

Why the I-900 Plan to Consolidate Multiple Reading
Rooms
Should Not be Implemented
In Light of
Best Practices for Reference Service
At the Library of Congress

A Series of Papers

Summary

Prepared for AFSCME 2910
The Library of Congress Professional Guild
Representing 1,350 professional employees
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Summary of Papers #1-7

Paper #1: Background Reference Philosophy and Readers' Expectations

Subdivisions:

Are assertions of “researchers’ expectations” of one-stop shopping, federated searching, and elimination of “silos” an adequate grounding for best practices in reference service at the Library of Congress?

Eliminating “silos” in the online environment: searching open websites in contrast to searching restricted subscription databases

The difficulties of seeing “the shape of the elephant” of relevant literature via one-stop Internet searching

The inadequacies of keyword searching within the open Internet

The inadequacies of keyword inquiries in federated searches of library-supplied subscription databases

The serious problems with consolidated “one-stop” searches of “everything”

A specific example: Indians of North America, Native Americans, Indians of North America

An additional problem with one-stop searching: loss of initial focus on core literature

The *importance* of silos

An additional problem with one-stop federated searching: its elimination of search mechanisms more powerful than keyword searching

The serious problem with naïve understanding and promotion of transdisciplinarity

Best practices *at LC*

Paper #2: Best Practices in Reference Service at the Library of Congress

Subdivisions:

If not “one stop” transdisciplinary shopping, what *are* actual “best practices” in providing reference service specifically at the Library

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of Congress?

Example of best practices at LC: Humor in the New Testament

Example of best practices at LC: Islam and Human Rights

Example of best practices at LC: Montague grammar

Best practices: proceeding *initially in stages and within disciplines* rather than trying to get everything and make all possible connections at once

Actual “best practices” being overlooked by I-900

Dumbing down LC’s greatest reference-service strengths

The extreme danger of regarding the very muscle of our reference collections as fat to be trimmed

I-900’s lack of understanding, and disregard, of how reference work is actually done

The naïveté of thinking transdisciplinarity is promoted by simply having specialists sit next to each other—and fewer specialists at that

Appendix: Ways to Improve Reference Collections

Paper #3: Subject expertise of reference librarians

Subdivisions:

Staff expertise is itself dependent on quality of reference collections: psychology example

Best use of reference collections is in turn dependent on staff expertise: acid rain example

Good reference collections provide some measure of subject expertise to anyone

Changing format from paper to online also changes access—and not all advantages accrue to online version

I-900 eliminates the best solution

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Paper sets—unlike online versions—also provide recognition access to related resources shelved nearby

Reference collections preserve some subject expertise of retired colleagues

Justified fears

The inadequacy of cross-training classes as a substitute for experience

Paper #4: The Need for Separate Ready-Reference Collections and Self-Service Collections

Subdivisions:

Creating problems with ready-reference and self-serve collections:
Microforms

Creating problems with ready-reference and self-serve collections:
Quotation books

Creating problems with ready-reference and self-serve collections:
Biography

Creating problems with ready-reference and self-serve collections:
Genealogy

Creating problems with ready-reference and self-serve collections:
Newspapers

Creating problems with ready-reference and self-serve collections:
Science

Creating problems with ready-reference and self-serve collections:
City directories and FBIS reports

The Principle of Least Effort in information seeking behavior

Real world concerns vs. slogans

Paper #5: I-900's Disregard of LC's Own History

Subdivisions:

Moving reference librarians away from the Central Desk

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Moving reference librarians into a separate Reference Assistance Room

Creation of a much improved ready-reference collection for Humanities and Social Sciences

Emphasizing a separate focus on Science and Business

Book delivery solutions embodied in the very architecture of the Adams Building

A Department Store analogy

Inconsistencies and contradictions within I-900's own philosophy

A transdisciplinary analogy

Interim summary

Paper #6: Better Ways to Promote Transdisciplinarity, An Analysis of FRD's "New Librarianship and the Role of Reference Librarians: A Bibliography [*sic*]", and The Principle of Least Effort

Subdivisions:

The FRD bibliography

Ways to promote transdisciplinarity *much* more effectively than via any specific suggestion in any of the FRD sources

The generality, superficiality, and irrelevance to LC of the FRD-cited sources

Disregard of the function of reference collections—especially their distinctive function in a huge library such as LC

PSU as a model *for the Library of Congress?*

Disregard of greatly increased delivery times

Disregard of staff consolidation problems, or irrelevancy of allusions to it

"Transdisciplinarity" at a focused Health Sciences Library as a model *for LC?*

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Increased barriers and delays in contacts between users and reference librarians

The Principle of Least Effort in information seeking behavior

I-900's misunderstanding of the place of transdisciplinarity in the large scheme of reference service

The irrelevance of the FRD-cited sources to the real points at issue

Overall summary

Appendix I: The transdisciplinary coverage of the *Web of Science* database

Appendix II: The transdisciplinary coverage of *19th Century Masterfile*

Appendix III: The cross-disciplinary applicability and validity of the Principle of Least Effort

Paper #7: The Factual Inaccuracies of the I.G.'s Report of September, 2012

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Overall Summary

(From Paper #6)

Promoting cross-disciplinary connections is indeed something good; that, however, is not the point at issue. The point at issue is how best to do it while simultaneously not throwing out the baby with the bath water—i.e., not losing crucial disciplinary, specialized strengths.

Regarding transdisciplinarity, we agree that it is good—but:

- if it is to be pursued by badly misapplying a philosophy appropriate to online Internet searching to the very different uses of LC's printed, specialized reference collections; and
- if it is to be pursued by lessening the very muscle of LC's specialized reference collections; and
- if it is to be pursued by forcing an inappropriate agricultural metaphor ("silos to synergy") on reference collections whose main purpose lies in providing disciplinary (not transdisciplinary) overviews and filters *within* subject "silos"; and
- if it is to be pursued at the cost of the Main Reading Room's loss of much

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of the transdisciplinary subject coverage it already offers in the areas of Law, Music, and Geography (through weeding of relevant large sets now in MRR); and

- if it is to be pursued by ignoring the real differences between ‘reference’ and ‘research’ questions and thereby decimating several different ready reference and self-service collections carefully formed over decades of experience in response to very real and fully predictable needs; and
- if it is to be pursued by repeatedly ignoring the *technicalities* of providing good reference service in exchange for grand, ungrounded, and impractical theories; and
- if it is to be pursued by significantly diminishing the time that real subject experts are simultaneously available to researchers at the point-of-need in LC’s reading rooms; and
- if it is to be pursued by requiring more readers to make more appointments with those absent specialists who cannot be simultaneously present at either the MRR Central Desk or the RAR area; and
- if it is to be pursued by radically changing the entire “slope of the gameboard” away from the maintenance and development of real specialized knowledge in reference librarians; and
- if it is to be pursued under the entailed assumption that reference librarians are all essentially interchangeable, and can all develop any necessary subject expertise through “cross-training classes”;
- if it is to be pursued via great institutional upheaval when the Library is already providing excellent transdisciplinary service through our online sources that we all have immediate access to right now, in all of our reading rooms; and
- if it is to be pursued through the expenditure of tens of thousands of dollars in staff time to bring about shifts in collections, and to hire more staff to deliver materials across the streets from Adams and Madison, when no such measures or expenses are needed at a time when the Library is already in dire financial straits; and
- if it is to be pursued by ignoring decades of LC’s history in steadily improving reference by creating *divisional expertise and focused responsibilities*; and
- if it is to be pursued by ignoring the fact that communication among subject specialists is already routinely made right now, where appropriate, with no need for librarians being physically next to each other in one space; and
- if it is to be pursued by repeatedly ignoring multiple problems in providing reference service whose solutions have been painstakingly incorporated into our current specialized rooms and, instead, *repeatedly restoring the original problems themselves and all of their difficulties*; and
- if it is to be pursued by ignoring the functionality of the existing reading room in Adams in assuring efficient and timely delivery for the Adams books—and thereby doubling delivery time for transport of *all* Adams

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- books, which will have to be sent across the street; and
- if it is to be pursued by similarly ignoring the practical functionality of the Madison reading room in assuring specialized service and timely delivery of materials for its clientele; and
- if it is to be pursued in violation of the Principle of Least Effort in information seeking by needlessly creating delays, barriers, and extra steps in service—none of which currently exist; and
- if it is to be pursued under an extraordinarily naïve philosophy that “transdisciplinarity” should now trump real subject expertise—a philosophy coming from administrators who have little or no actual *experience* in providing any reference service at all, *either* disciplinary *or* transdisciplinary; and
- if it is to be pursued on the basis of irrelevant library literature that is in agreement only on using online sources (not reference collections) for transdisciplinarity—which we are very efficiently promoting already, in ways (and via sources) not even mentioned by the sources listed in the FRD bibliography commissioned by I-900 proponents; and
- if it can be—and already is—being promoted by mechanisms that accomplish the cross-disciplinary connections *much* more effectively than would be brought about by a consolidation of very specialized reading rooms; and
- if the sources defending “transdisciplinarity”—whose value is not at issue to begin with—themselves lack awareness of the *cross-connections* to an array of several other important and impinging factors not only within the library literature itself but also *within their own planning*;

then reference service across the board would be much better served at the Library of Congress by maintaining our existing separate reading rooms for Humanities and Social Sciences, Science and Business, Genealogy and Local History, and Newspapers/Current Periodicals/Government Documents—and by allowing our Digital Reference librarians to go back to working at the full-time responsibilities they already have.

The Library created specialized departments over many decades for solid reasons (i.e., maintaining and developing subject expertise, improving service at the point of use, decreasing delivery time for requested materials); those reasons have not simply vanished regarding any of the above-named departments any more than they have vanished for Law, Music and Sound Recordings, or Geography—or Prints and Photographs or Motion Pictures or Rare Books or our Area Studies rooms. We most need specialists, and the specialized reference collections they rely on, in all of these areas *at the point of use* if high quality service is to be maintained rather than severely undercut at the Library of Congress.

The professional reference librarians represented by AFSCME 2910 are not resistant to change. We are resistant to very bad planning that will impede our work and substantially diminish the quality of reference service that the Library is now capable of providing.