Negotiating the Passage from User Demands to Needs

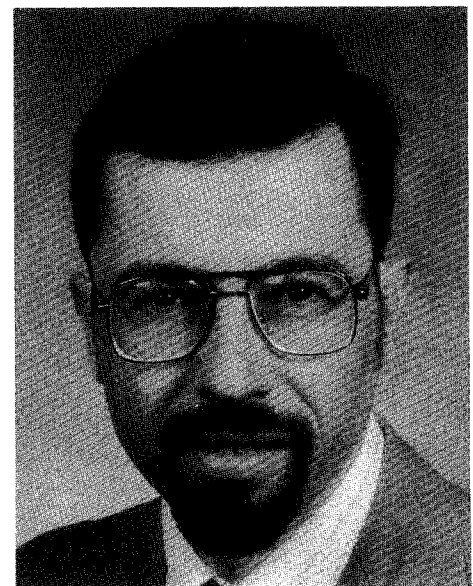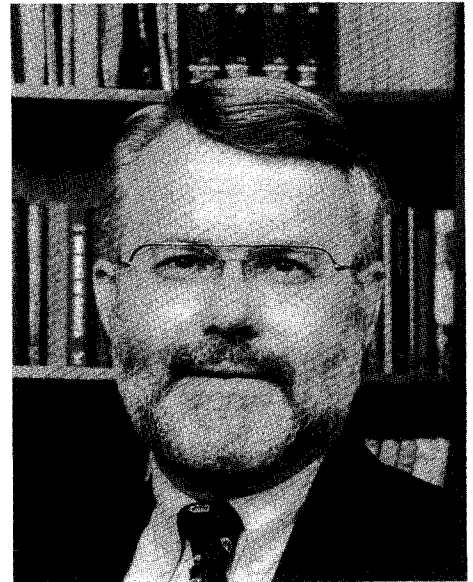## by Donald G. Davis, Jr. and James P. Niessen

Reference librarians as teachers continue to mediate between humanistic texts and their students. At large institutions and in other disciplines, Wisner's model is less applicable. But even here the sensitivity to patrons' information needs must take precedence over technology.

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W isner laments a divergence between the contemporary model of reference librarianship and his own. The role of librarians in society, he thinks, has shifted from the noble encounter with ideas to interpreting technology. In his view passive and unobtrusive librarians are content to provide technical support for young mariners embarking without compass on a boundless sea of information, whereas they ought to be uniting patrons with authoritative texts that will inspire solutions for their deeper questions. If not given adequate guidance, students demand citations or full-text files that will enable them to satisfy course requirements quickly, painlessly, and with little spiritual benefit. The information professionals who serve them, proud of their own philosophical modesty, become accomplices in a gross oversimplification of the educational process.

The Library as Maze and Sanctum

Spiritual benefit is the object of learning for Wisner. We wander the library's maze in quest of those texts which, imprinted on our minds, will illuminate for us the Splendor of Truth, *Veritatis Splendor*. Mary J. Carruthers writes that early humanists *learned* texts in order to manipulate them.[1] Modern students of the humanities work in the same way, their place within a scholarly tradition based upon an encounter with authentic printed or manuscript documents that serve as their point of departure.

Few will doubt that in a period when texts were more limited in number, curriculum standardized, readers relatively homogenous, and professions less numerous, the role of the librarian was different in its external expressions. One can view professional forebears with gratitude and even admiration without imputing more to them than the facts justify. Nostalgia and hyperbole aside, classical learning, at its best, continues to have its appealing characteristics. It is distressing that such educational experience is becoming rare, and

often survives only in graduate study and honors programs. Opportunities abound, however, if librarians will seize them in hospitable environments.

We are familiar, as patron and as librarian, with a fine theological library in Austin that serves its seminary in this way. One awkward, little used database is essentially an ornament. The encounter with truth takes place in the presence of ink and bound paper (or ink and toner; here, too, the librarian must serve a machine). The collection's breadth of coverage in theology is excellent, but more important for the seminarians is the quality of holdings and immediate access to them. The encouragement of a librarian cut from Wisner's pattern greatly enriches the experience of the readers.

This model and approach apply less well to the non- humanistic disciplines or to large collections with many disciplines. Social and natural scientists and their students require data, often published in expensive formats, but rarely need the artifact that provided the data's first medium. Modern research libraries cannot forego the skills of the humanist, but economics requires them to go beyond this model. It is superfluous to argue whether electronic "access over ownership" is a virtue if it is a necessity.

If Not Here, Where? If Not Us, Who?

What are the characteristics of an academic library's reference department operating according to Wisner's vision? Among them surely are an intellectual curiosity, broad reading, and what Daniel Boorstin has called "the free mind foraging in the rich pastures of the whole everywhere-past."[2] Some academic librarians will reminisce about yesteryear when scholarly values, the life of the mind, and the reading of books seemed to have primacy in higher education. As one of the many professional points of light, a solitary librarian may yet be able to engage in just the kind of teaching that Wisner admires, and perhaps at an institution other than St. John's College. Are library directors, or indeed college presidents, ready and eager for this?

There is another issue, however. To provide more patron service requires more staff and a better qualified staff, whose expense might have to be offset by a reduced acquisitions budget. Are most academic librarians willing to complement instructional faculty members on a basis of equality? Perhaps not. Yet, this is precisely what happens at smaller educational institutions. The sensitive, broadly educated reference librarian guides students in the most effective use of smaller collections.

At larger institutions, bibliographic instruction, networks, and databases are a response to patrons' demand for navigational assistance in the local collection as well as broader access. But do these demands address real needs? Jesse Shera, who would have some sympathy for Wisner, has written that the library is primarily product, and only secondarily a molder, of societal forces. Wisner suggests his colleagues are not the only ones romancing the information flow today, in a not always fruitful fascination with all that is out there. It would be desirable for instructors to provide adequate orientation to their students before sending them to the library, but what if they do not?

Electronic and instructional strategies are a complement to the humble reference interview, and helpful for more specialized and sophisticated patrons. Surely there is room for more than one medium, one educational style, and one kind of inquiry. One suspects Wisner would like to prepare a tripping wire, a lasso, or a lifesaver for students who pass his table on the way from the entrance to the work station. This might be a good idea.

Notes and References

1. Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
2. Daniel Boorstin, *Gresham's Law: Knowledge or Information?* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1970.)