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No Card Cat—No Problem! : WLN's Lasercat Provides Another Opportunity for Cooperation

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This article discusses the implementation of WLN's Laser-Cat CD-ROM catalog in a medium-sized academic library. It describes the creation of a LaserCat/Information desk in the library lobby and the use of technical services librarians and paraprofessional staff from technical services and elsewhere in the library to staff the desk.

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In large libraries, public and technical services functions have generally been quite distinct. In small libraries, on the other hand, every librarian and staff member has had to be a generalist, and there may not be the possibility of maintaining a strict division between the traditional functions, even if that were thought to be desirable. In a medium-sized library, predictably, the situation may be somewhere in between. More communication and cooperation may be achieved with somewhat less effort than is required in a large library, but the organizational chart of a medium-sized library is likely to be more similar to that of a large library than a small one. The idea of breaking down the barriers between the traditional technical and public service functions in libraries is extensively discussed in library literature, at professional meetings, and elsewhere.[1] Automation is one reason why this idea is discussed so frequently.[2] The catalog no longer resides in one place, and therefore the people who maintain the catalog may also be dispersed. Catalogs need no longer contain only conventional bibliographic records for conventional library materials, which may mean more participation in database building by public services personnel. Technical services staff may be faced with the prospect of sitting in front of a computer screen eight hours a day. Staffing a reference or information desk can provide needed variety as well as being another good use for the knowledge developed in technical services activities.

The University of Idaho (UI), with 9,500 students and 700 faculty, is a medium-sized university, and the UI library, with twenty-one librarians and sixty total staff, is a medium-sized library. The library is large enough for a high degree of specialization, but not always large enough to feel that any area has enough people. To make the most of the number we have, the technical and public services divisions have had to cooperate. Until 1983, for example, all librarians from both technical and public services staffed the reference desk nights and weekends. Although that is no longer required, a number of technical services librarians still participate.

Another area in which there has been interdivisional cooperation has been in the choice of a form of catalog for the public and in training the public to use that catalog. In 1988 the UI library was in its tenth year of using a microfiche public catalog produced by the Western Library Network (WLN). The fiche catalog used in conjunction with the closed card catalog gave library patrons access to all of the UI library holdings.

BACKGROUND

In 1980, shortly after joining WLN, the library embarked on an early, cooperative retrospective conversion (recon) project. Staff from pub-

lic and technical services volunteered to work all hours the network was available to make maximum use of the WLN terminals, making a first pass through the shelflist, attaching our holdings symbol to records they found there. Through cooperation between the divisions, we were able to convert several thousand records to machine-readable form. The library began a concentrated retrospective conversion project in the mid-1980s and by fall of 1988 the project was nearly completed. With the exception of serials, all materials previously listed only in the card catalog were now also accessible through the fiche catalog. Despite the formal and informal instructional efforts of the library staff, however, some patrons persisted in using the card catalog. Clearly, something had to be done.

WLN's announcement in 1987 of the availability of LaserCat gave us the opportunity to do that "something." LaserCat is a CD-ROM version of much of the WLN database. It consists of three discs and is updated quarterly. It includes all WLN records to which any library has attached holdings, as well as the last two years of LC-MARC records, regardless of whether any holdings are attached. Each quarterly issue includes cataloging done up to about two months before the issue is produced. Laser-Cat subscribers may choose to search for holdings of all of the approximately 300 WLN member libraries, or they may create a profile of one or more libraries and retrieve only items owned by the library or libraries chosen. Records may be displayed in "brief" (author, title, publisher, call number), "full" (all access points), or "complete^ (MARC-tagged) formats. Ways of searching include exact searches for some standard numbers, author, title and subject; keyword and browse searches for author, title and subject; limiting the search by date of publication, language, and cataloging format, as well as Boolean searching. The user begins by choosing a type of search and entering search words, and then may choose to display items from a list of matches.

When LaserCat first became available, we began slowly, purchasing one PC equipped with CD-ROM drives and a LaserCat subscription. At first, LaserCat was housed in an area where only library staff could use it and become famil-

iar with it. Some weeks later, the LaserCat station was moved to the library lobby near the entrance and close to the card catalog and to the Humanities Library. At every opportunity the Humanities staff (1.5 FTE librarians and 1 FTE upper-level support staff) taught individual patrons how to use this new product. Meanwhile, classes of students who came to the library for bibliographic instruction were also given Laser-Cat demonstrations. Within a short time, we had created a core of LaserCat users who in turn created a demand for the new technology.

Ironically, the need to save money gave us the opportunity to acquire more Laser-Cats. The UI library has four departments that do reference work. (See figure 1.) Each of these departments—Humanities, Social Sciences, Science and Special Collections—had had a WLN terminal. To reduce WLN charges, two of these were taken off-line in late 1987. Besides saving money in online charges, one of the former WLN PCs could be used as a LaserCat workstation. (The other began to be used for other CD-ROM databases.)

As we added more workstations, demand for LaserCat continued to increase. The workstations were always in use. We saw that there was an inexpensive way to replace the card and fiche catalogs and to provide access to the entire UI library collection. As our database of machine-readable cataloging records grew, so did the cost for producing the microfiche catalog. A new base catalog was created each year, with cumulative supplements. It cost approximately $.05 per record to produce the first copy of the base catalog or supplement. Until 1987, we had produced multiple copies of the catalog, and multiple cumulative supplements every month. Beginning in 1987, we began producing quarterly supplements to reduce the cost. Depending on the frequency of the supplements, and whether we had decided to produce a new base catalog or continue to issue only supplements, the microfiche catalog for fiscal year 1988-89 would have cost between $24,000 and $47,000.

CHOOSING LASERCAT

In the spring of 1988, the library decided to stop producing a microfiche catalog. Beginning the next fall we would rely exclusively on Laser-
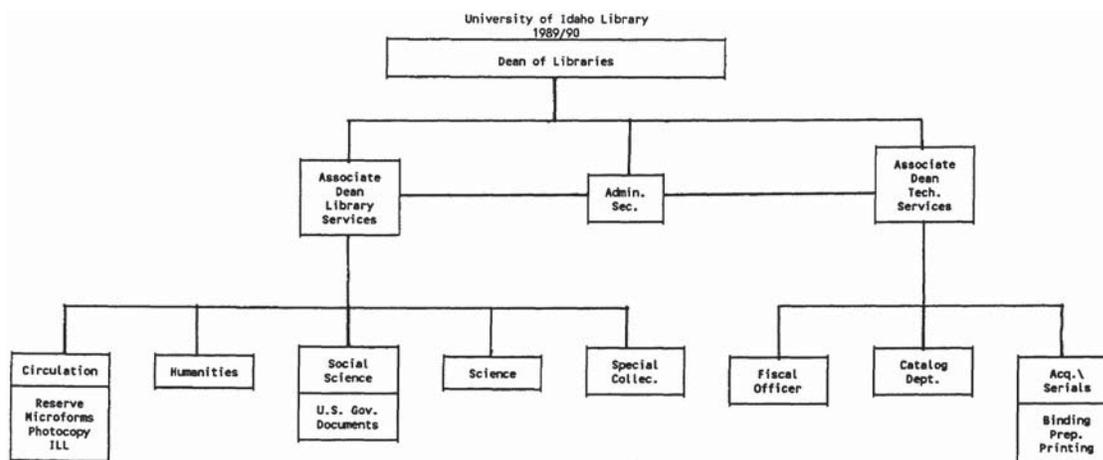
Figure 1. Organizational Chart

Cat. The main reasons for this decision were the high cost of the fiche catalog, the unpopularity of microfiche, and the fact that with recon nearly complete we could use LaserCat exclusively and discard the card catalog.

The initial investment in equipment for an adequate number of LaserCat workstations was not insignificant, about $1,700 each for twelve PC-XT clones with internal CD-ROM drives, plus about (350 for a number of printers for the workstations to share. But fifteen LaserCat subscriptions cost less than (16,000 a year, in contrast to the spiraling cost of the fiche catalog. The investment in equipment will not end with the initial purchase of workstations, of course, but equipment and subscriptions combined (about (38,000 the first year) still do not equal what we might have paid for another year of microfiche. Additionally, LaserCat provides many of the powerful searching capabilities, such as keyword searching, of an integrated automated system at a fraction of the database maintenance, equipment, and staff costs of a mainframe system.

In adopting LaserCat as its public catalog, the UI library had come nearly full circle. Until 1979, the library had maintained a card catalog. In 1979, when we joined WLN, the card catalog was closed, and was used only for locating unconverted holdings until it was discarded in 1988. For items cataloged using WLN, the library used WLN's Resource Directory, a microfiche version of the WLN database, as its pub-

lic catalog, from 1979 until 1983. From 1983 until 1988, we produced a microfiche catalog of UI holdings only. When we adopted LaserCat as our only public catalog in the fall of 1988, we were once again providing a union catalog, this time with a number of improvements over 10 years ago. First of all, we have all of our holdings represented in one catalog, rather than supplementing a closed card catalog with something else. Moreover, each LaserCat can be profiled to retrieve records from any combination of WLN libraries. Finally, most people would agree that a computerized catalog is infinitely easier to use than microfiche, or a combination of microfiche and cards.

Obviously, we could not have adopted LaserCat as our public catalog had recon not been completed. This major shift in the method of getting access to the collection was successful because of the cooperative efforts of the technical services and public services divisions. This unified effort did not end when the card catalog and fiche catalogs were physically removed from the library.

In the fall of 1988 the library purchased twelve more LaserCat stations, for a total of fifteen located throughout the library. Six were placed in the library lobby where the card catalog had been located previously (see the floor plan in figure 2). Although LaserCat is to some degree menu-driven, the sequence of steps required to complete a search for materials is not entirely self-explanatory or obvious. A Laser-

Cat/information desk in the lobby was to be staffed 8 A.M. through 5 P.M., Monday through Friday, with the goal of reaching most new LaserCat users. Evening and weekend assistance was available from the librarian at the reference desk in a different area of the library.

Staffing of the newly placed Laser-C at/information desk was done without adding any staff. We had the difficult task of adding 45 hours of "reference" duty to the library without additional staff. Public services staff were already stretched thin, and were unable to give more than about 15-20 hours more per week for desk duty.

In the same way that we began doing re-con, which is a first step toward automation, with the cooperative efforts of public and technical services, we implemented an automated catalog, instructing users without adding any additional staff. Once again technical services staff were called upon. Fourteen people volunteered for a total of 26 hours on the LaserCat/information desk. Many of the volunteers were not librarians; in fact, of the 45 hours of operation

Randy Henderson

WLN LaserCat

per week, the desk was staffed by professional librarians for only 13 hours.[3] All of the reference points in the library are staffed by paraprofessional staff part of the time, so this was not really a radical change. There was general acceptance of this arrangement, although some librarians would have preferred to staff the information desk with librarians only, if that had been possible.

STAFF TRAINING

The first order of business was to instruct the staff volunteers about use of LaserCat. Public service librarians gave all information desk staffers a one-hour instruction on the CD catalog. These instructional sessions were kept small and intimate, one teacher to one or two "pupils" to allow for questions and hands-on learning. These instructional sessions were completed over the course of a two-week period, before the installation of the fifteen LaserCat stations.[4]

LaserCat volunteers served one to three hours each week at an assigned time, and some people served as substitutes or alternates. Although staffing the desk this way reduced staff time in cataloging, acquisitions, circulation and other areas, supervisors generally approved of the arrangement, because no one served on the information desk long enough for his or her job to suffer. Moreover, the added variety and visibility, and the opportunity to learn new skills were an obvious benefit to staff.

A survey of LaserCat volunteers showed that the satisfaction that most felt was undeniable. When asked, "Do you enjoy staffing the LaserCat desk?" virtually all volunteers said that they did, with comments such as:

"I enjoy spending a little time with the students and hearing what they're interested in. It's also fun to see how easily they accept LaserCat. No card cat.—no problem!"

"It's good to remember how people actually use the catalog and the records it contains."

In addition to simply adding variety, it was an opportunity to learn something new. Asked about this, volunteers had a mixture of practical and philosophical replies:

"I feel more comfortable answering reference questions; most patrons are grateful for help."

"I learned things about the library that I hadn't known . . . [It] renewed my feeling that most people are (1) friendly and courteous; (2) just as nervous as I am; (3) grateful for assistance; and (4) doing the best they can."

"Sure, I hadn't used the LC Subject Headings since I was a student here— 1975! Subject searching is new to me after dealing with exact citations for eight years!"

"1. Creative searching. 2. Patience while demonstrating how the system works. 3. Humility. There's an awful lot I don't know anything about. I've learned not to be embarrassed to say, 'I don't know' and then send the patron to someone who can help them."

"It reinforces the notion that libraries are very complex and that things that seem simple to use are often very confusing."

STAFF REACTIONS

Volunteers found a new way of using the knowledge and skills they had learned on the job. Those in technical services also had the chance to expand their knowledge into other areas. They learned more about the library, such as who is eligible for inter-library loan? (everyone), and where to find Consumer Reports (all issues on Reserve). Volunteers got a glimpse of what reference work is all about, and were reassured that it is not always fast, neat, and straightforward for an experienced person either. The point that has been made elsewhere, that direct contact and gratitude from patrons is a rewarding and addictive feeling, turned out to be profoundly true. It was a real thrill when someone said thanks for your help, and frustrating when everyone claimed not to need any help. Volunteers from technical services felt a more direct connection with the mission of the library, and found it easier to understand their shared role in serving library patrons. Staffing the LaserCat desk with many volunteers from technical services gave staff from public services a real chance to see the value of skills and knowledge acquired in technical services work. Staffing the Laser-Cat desk from both public and technical services, and with staff from many levels and backgrounds, gave volunteers a greater sense of

collegiality.

Those in cataloging found that all those years of working with bibliographic data paid off. Expertise with subject headings came in handy when someone was trying to express what they were looking for in LCSH-ese. Experience formulating search strategies proved useful in helping patrons navigate "keyword" versus "browse."

Staff from cataloging saw how patrons used the catalog. Far from making it seem that the catalog and cataloging records are too complex, the value of the rich record is obvious—more information is good. On the other hand, the limitations of LC subject headings are also obvious, and, in many cases, the "brief (author-title-publisher-call number) record displays as much information as the patron needs. It is clear that having everything included in the catalog is helpful. The impact of retrospective conversion is plain to see in Laser-Cat, as was the impact of the library's practice of attaching holdings to records for some government documents. Cataloging errors are magnified online, and certain cataloging practices are shown to be not as helpful as we had assumed.

LaserCat volunteers from cataloging and elsewhere could not help but be made aware of the complexity of bibliographic data, and the fact that although we may take a system like the Library of Congress Subject Headings for granted, the average patron does not. When asked what patrons had the most trouble with and what was most difficult to make dear to them, volunteers replied again and again that subject headings and subject searching presented a problem:

"I frequently think patrons fail to comprehend 'subject' vs. 'subject heading,' which is understandable; it's not an easy concept if you've never worked in a library."

"How subject headings are assigned, i.e., why users don't find what they expect to under a subject heading when they're using the system to find a known item."

USER REACTIONS

The LaserCat volunteers also found that some features of the system presented problems for many patrons. While only a few people would

argue that a card or microfiche catalog could be better or more powerful than a good computer catalog, it would be hard to find a LaserCat user, staff, or patron who finds it a perfect system. The user interface can be learned, but one cannot use LaserCat without first learning how. Moreover, one has to "think like a librarian" to some extent, to become a real LaserCat expert.

A LaserCat user is first presented with an initial screen with two main areas (see figure 2). The top of the screen lists the kinds of searches that are available: Keyword author, title or subject and Browse author, title or subject. The bottom of the screen has a space for entering search words. (Although exact and Boolean searches are possible, the LaserCats used by the public have those kinds of searches disabled. Virtually all of the public Laser-Cats retrieve only records from the UI library and neighboring Washington State University (WSU)). A few public Laser-Cats are set up so that the patron may choose to search all WLN libraries or only UI and WSU. Most patrons prefer to search UI and WSU only. (ILL activity has increased in any case, since users may request books from WSU or any other library through ILL.) The result of any successful search is an index display, from which the user may choose entries using function keys. There are further function key options at every point. Bibliographic records have labeled fields (sometimes abbreviated). Users may print records they retrieve. LaserCat printouts do not simply contain what was on the screen, but are in a numbered bibliography format, without field labels. Queried about what features of LaserCat they had problems with, or what they would change, volunteers' replies ranged from,

"Getting started; changing 'boxes' on the first screen (type of search, search words)—the 'beep' is unnerving."

to

"Difference between call numbers and [record identifier] numbers on the printout [which does not have labeled fields]."

Aside from encountering the limitations of the LaserCat user interface, many volunteers were chagrined, amused, or bemused by human nature as displayed by the patrons they encoun-
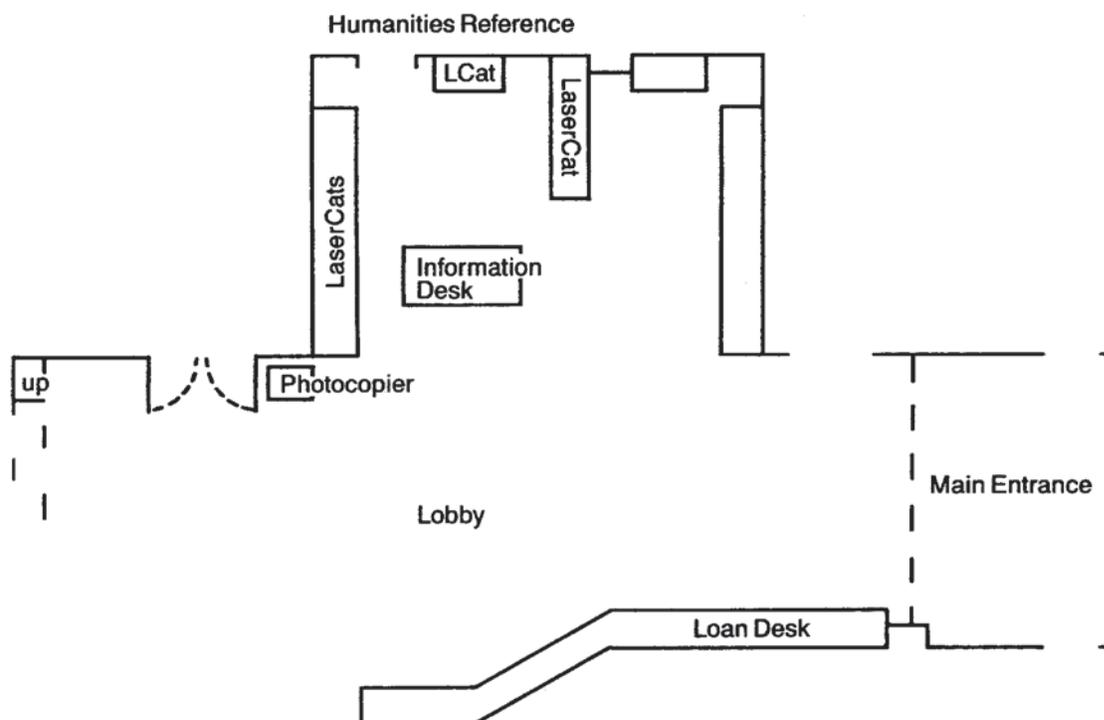
Figure 2. Floor Plan

tered:

"Making the connection between computers and the card catalog [was hard for some patrons]; they somehow expect the computer to give more information [than the card catalog]."

"[One difficulty patrons had was] their native tongue/spelling."

"(Feature of human behavior, not the hardware)—making them understand that they have to be patient [is hard]."[5]

And yet, volunteers could easily see what patrons liked about LaserCat and about the library's LaserCat installation:

"Those who are comfortable with computers found [LaserCat] to be a natural approach. They felt it was faster and equally efficient, although some still liked to browse in the card catalog (or even the microfiche)."

"*Once they get the hang of it,* they probably like subject searching."

Although the transition from card and microfiche catalog to LaserCat was generally smooth and a welcome change to most people, and although the volunteer staffing of the information desk was generally very successful, some peo-

ple had suggestions about what they would have done differently:

"Brief orientation in reference at the beginning and maybe a longer training session on LaserCat with actual difficult questions."

"I feel the transition from card cat to LaserCat went quite smoothly, and I feel it was 100% correct not to install LaserCat in full swing until the card catalog was removed."

"[I would have] kept the [fiche] catalog longer and ease people into computer use. Had a help desk available sooner during the transition."

Some standard problems awaited all LaserCat/Information desk staffers. Many patrons resisted the new technology. These patrons required gentle guidance, assurance, and most importantly, a successful LaserCat search to convince them that giving up the card catalog was not a great loss.

Paraprofessionals from both public and technical services divisions discovered a need for more basic information about the library. Directional questions concerning some areas of the library were difficult to answer for classified

University of Idaho   WLN LaserCat V3.20   Enter Search Words

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╔═══════════╦═══════════╗        Enter your search words
║ KEYWORD   ║ BROWSE    ║
║ SEARCH    ║ SEARCH    ║        You can edit the search words
╠═══════════╬═══════════╣        with arrow (<- ->), insert
║ Author    ║ Author    ║        (Ins), delete (Del), Home and
║ Title     ║ Title     ║        End keys.
║ Subject   ║ Subject   ║
╚═══════════╩═══════════╝        Then press the Tab key to move
                                 to the Search Type box or
                                 press Enter if you are ready
                                 to begin your search.
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Enter search words.  <- -> Ins Del Home End. Tab\Backtab to next box  │
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Figure 3. LaserCat's Initial Screen with Two Main Areas

staff who previously had no working knowledge about those areas of the library. More library tours and instructional sessions for staff would be a likely remedy.

Scheduling the desk was sometimes tricky, as each volunteer staffed the desk for only one hour of the nine-hour day. Some were able to volunteer for only one hour per week. Illnesses required sudden schedule changes, for which we had a supply of substitutes who were ready at a mo-ment's notice. Minor modifications in scheduling, such as two-hour shifts, might alleviate this problem.

Despite the minor headaches, the Laser-Cat/information desk experience has been a positive one for the UI librarians and classified staff alike. The sometimes overlooked talents of the classified staff were reaffirmed. Public services librarians and staff were reminded that all library employees play an important role in getting information to the public. Public and technical services employees had the opportunity to observe and appreciate one an-others' work. We all gained new insights into the effects of data upon the public. And as one staff member commented, having library staff from both divisions participate in this instructional effort "gave me the opportunity to get to know the other library staff better." The library as a unit continues to benefit from renewed mutual respect of the staff. From that standpoint alone, the LaserCat/information desk staffing "experiment" was hugely successful. We look forward to the next occasion for interdivisional library

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