MOBIUS Annual Conference, June 3, 2009
Tan-Tar-A, Lake of the Ozarks, MO

MOBIUS Forum Session H1, *Problem and/or High-Maintenance Patrons: Strategies for Successful Outcomes*

Facilitator: John Baken (Fontbonne University)
Room Host: Chris Smentkowski (Saint Louis University)
Recorder: Andy Stewart (Missouri University of Science and Technology)

John Baken opened the session by reminding attendees of a service provided by the Missouri Department of Mental Health, Librarian411.org. Representatives of this state agency had a display table at the conference; the website has an excellent array of video and print resources which can be used for staff training.

John also explained that this session was designed to be a discussion forum. To begin group interaction, John had uploaded a survey (PDF) to the MOBIUS Conference web site and had it available as a handout. In preparation for the Forum, John had also sent this survey to a few listservs (American Indian Library Association, for example) and had some responses from those listservs as possible solutions to share with the Forum. (*Recorder's note: John would still appreciate receiving more survey responses, as he remains interested in this topic of library service; here is the link:* https://mco.mobius.umsystem.edu/conferencesession/519 .)

Sample Problems

John then invited those present to share "sample problems." (*Recorder's Note: Nearly all references to institutional and personal names have intentionally been excluded or disguised.)* An urban private university has had trouble with high school students coming in, being noisy, after their school library had closed. Ordinarily, their policy is that university patrons have priority for computer and other resources. It took a long time to coordinate the agreement between the university library and the high school principal and librarian, but now these students are required to have an "InfoPass" signed by their school librarian before they may use this library.

Based on past history, a large, tax-supported law library only allows access to the library by law students during its Finals Week.

Another state-supported university library requires parental approval before youth are allowed to use their computer lab. When they have approval, the library staff members log in each user, after recording names and addresses. This will give library staff some recourse in the event of major problems.

Another large, mid-Missouri, state-supported library has a cluster of twenty Macintosh computers available for "public access." Usage on these machines can be

easily limited to one hour, while a private, urban institution has implemented the one-hour usage limitation on Windows computers. This library allows guests (with ID) to sign in, but gets occasional threats and has had both textbooks and laptop computers stolen. (While the library suspected the culprit in one case to be a "guest user," it turned out to be a student who was appropriately taken into custody.) This library also puts up extra signage during Finals as reminders that users must use extra caution with their own books, calculators, laptops, and other equipment.

Printing

Free printing was the next topic discussed. Nearly half of those present offered free and/or unlimited printing in their libraries. Someone from a small, private school was dismayed to find that a patron was using Britannica and had printed out more than 200 pages. Brandy Sanchez, Missouri State Library, offered the idea of SAM (Smart Access Management) as a printing control solution. She stated Springfield-Greene County Library uses this—it also lets patrons sign up for (and view) a waiting list. [SAM is manufactured by Comprise Technologies, http://www.comprisetechnologies.com and also appears to be sold by 3M.]

Impact of Library Mission Statements

For John's library, their mission statement says they are "open to the community." This can be a limitation when they would like to "clamp down" on some users. At another urban, church-affiliated school, the student handbook explains library rules. At the orientation session, the library director tells all incoming students that "Complaints come to me." A different church-based school has definitive guest access policies, including an agreement page that the applicant signs--stating he/she has read and understands the policies. In addition, they mail a letter (along with the guest patron card) which explains these policies to all new guest patrons.

Cell Phones

One library present suggested they use signs to explain acceptable noise levels (as well as small cards to hand out to offenders when someone is too noisy or otherwise behaving unacceptably). A suburban community college has identified separate "talk zones" and "quiet zones." One urban theological school has "followed the patrons' behavior" for cell phone use. It wasn't something they would have thought of, but patrons have begun using the stairwells for cell phone conversations. When patrons at one school tell the librarian, "It's my mom." the librarian says, "Let me talk to your mom." That is a strategy that works!

When there is no public library (or other access to high-speed internet) in an area, the library sometimes becomes the default internet access point. A problem arises when the cell phone user is talking to a customer service rep and looking at a specific web site. They ask the user to minimize disruptions to neighbors, but don't have a good solution for this particular problem.

Hardware solutions

Someone present mentioned that there is a vendor solution—purchasing and installing a small sound-proof booth, which minimizes the sound of disruptive cell-phone conversations for neighboring library users. The manufacturer's name wasn't known, but it was seen at an ALA display.

Closing Time and Departure of Staff

One library said they simply close down the computer lab 30 minutes before the library closes. One library director present said they intentionally plan to be in the library after the stated closing time. For example, "If the library closes at midnight, staff will be there until 12:15 or 12:30 a. m."

For computer labs, it is possible to have a pop-up computer message appear ten or fifteen minutes before closing—this insures patrons using computers are aware of the pending closing time.

High-Maintenance Patrons

One person present said one of their patrons requires "100 percent hand-holding." The patron always expects the librarian to stay with him. John's university has a program which invites non-traditional students--which brings in a higher proportion of these patrons. Sometimes it works to write down all the steps for a certain process and ask the patrons to always bring that paper back with them.

For law libraries, patrons who are doing their own legal research (*pro se* patrons) can take up extraordinary amounts of time. Librarians also have to be cautious not to provide "legal advice" in this setting.

Summary

In closing, this was a useful, informative session, well prepared for and led by John Baken. Many good ideas and possible solutions (not to mention a few examples of astonishing patron behavior) were shared among those in attendance. If nothing else, it is reassuring to know that other libraries have similar types of problems.