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Student Populations

“I sometimes feel as if I am working on the borderline of civilization and that my Introduction to Sociology course is really an introduction to society program. Each semester one of my students saunters into the classroom a half-hour late, waves ‘Hello’ to friends and proceeds to slowly drag a chair across the floor, making a sound like a huge piece of chalk squeaking on a blackboard. He or she then opens a huge paper bag emblazoned with the logi of a nearby fast food emporium and loudly consumes a three-course meal, making sure to slurp the last few drops of precious liquid at the bottom of a 16-oz, ice-filled container. Thereafter, the student, in anaconda-fashion, curls up to sleep off the meal....”

Krase, J. (1988/1989). Urbanism and the university. *Urban Academic Librarian*, 6/7(2/1), 4.

THE ESSENCE OF URBAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIANSHIP

by

Barbara Dunlap

A reference librarian discovers the essence of urban academic reference librarianship in serving a growing population of non-traditional students in a milieu where both resources and time are never sufficient.

A librarian who seeks to define the essence of urban academic librarianship should expect scant help from the literature. A search under relevant headings in *Library Literature* for the past few years does not yield any directly pertinent material. Articles have proliferated, however, on classes of students, e.g., the "new" and "non-traditional," the academically disadvantaged, and the student from a non-western culture--all of whom are found in the urban academic student body. Perhaps in attempting to serve these categories of students in the large numbers we do, as well as their more traditional counterparts, we are, indeed, practicing a distinctive kind of librarianship, "urban academic librarianship."

A significant number of urban public college and university students are from minority groups, foreign educated, perhaps a decade or more older than average, and often with family or work responsibilities which claim large amounts of their time. At the City University of New York [CUNY], the last available university-wide census, Spring 1986, revealed that almost 44% of first time freshmen were aged twenty-three or older, with 16% between thirty and forty-four (CUNY *Data Book*, 1985-1986, p. 163). Just over 66% of the CUNY population in the last ethnic census defined itself as Black, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American (CUNY *Data Book*, 1983-1984, p. 128). At my own institution, City College, 45% of the students registered in the Spring of 1988 were part-time (City *Facts*, March 1987; March 1988 Supplement, p. 2). Twenty years ago, part-time students were concentrated in evening sessions, along with some of the less academically prepared; now, more and more large urban academic institutions are "mainstreaming" them.

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In crowds they come then--older, educated outside of the United States, often with insufficient English language skills which they are in the process of bolstering--and they come not to a rural or suburban setting which can provide some rest for the spirit but to either a vertical campus where life revolves around perpetual waits for elevators which are always full or to collections of smaller buildings which are open to the neighborhood and often share its problems of security and congestion.

There are crowds at the financial aid office, crowds in the cafeteria and crowds at the circulation desk. Sometimes I think the most distinguishing feature of being an urban student--and the one which impacts the most on our work--is that one is always rushing, always needing to be somewhere else in twenty minutes: a class, a writing lab, a job, or the day-care center.

Additionally, many of the students either come from urban high schools--large, discouraging, and with minimally stocked libraries, or from secondary schools outside of the United States which do not have library reference and circulation services as we know them.

Lack of skills, tiring commutes, financial problems and family anxieties overburden many of these students. In the fragments of time available to them, they find it difficult to tackle oral and written assignments based on the use of a variety of secondary sources to be uncovered through leisurely research and serendipity.

Their situation is in direct conflict with the curricula and the teaching styles developed during the last twenty years in the humanities and social sciences which have steadily moved from a strictly text book or "required reading" approach to emphasize equally written and oral work based on a variety of supplementary sources. In seeking to ameliorate this situation, the urban academic reference librarian cannot give the student the gift of time, but with special efforts, can help the students utilize time more efficiently. In the pursuit of our long term goal to make every student we serve an independent library user who can find books and articles in a wide variety of sources, I have come to believe that sometimes the best route to that goal is to lead the bewildered students directly to a source which can provide some answers. Students who are new to library use and appear intimidated need immediate help: something placed in their hands which is useful. Rather than deterring them from further research, immediate

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help can result in their gaining confidence and being able to hear us when we explain about periodical indexes and bibliographies of selected criticism. Students so helped come back--we may not remember them, but they tend to remember us.

"Don't assume anything" is the watchword in the urban academic setting. A standard reading assignment in one humanities course is Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. In seeking critical materials, some students will ask for a book on English literature; they are reading the play in English and this seems logical to them. We can clear up this matter in a moment and send them to the catalog to look under "Sophocles" as a subject heading, but this is seldom really sufficient. They may profit first from the background provided by a reference book on Greek mythology or drama; most of all they need to be shown some selections in the catalog and have some helpful books pointed out.

A student wanted to write on the issue of "life support systems" for persons over seventy-five. There were no listings under that subject. But under the headings "Euthanasia" and "Terminal Care," subdivided by "Moral and religious issues" were several books which dealt with the issue of choice. The sort of discussion he sought was very likely to be included in one or more chapters of these books, but the concept of scanning entries and reflecting on their possible use was a skill this student had not mastered.

He and other students like him are the students who also seek information on topics which have not yet become LC subject headings but which may be covered by broader terms. Nor is it sufficient to send students to the catalog and tell them to look under "Teen-Age Pregnancy," when the catalog lists "Pregnancy, Adolescent." We cannot assume that there will be a cross reference, or, if there is, that a student will understand how to interpret it. (Key word searching in the CUNY integrated library on-line catalog will present a new set of opportunities and challenges in this regard.)

A classic request by undergraduates is for the "three" articles research assignment. Finding one article is "critiquing"; finding and blending three is "research." The number three in this context evidently has the magical connotation of three wishes or three tasks in folktales. Thankfully, publishers are obligingly putting out collections of essays presenting opposing viewpoints on "hot issues" such as euthanasia, abortion,

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and capital punishment, amongst others. We keep these forms of bibliographic "first-aid" at our information desk.

Assignments for longer papers require the use of periodical indexes. In going beyond demonstrating the use of the index--or supplying a handout which can get the student started--I find that in helping our beleaguered urbanite college student to make effective use of the resources we offer, I am negotiating a delicate line between the role of classroom teacher and librarian. Turning with a student to a recent volume of *Reader's Guide* and looking under "Child Abuse," we find articles which include case studies, calls for legislative action, articles about false accusations, and articles on the topic of emotional abuse. The harried student, looking at this sea of type, goes blank. "Are you supposed to focus on one part of this topic?" "Can you discuss with your instructor exactly what aspect you are to take?" Did he suggest any journals you should use?" Prefacing these questions with "Can I find out a little about your assignment?" makes the process seem less like a grand inquisition. This kind of refinement and definition should go on in class and perhaps it does, but the students often seem to come to the library with only the most cosmic view of their topic. While it is not the librarian's place to define the topic for the student, a little patience and the right questions may help the student to do the job.

Is it the urban setting that inspires so many assignments focusing on the urban ills of our time? After a morning of such steady requests, I sometimes wonder if all this grubbing about in the *New York Times* and the *Readers' Guide* for "three" articles on abortion or battered wives for the freshman English student is really to his or her benefit. This is an issue which goes beyond the library and ideally instructor and librarian should be collaborating. One reality of the urban academic institution which has a direct impact on the librarian is that many instructors in lower division courses are adjuncts. Often making contact with adjuncts is difficult and, when successful, great tact is necessary in trying to convey the difficulty (anguish) students can experience in trying to execute poorly defined or impractical library assignments. I long to suggest that freshmen be asked to write about abortion 50 or 100 years ago, or the way in which children were regarded in Colonial America or China, or the use of narcotics in the

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nineteenth century. How about something else all together, such as the importance of olive oil in history, or the invention of blue jeans, or the introduction of pointe work in ballet? Must it be the fate of urban academic librarians to spend a significant portion of their time showing overburdened urban students how to find yet one more journalistic treatment of the problems they live with each day? As new technologies make document delivery on site more of a possibility we might, indeed, ask if students should legitimately be spending their limited time in competing for volumes of *Newsweek*.

On the positive side, urban students in upper division electives can draw on a rich variety of resources, not commonly found elsewhere: the great lion-guarded New York Public Library, historical societies, and a multitude of special libraries can supplement the resources of the home campus and some students develop sophisticated information gathering skills, including judicious use of telephone inquiries to agencies and associations. With the City University's Open Access policy, CUNY students may borrow books and use all material at the eighteen campuses of CUNY. (Of course, a short and reliable inter-campus delivery system would be even more helpful.)

Clearly, I see a lot of frustration for the urban student who lacks many things, most of all time. Librarians are caught in the middle: we do not want to be accused of either "spoon feeding" or being unhelpful, intrusive, or condescending. We don't want to give conventional responses when we feel the questions mask deeper needs. We do not design the courses or develop the assignments, yet we can't help wondering if all these "person" hours spent pouring over current periodical indexes for articles on social problems by lower division students are really productive. City living is living in a world of multiple yet insufficient resources, a world filled with opportunities, uncertainty and lack of time. Perhaps the acceptance of this tension is the essence of urban academic librarianship.

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