The future of reference II: A response

By Lynne Brody

Head Librarian, Undergraduate Library
University of Texas at Austin

Fran Miksa presents some provocative ideas regarding the future of the academic research library based on the premise that the collection-centered paradigm, currently the focal point of the research library's mission, should be replaced by a user-centered model. He recommends a shift of a greater proportion of the library's total resources (including collection money) to provide the personnel and technological tools to perform in-depth analyses of researcher needs and to develop expanded services and programs to address them. Shirley Echelman, past executive director of the Association of Research Libraries, supports Miksa's premise when she says about research libraries, "what is needed is knowledge about information behavior; expert system capabilities for ordering and reordering information to individual needs; simulation methodologies/information studies rather than library studies."[1] Echelman does not, however, specify where the resources will be found to provide more in-depth and expansive needs assessment and services to users.

Admittedly the user-centered paradigm which Miksa envisions has great appeal to the advocate of more and better public services. However, in reading Miksa's paper, it occurs to me that he makes no distinction among academic research libraries and the variant roles played by each, nor the effect that a given research library's unique role within the research community may have on the feasibility of the shift in primary focus which he advocates. He defines a paradigm as "a pattern, especially a typical pattern, of behavior and relationships."[2] Let me begin by saying that, in practical terms, I question how well his paradigm or model of the future academic research library actually applies to individual research libraries, given their complexity and variability.

Each year the Association of Research Libraries collects and distributes information provided by member libraries, including the volumes they have added, the library's total number of volumes, serials received, etc. This information serves as the basis on which research libraries are compared and ranked—heavy emphasis placed on the total size of the collection. The most highly ranked large academic research libraries bring prestige to themselves and reinforce the prestige of their parent institutions. Prestige, in turn, attracts corporate and individual gifts, supports faculty and student recruiting efforts, and helps capture grants for the library[3] and for campus researchers. Prestige and high national rank also provide additional clout to library administrators when competing for limited financial resources on university campuses helping to assure that the eminent research library receives, at the very least, its fair share of available funding. It is my view that by virtue of the prestige and national influence enjoyed by the largest academic research libraries, they have a vested interest in continuing the emphasis on collection growth/strength as the library's central mission and in promoting this as a continued shared value among academic research library peers.

Beyond prestige and its by-products, the largest academic research libraries additionally serve a critical role as major research resources for their home states and regions and even nationally and internationally, depending on specific collection strengths. This important shared role played by the largest major research libraries is one that, in my opinion, should not and will not change appreciably and makes them less susceptible to the user-centered operational paradigm described by Fran Miksa, if the new model requires reallocation of substantial resources away from collections. This does not mean that a more user-centered approach should not or will not be pursued vigorously in the largest research libraries; it merely means that this

---

[1]Shirley T. Echelman, "Why Do Academic Libraries Get Such a Bad Rap?" *Library Journal* 113 (October 1, 1988): 41.

[2]See Francis Miksa's paper, pp. 780–90.

[3]Likewise, the majority of the largest government and foundation grants made to academic research libraries are collection-centered: to enhance an already strong collection, to provide or to improve bibliographic access to collections, to preserve collections, et al.

approach must be pursued parallel to the library's continued and substantial collection commitment.

It also means that the added necessary resources will have to be obtained in other ways—through additional funding, through internal savings and reordering of priorities, and most importantly through utilization of existing campus expertise and collaboration with other campus service agencies in realization of the greater user-centered emphasis.[4]

I would suggest that perhaps Miksa's paradigm, as it relates to shifting more resources from collections to user-centered services, would work for smaller academic research libraries without large collection-based prestige to preserve and without major regional or national resource sharing roles to maintain. But here, too, the economic and political realities of each institution will greatly influence how they approach the user-centered model prescribed by Miksa. I do believe, however, the major shifts of the kind Miksa describes will most likely occur through the shared efforts and changing perceptions of the national academic research library community and assisted by availability of more comparative information about research library services and the library user populations that goes beyond collection data.

In this regard, ARL can provide important support to academic research libraries by performing more in-depth analysis of the data they already collect and by collecting and distributing additional pertinent data which helps put collection size and annual collection growth rates in perspective.[5] The national academic research library leadership should, in my opinion, reach a consensus about the kinds of additional information which would be of greatest value and urge ARL to provide more

analysis of the information which they collect. No doubt the shift in research library priorities and resources which Miksa describes will vary in degree among libraries. Relevant additional information about peer institutions which places collection size and growth in context can only help library administrators in supporting the kinds and degree of change appropriate to the individual academic research library.

Now to explore another premise of Fran Miksa's paper which is, for me, especially intriguing—his call for the academic research librarian to spend more time determining individual research user needs and responding to them. His premise is that librarians generalize too much about broad user groups and have little real understanding of individual research needs. One of Miksa's underlying assumptions is that more in-depth user studies and analyses will likely support the shift from the collection-centered paradigm to a more service-centered model; that the kinds of support that researchers need increasingly from the library are not very well served by owned collections nor by the major share of resources required to maintain and extend them.

And yet, what librarians hear most from university faculty/researchers regarding the library is heavily collection-centered—the need for more serials, more monographs, faster turnaround time on serials binding, more duplication of heavy use titles on the largest campuses, and need for convenient, accurate, and detailed bibliographical information represented in online catalogs to improve access to the university library's collections. These are some of the collection-based issues which tend to rally the research faculty. We, in fact, hear very few demands from researchers regarding the need for more and better reference services to help support their research.

It is my perception that Fran Miksa's user-centered paradigm, as developed in his paper, does not successfully distinguish between user needs and user demands and perceptions.[6] Researcher demands and perceptions, in my experience, continue to focus heavily on the collection-centered research library and probably will continue to do so for some time into the future. Academic researchers, largely a product of established university graduate and professional education, are trained to view the research process as one involving a large measure of self-reliance. Identification, collection, manipulation, analysis, and integration of informa-

---

[4]Universities have a variety of academic support agencies. Examples of the kinds of agencies with which the research library might seek more shared expertise and greater collaboration are such as the following at the University of Texas at Austin: Office of Institutional Studies, the University Research Institute, the Measurement and Evaluation Center, the Computation Center, et al.

[5]Possible ARL analysis which might prove useful would include: ratio of full-time faculty, graduate students, undergraduates to total volumes, to volumes added, to current serial subscriptions; ratio of circulation to total collection; ratio of ILS lending and borrowing to total collection; ratio of Ph.D's granted to total collection, volumes added, current serial subscriptions; dollars spent annually for information resources per undergraduate, graduate, full-time faculty member, per Ph.D's granted; reference transactions in relation to personnel, collection, etc.; database searches performed by library staff, end-user searches, etc.

---

[6]Michael K. Buckland in his book *Library Services in Theory and in Context* (New York: Pergamon, 1983) devotes a chapter to the subject of user demand. He points out the variety of library needs, wants, and demands and their implications for library services.

tion into one's research is still viewed by many as the responsibility of the individual researcher or research team. With some notable exceptions, researchers make use of the services of reference librarians only occasionally, in my opinion, because of researchers' perceptions about their own central role in the entire research process. The established faculty researcher is, in turn, the teacher of the future researcher, perpetuating in many cases the value of self-reliance in the research process, despite its growing complexity and scope of mastery.[7]

One might speculate that despite the lack of clear researcher demand or expectation, the academic research library must accept the major responsibility for managing the increasing complexity of the research process. Rather, I see the academic research library playing a shared role in addressing the greater intricacies of information needs for research. I believe that graduate and professional school programs in all academic disciplines must share in this responsibility as well, through reform in their curricula in order to better prepare students to become effective and adaptable researchers. I believe that the computer centers on university campuses must also play an

important shared role, collaborating with the research library and the various academic departments in tailoring technology to specialized research needs and participating in the preparation of advanced students to acquire the more in-depth research and technical skills they will need.

In conclusion, I believe one must expand the "paradigm of the academic library organization" which Miksa discusses in his paper to the broader vision of the research university. In my view the academic research library should be one important participant in addressing the growing complexities of the research process—working closely with other campus organizations and academic programs, sharing expertise and resources, building on the strengths of the participants (including the library's collection), and, as a group, developing the added services and programs to meet the expanding research requirements.[8] Moreover, librarians must thoroughly understand researcher expectations regarding research support from the library, not confusing our perceptions of what the researcher needs with what the researcher values most about the library.

---

[7]See Miksa's discussion of greater researcher self-reliance which occurred in the late 19th century as a result of significant library changes.

[8]David W. Lewis provides an excellent analysis of the changing academic research library in context in his "Inventing the Electronic University," *College and Research Libraries* 49 (July 1988): 291–304.

The future of reference II: Discussion summary

By William Kopplin

Reference Librarian
University of Texas at Austin

The debate following the panel's presentations seemed to keep returning to three central concerns about the new paradigm. One, is the proposed new paradigm valid? Two, if valid, how do the service implications of the new model change the traditional library infrastructure in such terms of staffing, access, and funding? And three, if there are two valid models of academic librarianship, one collection-based and one user-based, where are we now in relation to the two models? While the debate flowed back and forth between these points, the following summary presents the comments in thematic order.

Where are we now?

The first response from the audience immediately lent weight to the validity of the proposed model. Harold Billings, director of the General Libraries, noted that the two models were not necessarily in opposition but only the current endpoints along a continuum. On a map, the General Libraries would be between the two points. The current map is one "freeze-frame" in an ongoing and endless series of "snapshots-in-time." In actuality, the library resides in a very dynamic environment constantly in a state of transition. The library