The Effects of Combining the Circulation and Reference Desks

At the University of Nevada, Reno Knowledge Center

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Abstract

In 2008 a new library was completed on the University of Nevada, Reno campus. This library is called the Knowledge Center because it is not only a library but also a place to connect with the campus community. The decision was made to combine the Library and Information Technology departments to make a true center for students to gather knowledge. The Circulation department was placed at the most visible desk on the main floor, and Reference and Computer Help shared a less visible desk. After an entire semester of taking statistics at every public service point the decision was made to combine the Circulation and Reference desks. This decision was made in an effort to improve customer service. Another round of statistics will be collected to observe the effect the combining of desks has on patron referrals and customer satisfaction. The library paraprofessional staff, librarians and student library workers will be completing an online survey to collect the data.
Introduction

Overview of the Topic

University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) has a student enrollment of 17,679, and there are 941 faculty members. Three years ago there was a new state of the art library constructed on campus. When the library was being planned out the decision to combine the computer help desk and the reference desk was made. In the time that the building has been open it has become obvious that a change is indicated. As many other libraries have done across the country the UNR library decided to combine the reference and circulation desks. This library serves the entire campus as well as community members and students and faculty of surrounding community colleges. The University of Nevada, Reno is one of two universities in the state. The other university is three hundred and fifty miles away.

As previously stated there is a current trend in libraries to combine the reference and circulations desks, and UNR has decided to join this trend. The decision was made (on a trial basis) at the UNR library to combine the desks. The thought was that there would be less referral of patrons to different desks. Also, it was thought that more reference questions would be answered with the reference librarians being present at the circulation desk.

Before the desks were combined the Research Services desk was on the right hand side of the library and the Library Services desk was in the center in the back. Due to the nature of the layout most patrons approached the Library Services desk for all questions unless they were specifically aware of the Research Services desk. This posed a problem because the circulation staff would have to frequently refer patrons to the reference librarians. There was not a straight
The effect of combining the circulation and reference desks at the University of Nevada, Reno Knowledge Center line of view from one desk to another. It was observed on several occasions that the patron who was referred did not go the research desk but instead left the library.

The Library Services staff and the Research Services staff decided that it would be the in patrons best interests to combine the desks. The research librarians moved to the Library Services Desk; the combined service point is now called the Library and Research Services Desk. This service point not only encompasses circulation and reference help, but interlibrary loan and reserves as well, truly making this a one stop shopping point for the patrons.

**Literature Review**

The literature on this topic revealed two main reasons why libraries combine reference and circulation services, to provide better services and budget issues.

In 2002, Duke University Medical Center Library & Archives made to move to a single service point due to budget issues and declining use statistics (Murphy, 2008). Duke University library made changes in staff duties due to the combing of desks. They broadened the responsibilities of the services desk staff, created core competencies, and cross trained staff members. After a few years of the preceding service point model they further refined the idea. In 2005 the reference librarians were moved to on call status and members of the technical services staff were asked to help staff the desk.

Bracke (2007) described the University of Arizona’s move to a combined desk mostly due to budget constraints. The University of Arizona put together a team to survey patrons to determine customer satisfaction. Through these surveys they established staffing needs and calculated the cost of providing the services. The survey data gathered helped them determine what new service points to establish and how to reduce reliance on professional staff without the
patrons seeing decrease in quality. The examination of the data by staff members led the university to combine the reference and circulation desks at the two libraries that the desks were not already extremely close. After implementing the changes and conducting additional surveys the University of Arizona libraries determined that the combining of desks accomplished what they had hoped; cost reduction without decreased customer service.

There are several libraries that decided to combine the reference and circulation desks for the sole reason of better customer service. Grand Valley State University is one such library (Sheehan, 2011). The university has three separate libraries and decided to combine desks only at their largest library. This library developed a scale for reference questions to determine how many questions asked at the reference desk required the attention of professional staff. It was determined the 95% of the questions asked could be handled by paraprofessional staff. This led the library to determine they should combine the reference and circulation desks. They thought that by combining the desks the patrons would get better service because they would only have to go to one desk and it would free up some of the librarians time.

The Engineering Library at Cornell University moved to a single service point in 2004-2005 (Powell, 2007). They did so to accomplish several goals including establishing a one stop shopping point for patrons, and using limited space more efficiently. The library administration held several meetings where the staff could discuss and voice their concerns. A design model was developed to address all points of view, and a working group was tasked with developing a service model. After staff training the service model was implemented and has received a very positive reaction from library patrons.
An article by Flanagan and Horowitz (2000) they describe the process of combining the reference and circulation desks at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T). The librarians at this university were seeking to solve the problem of multiple service points confusing patrons by combining services into one desk. Through discussions and reevaluation of their goals the M.I.T. library decided to move the reference staff to the circulation desk. This move required that the reference staff be trained in circulation functions. There was a group formed to measure the success of the project that developed a staff and a patron survey. The staff survey showed that overall the staff members were happy with the move and pleased with the new camaraderie that had formed between the circulation and the reference staff. They were most worried about the logistics of handing off patrons from one staff member to the next. However, the patron survey did not show that their worry was a real problem. All in all the final survey indicated “cautiously positive” results (Flanagan, 2000).

Wang (2011) discusses the planning and implementation of combining services at the Georgia Institute of Technology. The research conducted at the library showed that patrons were confused because there were many service points within the library. It was also thought that combining the desks would use staff more effectively. There were many steps the library took to arrive at their destination of combined desks. New software was purchased, staff was cross trained, some construction was completed and finally the combined desk was staffed. In the spring of 2012 the library is scheduled complete an assessment of the project.

One very important aspect of combining service points is staff training. In her article, Moore (2001), discusses the training process at the Health Sciences Library at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. At this university the problem of training was solved by developing online training modules for all staff involved in the desk merge. There were also cross training
opportunities and group training after the online portions had been completed. With the training complete, and the combined desks functioning for several months, the library conducted a training assessment and a staff survey. Based on the assessment and survey they addressed weak areas. As of October 2011 this library was still in the process of evolving their training for staff members.

Naismith (2004) surveyed several libraries about combining service points. She asked libraries a series of questions concerning logistics and outcomes of their decisions. Through the surveys the author discovered several points that were stressed repeatedly by the libraries surveyed. Most libraries found that having one service point worked well even though there may be territorial problems. Libraries also stressed that having one person in charge worked well, and that working out the rules so everyone knew their role was very important. Training of staff was also a point that arose in many of the surveys.

Allegri (2006) examined two libraries operations in depth and provided the “lessons learned” from the implementation of single service point models. Both libraries implemented a combined desk structure in the early 2000s with the purpose of better serving the patrons. Several lessons were learned in the course of the implementations. First, a single service point will not necessarily reduce costs, and second librarians will not lose their skills if they are not at the reference desk as often. It was also found the staff at combined desks often have better honed reference skills and are more comfortable referring patrons. One aspect that did not change was the difficulty of scheduling. It was also discovered that a combined desk can be a way of improving job satisfaction among library support staff.
On a blog about library service desks written by screen name Tesutherland (2008) there is a comprehensive list of ideas and advice for combining service desks. The author asked library staff from all over the country to contribute to the list. Some of the highlights include looking at the place patrons are most likely to do research and placing the service desk there. There is also emphasis placed on the importance of having just one desk for information because it is less confusing for patrons.

**Purpose and Rationale**

The purpose of this study is to investigate if patrons are better served by the library with a combined Research and Library Services Desk. This is a very important topic to study because the goal of librarians and library support workers is to provide the best customer service possible to patrons. It seems like a good idea to combine the desks, but its effectiveness has not been studied thoroughly enough to present conclusive results. Also, the effectiveness of combining the desks will vary from library to library depending on the set up of the building and the patron’s habits. This study is important because it can potentially yield results that help libraries provide better customer service to patrons.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants will include nine librarians, ten classified staff members, ten librarians, and ten student workers.
The data collection instrument will be a short online survey filled out by the staff members. The survey will record the number of patrons helped at the desk they approach and the number of patrons that are referred to a different desk. The survey will also record the length of reference transactions.

**Procedure**

First, the questions for the survey will have to be developed and the survey itself will have to be created. After the survey is created the webmaster will put the short survey up in the library staff’s wiki page. Next, the staff will need to have a little training on how to get to the survey. This training will take place through e-mail and in person demonstrations.

Once the survey is up and the staff is trained data collection will begin. Each staff member working at the combined circulation and reference desk will record transactions with patrons. Only referrals to other desks and length of time spent on reference questions will be recorded. The simple process of book check in and checkout will not be recorded on the survey.

This data will be collected for two months; the last month of the semester and the one preceding it. Once data has been collected for two months it will be compared to the data previously collected.
References


Powell, J., Michelson-Thiery, M., Patterson, M., Bryan, L., & Koltay, Z. (2007). Integrating an


