

# Nonaffiliated Users in Academic Libraries: Using W.D. Ross's Ethical Pluralism to Make Sense of the Tough Questions

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Though the academic library's primary mission is to serve the students, faculty, and staff of its parent institution, would-be users not officially associated with the institution frequently call upon the library to provide services and/or resources. Requests by these nonaffiliated users (sometimes called community users) pose a moral quandary for public-service staff. Library personnel must weigh the demand to be helpful against their responsibility to make students, faculty, and staff their top priority. The authors employ W.D. Ross's pluralistic framework of prima facie duties to examine the conflicting obligations at the heart of this ethical dilemma.



Librarians have consistently operated in accordance with an egalitarian vision of the library articulated by Enoch Pratt. According to Pratt, the library is a place where "races, ages, and socio-economic classes mingled and people could educate themselves."<sup>1</sup> With regard to academic libraries, this concept of the library as a place that serves all people must be tempered by the academic library's mission, which gives priority to the needs of students, faculty, and staff. However, the ethos Pratt describes is so pervasive within the profession of librarianship that many practitioners in academic settings feel obligated to serve both affiliated and nonaffiliated users as best they can. Librarianship as a practice (at least in its contemporary forms) is rooted in the idea

of free, unfettered access to information for all, so it may seem counter to librarians' individual or collective instinct to say "no" to anyone; but when saying "yes" might be detrimental to the library's primary clientele, one must question how best to serve these potentially competing populations. Wrestling with this dilemma can cause both policy makers and frontline staff to experience moral<sup>2</sup> conflict as they are torn between the competing demands of being helpful to nonaffiliated users and maintaining an optimal level of service for students, faculty, and staff.

An early exploration of libraries' policies and procedures regarding nonaffiliated user services was conducted by the Ad-hoc Committee on Community Use of Academic Libraries, sponsored by the College Libraries section of the Association of

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College and Research Libraries. The authors of this 1967 study found overall that libraries attempted to provide modified building access, circulation privileges, and reference assistance to nonaffiliated users.<sup>3</sup> Committee chair J. Josey concluded that "the question now is not whether there should be community use of academic libraries. The question is how is it possible to create the conditions under which there should be community use of academic libraries."<sup>4</sup> Subsequent studies over the past 40 years have offered several visions of what the ideal "condition" might be.

The 1967 study did not address one major factor that complicates matters for today's academic libraries—computers. Nonaffiliated users' demands on academic libraries have increased dramatically as a result of the ready availability of computing and the Internet.<sup>5</sup> In 2003, Nancy Courtney surveyed 814 libraries and concluded that, along with building access and borrowing privileges, "academic libraries have also been generous in allowing computer use by unaffiliated users," citing that 95 percent of academic libraries allowed computer access for library resources; 79.8 percent allowed Web surfing; 57.6 percent allowed checking e-mail; 31.8 percent allowed word processing; and 25.6 percent permitted use of other software applications.<sup>6</sup>

Providing computer access for nonaffiliated users can be problematic for two reasons: first, it can divert limited computer resources away from students, faculty, and staff, especially during busy periods; and, second, working with nonaffiliated users who are unfamiliar with the library's electronic resources or who have low levels of computer literacy can be quite time consuming, which also poses problems during busy periods in the library.

Verhoeven, Cooksey, and Hand note additional challenges posed by opening the doors of the academic library to nonaffiliated users, including: "funding formulas, which seldom incorporate external users ... and extra burdens for library services including longer queues

and reduced service for affiliated users, more competition for seating space, more wear and tear on librarians, machines and materials, and more resources devoted to security." This article also points out that because most nonaffiliated users are relatively unfamiliar with the library, "they typically require more orientation than affiliated users," and as a result may impose severe burdens on both reference services and affiliated users.<sup>7</sup>

Much of the literature suggests that library staff often view their interactions with nonaffiliated patrons as problematic. Several of the articles consulted had titles that appear to be at odds with Pratt's vision of the library as a place where people from all walks of life are encouraged to learn together. Articles such as "Barbarians at the Gates...," "Pests, Welcome Guests or Tolerated Outsiders," "The Mole's Dilemma," and "Welcome or Not, Here They Come..." clearly convey negative attitudes toward nonaffiliated users.<sup>8</sup> All of these articles report that the majority of staff believes they should provide some level of service to nonaffiliated users, but the articles also make it clear that staff frequently find it quite burdensome to do so. The observations of Tuñón, Barsun, and Ramirez are representative of the findings of these studies and include concerns such as "the strains unaffiliated distance students put on their library's resources"; the difficulties posed by "inexperienced outsiders.... [who] often require a disproportionate amount of one-to-one assistance"; and "attitudes of entitlement to services by some walk-in library users"—these were just a few of the negative sentiments.<sup>9</sup> Johnson's 1998 article quoted the following from a librarian: "Unaffiliated users are not shy and can be quite demanding. ... They may monopolize the time of a staff member or may request special services that are not normally available to our primary clientele. ... They can be difficult, single-minded, and unwilling to share."<sup>10</sup> In 2007, Keller studied the staff perceptions of unaffiliated users and determined that many of the negative perceptions are due

to the fact that “policies on access and use were not explicit enough concerning types of library use.”<sup>11</sup>

In spite of the problems that nonaffiliated users often pose for library staff, other authors insist that service to this group is an important aspect of the academic library’s mission. Martin contends that, “given the growing importance of information in our society and our traditional belief in the values of access to information, it would be irresponsible to deny or limit [the nonprimary user’s access to] assistance.”<sup>12</sup> Wilson notes that nonaffiliated users are frequently local citizens who support the college or library in numerous ways (beyond merely paying taxes) and that liberal access for these users is important for maintaining harmonious relations between “town and gown.”<sup>13</sup> Schneider identifies regional campus libraries as having a special opportunity to demonstrate to their communities the value of public higher education. She recommends that libraries on regional campuses extend outreach efforts to the local community and that they make an explicit commitment in their mission statements to serving nonaffiliated users.<sup>14</sup>

The findings of the above articles suggest that the ideal policy for nonaffiliated users will accomplish three objectives:

1. This policy will permit broad access to nonaffiliated users wherever doing so is practical.

2. Such access must not interfere with the library’s service to its primary clientele of students, faculty, and staff.

3. The policy will give library staff a sense of clarity as to how they should balance the demands of objectives 1 and 2.

The specifics of the ideal policy will depend a great deal on a library’s particular circumstances. The following sections offer a framework for reflecting on and discussing the set of conditions that shape a library’s obligations at the local level.

### Ross’s *Prima Facie* Duties

The demands nonaffiliated users place on academic libraries call upon policymakers

to negotiate between competing goods, namely, (1) broad access to information for all users and (2) optimal service for the academic library’s primary clientele. This complexity is profitably explored by describing the situation in terms of *prima facie* duties, a pluralistic set of ethical considerations originally formulated by W.D. Ross.<sup>15</sup> Written in the early twentieth century, Ross’s theory can be understood as a reaction against the consequentialist ethics of writers like Henry Sidgwick and G.E. Moore. According to Ross, the compunction one experiences in a morally significant situation is best described in terms of duties, some of which are grounded in the potential consequences of one’s actions (the duty not to cause harm, for example), others of which have a different basis (such as the duty to respond in kind when others do something kind or helpful). Ethical theories that judge right and wrong solely on the basis of the consequences of the action in question are inadequate in explaining many common experiences of moral compulsion, such as the duty to keep a promise, even when the consequences of breaking that promise are likely to be morally desirable.

Furthermore, Ross holds that the moral compulsion one experiences in everyday life cannot be adequately accounted for in terms of a single overarching ethical principle, e.g., the duty to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Instead, Ross maintains that at least seven principles are required to give an adequate representation of the moral claims one might experience.<sup>16</sup> He provides the following list of duties:

*Fidelity*—One has a duty to follow through on commitments one makes to others, both explicit and implicit.

*Gratitude*—One has a duty to reciprocate the helpfulness and generosity of others.

*Reparation*—If one’s actions harm others, one has a duty to treat them in such a way that makes up for the damage one has caused.

*Justice*—One has a duty to resist or overturn systems of distribution in which advantages accrue to those who are least virtuous.

*Benevolence*—One has a duty to improve the situation of others with respect to knowledge, pleasure, and virtue.

*Self-Improvement*—One has a duty to promote one's own welfare with respect to knowledge and virtue.

*Nonmaleficence*—One has a duty to avoid harming others.

Ross includes a few important details about this list of categories of duties:

1. They are not necessarily exhaustive (although it is difficult to find an example of a moral obligation that does not fall under one or more of these headings: for example, Ross understands the duty not to lie as a combination of *fidelity* [in most situations, the act of speech implies the commitment to tell the truth] and *nonmaleficence*).<sup>17</sup>

2. Ross refers to these duties as *prima facie* duties, by which he means that these seven claims tend to apply generally in morally significant situations.<sup>18</sup>

3. The level of priority given to each *prima facie* duty is dependent upon the details of the particular situation to which they apply: that is to say, *fidelity* is not necessarily more compelling than *gratitude*. To find out how *prima facie* duties apply to particular situations, consider the example below.

In explaining how *prima facie* duties apply to concrete situations and how moral agents navigate among them to arrive at their *final* or *actual* duty, Ross alludes to circumstances in which one is morally justified in breaking a promise.<sup>19</sup> Let's say a librarian makes an appointment to meet with a student at the reference desk at 2 p.m. On her way to the appointment, at 1:58 p.m., she encounters another patron having a heart attack in the lobby. Conditions are such that she can either keep her appointment with her student or tend to the gravely ill patron and see that he gets the medical attention he requires. The two salient *prima facie* duties in this

case are *fidelity* (the librarian should follow through on her agreement to meet with the patron at the reference desk) and *benevolence* (the librarian should give aid to the heart-attack victim). *Gratitude*, for example, does not apply given the specific details of this case. It is clear that, in this scenario, the librarian's duty to help the heart-attack victim overrides her duty to keep the appointment. To use Ross's terms, although the *prima facie* duties of benevolence and fidelity both exert a moral claim in this situation, the librarian's *actual* or *final* duty is to help the gravely ill patron. Note that, although the duty to help the ailing patron overrides the claims of fidelity in this situation, the duty to keep one's word does not simply disappear. Instead, failure to keep the appointment creates a duty of *reparation* for the librarian—she should at least apologize to the patron for not meeting her at the agreed time.

The greatest strength of Ross's approach is that the broad set of *prima facie* duties Ross identifies encourages well-rounded judgments in morally complex situations. Duties like *reparation*, *justice*, and *gratitude* acknowledge the commonsense fact that past actions (one's own or those of others) create special moral demands on individuals involved in those actions. Duties of *benevolence*, *self-improvement*, and *nonmaleficence* require careful attention to how one's actions might shape the future. The duty of *fidelity* acknowledges the claim that promise-keeping exerts upon one's conscience, even when lying or breaking one's word seems likely to produce morally desirable results. Although Ross's extensive list of competing demands does not lend itself to the easy resolution of moral difficulties, the set of duties he identifies provides a truly helpful vocabulary for articulating the salient features of everyday moral experience in all its complexity. In a sense, it serves as a reminder of *how confusing it should be* as one attempts to navigate one's way through complicated situations, thus making it easier to resist the temptation of facile, one-sided conclusions.

Ross's approach is especially apt for identifying the various claims involved in situations of moral conflict. It proves particularly illuminating for the deliberations of policy makers and frontline staff as they seek to determine the appropriate level of service to provide to nonaffiliated users.

### **Library Application: The Question of Service to Nonaffiliated Users**

In Ross's conception of moral obligation, duty applies with regard to oneself or others. Before applying Ross's general principles to this case, it is important to identify the relevant parties who potentially exert a moral claim in this situation.<sup>20</sup> These parties include:

1. Nonaffiliated users—Users without an official connection to the college or university, who have decided for any number of possible reasons that the academic library is the best place to meet their needs.

2. Students, faculty, and staff—The library's primary service group, who may have resources and services shifted away from them as a result of a liberal nonaffiliated-user policy.

3. Frontline staff—Librarians, paraprofessionals, and student workers who are responsible for implementing the library's policies as they provide services to users.

4. The greater institution the library serves—Typically a college or university, whose interests might be affected for good or ill by the nonaffiliated user policy, especially with regard to "town and gown" relations.

5. Local public libraries—Public libraries may see their gate counts drop dramatically if nearby academic libraries offer liberal access to computers, materials, and services. This could impact their funding.

6. Librarianship as a profession—Library workers have worked hard to establish a reputation for libraries as a cultural institution. This carefully cultivated image sets libraries forth as welcoming

destinations for those who require material or personal assistance in working with information. Individual libraries have a responsibility to consider the profession's mission when making local decisions.

Consider the *prima facie* duties that the library might owe to these parties:

**Fidelity:** The duty of fidelity consists in the obligation to follow through with one's commitments, both explicit and implicit, and to communicate honestly (Ross claims that most cases of speech or writing include an implicit commitment to report the truth).<sup>21</sup> The claim of fidelity requires libraries to follow through with the commitments expressed in their policies, and this is particularly true with regard to the question of service to nonaffiliated users. Several groups have a stake in the library's consistent application of its policies:

1. Nonaffiliated users and the primary service group—Upon adopting a policy, the library should communicate that policy clearly and work within the guidelines set forth. Is it possible to deviate from the policy and still fulfill the obligations of fidelity? The most reasonable course is to acknowledge latitude for exceptions that preserve the spirit in which the policy was written. Such exceptions must (a) work for the benefit of the nonaffiliated user (all things being equal, it would be problematic to make an exception that further restricts the nonaffiliated user's privileges, as the policy stands as a guarantee of the services that the library extends to them) and (b) not offer privileges to nonaffiliated users at the expense of service to students, faculty, and staff. When making exceptions, library staff should make certain that nonaffiliated users are aware of the policy and explain the basis for the exception. Such transparency should help to avoid misunderstandings in the future, especially if, when the nonaffiliated user makes his next request that deviates from policy, conditions are such that the library cannot comply with his wishes. Unless the library staff is clear about making exceptions for a nonaffiliated user on a quiet weekend morning, that user may feel

slighted when he is denied a similar level of service on a busy Monday evening.

2. Library personnel—A library's policies for the public must be consistent with the terms under which its employees agreed to work there. Otherwise, the library fails to live up to the obligations of fidelity with regard to its own personnel. A policy regarding nonaffiliated users should not require library employees to perform duties significantly beyond the range of duties listed in the job descriptions for their positions. For example, if the job descriptions of public service staff do not include the supervision of young children, it would be wrong for the library to adopt a policy that permits nonaffiliated users (or anyone else) to leave young children unattended.

3. Parent institution—An academic library's policies (and its interpretation and enforcement of those policies) should be consistent with policy statements of the parent institution. For example, if a university's mission expresses a commitment that the institution will be an agent for positive change within the community, this commitment would, all things being equal, tend to support a relatively liberal access policy for nonaffiliated users.

4. Librarianship as a profession—Commitments expressed by the American Library Association, such as the "Freedom to Read" statement and the "Library Bill of Rights," set a tone for practitioners in libraries of all descriptions.<sup>22</sup> Although these statements do not explicitly state that academic libraries should make their materials accessible to everyone regardless of institutional affiliation, such statements' emphasis on equitable access tends to support liberal policies for nonaffiliated users.

**Reparation:** Obligations of reparation arise when one person's actions result in another's harm: the person responsible for those actions is obliged to do something to make up for the harm he or she caused. Although library activities typically have as their aim the benefit of others, there are circumstances in which academic libraries are likely to incur duties of reparation.

With regard to nonaffiliated users, there are three senses in which reparation can serve as a ground for obligation. The first is the "everyday" way in which particular actions inconvenience specific individuals. For example, if a patron is asked to wait for a long time while library personnel attend to other responsibilities, one might say that the staff member owes the patron at least a modest level of special consideration when addressing his or her request. At the very least, the staff member owes the patron a verbal apology.

The second sense in which reparations may be owed to nonaffiliated users is more substantial. If the library's policies or activities are such that library personnel must refuse service to a nonaffiliated user, that refusal is the basis for a debt of reparation owed to that user. Although some may question whether refusing service is technically the same as doing harm to a person, and therefore whether such a refusal provides the basis for a debt of reparation, there are good reasons for arguing that this is indeed the case. For one thing, the refusal is likely to pose significant inconvenience to the nonaffiliated user, who, in some cases, has devoted a portion of his or her day to making a trip to the library. In many cases, the library staff member is made aware of this inconvenience, yet still persists in upholding the library's restrictive policy (often for valid reasons). Giving priority to the library's policy over the individual's interests is, in at least a small way, detrimental to that individual. This harm is the basis for a moral demand for a proportionate gesture of reparation, such as a patient, gentle explanation of the library's policy and a willingness to help the user find other avenues to satisfy his or her information need.

The third sense in which reparation can form the basis for a library's obligation to nonaffiliated users is more controversial and more profound. To what extent are libraries obliged to offer reparations for harms done by the greater community of which the library is a part? This ques-

tion is of particular importance for the authors' institution, which is located in Prince Edward County, Virginia. During the 1950s and '60s, local officials responded to a federal mandate to end segregation in schools by closing the county's public schools altogether.<sup>23</sup> As a result, the county has a generation of residents with significant gaps in their education. One could make a strong case that reparations are owed to those who bear the consequences of this policy. The question takes on additional significance for the library, as the library by the nature of its function has the resources to help those individuals address some of the lacunae in their education. Resolving this question satisfactorily requires that one determine the extent to which an entire community must answer for the actions of its officials, a question that cannot be addressed in sufficient depth in this paper.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, one could make a strong argument that reparation forms the basis for an additional degree of consideration for these individuals over and above that ordinarily called for by the duty of beneficence.

**Gratitude:** Duties can also be created by the actions of others. If someone does something kind or helpful for someone else, that action alters the moral relations between the two parties, as the recipient of the kindness now owes his or her benefactor the special consideration that goes with being in another's debt. The duty of gratitude exerts a claim upon academic libraries in several ways – many of which are brought to the fore by the issue of service to nonaffiliated users. Because the tuition paid by students and their families is a major source of support for institutions of higher learning, the claims of gratitude tend to bolster the idea that services to nonaffiliated users cannot be so extensive that they negatively impact the library's performance on behalf of students. A similar claim can be made on behalf of faculty and staff: because their work contributes in many ways to the viability of the parent institution, the

library, as an agent of the parent institution, should make it a priority to support those whose work supports the college or university.

Concerns of gratitude also tend to support the idea that the academic library should offer *some* degree of service to members of the community who are not otherwise affiliated with the parent institution. These obligations are particularly clear in the case of publicly funded colleges and universities, as the state supports these institutions with revenues from taxes paid by those in the local community. One might argue further that all institutions, whether public or private, are to varying degrees beholden to their neighbors in the surrounding community. After all, the community provides the institution's employees a place to live with their families. When the community commits public funds to improve basic services or amenities in the area, the college or university benefits indirectly, as a relatively desirable quality of community life makes the institution more attractive to competitive job candidates. Furthermore, the immediate community benefits the institution by providing job and internship possibilities for its students. The more resources the community expends in such efforts, the greater the library's obligation to reciprocate by serving the institution's neighbors.

One also might argue that considerations of gratitude apply to the relationship between academic libraries and all scholarly researchers, not just those who work for the library's parent institution. From a "big-picture" perspective, academic libraries and researchers maintain a symbiotic relationship: researchers participate in the scholarly processes that produce the bulk of the content managed by academic libraries, while libraries facilitate these scholarly processes by providing information to researchers and making the work of these researchers accessible to other scholars. Libraries should acknowledge this relationship by supporting the research of scholars within

and outside their institutions whenever it is feasible to do so.

**Justice:** Ross conceives of the duty of justice as the obligation to act when one encounters unfair distributions of goods that are in limited supply. When these distributions are not "in accordance with the merits of the persons concerned," one has a duty to correct or overturn the system by which such resources are allotted.<sup>25</sup> Among libraries, this idea of merit among those who receive a share of the resources is often ignored, but the moral advisability of this stance is debatable. Consider the following example: two students have entered the information commons through different doors, and each is independently making her way to the last available computer. One student wants to use the computer to find articles for her paper on sustainable waste management practices at universities, while the other wants to use the computer to play solitaire. Other conditions being equal, the *merit* of one student's intended use of the computer outweighs the other's, especially in light of the library's mission to support the educational and research pursuits of students, faculty, and staff. In this situation, the usual policy of first-come, first-served may require some correction by the attending library staff. The question of the merit of the patrons' intended use becomes especially tricky when it is a nonaffiliated user who has a more serious research need than the student who wants to download pictures of last night's party.

With respect to the question of non-affiliated users, the duty of justice also exerts a claim on behalf of frontline library employees. Because libraries frequently cannot provide nonaffiliated users the same degree of access and support that they offer to students, faculty, and staff, there is significant potential for misunderstandings, conflict, and hurt feelings when interacting with nonaffiliated users. Implicit in Ross's concept of justice is the idea that benefits should accrue to those who deserve them. Within the library's organizational structure, librarians and

other managers are given the advantages of greater authority and greater compensation relative to paraprofessionals and student workers. In a just library, these advantages come with the obligation to take a lead role in addressing the concerns of dissatisfied patrons, particularly nonaffiliated patrons. Rather than leave paraprofessionals and student workers to bear the brunt of patron complaints on their own, librarians need to make themselves available for quick referrals whenever conflict arises.

**Beneficence:** The obligation of beneficence requires that, other things being equal, one should seek to improve the lot of others with respect to virtue, intelligence, or pleasure. In other words, one should help people when the opportunity arises. With regard to the library, when anyone makes a request of the library, and the library is in a position to fulfill that request without a detrimental impact on its primary service group or upon its employees, the library should fulfill the request. As should be apparent from the preceding sentence, there is frequently a gap between the ideal of beneficence and what a library can offer given limitations on resources and personnel. This gap must be navigated with creativity in the utilization of resources and sensitivity toward all parties concerned. Furthermore, the claims of beneficence are frequently in conflict with the claims of fidelity, particularly when one is asked to do something prohibited by library policy. The ever-present obligation imposed by beneficence keeps library workers humane as they attempt to resolve the tensions between patron requests and institutional policies. As discussed above, when confronted with a request that involves some bending of the rules, personnel should consider the possible consequences of deviating from the policy and, if those consequences are determined to be acceptable, make an exception and assist the patron. The academic library that regularly refuses aid to nonaffiliated users, especially during periods of



relatively low use by the primary service group (for example, weekend mornings, summer), may be falling short in fulfilling the demands of beneficence.

**Self-Improvement:** This is the idea that, in the absence of other, overriding concerns, one is obliged to improve oneself with respect to virtue or knowledge. With regard to service to nonaffiliated users, obligations for self-improvement require academic libraries to reflect on and seek to enhance those policies and procedures that impact each stakeholder group. In particular, the duty of self-improvement obliges libraries to monitor, assess, and improve those services and resources utilized by both its primary service group and nonaffiliated users. Wherever possible, the library must adapt to minimize the impact nonaffiliated users have on the use of those resources important to students, faculty, and staff.

Furthermore, for the sake of its own personnel, librarians should frequently seek to refine the library's policies regarding nonaffiliated users to ensure that the policies are clear, justifiable, and easy to enforce with minimal awkwardness. Finally, the library should establish and maintain clear communications with other libraries to facilitate referrals and offer complementary services wherever possible. In short, the duty of self-improvement requires that libraries frequently revisit their policies and procedures to ensure that they are in a position to respond effectively to opportunities and challenges posed by the demands of nonaffiliated users.

**Nonmaleficence:** Sometimes referred to as the duty of *noninjury*, this type of obligation is the duty to ensure that one's actions bring harm to no one. Nonmaleficence tends to work as a counterbalance that ensures appropriate caution in the pursuit of other duties. For example, if beneficence were one's sole consideration, it would be tempting to provide unrestricted access to all library services and resources to anyone who asks for them. Nonmaleficence requires that one

consider the consequences of that policy and obliges one to desist if the end result has a significant detrimental effect on library stakeholders. In many cases, such a liberal policy would involve an unacceptable level of inconvenience for students, faculty, and staff. Concerns of nonmaleficence oblige the library to come up with a more nuanced policy to minimize potential setbacks for the primary service group.

On the other hand, the duty of nonmaleficence also requires library personnel to display appropriate sensitivity to the requests of nonaffiliated users, especially when their requests fall outside the scope of what the library has deemed appropriate to provide. Concerns of nonmaleficence also apply to policymakers as they establish the procedures that frontline staff will follow. If frontline personnel are already busy serving students, faculty, and staff, care must be taken that services offered to nonaffiliated users do not over-extend these employees.

Furthermore, nonmaleficence requires that the academic library exercise particular sensitivity as it considers the interests of stakeholders outside the library. An excessively restrictive policy is likely to diminish the parent institution's ability to establish harmonious town-and-gown relations. On the other hand, too liberal a policy may work against the efforts of local libraries to attract and maintain a healthy base of patrons. If the local academic library offers unlimited access to computers and other resources, this level of service might steer nonaffiliated users away from using their public or school libraries. The resulting decreased gate counts can make it more difficult for these libraries to demonstrate a need for additional funding for their own initiatives.

### **Ethical Reflection at Greenwood Library**

The previous section demonstrates how Ross's pluralist framework of *prima facie* duties can be applied generally to inform policies for nonaffiliated users. This

section shows how the authors have applied Ross's system in reviewing current and previous policies for computer use by nonaffiliated patrons in Longwood University's Greenwood Library (where the authors work). Ross's system made it easier to identify and articulate important points to consider with regard to this issue. In this section, the authors apply Ross's approach to their local situation as an example of how one might refer to *prima facie* duties as an aid to reflection on the library's service obligations.

The library's first substantive policy on computer use by nonaffiliated patrons was developed approximately five years ago, shortly after the library remodeled its Reference and Periodicals Room to create the current Information Commons, which then featured forty-eight computer stations. Because the library had a long-standing commitment to making its resources available to the community, the library permitted nonaffiliated patrons to use these computers. Use by nonaffiliated patrons exceeded the library staff's expectations. Limited services at the local public library and Greenwood Library's relatively convenient location at the center of town are likely factors behind this heavy usage. The library's computing facilities became so popular among nonaffiliated users that the library staff had to intervene in some cases to reserve spaces for use by the university's students, faculty, and staff. Although most nonaffiliated patrons were very cooperative, many were not. Several of the staff endured threats and other forms of verbal abuse from nonaffiliated users when they attempted to limit access during periods of peak use by faculty, students, and staff. In an effort to protect the staff from this abuse and to ensure the availability of computers for the library's primary service group, the library adopted a much more restrictive policy for computer use by nonaffiliated patrons. The relevant features of this early version of the policy are listed below:

- Use of the computers [by nonaffiliated users] is for academic research

purposes only. E-mail, chat, games, surfing, and non-research-related use of the Internet, and use of Microsoft Office applications are not allowed.

- Due to the increased demand for Internet workstations, their use is limited to three nonaffiliated users at any given time.

- Each nonaffiliated user is allowed up to 30 minutes of Internet workstation use. If no other nonaffiliated user is waiting for a computer when your time is up, you may continue to use the workstation until someone else requests it.

- Nonaffiliated users may be asked to relinquish Internet workstations to Longwood faculty, students, or staff at any time.

This policy was successful insofar as it allowed library staff to restore order to a situation that had grown chaotic. Limitations on the number of nonaffiliated users and the duration of their use helped to ensure that computers were available for students, faculty, and staff. Restricting the use of computers to the conduct of academic research promoted the use of resources for purposes that were consistent with the library's mission. It also discouraged those who would use the library as their personal office or as a place to enjoy a few hours of casual surfing free of charge. For cases in which the policy seemed unnecessarily restrictive (especially during periods of low use), staff were encouraged to make exceptions to the rule on the number of nonaffiliated users permitted at a given time and to allow more latitude on how the nonaffiliated users used the computers.

The major drawback of this policy was that it hinged upon the idea of academic research. Restricting computer use by nonaffiliated users to academic research proved problematic for several reasons:

1. It weakened the staff's authority in enforcing the policy when a casual glance around the room showed students, whose access was not restricted, using the computers to watch YouTube, surf through Facebook, or play solitaire. One might

argue that students' tuition payments entitles them to unrestricted use of the computers, but this argument will not always be convincing, especially when nonaffiliated users may want to use the computers for more practical purposes, such as typing up a paper for class or applying for a job.

2. It proved difficult to establish a clear distinction between academic research and nonacademic use. Some nonaffiliated users have actually taken advantage of the blurred lines between the two. One such user successfully appealed the staff's refusal of her request to use the computer for online shopping by arguing that she was doing *research* on how best to remodel her kitchen.

3. Nonaffiliated users can misrepresent their intentions for using the computers. When the staff sees these patrons using the computers for other purposes, confronting these users often leads to awkward, even combative, moments. The patrons may find themselves in the uncomfortable position of having been caught in a lie, and the staff become frustrated because they do not want to be "the bad guy."

As a result of these challenges, many among the staff found it very difficult to enforce the policy consistently, and those who did frequently ended up feeling conflicted for having done so.

Because this policy was difficult to enforce consistently and fairly, and because it involved grey areas that either confused users or enabled them to circumvent the spirit of the policy, the authors sought a new way to extend computer access to nonaffiliated patrons. This new approach had to improve upon the old policy in the following ways:

1. It had to be conducive to consistent enforcement, thus enabling the staff to make certain that the library's actions matched its commitments as stated in its policies (fidelity).

2. The new approach had to facilitate the use of computers consistent with the library's mission as a place of learning

and scholarly endeavor (fidelity, beneficence), and it had to make sure that usage for other purposes did not create an obstruction for those with academic needs (nonmaleficence, justice).

3. The revised approach had to alleviate staff discomfort by putting librarians and paraprofessionals in a more justifiable position when enforcing the policy (nonmaleficence).

4. As a public institution in a relatively close-knit community, the library was obliged to provide some level of access for community members whenever possible (gratitude, beneficence).

The library has met these objectives by taking up a revised approach that (a) relies on technology to limit access for nonaffiliated users, where appropriate, and (b) no longer requires staff or nonaffiliated users to draw a distinction between academic research and other uses of the computers.

To provide more flexibility in meeting the computer needs of all users, the library has added five new computer stations to the information commons. These new computers, called Quickstations, play a key part in the new policy toward nonaffiliated users. These stations are essentially the same as the other computers in the information commons, with one exception: they are set up to log off automatically after 30 minutes of use. Students, faculty, and staff can log in to these stations using their campus network ID and password, while nonaffiliated users have to ask the staff at the information desk to log in for them. The addition of the Quickstations gives staff three options for providing access to nonaffiliated users. The staff is to choose which option to provide based upon how busy the Information Commons is at the time of the nonaffiliated user's request:

1. When there is only a low level of usage at the information commons (as is frequently the case on weekend mornings or during the summer), staff may log patrons in either at a Quickstation or at a regular computer.

2. When there is a moderate level of use of the information commons (or at times when use is expected to increase significantly, such as at the end of the lunch hour), staff log nonaffiliated users in at a Quickstation. Staff may log these users in again at the end of their thirty-minute session, provided that there are not others waiting to use the Quickstations and that the Information Center has not become very busy.

3. During extremely busy times (especially during periods of peak usage near midterms or around finals), the staff may need to turn nonaffiliated users away. Although there may be a handful of stations open at any given moment, those computers need to be kept open for students who may be coming in to use them.

To this point, the new procedure has been successful in making the staff more comfortable in their roles as regulators of computer access. A major factor in this success is the change of the criterion for access from a condition that was not always obvious (that is, the nonaffiliated user's purpose for using the computer) to a condition that is readily apparent to all parties concerned: namely, the number of computers that are open. Though the authors have not conducted a formal study of the attitudes of nonaffiliated users of Greenwood Library, their experience suggests that the majority of nonaffiliated users acknowledge (some grudgingly) that students, faculty, and staff need to have priority for using the computers and that nonaffiliated users appear to think it is legitimate for staff to turn them away or offer only limited access during busy periods. Both the staff and the users appear to be more comfortable not having to ask or answer probing questions about what users are doing on the computers.

Given the above discussion of non-maleficence, one might ask whether this relatively permissive policy draws users away from the local public library. The answer to this question is a qualified no, for two reasons:

1. The local public library, which serves a county of approximately 22,000 people, offers only three computers for public use. Computer use is not really one of the public library's priority services currently, though this may change when it moves into new facilities in 2010. Greenwood Library will need to revisit this question at that time.

2. The information commons is typically quite busy, so it is normal to restrict access for nonaffiliated users to the 30-minute stations only. This thirty-minute access period is similar to what the local public library offers.

This new approach to permitting computer access to nonaffiliated patrons at Greenwood Library goes a long way toward satisfying the concerns of the various stakeholders involved with this issue. It also acknowledges important obligations identified by Ross in his system of *prima facie* duties. In essence, the policy permits the library to strike a balance between beneficence toward all who seek assistance and fidelity to the library's primary mission of service to students, faculty, and staff. It is also an improvement on the former policy with regard to nonmaleficence, as the current policy removes the library staff from the very awkward position of judging whether a nonaffiliated user's purposes for using the computer are acceptable.

### Conclusion

Nonaffiliated users are likely to seek out the services and resources of academic libraries in increasingly greater numbers. As distance education programs continue to increase in popularity, many students in these programs will find it convenient to seek support for their work from an academic library close by.<sup>26</sup> As budget pressures continue to force public library systems to cut back their services, increasing numbers of nonaffiliated users will turn to the academic library for information, assistance, and computer access. These conditions make it increasingly important for policy makers not only to

explore the nature of the library's obligations to both internal and external stakeholders, but also to explore meaningful processes for achieving clarity regarding these obligations. Ross's system of *prima facie* duties can profitably be used to examine questions of access and allocation for any service or resource in the academic library. Possibilities extend beyond the issue of computer use examined in this

paper to include access to reference services,<sup>27</sup> circulation privileges, access to special collections, use of meeting rooms, and interlibrary loan privileges. Libraries that use Ross's ethical framework to structure their investigations should expect, after a considerable period of reflection and discussion, to construct a nuanced policy that deals fairly with the needs of all parties concerned.

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### Notes

1. Barbara Levin, "The Public Library as Great Equalizer," *American Libraries* 31, no. 8 (2000): 51.
2. The authors use the terms *moral* and *ethical* advisedly throughout this paper. *Moral* refers to the values, ideals, and rules a society or an individual uses to make judgments regarding a person's action or character. *Ethical* refers to the activity of articulating, evaluating, critiquing, and prioritizing moral ideals and demands. In other words, ethics is reasoned reflection about morals.
3. E.J. Josey, Richard C. Quick, John E. Scott, Edward C. Heintz, Barbara Lamont, George C. Elser, and Edward A. Howard, "Community Use of Academic Libraries: A Symposium," *College & Research Libraries* 28 (May 1967): 184–202.
4. *Ibid.*, 202.
5. Nancy Courtney, "Barbarians at the Gates: A Half-Century of Unaffiliated Users in Academic Libraries," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 27, no. 6 (2001): 475.
6. Nancy Courtney, "Unaffiliated Users' Access to Academic Libraries: A Survey," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 29, no. 1 (2003): 5, 7.
7. Stanley Verhoeven, Elizabeth B. Cooksey, and Carol A. Hand, "The Disproportionate Use of Reference Desk Service by External Users at an Urban University Library," *RQ* 35, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 392–93.
8. Johanna Tuñón, Rita Barsun, and Laura Lucio Ramirez, "Pests, Welcomed Guests, or Tolerated Outsiders? Attitudes of Academic Librarians toward Distance Students from Unaffiliated Institution," *Journal of Library Administration* 41, no. 3/4 (2004): 485–505; Kappa K.A. Waugh, "The Mole's Dilemma ..." *Internet Reference Services Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (1999): 7–22; L.M. Jansen, "Welcome or Not, Here They Come: Unaffiliated Users of Academic Libraries," *Reference Services Review* 21 (1993): 7–14.
9. Tuñón et al., 485, 488–89, 497.
10. P. Johnson, "Serving Unaffiliated Users in Publicly Funded Academic Libraries," *Technicalities* 18 (1998): 8.
11. M.S. Keller, "Perceptions of Unaffiliated Users in Academic Libraries and Other Issues Associated with This Group" (MLIS thesis, University of North Carolina, 2007): 30.
12. Rebecca R. Martin, "The Paradox of Public Service: Where Do We Draw the Line?" *College & Research Libraries* 51, no. 1 (1990): 24.
13. Terrie L. Wilson, "The Community User in the Academic Art Library," *Art Documentation* 24, no. 2 (2005): 39.14
14. Tina M. Schneider, "The Regional Campus Library and Service to the Public," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 27, no. 2 (2001): 126.
15. W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, ed. Philip Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).
16. In *The Right and the Good*, Ross first proposes a list of the seven duties I have listed here (20–21), then goes on to say that the duties of self-improvement and justice may be subsumed under the "general principle that we should produce as much good as possible" (27). His grounds for consolidating these duties into one are that, by improving oneself, one is increasing the amount of goodness present in the world. The same can be said of acts that promote a just distribution of the means to achieve happiness. I have decided to work with Ross's original list of seven duties, because a list that specifies concerns of justice and of self-improvement has the pragmatic advantage of providing a more robust aid to reflection in situations of moral conflict.
17. *Ibid.*, 54–55.
18. Philip Stratton-Lake, Forward to *The Right and the Good* by W.D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon

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Press, 2002). Stratton-Lake points out that it is not entirely accurate to refer to *prima facie* duties as duties. Strictly speaking, they are features of a course of action that give us moral reasons to pursue an action or refrain from it (xxxiii–xxxiv). These reasons may or may not be ultimately compelling, depending on how they shape one's final or actual duty. The example below further explains the relations between *prima facie* and actual duties.

19. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 18, 28.

20. The method employed here for applying Ross's ethical pluralism involves identifying the parties potentially affected by a change in policy and examining their relations to the library from the perspective of each type of obligation mentioned in Ross's list of seven *prima facie* duties. For other, more elaborate application procedures, see B.C. Postow, "A Partial Application Procedure for Ross's Ethical Theory," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 31 (2006): 239–48, and Alan Wong and Eugene Beckman, "An Applied Ethical Analysis System in Business," *Journal of Business Ethics* 11, no. 3 (1992): 173–79.

21. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 21.

22. See American Library Association, "Freedom to Read Statement" (June 2004), available online at [www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/statementspols/ftstatement/freedomreadstatement.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/statementspols/ftstatement/freedomreadstatement.cfm) [accessed 23 February 2009], and American Library Association, "Library Bill of Rights" (Jan. 1996), available online at [www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/statementspols/statementsif/librarybillrights.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/statementspols/statementsif/librarybillrights.cfm) [accessed 25 February 2009].

23. R.C. Smith, *They Closed Their Schools; Prince Edward County, Virginia, 1951–1964* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965).

24. For an account that shows the difficulties involved with resolving this question and that provides a plausible basis for claiming that reparations are appropriate, see Janna Thompson, "Collective Responsibility for Historic Injustices," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2006): 154–67.

25. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 21, 26–27, 138.

26. For a well-rounded discussion of the issues involved in serving nonaffiliated distance education students, see Rita Barsun, "It's My Library Too, Isn't It?" *Journal of Library Administration* 37, no. 1/2 (2002): 59–82.

27. For another philosophy-based discussion of the allocation of reference services, see Wendell G. Johnson, "The Need for a Value-based Reference Policy: Rawls at the Reference Desk," *The Reference Librarian* 47 (1994): 201–11.

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