

# Rethinking Ring and Shapiro: Some responses

By Larry R. Oberg, Douglas Herman, Virginia Massey-Burzio, and Carol Schroeder

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## *The debate on faculty status and reference service continues*

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### **Tiered reference and faculty status redux**

The current unstable and rapidly changing academic library environment appears increasingly to mimic the world's political scene: it ferrets the conservatives out of their closets, puts them on the peck, and reopens old wounds. Two recent frontal attacks published in *C&RL News*—one on faculty status by Beth Shapiro ("The myths surrounding faculty status for librarians," November 1993) and the other on tiered reference by Daniel F. Ring ("Searching for darlings: The quest for professional status," December 1993)—underscore librarians' long-standing penchant for denial. The defensive nature of these pieces reminds us that before automation pulled the rug out from under our plain, comfortable work shoes, we librarians had enjoyed a long history of stability and conservatism. A number of our colleagues appear to yearn for a return to those halcyon days of yore.

In my opinion, the subtext of the Shapiro/Ring "contribution" is nothing less than whether this profession is going to make it intact and smiling into the 21st century. It is certainly not whether some of us ("Oberg and Company," as Ring puts it) have the unmitigated gall to question practices that our more genteel colleagues prefer to avoid addressing.

In an impassioned defense of the traditional "sit and wait" reference model, Ring assumes that only librarians can do reference competently. Triage, the critical process of interpreting often ambiguously phrased reference ques-

tions, requires "minds constantly nourished and honed by interaction with students and productive and sustained reading." Reference work, he asserts, is "simply not for the graduate student or the dilettante." (Read nonprofessional.) This kind of nonsense insults not only graduate students, but also the many capable and competent library paraprofessionals who for decades, and mostly without significant restriction, have worked alongside their terminally degreed colleagues at reference desks in a majority of our university libraries.

As immediate past-chair of the ACRL Academic Status Committee, I never ceased being taken aback by the vehemence with which a small minority of librarians oppose faculty status. While insisting that faculty status is a dead horse, they beat it mercilessly. Clearly, this is an issue that cuts to the quick of who we think we are. I find the traditional arguments against faculty status (Shapiro and Ring borrow copiously from them) all too often specious: librarians do not do what "real" faculty do; librarians are not paid enough and do not have enough time to do research, serve on committees, etc.; tenure protects incompetents (hence, we should reject tenure); librarians' research is of poor quality (hence, we should reject research); faculty work is not the "real" work of librarians; on and on, ad nauseam. Fred Hill and Robert Hauptman ("Faculty status for librarians? A response," *C&RL News*, January 1994) have clearly and succinctly deconstructed Shapiro's minimalist model of librarianship. The scope of their rebuttal did not, however, permit them to highlight the advantages of faculty status.

I suggest that librarians should have faculty status for the same reasons that our teaching faculty colleagues require and prefer it. It gives

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us the protection we need to build our collections without fear of attack. It allows us to conduct and publish our research as we see fit without inappropriate institutional constraint. It gives us the wherewithal to relate to teaching faculty and administrators as colleagues and peers, not as subalterns and handmaidens. (In fact, student and faculty contacts with the library may be seriously degraded when librarians are perceived as clerks and not as experts and coequals in the research process.) Faculty status also focuses our attention on our highest-level responsibilities and helps us to achieve an appropriate balance between our institutional and professional obligations. Tenure-track positions attract the best candidates in a tight job market. This is doubly important at a time when we are required to master rapid change if we are to ensure the future of librarianship as a vital and responsive profession.

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Faculty status is also the associational standard for all academic librarians, a fact often conveniently overlooked by its opponents. It was reaffirmed as such in 1992 when the revision of the *Standards for Faculty Status for College and University Librarians* policy statement was approved by the ACRL Board of Directors. Further, at the 1993 Midwinter Meeting, the ALA Council approved the revised standards and this lends the document the support and endorsement of the prestigious parent body.

We live in an age of rapid change and only quick-witted, creative risk-takers are going to survive. Tiered reference and faculty status encourage librarians to participate fully in the scholarly life and governance of our campuses. Faculty status accords librarians full partnership in the creative, cooperative, synergistic, collegial relationship between students, teaching faculty, and campus administrators that today's volatile academic environment requires.

Dump faculty status? I think not. Rethink reference? Absolutely. Then let's move on to rethinking librarianship itself. If we do, we may decide at last whether we are a profession or merely a craft.—*Larry R. Oberg*

## **The Brandeis reality**

I don't know whether it's due to "stress, overwork, and burnout" or not, but somehow my colleagues and I never seem to find the time to worry about things like professional status, and I therefore have no axe to grind with Daniel F. Ring on that subject one way or the other. Since Ring's reactionary display of virtue takes the "Brandeis model" as an example of what's wrong with us as a profession, I'd like to clear up a few misconceptions about reference practices at Brandeis.

It is unfortunate that the "Brandeis model" label has stuck, since what we actually do in our library is a much narrower concern than the whole body of possibilities and experiments with tiered reference services that the label now invokes. At Brandeis, at least, the only and wholly sufficient motivation for our current reference model (which we call the research consultation model) is a desire to preserve the quality and depth of our encounters with our users in an atmosphere of increasing demand and level staffing.

One always likes to hear good news from the field, so I'm happy to learn that the general atmosphere in Ring's reference area remains calm and controlled. At Brandeis's Main Library, the number of reference encounters more than doubled between 1987–88 and 1992–93, while the number of reference librarians remained the same. It is easy to see how this trend could lead to treating both novice users and advanced researchers with increasing superficiality, just to keep the line moving. The research consultation model represents a choice to give adequate attention to as many people as we can see rather than simply seeing as many people as we can. Through most of the academic year we have people lined up and waiting for us. The state of affairs that Ring describes as "hairy" is the rule, not the exception, as I'm sure is the case at other libraries that are working on reference reform. It should be sufficiently obvious that in settings where there is no such problem, no such reforms are called for.

We are not hidden away in our offices and available only by appointment. We have experimented with appointments in a number of ways, to make up for the longer waits to see the librarian, for example, and we now use them principally for follow-ups. Time spent meeting users by appointment is in addition to, not instead of, our scheduled duty hours. Whether our users come at an appointed hour

or just wait to see us, the main point is that they are indeed treated like professional clients and not like customers standing in line at a supermarket checkout. (Ring thinks that they are not clients because they do not pay for our services, an assertion that would astonish most of their parents.)

No one has ever pretended that the new reference model was a painless panacea for everything that is wrong with reference. If we cannot be all things to all people, then we have to make some choices. Ring's point that there is some loss involved in having nonprofessionals evaluate a patron's initial question is well taken: it is much easier to train our graduate students to look up an address in a directory, for example, than it is to teach them to recognize when there are deeper needs hidden behind an over-specific question. Any library contemplating an information desk staffed by nonprofessionals should plan to devote a great deal of attention to this problem, as we have been doing at Brandeis for the past two years. And if we could have simply doubled the size of our professional staff instead, I believe we would have given it some serious thought.—  
*Douglas Herman*

### **Delivering better reference service**

As the creator of what is referred to as the "Brandeis model" in Daniel F. Ring's article, I must take issue with its inaccurate representation of the model (more appropriately referred to as the research consultation model) and its goals. I refer to my own "Reference Encounters of a Different Kind," in the November 1992 issue of *Journal of Academic Librarianship* for a description of the model, its purpose, and some of its results. Ring's article is so riddled with inaccuracies and misinformation, that I can only conclude the author was much less interested in the model itself than in delivering a diatribe on what appears to be an issue dear to his heart, keeping reference librarians "in the trenches where we belong. . . ."

The fact of the matter is that the model was never expressly designed for the purpose of elevating the status of reference librarians, although that was surely a welcome by-product. Rather, it was designed to deliver better service to readers with the same level of staffing.

The kind of attitude that the "Searching for darlings" article represents is, unfortunately, not atypical and illustrates the almost pathological fear some librarians appear to have of enhanc-

ing their professional status and the vigorous defense they often mount to maintain the status quo. This attitude is difficult to understand. Scores of studies have shown that traditional reference service is not very effective, and that there is no reason to cling to it so piously. As responsible professionals, it is incumbent on us to rethink our practices, to see if we can do a better job. The Library Solutions Institute #2, "Rethinking Reference in Academic Libraries," tried to provide a forum for doing just that. (Ring's article attempts to respond to Larry Oberg's review of that institute ["Rethinking reference: Smashing icons at Berkeley," May 1993].)

What I myself have observed from experimenting with the model is that the more users understand what a librarian actually does and knows, the higher the quality of the interaction and, in turn, the greater the benefits derived from it for the patron. While the research consultation model is not the answer for every library, the enhanced quality of the patron-library interaction it appears to achieve is significant, and of potential consequence for other service possibilities.

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Douglas Herman, my former colleague at Brandeis, has just completed a report on a study of this new model, hopefully to be published soon. The study clearly shows that users respond very favorably to this new relationship with the librarian.

Although Ring and a few others may well persist in their self-flagellation, I'm hoping many more colleagues will find working on new ideas a much more relevant and exciting challenge.—  
*Virginia Massey-Burzto*

### **Faculty status provides clout**

After reading the article by Beth Shapiro I found it difficult to keep my response shorter than her 1,200 words. Here is my compromise letter, a mere 600-word epistle.

Answer to #1: Faculty status is appropriate to the role of librarians. Our work as librarians

is not fundamentally different from the teaching faculty. There are many modes and versions of teaching, and they are not necessarily defined by the 40-minute classroom lecture. Librarians do teach in the traditional sense. They also inspire, guide, and support students and peers offering an in-depth knowledge of librarianship and other subject areas as well. Shapiro contends that "the research requirements for [teaching] faculty are significant to the fields in which they teach," and she further derides the quality of research in librarianship.

One may question the significance of research in any field. There is no data to support the claim that research in library science is any less or any more significant than in other fields. Nor can the quality of research in librarianship be dismissed for being too empirical. There are a limited number of great minds that have, as a result of their research, changed our lives. But that should not deter others from adding to the canons in their respective fields.

Answer to #2: The protection of faculty status is important for academic librarians. Many library faculty believe that faculty status provides them with more credibility and respect on campus. It affords them entrée into the educational process on an equal footing and not

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*(Fuseler cont. from page 132)*

costs) are \$4,585. Our estimated cost for processing an interlibrary loan request is \$12. We were thereby able to reduce our costs for the total service from \$26.06 to \$23.88 per article.

## **Future**

Expanded access to our online catalog and various databases allows our patrons access to tables of contents online. Uncover2 is available to most of our users from their offices or computer labs. Despite the ease of scanning tables of contents online, currently only a few of our patrons use UnCover2 for current awareness. We hope to institute some educational programs which will increase our patrons' use of this service.

Currently we have a pilot project which allows patrons to place requests directly on UnCover2 at no or low cost. If the patron does not have access to a place for fax delivery of the article, a copy is delivered to a vendor within the library for a \$2.00 charge.

We are certain that as modes of delivery and the number of document-delivery vendors increase, we will continually evaluate and refine this service to our patrons. ■

as an invited or occasional guest. It provides a link for working cooperatively together and for improved communication to promote the educational process.

Answer to #3: Faculty status benefits the academy, not just librarians. First, let us clarify that faculty status is more than earning tenure. It is an orderly procedure by which faculty are evaluated using guidelines and criteria established and accepted by the institution and the faculty. As such, it strives to be a fair and impartial mechanism which is as much a benefit to the academy as it is to the faculty. Is tenure a panacea for academic freedom? The author points out that "junior faculty members and others without tenure enjoy markedly less academic freedom than tenured people, and a determined vicious chairman can still abuse a tenured faculty member." Think where we would be if tenure vanished.

Answer to #4: Faculty status provides a position of influence for the profession. I agree wholeheartedly that our influence on campus must be earned. It is crucial that we become active participants not only in the governance system, but also on committees which afford an opportunity to communicate the role of the library on campus. Collection building and the deselection of materials are enhanced by a thorough understanding of the library's constituents and their special needs. Librarians are often at the forefront in teaching faculty and students how to access information via new telecommunications links and computerized databases. In no way does faculty status for librarians detract from or debase our position on campus. On the contrary, many have firmly held opinions that faculty status is a kind of pedigree that counts in the academic climate.

Answer to #5: Faculty status has proven to be a benefit to academic librarians: The author points out that faculty status is not a guarantee of pay equity with teaching faculty in the same institution. However, it is a model that has worked, and worked well, in some instances. It seems to me that the standards promulgated by our national and regional library organizations have had little effect on our professional salaries. In the real, messy world of economic expediency, those who have no or little political clout in the academy are usually the first to be victimized by both the loss of jobs or salary inequities. Faculty status provides that clout, at least in some instances and to some extent.—

*Carol Schroeder* ■

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