

Reducing Service Points in the Academic Library: How to Provide Quality Customer Service in the Face of Budget Cuts

Abstract

Most academic libraries have been experiencing cutbacks in staff and resources and are expected to do more with less. In response to these cutbacks, the University of North Texas (UNT) Libraries came up with a plan to reduce the number of staffed service points. By the end of the Spring 2012 semester the UNT Libraries had successfully merged nine service points into three: two service desks at our main library and one at our science library. This paper will present an overview of the steps the UNT Libraries Public Services Division took to effectively manage these mergers. It will describe the methods used to cross train library support staff, and provide suggestions for other libraries who may also be considering streamlining their service points.

Introduction

The University of North Texas (UNT) is a sizeable advanced degree granting institution in the north Texas area with a diverse population of over 35,000 students, over 1,000 faculty members, and over 3,500 staff. The UNT Libraries, the most widely utilized service on campus, provide access to over seven million items in print and digital formats and offer many services to assist its diverse group of users in their academic success (Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness). A vast number of libraries in Texas have encountered financial challenges over the last few years, have lost staff and resources, and yet have an even greater demand for quality services. In response to the financial downturn, the UNT Libraries created a strategy to reduce the number of staffed service points. By the end of the Spring 2012 semester the UNT Libraries had successfully merged nine service points into three: two service desks at our main library and one at our science library. This paper will present an overview of the steps the UNT Libraries Public Services Division took to effectively manage these mergers. It will describe the methods used to cross train library support staff, and provide suggestions for other libraries who may also be considering streamlining their service points.

In the Fall 2009 semester the UNT Libraries had a new library dean begin his service and with his arrival came a change in the entire administrative structure of the libraries. We now had divisions that specialized in various library functions such as public services, collection management, and digitization. Suzanne Sears, former head of our Government Documents department, became our Assistant Dean of Public Services, which included the Eagle Commons Library, Research and Instructional Services, Government Documents, and Access Services (which was a merger that occurred shortly after Suzanne started in this role in the summer of 2010, of the circulation, interlibrary loan, reserves, and fines services). This paper will focus on the Public Services Division services points as it is written from the perspective of one Public Services Division department head; however, outside of the Public Services Division, there are five service points in three campus Libraries in the Special Libraries Division and one service point staffed by the Facilities and Systems Division in the main library.

From Many Service Points to Few...

In 2009 the Public Services Division staffed seven service desks in Willis Library (Check Out Desk, Circulation Desk, Interlibrary Loan Desk, Fines Desk, Reserves Desk, Reference Desk, and the Government Documents Service Desk), six of these desks were located on the first floor, and two service desks located at our Eagle Commons Library (Circulation and Reference). The Willis Library Check Out Desk was staffed mainly with student assistants who monitored the alarm gate, checked out books, and provided basic directional information. There was a long desk just past the Willis Check Out Desk that was staffed by Circulation staff on one end and staffed by Interlibrary Loan on the other end, providing two separate services with two separate book drops, but with no discernible difference in the two areas from the patron's perspective. Our Fines Desk in Willis Library was located near Circulation but behind what the library staff affectionately called, "the door of shame." We had a Reference Desk hiding in one corner of Willis Library first floor and a Reserves Desk hiding in the other and since both started with the letter "R" it was a 50/50 chance a patron would end up at the wrong desk when referred. Government Documents was, and still is housed on the third floor of Willis Library as is their Service Desk. Public Services staff spent a good portion of their day playing "pass the patron," referring from one desk to another, and on several occasions patrons got quite frustrated by not being able to take care of their library business in one location, or embarrassed because they did not know where they should go to receive the service they needed. At Eagle Commons Library (which used to be the Science and Technology Library), we had separate Circulation and Reference Desks. It is a wonder how we efficiently and effectively helped our patrons.

In the Summer of 2010, the new UNT Libraries Assistant Dean of Public Services immediately began investigating ways to improve our public image and bring the departments together in a cohesive and meaningful way that would not only benefit the patrons but also the staff. Two major events occurred in the Division in 2011. First, a complete makeover of the Science and Technology Library occurred, closing the Library in November 2010 for construction and reopening as the Eagle Commons Library in February 2011. In this remodel we created several group study areas with interactive white boards and one service desk staffed by a circulation and a reference staff member. Reference staff (this included librarians, support staff, and graduate assistants) were required to cross train in basic circulation functions and Circulation staff (which included support staff and student assistants) were required to cross train in the basic reference interview. Were their stresses and challenges involved? Of course, from the first time a reference librarian has to tell a patron they are blocked from checking out books due to long overdue items, to the first time a Circulation staff member has to start showing a patron how to search Academic Search Complete because the Reference staff member is helping another patron. The second major restructure in the Division was the creation of the Access Services department that brought several services into one access point for patrons. Staff had to cross train in all of the services provided by the department which brought on its own set of challenges. The Circulation workroom was expanded by removing a wall, moving the Reserves collection to the Circulation area and creating a processing area for Interlibrary Loan in the former Reserves area. In one very inexpensive remodel we were able to move four services to one desk (reserves, circulation, interlibrary loan, and fines) which created a one stop area for our patrons for all Access Services related library business. We

did lose one service point in this restructure, the Willis Check Out Desk; however, it was turned over to our Facilities and Systems Division where students staff the desk 24 hours a day, seven days a week when classes are in session, they still monitor the alarm gates but also provide basic tech help as well as check out laptops.

The Eagle Commons Library Service Desk was a great proving ground for Reference and Circulation staff working together at the same service point and provided a great foundation for what our Assistant Dean asked us to accomplish the following year: The Willis Library Services Desk. Access Services and Reference staff working hand in hand at our main library.

Change is not easy. For some, it was hard to imagine an academic library with no reference desk, especially when that was the sole reason many of us went to library school, to be academic reference librarians, but we had six months to warm up to the idea (from November 2011 to June 2012) and to coordinate the merger. An ad hoc committee of three Access Services staff members and three Reference staff members were tasked with the coordination of the merger to the single service desk, discussing ways of working out the changes with the staff, and creating and planning cross training.

The committee determined the best time for the move would be over the summer so we would be able to identify as many staffing or training issues as possible before the rush of the Fall semester started, so the launch date was June 1, 2012. The first half of the Spring 2012 semester was spent discussing the best way to go about training and preparing the staff, researching other libraries that had removed their reference desk, and interviewing other libraries who had done similar projects to get an idea of what challenges and pitfalls they encountered so we could address these at the outset. Oh, and one other tiny item to add to the mix, our Assistant Dean also wanted the committee to find ways of minimizing librarian time at the desk so they could focus on their liaison duties like library instruction, reference by appointment, outreach, and marketing. It was a tall order but the committee came up with a training plan as well as steps to move most of the librarians from the desk.

Cross-training the staff

The committee decided to have the Graduate Library Assistants start working two hours per week at the Access Services Desk starting during Spring Break 2012. Our Graduate Assistants would be well versed in circulations tasks by the time the merger occurred and we wanted to get library patrons used to seeing reference staff at the other desk. Since the Graduate Assistants had been working at the Eagle Commons Library Service Desk, they were already familiar with the types of circulation tasks they would need to perform. Our Access Services support staff shadowed librarians at the reference desk for a few hours per week so they would become familiar with frequently asked reference questions.

The committee arranged three reference training sessions for the access services staff before the June 1st deadline. The first training covered the reference interview and referrals. In this training we covered the steps of the reference interview and how and when to make a referral to the subject specialist. We also did several role playing games on the interview. At the end of the training session we included a

catalog training assessment for the staff to complete before the next training session so we would know how basic or advanced to gear the next training.

The second training covered using the catalog and subject guides. In this training we discovered that the Access Services staff was very skilled at using our Integrated Library System (which at the time was Millennium, we have since moved to Sierra) because it was convenient for them since it was already up at their computers to check books out to patrons so they did not use the online catalog as much which made it a challenge to instruct patrons on using our online catalog. We also covered utilizing the subject guides to recommend resources for patrons at night or on weekends. Again, we followed this training with an electronic resources training assessment so we would know the experience level of the staff for the next training session.

Finally, we provided training on using the electronic resources focusing on Academic Search Complete to help patrons get started on their research and did exercises to identify other subject specific electronic resources using the subject guides. In each training we emphasized that they are already using many of these basic skills which seemed to be a confidence booster since some were a little nervous about answering reference questions.

Our librarians needed some training as well to provide our Librarian on Call service. We ordered a set of walkie talkies, we leave one at the Willis Library Services Desk with our reference Graduate Assistant and the librarian takes the other one back to their office. Most librarians have a four hours shift on call and they get paged by the graduate assistant if they get a reference question that is very complex or if they have more patrons than they can manage at one time. The librarians can work on other things in their office during their on call shift but their primary duty is to serve as back up and to be available when paged.

What Public Services looks like now with Three Service Desks...

One thing in particular that we try to stress to our Graduate Assistants is that we want to provide the most seamless service experience we possibly can for our patrons. Generally, your average undergrad student is not thinking about your education level when they visit the desk, if you can help them find the article they need, check out a book, or help them find out if their professor put their text book on reserve, they are not concerned if you are a peer or a PhD. Providing seamless service at blended service desk does not mean you will know how to do everything well, it means you know and appreciate the skills and expertise of those around you so you can follow through with a smooth referral to the appropriate person.

This type of service desk is not meant to diminish the value of the MLS in any way, the degree certainly still has a place in the academic library, but perhaps we need to think about how to use our knowledge and experience in other ways. College students do not have the same information seeking behavior they did 20 years ago, or even 10 years ago, we need to use our efforts meeting students where they are, for example, we have librarians providing on-site library research help in dormitories, in group study areas

of academic buildings between classes, and even moving to office in the same building as the students and faculty in their subject specialization. The work our support staff, graduate assistants, and student assistants are doing at our service desks allow us to provide these innovative services to our students and faculty.

Conclusions

In December 2012, we collected feedback from those staffing the desk to determine what was working and what could be improved. We did request monthly feedback from staff but this was the first time we sat down to put together a formal assessment. We also reviewed our reference statistics database to get patron feedback, desk traffic patterns, and needed staffing levels.

From our assessment we determined the following was working well:

- Reference and Access Services staff at the same desk allows us to learn from each other
- Closeness of staff allows patrons to have their needs responded to quickly
- Positive feedback from patrons regarding the one stop service desk
- Easy to call for full time Reference or Access Services help
- Team work and camaraderie displayed by staff in both departments
- Good two way communication from managers and desk staff

We determined the following could be improved:

- More privacy needed for reference transactions
- Graduate Assistants would learn more if they could hear librarian responses when called (prior to the merged desk Graduate Assistants had one shift per week on desk with a librarian)
- Reference staff wanted more circulation training
- Circulation staff not using Librarian on Call service when the Graduate Assistant is busy
- Librarian on Call should stop by the service desk at the beginning of shift
- Set up and organization of the service desk needs to be addressed

Overall training methods for both sets of staff need to be reviewed and improved with core competencies for reference and circulation. We have experienced a boost in staff morale, camaraderie, and trust across the two departments because staff have a greater understanding and appreciation for the skills their co-workers bring to the table. Communication between Access Services and Reference is more frequent and improved. Desk coverage is much easier due to the numbers of cross trained staff. Student assistant costs have been reduced. Better service in general and most of all, no more desk labels, one single service point!

Reference

Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, University of North Texas. (2012). Fact Book. Retrieved from <http://institutionalresearch.unt.edu/sites/default/files/Draft%231FactBook2011-2012.pdf>