



Flyer 237

Managing Food and Drink in ARL Libraries September 1998

INTRODUCTION

Virtually all ARL libraries have policies and procedures for the management of food and drink in their facilities. Recently, ARL library directors discussed the usefulness of such policies. Proponents of more liberal policies suggested that the actual problems resulting from food and drink (damage to library materials, vermin infestations, etc.) are minimal or nonexistent and that, in any event, these problems might be outweighed by user convenience and the overall positive public relations impact of permitting food and drink.

This SPECC survey sought to discover: 1) to what extent ARL libraries permit food and drink to be consumed in library facilities; 2) whether there has been a shift in recent times toward a liberalization of policy and practice; 3) how restrictions (where they exist) are enforced; and 4) whether there are particularly successful strategies for the management of food and drink.

The focus of the survey was on the consumption of food and drink, not merely the possession of it. Also, it was assumed that most or all libraries do not permit food and drink in special collections areas.

SURVEY RESULTS

Although there have been some recent changes in ARL libraries' programs for the management of food and drink, most do not permit the consumption of food and drink in general use areas. Out of the 72 libraries (60%) responding to the survey, 51 (71%) prohibit food and drink entirely. Twenty-one libraries (29%) permit food and drink, but there are usually restrictions about what may be consumed and where. Of these 21, only three (4%) do not restrict what may be consumed. Food is more commonly prohibited. When liquids are permitted, they typically must be in covered and/or reusable spill-proof containers. Several libraries specify that water only is permitted. When there are restrictions concerning areas of the library, computer installations head the list of prohibited areas.

Preservation of library materials is the leading reason for restricting food and drink. But there are other reasons as well: maintenance of a healthy environment in the facility; protection of the facility (floor coverings, etc.); protection of furniture and equipment; and pest control. On the other hand, libraries that have become more liberal in their policies concerning food and drink cite user convenience as the primary reason, with difficulty of enforcement a close second.

There appears to be a moderate shift in ARL libraries toward

a more permissive approach to food and drink. While 32 libraries (44%) reported that their policies on food and drink are about the same as they were ten years ago, 30 (42%) reported that they were now more permissive. Only nine (13%) said that they were now more restrictive. Most of these changes occurred within the last four years.

Libraries that are taking a more liberal approach and permit liquids in prescribed containers apparently do so as a concession to current cultural norms—everyone seems to carry a water bottle these days—and as an acknowledgment that total restriction may not be a goal worth the extreme effort required for enforcement. One library noted, for example, that the advent of backpacks has severely hampered monitoring efforts. In several cases, it was suggested that, although the policies themselves had not changed, enforcement had become more lenient in recent times.

Libraries taking a stricter approach, on the other hand, typically suggested either that the change had coincided with the opening of a new facility and the desire to keep it in good condition or that trash, spills, and crumbs had exceeded the ability of custodial staff to handle.

For perhaps obvious reasons, responding libraries tend to be more lenient with staff in the management of food and drink: unlike users, staff are limited in their ability to leave the library to get refreshments. Fifty-one libraries (71%) responded that their policies and practices were different for staff. Typically, staff are permitted to eat and drink at their work stations, although some libraries do not permit them to do so while they work with library materials. Many libraries mentioned that they require staff to be discreet in transporting food and drink through public areas to their work stations. In no case were staff permitted to eat or drink in public areas, though in one case there was a reported movement on the part of some public service staff to have the same privileges as users—that is, to consume water from spill-proof containers at public service desks.

Staff enforcement of food and drink regulations is a difficult issue. In 66 of the responding libraries, staff are expected to enforce food and drink regulations, but in 17 of these libraries only some staff, typically in public service areas, are expected to. In 12 libraries only security staff, who are sometimes students, are expected to enforce regulations. In the 66 libraries that ask staff to enforce regulations, only 23 provide special training in how to do this. In one case, university counsel has advised the library not to have staff enforce food and drink rules, as they are

concerned that enforcement might put staff in physical danger.

When asked how rigorously they enforce food and drink regulations, 40 libraries said enforcement was rigorous, while 30 characterized their enforcement as ranging from not very rigorous to quite lax.

Fifty-seven percent of respondents characterized their programs restricting food and drink as successful, while 43% said the programs were minimally or not at all successful. Enforcement problems were sometimes traced to value differences among staff, some of whom do not agree with food and drink regulations. More often, however, the issue is more basic: staff discomfort with the task of policing and enforcing. One library mentioned the "risk of public service burnout in enforcement." Many libraries acknowledged the lack of convenient access to food and drink facilities as a contributing problem. Only 15 responding libraries provide any sort of separate snack/study area for students. In some cases, lack of sufficient staff was cited. Another often mentioned problem was the difficulty of monitoring the vast areas found in many ARL libraries, especially when users can be skilled at smuggling food and drink into the building. Finally, several respondents mentioned cultural changes as having a powerful effect. Some cited the examples of book stores and other establishments where customers are encouraged to relax with store stock and a cup of coffee.

In addressing strategies for managing food and drink that have been successful, respondents offered few ideas. However, one significant theme emerged: it is more effective to deal with food and drink at the library entrance, through both signage and intervention from staff, than through elaborate monitoring systems that aim to cover the entire building. One library indicated that relaxing the rules—allowing covered drinks in the library—was actually the best strategy employed. Four libraries (6%) reported that they had developed a reward system to reinforce good behavior on the part of staff and users. One provided spill-proof containers with printed messages about preservation tucked inside. Another made low-cost tote bags available to staff to conceal food and drink from the library entrance to their work stations.

Though most libraries (71%) have written policies on food and drink, no one suggested that having a policy contributed to the success of their program, although one viewed the lack of a policy as being the root cause of many enforcement problems. In general, policies seem to fall into two categories: 1) those that simply inform people about the rules and the rationale for them; and 2) those that invoke library, campus regulations, and/or state laws. The latter often put food and drink infractions in the same league as theft and mutilation of library materials.

Overall, 31 respondents (43%) were at least somewhat satisfied with their current policies and practices related to the management of food and drink, while 37 (51%) were not satisfied. Twenty-four libraries (33%) anticipate changing their

management of food and drink in the near future. Only one library reported that they had attempted to estimate the cost of managing food and drink.

CONCLUSION

Member responses suggest that the management of food and drink is an important aspect of every library's activity. Following are some recommendations to assist libraries as they wrestle with food and drink policies in their facilities.

- Have a clear policy with a rationale for prohibitions.
- Manage food and drink as much as possible at library entrances and through signage.
- If staff enforce regulations, be sure that they understand the rules, as well as the rationale for them. In one institution, all staff receive training in the basic care and handling of library materials, including tips on how to communicate with users who have food and drink. Provide training that equips staff with the appropriate skills for intervening.
- Since 100% compliance is probably impossible, decide where to focus efforts. One library decided to ignore water bottles and concentrate on food.
- If the issue is important enough in your library, spend some time analyzing it. What are the real costs of enforcement? What are the real findings concerning vermin infestations? How much "illegal trash" is collected by custodians during certain periods of time? Do the findings signal a need for change?

This SPEC Flyer and Kit were prepared by George J. Soete, ARL/OLMS Organizational Development Consultant.

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