 126 major university libraries.<sup>15</sup> Miller discovered that the limited purpose (checking out books, stack maintenance) of circulation remained firmly entrenched. Most administrators, including those who employed professional circulation librarians, clearly favored a restricted and largely technical/clerical role for the department. Despite the lack of functions requiring the specific assignment of professionals, Miller's Survey indicated that

over half the libraries responding still employed such personnel in their circulation departments. Most of these libraries reported that policy making and supervision justified a professional presence. Miller took exception with this position. He argued that policy making should take place at a higher level within the organization, and supervision did not require a professional degree.

Although Miller's survey confirmed the status quo, it also indicated a slightly different trend among those libraries that had more experience with automation. Of the 41 libraries that had undergone some form of computerization and systems analysis, Miller reported that 13 had broadened the range of functions allocated to the circulation. Only two indicated that the scope had been narrowed.<sup>16</sup> Miller found this result "surprising." At that time, many librarians expected automation to lead to a further diminution of circulation's responsibilities.

### ***ACCESS SERVICES: BACK TO THE FUTURE***

Miller's survey foreshadowed a new shift in the function and role of circulation departments in academic libraries. Since the mid-1970s, libraries have experienced several changes, both internal and external, which have had an impact on their mission, structure, and procedures. While the goal of unit efficiency seemed to dominate previous decades, in recent years libraries have been forced to examine their overall effectiveness. Library managers are still concerned with performing each task quickly without wasting resources, but they are becoming increasingly sensitive to broader priorities. Which tasks produce the most public benefit, and which tasks must we abandon to meet more important needs? The most significant developments shaping this shift include: the explosion of information in all formats, increasing costs of materials and labor, declining budgets, rising expectations on the part of the user community, and changes in library automation and the emergence of electronic and network technologies. In response to these changes, many academic libraries have reorganized and reassigned responsibilities. In the search for greater effectiveness, the goals and duties of the circulation department have broadened, and in some



institutions, the term "access services" has been selected to reflect this new focus.

One of the first changes to occur which affected the function of the department was a reaction to the principles of scientific management. Several widely-read management theorists, including Taylor admirers such as Drucker, began to criticize some of the principles of Taylorism because they resulted in a fragmentation of jobs without regard for quality.<sup>17</sup> In libraries, those who were influenced by Drucker's persuasive reasoning began to wonder if the circulation department had been subjected to a level of micro-management which resulted in increased efficiency without significant improvements in service. A few critics within the library profession argued that it did not matter how many items could be checked out in an hour or how many books were purchased if a significant portion of the users were unable to find the information they needed. In the mid-1970s, a few researchers including Buckland, Urquhart and Schofield began to look at failure rates, sometimes referred to as "frustration surveys."<sup>18</sup> Collections had become so large and complex, Buckland and others encouraged libraries to turn their attention to quality service and user satisfaction. How many times did students and faculty leave the library without the information in hand, and what prevented their success? Why did some students elect not to use the library? This type of analysis revived interest in user satisfaction and the larger service role of the circulation department.

In 1976, Betty Young wrote an article which questioned the limited clerical function of the circulation department.<sup>19</sup> The few studies that evaluated user satisfaction indicated a growing criticism of the level of assistance provided by the largely clerical and student staff at the circulation desk. Young made a connection between the reduction of circulation services to mechanical operations and a decline in user satisfaction:

After reading user criticisms of service, it would seem that another look should be taken at the role of this library service point, where users have their heaviest contact and where judgments tend to be made about the entire library. Much of the dissatisfaction expressed with librarians is based on the com-

mon misunderstandings as to who are the librarians, a confusion easily explained when it is remembered that the primary contact users have with the library is with the circulation staff. Should not, then, professional librarians be returned to circulation, the nerve center of the library?<sup>20</sup>

This renewed interest in the quality of service has accelerated in the last decade in response to changing economic conditions. In the past, the organization of libraries reflected a production orientation allowing for consistency, control, and considerable job specialization. With the decline in purchasing power and the proliferation of information being produced, access has become as important as ownership, and service programs have become as important as production schedules.<sup>21</sup> The documentation on price increases has been prolific and shocking. Data reported by the *Serials Librarian* show an average price of \$34.55 for a U.S. journal in 1975; by 1988, the average cost was \$117.75. The falling dollar helped to bring absurd increases—as much as 200 percent since 1985—in the cost of foreign subscriptions. Since 1986, the number of monographs purchased by research libraries has decreased 19 percent while the cost per title has increased 38 percent.<sup>22</sup> Libraries have been spending more and getting less. It became clear to many leaders that organizational survival depended upon the ability to redefine the library's mission and enhance the delivery of service. Thus, the concept of access acquired new meaning and higher priority.

Growth tends to produce departmentalization and fragmentation; stagnation or economic retrenchment usually results in consolidation. The recent philosophy of combining the concepts of access and ownership has had significant impact on the organization of circulation departments. Circulation services have been combined with other functions, often interlibrary loan and document delivery. The role of access services departments has become larger than simply checking out books. These enlarged units have assumed responsibility for the final step in the provision of information, regardless of its format or location. The term "access services" also gives an important signal to the users: the patron can get assistance even if he has failed to find an identified title. The regroup-

ing of certain functions represents an active commitment to improved service compared to the more passive and mechanical role of circulation departments during the middle part of this century.

Automation has been another important factor leading to broader responsibilities for many circulation departments. Manual files required considerable time and effort to maintain and could provide only minimal information. As a result, they had a limiting effect on the function of the department. Automation has helped to eliminate the labor intensity associated with manual files and opened the door to the possibilities of reorganization. Circulation departments were able to shed much of the routine labor and assume responsibility for more complex procedures which related to the work of other departments, particularly cataloging. The sophistication of integrated library systems required the circulation staff to have broader training and understanding of the techniques and principles of bibliographic control. Circulation's role in helping to create and maintain the bibliographic database has broadened the department's purpose and perspective. In some libraries, circulation units were transferred into technical service divisions; in other cases, the term "access services" was adopted to reflect the integration of technology and its impact on the traditional division of labor.

Automation has also provided complete inventory control systems that can generate a wealth of statistical detail, and has given circulation staff a more comprehensive understanding of the user's needs. Although this information is less personal, it is similar in some respects to the knowledge that loan librarians had of their patrons a century ago. The circulation librarian is again in a position to play a more active role in database maintenance, collection development, and the design of new services based on the availability of more useful information.

The creation of access services may be closely linked not only to the automation of circulation functions, but the growing complexity of tasks throughout the library and the existing distribution of professional staff. Prior to automation, the need for professionals in circulation was a debatable issue, but many academic libraries chose to retain these positions. Regardless of their necessity at the time, it is quite likely that professional circulation librarians have been in a position to accept greater responsibility such as

stack maintenance, document delivery, and interlibrary loan. As their colleagues in reference and technical services become increasingly involved in more complex systems and services, the professional whose sole task it is to manage in-house loans may seem anachronistic. In those cases where the professional position exists, library administrators may see it as a perfect opportunity for job enlargement and a more equitable distribution of responsibility. For example, creating an access services department may justify removing interlibrary lending from an overburdened reference department and combining this service with in-house circulation.

Widespread implementation of computer systems throughout the library has highlighted the need to re-examine written policies and procedures. It is possible that the increased involvement of circulation librarians in policy analysis has increased their professional visibility within the organization and has made them likely candidates to assume greater responsibility. The creation of access services may also reflect the need to take advantage of experienced managers within the library. The head of circulation must be, first and foremost, an excellent manager. The largest task is to train and supervise a front-line staff ranging from the most inexperienced student assistant to the senior-level clerical employee. The head of circulation often has managerial expertise that is unmatched. These skills can be transferred to other situations, particularly those that require more managerial oversight rather than a significant commitment of professional time, such as stack maintenance, photocopy services, document delivery, and other responsibilities often grouped under the access services umbrella.

The creation of access services may also reflect a growing organizational philosophy that is based on the point of view of the user. It is unlikely that the user cares very much about who owns the information or how it is stored; the biggest concern is usually availability. How quickly can the information be obtained? During the era of departmentalization, libraries organized around function, format, clientele, and subject. During the current wave of consolidation, some library leaders are advocating a simpler approach that makes sense to the patron.<sup>23</sup> Moving to an organization based entirely on function might increase effectiveness by eliminating some of the confusion for the user. Access services can be a solution to

some of the existing fragmentation by centralizing responsibility for the use of all library materials regardless of their format, location, or intended readership.

The anticipation of dramatic and sweeping organizational change as a result of automation may be fading. Although a few large university libraries experimented with some bold changes, most libraries have introduced only modest alterations to the existing structure. One possible explanation for this conservative response is the prevailing commitment to provide continuous access to collections and services. Libraries are more likely to introduce structural and job design changes in increments which include redundant and overlapping functions that reduce the risk of service interruptions and staff-resistance.<sup>24</sup> The creation of access service departments represents an incremental but rational change in library organizations based on a number of plausible reasons and benefits.

It is too early to predict how long this new organizational trend will continue or when it might become universal. Because there are several variations and no set prescription for its structure, access services will offer many libraries the opportunity to increase their effectiveness, focus more directly on the patron's information needs, and take advantage of professional staff with managerial skills and experience. Perhaps most importantly, access services represents a break from tradition and a end to a stagnant organizational structure that has dominated the past.

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