

Applying Discourse Analytical Methods to Deepen Understanding of User Needs in an A-synchronous Information Environment



Debbie Rabina, Emily Drabinski, Laurin Paradise

GL 18 @NYAM 2016 | Nov | 29

Terminology

- These terms (and others) all tend to be used colloquially interchangeably, but they all have different social, lexical and legal meaning.
- The preferred term is in blue
 - Prisons, jails, incarceration, carceral facilities
 - Prisoners, inmates, **incarcerated people**.



Introduction



- Original dataset from earlier studies: NYPL Correctional Services Program & Pratt Institute School of Information, Information Services & Resources service-learning project
- Initial studies provided **quantitative snapshot** of the information needs of incarcerated people
- The present study utilizes a larger dataset drawn from classroom engagement with the NYPL prison letter service.
- The researchers deployed the method of **discourse analysis** to analyze the information needs of people in prisons and jails in the context of information worlds.

Methodology & Theoretical Approach to Information Needs in Prisons & Jails

- **Discourse analytic** approach to library & information science research
- Enabled extension of earlier work that relied on **quantitative methodology**
- Information requests received were counted and sorted to produce a set of information topics. This data was used to point to areas of **information poverty** experienced by people in prisons and jails.

Methodology & Theoretical Approach to Information Needs in Prisons & Jails

The discourse analytic approach enabled us to:

- Analyze the information requests as **discursive units** and modes of interpretation
- Understand reported information needs as simultaneously **descriptive of information worlds**
- Understand the letter writers as agents in the production of their **information environments**.
- Build an analysis of prisons and jails as environments that produce **certain kinds of questions**
 - These questions tell us as much about the conditions of confinement as they do about the individuals seeking answers to particular questions.

Discourse Analysis

- Assumes that the **role of speech** is to construct the speakers' (and listeners') social world.
- Regards speech as an act in itself and is focused on **analyzing the functions and outcomes** of speech acts.
- Makes visible “**ongoing conversations**,” important debates, and interpretative conflicts existing in the society, and the genuine ambivalence of many social questions and issues.
- Discourses **produce and transform reality**, making it possible to evaluate the practical consequences of different ways of approaching a particular phenomenon.

Discourse Analysis: Process

1. Construct your research question
2. Select a sample of discourse to study
3. Collect the records of documents you will analyze
4. Code the data & Identify themes
5. Analyze your data
6. Validate your findings

Method

- 290 reference letters answered during September 2013 to May 2015
- Two phases to preparing the dataset for analysis using a spreadsheet created with each letter as a unit of analysis
 - Identified demographic elements:
 - Sentence term, time to release
 - Name of Facility
 - Race & Year of Birth
 - Time lapse between Q & A
 - Transcribed and uploaded all letters to **Atlas.ti**



Limitations

- Only a **snapshot** of the information needs and environments are represented
- Letters selected for service-learning project leaned towards challenging and unique
- All letters represent **only the needs** of the incarcerated who are active users of the letter service program



- **Reference Letters**

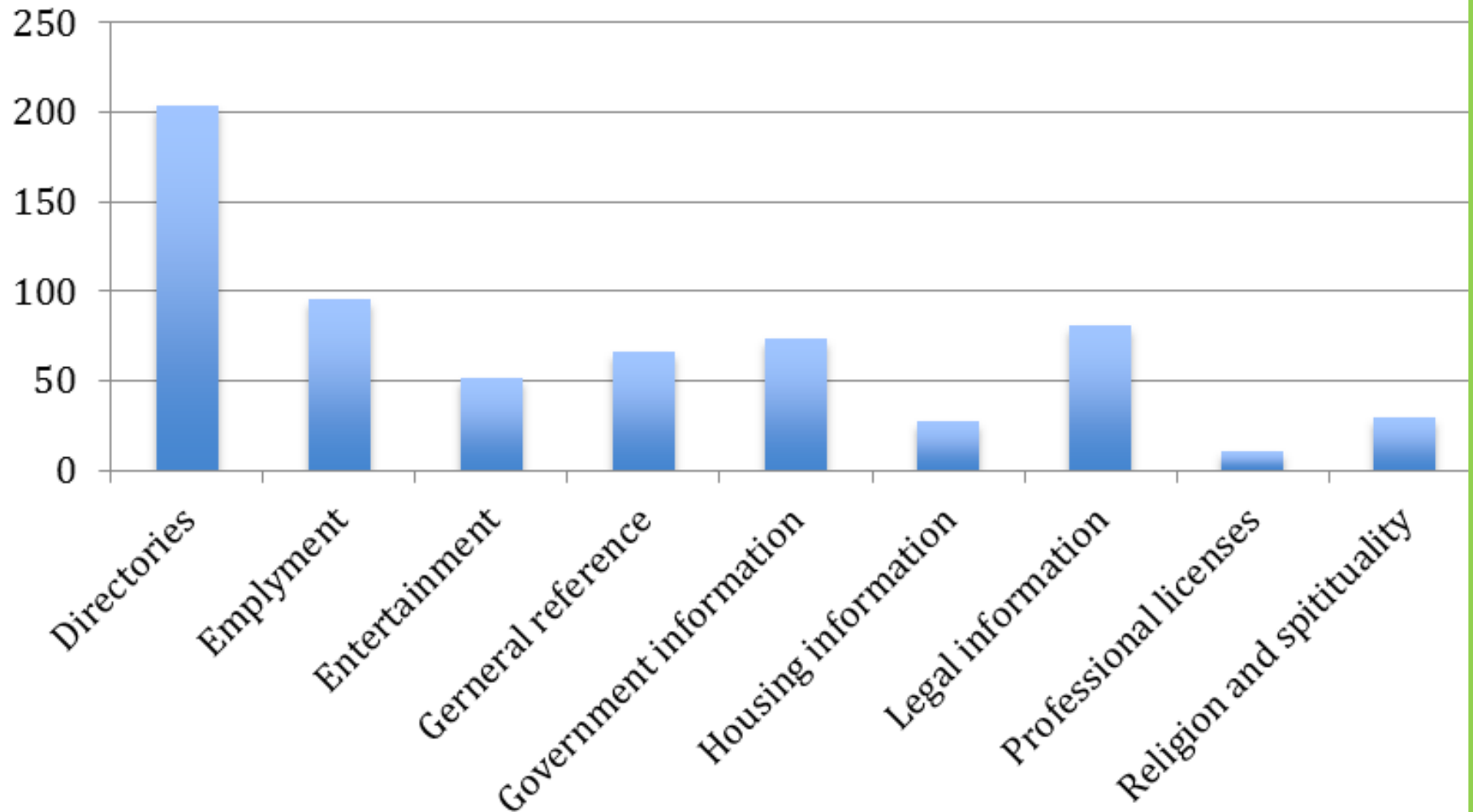
- indicate the kinds of collections carceral libraries might build
- reveal the kinds of information needs produced and circulated inside the small worlds of these institutions



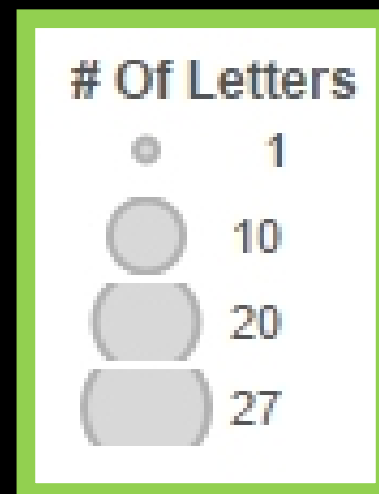
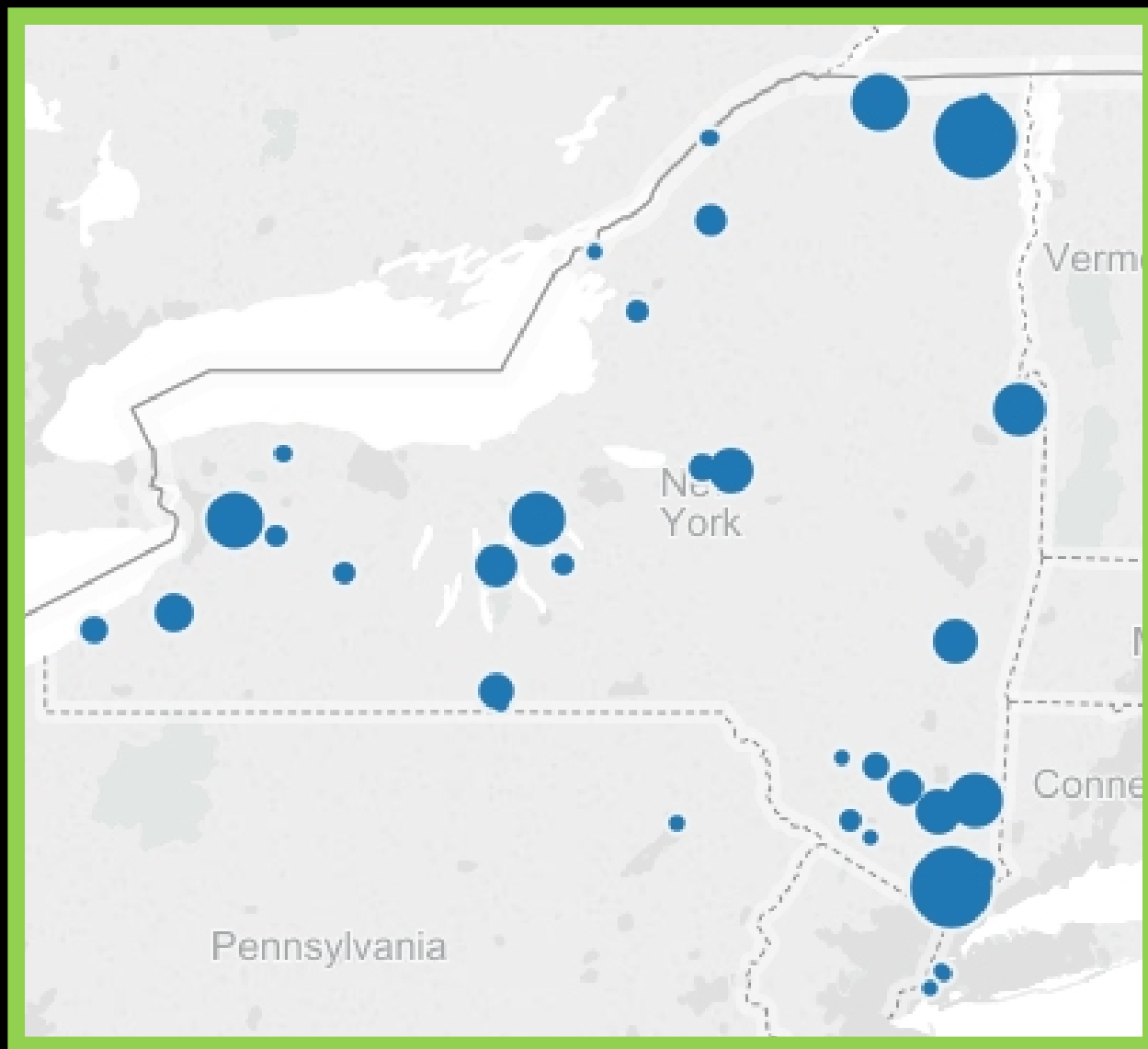
- **Three general categories emerged**

- **Self-help:** Rights to medical services, Opportunities to study while in prison, Legal information
- **Re-entry:** Employment, half-way houses, social security benefits, other practical matters.
- **General Reference:** All other reference questions

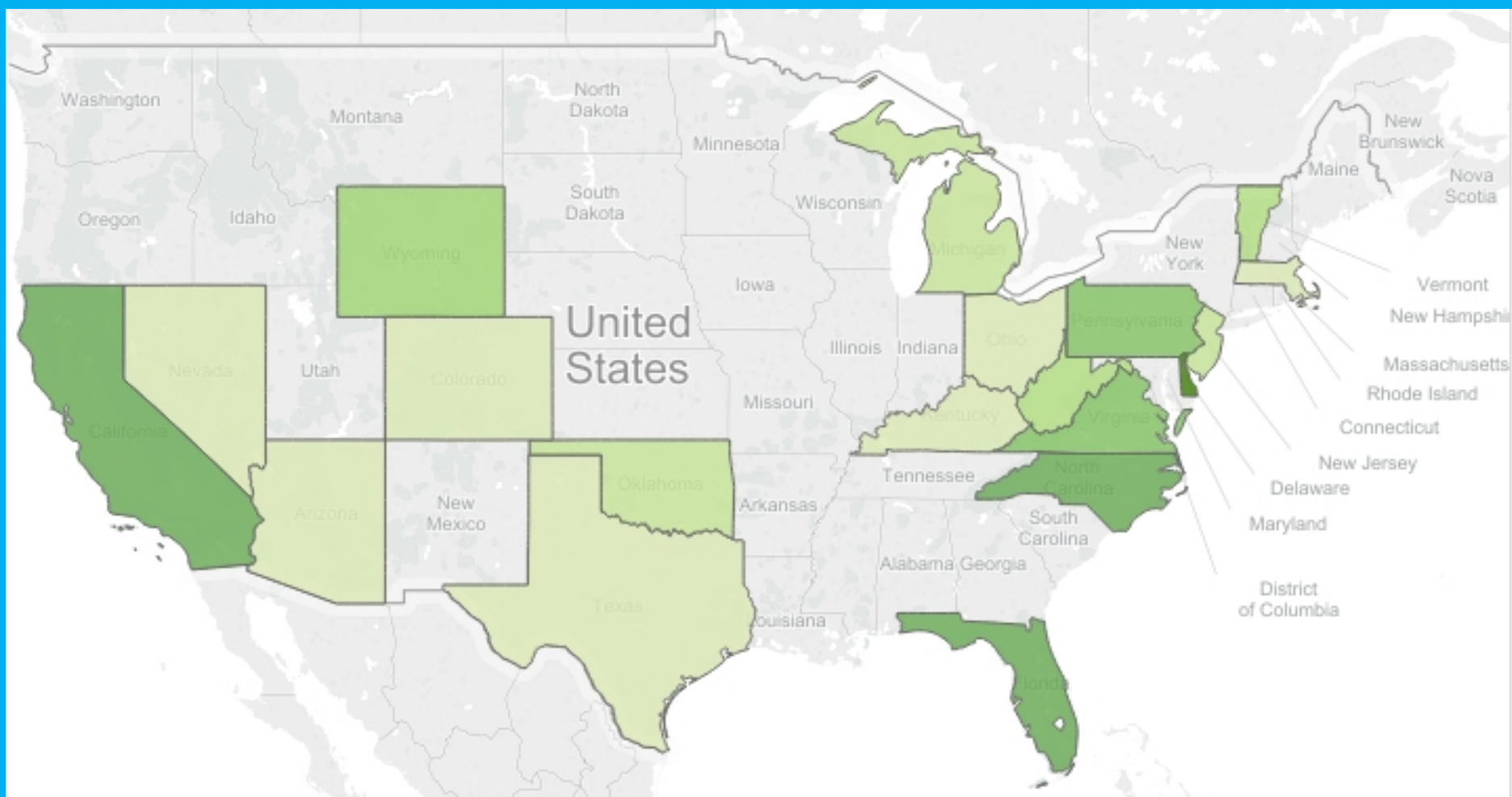
Breaking of families by # of quotes



	Practical	Recreational
Associations		0.05 (17)
Books		0.09 (29)
Business directory information	0.05 (31)	0.08 (27)
Business information	0.08 (46)	
Education	0.08 (44)	
Employment opportunities	0.08 (48)	
Entrepreneurship	0.12 (69)	
Federal government information	0.07 (41)	
History		0.06 (18)
Legal information	0.08 (49)	
Music		0.07 (23)
Newspaper articles		0.07 (24)
Photos and images		0.07 (22)
Public figure directory information		0.06 (19)
Re-entry (general)	0.11 (61)	
Religion		0.05 (15)
Self-help	0.09 (51)	
Social services	0.05 (32)	
Website request	0.05 (30)	0.09 (31)



**Letters Received
from facilities in
NY State**



Letters Received from Out of NY State

Question	Responses	
Is this your first time using this service	Skipped answer	46%
	Yes	30%
	No	24%
Did we understand your question	4	85%
	3	5%
	2	--
	1	4%
	Skipped answer	6%
Did you find our answer helpful?	4	89%
	3	--
	2	2%
	1	2%
	Skipped answer	7%
Did you find our answer complete?	4	78%
	3	7%
	2	6%
	1	2%
	Skipped answer	7%
Comments	Comments included	99%
	Comments not included	1%

Findings & Future

- Continued **relevance of reference sources**
- Prison **produces anxiety** about employment/reentry
- Information-needs of the users often are often **created by the prison itself**
- Development of **mode of discourse** through letter service

Prison **produces anxiety** about employment/reentry

To:

From:

Date:

Subject: Various ...

Facility

To whom it may concern,

Okay, where to start...

I have a very long history, and I can't keep on writing 10 and 20 page letters to every organization that I'm trying to reach out to for help.

I do go to the parole board next year July, and please don't tell me 6 months to the board. I don't have any time to lose in as much as I need the information that I need now, so that when other issues arise, I can check them off as I go along.

O.k., here's what I mean:

Continued **relevance** of reference sources

Sir, could you please send me the following:

- ① A copy of the "STAR SPANGL BANNER" AND A COPY OF "PLEDG OF A LESIONS TO THE FLAG" AND INFORMATION ON WHO WROTE IT, AND WHAT YEAR.
- ② I NEED INFORMATION ON THE "40 ACRES AND A MULE" LAW THAT ~~HAPPEN~~ HAPPEN IN THE SOUTHERN STATES - back then, THE LAW BEHIND IT.
- ③ COULD YOU PRINT ME SOME OF THE OLD LAWS THAT WAS CREATED INTO EFFECT AFTER SLAVERY WAS ABOLISH.
- ④ WHO WROTE THE CONSTITUTIONS AND AMENDMENTS, WERE THEY SLAVE OWNERS?

Prison **produces anxiety** about employment/reentry

I do go to the parole board next year July, and please don't tell me 6 months to the board. I don't have any time to lose in as much as I need the information that I need now, so that when other issues arises, I can check them off as I go along.

O.k., here's what I mean:

I need advice for a start-up with my wife,

I have a business plan, but it might be out dated,

A business loan is a must,

I want to form a corporation,

What exactly is SCORE?

Do you have material for your workshops that I can look at from where I'm at?

Which Federal loan process are your org. pushing at people, and why that particular program?

Prison **produces anxiety** about employment/reentry

Im writing to see if you can find any drug or alcohol residential programs in the towns listed below, and Salvation army.

Salem, N.J.

Rahway, N.J.

Freehold, N.J.

Eaton town, N.J.

Toms River, N.J.

Bakers Basin, N.J.

Vineland, N.J.

Information-needs of the users often are often **created by the prison itself**

08-18-2016

New York Public Library,

I would like send me directions on making greeting cards, how to make pop-up cards and cards that have moving parts on the inside so when you open the card something moves.

Remember Im in prison I have no way of getting on the computer, links are no good to me

I need details and pictures if possible.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely

Information-needs of the users often are often **created by the prison itself**
Development of **mode of discourse** through letter service

Correctional Library Services
445 Fifth Avenue
New York NY 10016

9-10-2016

Please send me the information I'm requesting.
I also want to thank you for your time and
services, it's a really good thing you are
doing for inmates like me who are planning
a release from prison.

- ① Please send me names of companies
in the oil field who hire ex-offenders.
- ② Please send me names of companies
in the pipe line field who hire ex-offenders.
- ③ Please send me names of companies
in the off shore field who hire ex-offenders.

Development of **mode of discourse** through letter service

DATE: 1/13/2018

TO: THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY CORRECTIONAL LIBRARY SERVICES
RE: INFORMATION AND OR LIST OF PRE-PAID DEBIT CARDS.

DEAR SIR/MADAM

GOOD DAY TO YOU. I AM WRITING YOU AT THIS TIME TO POSSIBLY OBTAINING INFORMATION AND A LIST OF PRE-PAID DEBIT CARDS, THAT CAN HELP ME TO BUDGET MY FINANCES UPON MY SOON RELEASE. I AM ALSO REQUESTING THE MAXIMUM AMOUNT THAT CAN BE PLACED ON SUCH DEBIT CARDS, IN DOLLAR TERMS. ALSO I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW THE MAXIMUM AMOUNT THAT CAN BE USED TO ACHIEVE A SECURED CREDIT CARD THROUGH A BANKING INSTITUTION. I'VE WRITTEN YOU OVER 90 DAYS AGO AND HAVE NOT RECEIVED A RESPONSE AS OF YET. I DO UNDERSTAND THAT YOU RECEIVE A HIGH VOLUME OF LETTERS AND I THANK YOU FOR ALL THE ASSISTANCE THAT YOU HAVE PROVIDED ME WITH OVER THE YEARS OF MY INCARCERATION AND ESPECIALLY OVER THE LAST YEAR. THANKS TO YOU I AM MUCH BETTER PREPARED FOR MY RETURN TO SOCIETY. THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND PATIENCE. LOOKING FORWARD TO HEARING FROM YOU SOON.

Q&A

Debbie Rabina, Ph.D.
Pratt Institute
School of Information
New York, NY drabina@pratt.edu

[forthcoming article] Rabina D., Drabinski, E., Paradise L. (2016)
Information needs in prisons and jails: A discourse analytic approach.
Libri 66:4.

References

- ❖ Rabina D., Drabinski, E. (2015). **Reference services to incarcerated people, Part I: Themes emerging from answering inmates' reference questions.** *Reference and User Services Quarterly [RUSQ]* 55:1, 42-48.
- ❖ Rabina D., Drabinski, E. (2015). **Reference services to incarcerated people, Part II: Sources and learning outcomes.** *Reference and User Services Quarterly [RUSQ]* 55:2, 123-131.
- ❖ Talja, Sanna. 1999. **Analyzing Qualitative Interview Data: The Discourse Analytic Method.** *Library and Information Science Research* 21(4): 459-477.
- ❖ Wildemuth, Barbara M. and Carol L. Perryman. 2009. **Discourse Analysis.** In *Applications of social research methods to questions in information and library science*, edited by Barbara Wildemuth, 320-328. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.