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Oregon Reference Link: Providing All the Answers Most of the Time

by Amy Kinard
Jackson County Library

All the libraries in Oregon, from a school library east of the Cascades to a public library on the coast, are linked together for reference service. Connected by a network of five regional reference centers located throughout Oregon, no librarian is more than a telephone call or e-mail away from reference support. If your patron's question cannot be answered by local staff or collections, it can simply be forwarded to your regional reference center. Too good to be true? Is there a catch? There is no trick to it. Once local resources are exhausted, a question can be forwarded to a regional reference center where other reference librarians will work on it. (Contact information for regional centers is included in this article.) Based on the number of reference questions received by these centers, most librarians are apparently familiar with the Oregon Reference LINK program, but a little background may clarify the system.

BACKGROUND

The passage of Senate Bill 20 by the 1993 Oregon Legislature ensured establishment of a statewide resource sharing program: Oregon LINK (Library Information Network for Knowledge). Under this legislation three types of library resource sharing activities were allowed:

- Interlibrary loan net lender reimbursement
- Regional Reference Referral centers
- Direct loan net lender reimbursement

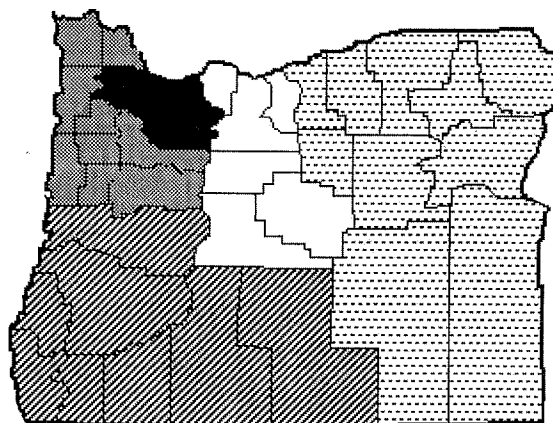
Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) funds became available when the Oregon State Library adopted a new, more focused mission to serve Oregon government agencies. Because funds were not sufficient to fund all three components of Oregon LINK at that time, the State Advisory Council on Libraries recommended that the first LINK component would be the establishment of five regional reference referral centers. On October 28, 1993, the State Library Board accepted the State Advisory Council's recommendation to adopt "Proposed Plan for Oregon LINK, 1993-1995," which was finalized as the "Plan for Oregon LINK, 1993-1995." The establishment of five regional reference centers was the highest priority, to be followed by interlibrary loan

net lender reimbursement in the next biennium and direct loan net lender reimbursement at a later date. The five regional centers are as follows:

1. Central Oregon-North Information Network (CONIN)—Located at Deschutes County Library. Serves libraries in Crook, Deschutes, Hood River, Jefferson, Sherman, and Wasco counties.
2. Eastern Oregon Information Network (EOIN)—Located at the Walter M. Pierce Library of Eastern Oregon University. Serves libraries in Baker, Gilliam, Grant, Harney, Malheur, Morrow, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa, and Wheeler counties.
3. Southern Oregon Libraries Information Cooperative (SOLIC)—Located at Jackson County Library Services. Serves libraries in Coos, Curry, Douglas, Jackson, Josephine, Klamath, Lake, and Lane counties.
4. Northwest LINK—Located at the Valley Library of Oregon State University. Serves libraries in Benton, Clatsop, Columbia, Lincoln, Linn, Marion, Polk, Tillamook, and Yamhill counties.
5. Multnomah County Library (MCL)

In addition to serving Multnomah County, MCL serves as reference referral center for Clackamas and

Oregon Reference LINK



- Multnomah County Library
- ▨ Oregon State University, The Valley Library, Northwest LINK
- ▩ Jackson County Library, Southern Oregon Libraries Information Cooperative
- Deschutes County Library, Central Oregon-North Information Network
- ▤ Eastern Oregon State College, Walter M. Pierce Library, Eastern Oregon Information Network

Washington counties under mutually agreed upon conditions. While all the centers serve as third-level centers for each other in areas of specialty, MCL is used most in this manner.

According to the "Oregon Reference LINK Design Plan," all five Reference LINK Centers would provide the following services:

1. Answer requests for information that cannot be answered by the local library.
2. Provide for patron anonymity, toll-free or low-cost communication, and least cost methods of delivery for answers.
3. Communicate regularly with local libraries in the geographic area, either in person, at meetings or via electronic or print communications.
4. Provide or facilitate training and educational opportunities about reference services, seeking to strengthen reference service at the local level.

How It Works

Oregon Reference LINK is not a substitute for local reference service but serves to expand a local library's resources. The system is based on a three-tiered structure:

Tier 1.

The first level of service is at the local library, where the patron has direct access to a librarian. When local library resources are exhausted, the unanswered question may be forwarded by the local librarian to that library's regional reference referral center. (Patrons do not call the regional referral centers directly.)

Tier 2.

When a regional reference center receives a request, it may contact the patron if additional information is necessary, but usually communication is librarian to librarian. Answers are sent back to the requesting library to deliver to the patron. This is an important factor in maintaining strong local reference service.

Tier 3.

If a regional center cannot answer a question, it may contact any of the other regional referral centers. This is usually to access a special collection, such as MCL's song collection, Oregon State University's agricultural materials, or material of regional interest. In an effort to avoid unnecessary delays, any Oregon library with more than ten professional staff members may also contact any of the five regional reference centers directly.

As expected, the reference referral centers receive a wide range of questions. Requests include songs, poems, wiring diagrams, health information, and stu-

dent report topics. There are requests for company information, stock prices, trademark searches, and vocational schools. The variety is endless and typical of what most reference librarians see each day. The difference is that a question that is "impossible" in one library may become a successful search with this three-tiered networking. These are some recent requests answered by regional centers:

- A city manager needed a list of trees and shrubs found in riparian zones in Eastern Oregon.
- A middle school student needed the name and biographical information about any female Mexican poet.
- A school principal needed studies about the effectiveness of grade repetition in middle school years.

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Oregon Reference LINK Regional Centers

Please contact the LINK center serving your county. (See article for the list of counties served by each center)

1. Central Oregon-North Information Network (CONIN)
Deschutes County Library
(800) 727-5630
(541) 389-0485 fax
2. Eastern Oregon Information Network (EOIN)
Eastern Oregon University,
Walter M. Pierce Library
(541) 962-3699
(541) 962-3335 fax
reflink@eou.edu
3. Southern Oregon Libraries Information Cooperative (SOLIC)
Jackson County Library Services
(800) 866-9047
(800) 564-6817 fax
solic@jcls.org
4. Northwest LINK
Oregon State University,
The Valley Library
(800) 689-9991
(541) 737-3453
nwlink@ccmail.orst.edu
5. Multnomah County Library
(503) 248-3238
(503) 248-5475 fax
ardens@nethost.multnomah.lib.or.us

Sharing the Wealth

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NO, I'M NOT A LIBRARIAN— BUT YES, I CAN HELP YOU

Cindy Skinner

When I was first hired in the library 11 years ago as a clerical specialist, I never imagined that I would end up working as a paraprofessional "librarian" at the reference desk. Working at the reference desk without an MLS is challenging, in that it is hard to know where I fit in with my colleagues. Each of us brings different experiences with us to the desk. The librarians, of course, have their library education, and I have many years of experience.

When I started working in the library, I managed the reference collection. At first it was just my job, but soon I became very interested in the books. I'd find myself looking forward to processing them to see what we were adding to the collection. That experience has helped me a great deal in my work at the reference desk.

This past year I had the opportunity to work with the NW LINK Program, a statewide program providing reference service to community colleges, schools, and public libraries across Oregon. This was a whole new learning experience for me. I received the questions by mail, phone calls, and faxes. There was no interview to conduct, no body language to read—just the question. What did they

really want? What were they going to use the information for? Did what I sent them really help or just confuse them? The questions I received were totally different than the ones I would get at OSU's reference desk. The majority of the questions were referred by public libraries, and no two questions were alike. Some of them were downright funny! I'd have to rely on the groundwork of the staff person who had sent the question to me.

When our service desks merged and I began hearing the librarians interview the patrons, I realized that I, too, could help find the answers. Finding out what the patron really wants to know takes good listening skills, patience, and experience. I have that! Often I recognize what book the patron is asking for, and I know just where it is. Well, this seems easy. But sometimes I don't have a clue what a patron is asking. Nothing sounds familiar at all. How do the librarians know what the patron wants? Is this what they learn in library school? Maybe I can't do this after all! And then I remember: Ask questions. Many times patrons don't know exactly what they want, hence, the valuable reference interview. Sometimes I still have trouble figuring out what the question really is, but once I start asking questions, the barrier between patrons and me seems to break down and together we find what they want. **Q**

Oregon Reference Link

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- A nursing home volunteer needed the words to the song "Where the Morning Glories Twine Around the Door."
- A home mechanic needed a clutch diagram (and instructions) for a 1941 Ford 9N tractor.

None of these questions could be answered at their local libraries, but because they were referred to a regional center, local librarians were able to deliver the answers, and patrons were well served.

FUTURE OF OREGON REFERENCE LINK

As we know, "nothing stays the same," and this is especially true in the world of information. The Internet and other online resources are expanding the "walls" of libraries. While basic information needs have not changed (there will always be a broken car or a report on capital punishment), access to information is changing. What does this mean for regional reference service? Will our patrons be able to access the information sources without reference assistance? Are our libraries funded and open to provide this access? Perhaps extended reference service will be more important than ever as information

sources expand, and citizens' demands for immediate service grow. Questions regarding the future of reference service are the same everywhere. This fall, Oregon Reference LINK services and performance will be evaluated by an independent consultant, and it is hoped that information from this process will help determine how Oregon Reference LINK is structured in the future. Comments on this future and the delivery of Reference LINK services in general are most welcome and encouraged. Send them to Rushton Brandis, Oregon State Library, State Library Building, Salem, OR 97310. **Q**

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