Guest Editorial

Faculty Client Files

A practice common to professionals who have direct interaction with individual clients is the maintenance of a file for each client. Physicians, dentists, accountants, architects, and psychoanalysts maintain client files. These begin with the first professional encounter and are updated with subsequent visits. The practice is so common that we rarely think of it except when someone loses our file or when we ask that it be forwarded to another professional.

Such practices extend to animals. An injured stray kitten will have a file opened by a veterinarian. The file will contain a record of observations about age, breed, general health, extent of injury, treatment, and advice to the prospective owner. The maintenance of the file is systematic, not dependent upon whim or whether there is a close friendship with the pet's owner. The veterinarian knows that excellent professional service is related to having full, up-to-date information at hand.

For the last fifty years, librarians have examined various aspects of the profession and contrasted its state of maturation with those of law and medicine. Through these analyses, much has been accomplished for librarians as well as for those we serve.

Academic librarians—judging by the literature on the subject of client contacts—are overlooking a splendid tool for the development of a close professional relationship with, and effective service to, the faculty of our institutions. A thoughtful, thorough examination of the applicability of client files to academic libraries illustrates that both librarian and faculty member would profit from the creation and maintenance of such files. The thrust of this editorial is that client files should be a routine ingredient in our faculty relationships.

How might the academic librarian develop a client file for each faculty member who is or ought to be professionally dependent on the librarian's bibliographic services?

An ideal cornerstone for the librarian's client file is the faculty member's vita. The vita is a personally prepared statement, normally current, which includes some mention of virtually every major aspect that is professionally important to the author. No single document is so readily accessible or offers a fuller introduction to the newly appointed associate or a better review of the longtime colleague. A file can therefore be easily opened for every faculty member served, regardless of the length of the working relationship.

The librarian's creativity will largely determine how many ways the vita information is used. For the sake of illustration, consider the newly appointed reference librarian. At a brief, introductory meeting with the faculty member, the new librarian obtains a vita and will surely find some element in it that will provide the basis for a follow-up meeting. For example, if the faculty member has published, the librarian might analyze the library's holdings of materials cited in his or her most recent publications. Should the library lack a significant portion of the materials cited, the librarian has discovered a topic of mutual importance.

In the second meeting the librarian will be able to convey a familiarity with the faculty member's recent work and an understanding of the collection. Such expertise and concern may form the foundation for a long, productive, professional relationship.

From this simple beginning, the librarian can expand the client file after every professional encounter, whether face-to-face, by telephone, or by mail. Following the discussion of collection lacunae, joint determination of necessary actions is recorded; later pertinent developments are entered as well.

Another singular opportunity to gather useful data is in a discussion of how faculty members involve the library in their instruction. Assignment sheets can be analyzed in a fashion similar to the citation examination mentioned above. Invariably there will be an occasion, with a majority of faculty, to follow up with an analysis of the library's ability to support their instructional efforts. Given the information explosion and proliferation of containers and sources, it will be a rare occurrence when the librarian cannot contribute professional expertise that assists faculty.

The faculty client file becomes an impetus for highly personalized service. A notation on the expected completion of a research project forms the basis for a review of research findings, the library's utility, and, especially, where the faculty member plans to turn next. After getting such information, the librarian may need to explore the collection, do literature searches, or inquire into other matters of significance to the faculty member. The audit trail of encounters and actions will assist the librarian in determining what steps to take next.

Through judicious use of the file, the librarian can develop services for the individual faculty member that are analogous to those provided by health maintenance organizations. From information contained in the file, the librarian has the basis for planning a customized program of information support. There will be little doubt about the content of conversations held, actions proposed and taken, and outcomes expected and observed.

For most librarians, the natural outcome of maintaining faculty client files will be more frequent, systematic faculty contact, greater effectiveness in support of our colleagues, and thus a more significant role in the academy. Even a modest investment in these files will yield valuable results.

There is yet another major benefit. The librarian's successor will begin work with a store of professional information that can be put to immediate use. To begin where one's predecessor left off is far better than beginning at random.

To summarize: the purpose of the faculty client file is to document the interaction between librarian and faculty member and to provide a record of the faculty member's information needs. The file can be an important communication tool between librarians as well: its contents should facilitate research, evaluation of services, and administrative planning.

Given the central function of client files in other professions, and given the potential benefit to librarians and to those faculty we serve, what now deters us from incorporating this near-universal practice into our faculty liaison work?

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