

## **SOPAG's Task Force on Digital Reference Service - April 18, 2001**

**BACKGROUND:** With the advent of the Internet and the proliferation of online resources, the boundaries of a library's collection have expanded tremendously and information seekers require more guidance than ever. To address this need, several UCs and a growing number of libraries in the country have launched or are exploring digital reference services, as the Internet affords the ability to conduct entire reference transactions via the Web, from specifying users' needs to delivering information from the collection. Moreover, it is now possible to develop innovative reference delivery methods by using new Web tools and products such as synchronous dialogue and two-way application sharing. Integrating reference service and new technology offers opportunities and possibilities to enhance the reference process and collaboration.

Digital reference service, however, introduces new issues and service challenges, including audiences served, technology used, resources and skills required, and policies necessary. Another key issue in conducting digital reference service is scalability: how can a digital reference service grow to handle a large number of questions given existing resources? As we attempt to forge next-generation service models for the digital environment, we need to have a better understanding of the theoretical and pragmatic facets of digital reference service in order to concentrate our efforts to design services to best meet the rapidly evolving information needs of remote users.

To better understand the benefits and implications of digital reference service, SOPAG is appointing this Task Force to develop a white paper on digital reference service to provide guidance to UC libraries as they rethink how to best create and perform new models of reference in the future.

**CHARGE:** The charge to the Task Force includes:

1. Assess the role of digital reference service in academic library settings and examine key issues. Key issues might include: the future of traditional, face-to-face reference service; costs and technology needed to support digital reference services; scalability of digital reference services; training of personnel; and relationship between providing answers to user queries and instructing users on how to find information independently.
2. Investigate what other libraries are doing regarding digital reference service and to resolve cost, technology, staffing and training issues.
3. Suggest methods to gather and share user feedback on UC digital reference projects to shape the development and refinement of new digital reference models.
4. Suggest ways UCs might collaborate in building and sustaining these services. These might include: sharing experience and knowledge about Web tools; dividing up development work (sharing the development of scripts for responses, specialized bookmarks and resources); sharing the workload for maintaining digital reference services among the UC participants; and building a question/answer database to identify extant and emerging user needs that would inform the development of reference and educational programs and the usability of interfaces and resources.

**MEMBERSHIP:** The Task Force membership should include representation from Public Services, Resource Sharing, Systems, and CDL Tools and Services.

**TIME FRAME:** 6 months