**X Marks the Spot: Creating and Managing a Single Service Point to Improve Customer Service and
Maximize Resources**

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Abstract

This article will describe how merging service points in an academic library is an opportunity to improve customer service and utilize staffing resources more efficiently. Combining service points provides libraries with the ability to create a more positive library experience for patrons by minimizing the ping-pong effect for assistance. The Access Services Department at the University of North Texas Libraries was charged with management of the circulation and reference services offered at the service desk. Streamlined planning and modernized management of the desk and its impact on customer service in a changing library environment will be discussed.

Keywords

Access Services, customer service, combined services desk, management, case study

Introduction

Academic libraries and the services they offer contribute greatly to student success. Libraries provide learning opportunities outside the classroom with the support of helpful library staff. However, one of the challenges academic libraries face is bringing students into the physical library building when there is so much competition for their time and attention. Another challenge is finding ways of communicating clearly what academic libraries have to offer once students are in the library. When students come into the library, having a welcoming and helpful environment increases the possibility that they will return. Service desks in an academic library are responsible for providing service at the point of need in an effective and positive manner. They play an important role in students returning to the library based on the customer service the staff at those desks provide. Multiple service desks on a library floor can cause confusion for a student who is new to the library and may cause barriers to service. Elizabeth Wilson, the Dean of the University of Washington Libraries, stressed the importance of user-driven services in her article:

In our environment of continual change and new opportunities, we need to focus explicitly on the user. We must invest in continuously assessing the landscape, listening to our users, and looking for places where we can make a difference in connecting people with knowledge.

(Wilson, 2008, p. 131)

Merging service desks enables academic libraries to streamline access points and improve service. Sending students from desk to desk creates a ping-pong effect of service for students which often results in them walking out the front door and searching for information elsewhere. Designating a single service point for front line services such as circulation and reference fosters a user centered environment and increases the enrichment possibilities of the library experience for students. Creating a single service point also enhances management's ability to utilize staff resources effectively, modernize

services, expand cross-training and develop a more engaged, active, learning environment for staff and student assistants.

Literature review

Merging different types of services has been done in several libraries and addressed in the literature in the last decade. This transformation in Access Services has been viewed from different angles and points of view. Some looked at the transformation as a response to budget cuts, while few others viewed it as a new method for improving customer service (Chang & Davis, 2010; Flanagan & Horowitz, 2000).

In the era that users' needs are changing constantly, libraries are encountering higher expectations for instant answers and assistance (Chang & Davis, 2010). Creating a single service point to answer questions faster and provide a variety of services and assistance in one location seems to be a logical step in responding to users' needs. This new method of service delivery not only saves patrons' time, but is also specifically beneficial to patrons who are experiencing library anxiety.

In the article titled "One-Stop shopping: Merging service points in a university library", J. Crane and J. Pavy (2008) stated that some patrons do not understand the differences between some of the services or staff, which can cause them issues such as not knowing which desk to go to for their questions. With the combined services desk, patrons do not need to necessarily know the meaning of library jargon to get help.

Another benefit of a combined desk is the increasing collaboration between the departments. As Crane and Pavy (2008) discussed, the combined services desk removed the wall between the departments. Working together makes staff more knowledgeable about users, their information needs, and their information seeking behavior (Flanagan & Horowitz, 2000).

Cross-training which is an inevitable component of merging service points, expands the scope of staff's duties, enriches their skills, and enhances team-building. It also creates a positive work environment across the department (Chan & Soong, 2011). Fritch, Bonella, and Coleman (2014) demonstrated how excluding the reference desk from the consolidated library help desk resulted in an increase of reference transactions at the Kansas State University Library, but they admitted that they "have lost some of the benefits of cross-training".

One of the issues regarding managing a combined services desk is the reporting lines. Now that a couple of units or departments are merged, should the staff continue to report to the same person or does everybody need to report to a single manager? This type of question may cause some anxiety and uncertainty among some staff as mentioned by Crane and Pavy (2008).

Crane and Pavy (2008) recommended to all managers and unit heads of the desk to practice working at the desk so they can have a better understanding of the new workflow and schedule. They can also address staff issues more quickly and efficiently and "demonstrate their support for the merger".

Background

The University of North Texas (UNT), located in Denton, Texas, serves approximately 36,000 students. In 2011, the UNT Libraries had six public services points on the first floor of the main library, Willis Library, to assist patrons with their service needs (see figure 1). The six desks were the Express Checkout Desk, the Main Circulation Desk, the Fines Desk, the Interlibrary Loan Desk, the Reserves Desk and the Reference Desk.

Welcome to Willis Library First Floor

Fig. 1 Willis Library First Floor Spring 2011

In theory the multiple desks were established to provide more of a public presence on the floor.

However, in practice, the service desks created a ping-pong effect where patrons were sent from desk to desk depending on their service needs instead of receiving full service at a single service point. In late spring of 2011, a plan for merging the service desks was created under the direction of the Assistant Dean for Public Services and in collaboration with the service managers for Circulation Services, Interlibrary Loan Services and Reference Services.

Managers of circulation services, interlibrary loan services and reference services were actively involved in the planning and implementation of the single service point, the Library Services Desk. Having multiple service desks on one floor in the main library caused several customer service issues for

patrons. Patrons were often sent from one desk to another to receive reference and circulation assistance, or even to check out a reserve item for their classes. Multiple service desks also increased library anxiety for first time visitors already unfamiliar with the services academic libraries have to offer. Limiting the services offered at a service desk reduced staff and patron awareness of other services the library offered.

The first phase of the plan took place in the summer of 2011. The Reserves Desk and the Fines Desk were merged with the Main Circulation Desk. This first step received favorable feedback from both the patrons and the staff because they received more centralized circulation, reserves and fines assistance in one place. The second phase of the plan was implemented in the fall of 2011. This phase was two-fold. It not only merged the Interlibrary Loan Desk and Main Circulation Desk, which now offered reserves and fines services, but also merged the Interlibrary Loan Department and Circulation Department, creating the Access Services Department. The creation of the Access Services Department was a pivotal part of the plan because this would be the department to eventually manage the single service point for all public services on the main floor of Willis Library. The third phase of the plan was to combine the Reference Desk and the Main Circulation Desk, which took place in the summer of 2012. This final phase enabled patrons to receive all circulation, interlibrary loan and reference assistance at one desk. This combined service point was named the Library Services Desk (see figure 2).

The map illustrates the layout of the Willis Library Learning Center. Key areas include:

- Reference Librarians' Offices:** Room 155 (green).
- Office:** Room 186 (red).
- CyberCafé:** Room 184 (dark red).
- Interlibrary Loan/Document Delivery Offices:** Room 141 (pink).
- GAL Computers:** Room 138 (blue).
- The Forum:** Room 140 (large blue area).
- General Access Lab:** Includes study tables, casual seating, and assistive devices (ADA scanners, printers, multimedia stations).
- Willis Library Learning Center:** Includes Room 136 (brown) and Room 134 (olive green) Study Space.
- Access Services Offices:** Room 126 (maroon).
- Library Services Desk:** Located near the entrance, circled in red, with a note: "Check out and return books, reserve materials, and ILL items; pay fines; get reference help".
- Reserve Collection:** Room 121 (teal).
- Public Computers:** Located near the Reserve Collection.
- Tables with Outlets:** A row of yellow tables.
- Reference Collection:** A row of yellow bookshelves.
- Entrance:** At the bottom center, marked with a blue wheelchair icon.
- Restrooms:** Men's and Women's restrooms are located throughout the building.
- Emergency Exits:** Marked with red arrows and text.
- Other Features:** Lactation Room, Men's Restroom, Women's Restroom, Freight Elevator, Stairs, Print Release Stations, Color Printer, Self-Checkout, and an Automated External Defibrillator.

Initially, the management of the Library Services Desk was under two departments, the Access Services Department and the Research and Instructional Services Department. The Library Services Desk was staffed by members of the Access Services Department (full time staff and students) who responded to patrons needing Access Services assistance and Graduate Library Assistants (GLAs) who responded to patrons needing reference assistance. Both departments worked closely together to develop cross-training guidelines, core competencies and hours of operation.

An opportunity to streamline management of the desk under one department came about in the fall of 2014 when the Research and Instructional Services Department was split into two departments to be more user-centered. The Library Learning Services Department was created to focus more heavily on undergraduate students and information literacy. The Library Research Support Services Department

was created to focus more heavily on graduate students and faculty. As a result of these departments being created, the opportunity arose for Access Services to be given full management of the Library Services Desk, which included the management of the GLAs and basic reference services. This unique and innovative step enabled the Library Services Desk to be a truly combined circulation and reference service point, managed by one department. The scope of the Access Services Department was thus changed and expanded to include reference (research assistance) services. The Access Services Department was also given a librarian position. This was another unusual step since it was rare for the department to gain more positions. The trend in Access Services has been focused on reducing or reallocating staff, so to gain a librarian position was a tremendous morale boost for the staff. The addition of a librarian position to the department communicated to staff how valued their work was and provided them with the possible opportunity for advancement. Many of the staff members had their MLS degrees, but there was no path for promotion to a librarian position within the department. Having a librarian position added to the department created that path. One of the staff members was promoted to the librarian position. The Academic Outreach and Engagement Librarian would work with the Access Services Department Head to modernize reference services and enhance training methodologies for the Library Services Desk.

Management of the Single Service Point

In addition to improving customer service for patrons, there were other goals the managers wanted to accomplish with creating a single service point that related to student and staff management. Managing multiple service desks required staffing those desks with both staff and student assistants. If staff shortages occurred, it impacted service at those desks. Multiple service desks also posed several management challenges regarding supervision, training and follow up. With a high turnover of student assistants, maintaining a consistent and excellent level of customer service at many access points was a daunting task. The managers understood how critical training and soft skills were to successfully

implementing a single service point for circulation and reference services. Cross training modules were created in the learning management system Blackboard Learn. The modules covered core competency components of circulation and reference basics. Internal goals for merging the service desks included improving management of staff resources, increasing more collaboration between staff members, creating a more knowledgeable and engaged staff, increasing the avenues of communication and developing new opportunities for learning and mentoring.

Transitioning to a single service point was a huge change for librarians, staff and student assistants. Managers gathered feedback from both circulation and reference staff to address the concerns they had related to cross-training and how their workloads would be affected. Managers learned that communicating the reasons behind the changes was a critical part of getting everyone on board. One of the major factors that contributed to the success of the implementation of the single service point was the attitude of the librarians, staff and student assistants. They all were working in areas of public services and were dedicated to providing excellent customer service to patrons. Working at the different service desks they understood how frustrating it was to send patrons from one desk to another to obtain different types of library services. Managers communicated to their employees how a single service point would provide better assistance to patrons and would enable them to pursue new user centered services because there would not be as many desks to staff. The inability to modernize services was directly tied to staffing multiple service points. Another critical factor that contributed to the successful implementation of the single service point was the hands on engagement of the managers. Managers, including the new Head of Access Services, worked at the Library Services Desk to gain a staff perspective of how the combined services desk was working, to see how the staff were working together and to address any immediate concerns the staff might have.

Prior to the creation of the Access Services Department, circulation services such as reserves, fines, and check out were offered at separate desks, but were all under the management of the Circulation

Department. Interlibrary Loan and Reference also had separate desks with separate management. With the combined services desk and the creation of the Access Services Department several more positive changes came about as a result. The Head of Access Services created a unit structure of management to more effectively manage services, the Library Services Desk, and the nine full time staff, two librarians, seven GLAs, and thirty five student assistants in her department. Four units were created (see figure 3). Each unit was responsible for managing a specific area of services. The Services Desk Unit was responsible for managing operations of the service desk, student assistants, reserves and fines. The Circulation Support Unit was responsible for managing the stacks, document delivery for library owned items, faculty book deliveries, online holds and graduate carrels. The Interlibrary Loan Unit was responsible for managing interlibrary loan services and our ILLiad program. The Academic Outreach and Engagement Unit was responsible for managing the GLAs, research assistance training and the Ask Us Service.

Fig. 3 Access Services Organizational Chart 2015

The elimination of several circulation related service desks enabled the Head of Access Services to reallocate staff resources to assessing current levels of service. Prior to merging the service desks, most of the staff's time was spent at a service desk. Very little time was spent on skill development and assessment. Everyone did a little bit of everything, but did not feel empowered to come up with new ideas to improve services. The Head of Access Services not only modernized the management structure of the department, but also modernized how workloads were assigned. Each staff member was tasked with managing a service and would report to a unit manager. As a result of this new workload structure, the Head of Access Services was able to get staff positions reclassified to a higher level. Staff were then able to move forward with modernizing workflows, processes and services. Thus, the Library Services

Desk became a catalyst for change and modernization. Staff and librarians were on board with modernizing services and began to see change in a positive light because of the success of the implementation of the single service point and the active involvement of the management. The Library Administration was also supportive of these changes because of the cost savings in student assistant expenditures as a result of reducing the number of service desks that needed to be staffed. Desk operations were assessed each semester and multiple opportunities were available for staff and managers to communicate through unit meetings, department meetings and an online suggestion box.

Modernization of Circulation and Reference Services

Modernizing the delivery of public services to a single service point sparked the beginning of the evaluation of services in the Access Services Department. The possibility of modernizing circulation and reference services to improve customer service became more of a reality to staff. Patron feedback, staff inputs, and current literature were considered and consulted. Some of the services which received major modifications were Ask Us, fines, and holds.

Ask US service - Ask Us is the UNT Libraries service for providing reference services face to face, over the phone, and via email. While basic reference questions are answered at the Library Services Desk by the GLAs, more complicated and subject specific questions are referred to subject librarians. Previously, the Reference and Instructional Services Department was managing the Ask Us service, although librarians in different departments were involved in answering questions related to their subject areas. When the Access Services Department became solely responsible for the management of the Library Services Desk including Ask Us, an ongoing project of evaluating and modernizing this service was started.

One of the issues that came up during the evaluation process was the use of the term “reference” to describe the research assistance provided to patrons. Questions regarding the use of the term were voiced by the GLAs, student assistants, and staff working at the Library Services Desk. Further

investigations indicated that the online form on the Ask Us webpage for submitting questions was confusing to patrons and could use some changes. A critical issue was that the Ask Us service was not advertised properly anywhere other than the library website. The Access Services management wanted to change this by marketing the service more heavily at the Library Services Desk and with subject librarians in their instruction sessions.

The term “reference” was replaced with “research assistance” on our marketing materials at the desk, throughout the library, and on the website. This change helped staff at the Library Services Desk communicate more effectively the research assistance services the library offered. The Ask Us webpage was modernized to remove library jargon and improve usability.

Fines - The combined services desk enabled the Access Services Department to increase its hours of operation for other services such as collecting fines. However, it required additional training for all the full time staff so they could properly answer patrons’ inquiries and process fines collections accurately. The Access Services unit managers made sure staff were thoroughly trained according to university guidelines because it is tied to being PCI DSS compliant and having the ability to process credit card transactions. Further changes included expanding the fines training to senior GLAs and student assistants. With having more hours of operation and more trained employees, the fines collections service became more convenient for patrons. They may call or stop by to take care of their fines at any time during the desk’s open hours.

Online holds - The UNT Libraries collection is located in 4 libraries and 2 remote storage facilities in Denton, Texas. Patrons could request the items located in the remote storage facilities by filling out a basic online form. This form was not linked to the library system so upon receiving the request, staff had to manually place a hold on the item. The remote storage staff would pull the item and send it to the chosen library location. Patrons were limited to requesting 5 items at the time. This system was not very

efficient and convenient for patrons and staff. It was time consuming for patrons to fill out a form for every single book they needed. Frequently patrons would ask if books from the stacks could be pulled for them. Before merging the service desks this was not a possibility due to staff limitations.

In August of 2013, the online holds service was created in order to improve the accessibility of the physical resources to patrons at any preferred library location. Within this service, all library members including UNT students, faculty, staff, and community could request an item through the library catalog to be delivered to the library of their choice. The Access Services Department took a step further in improving customer service by establishing a self-service holds pick up shelf in the Willis Library which enables patrons to pick up their requested materials 24/7 and increased the number of hold requests that could be made from 5 to 25. From August 2013 to January 2016, over 50,000 hold requests have been processed.

Customer Service Benefits of a Single Service Point

Merging service points and modernizing other public services to create a more user-centered environment is beneficial to patrons, staff and management. More centralized training, on the job mentoring and opportunities to actively collaborate with coworkers in assisting patrons improves the level of service offered at a single service point. Developing core competencies and training modules provide staff and student assistants with the training and skill sets necessary to have a general overview of what library services are available. This knowledge enables staff to give patrons a better service experience because they are more familiar with both reference and circulation services.

Patrons coming to the Library Services Desk can check out a book, get research assistance, pick up a reserve book or interlibrary loan item, and take care of their library fees all at one service point, which saves them time. When staff working at the Library Services Desk ask patrons if they have found everything they needed, if they have any additional research questions they can get assistance at the

same desk. Desk staff are familiar with who the subject librarians are and can refer patrons to them if more in-depth research assistance is needed. Librarians who used to be tied to a reference desk are now able to participate in more embedded activities and instruction sessions outside of the library, which increases students' awareness of library services.

Desk coverage is much easier to schedule and coordinate when there is a single service point. Managers are better able to allocate staffing resources and funding when there is only one desk to staff. They are able to look at peak times when more patrons come to the desk and adjust staffing levels accordingly. If someone is out sick there are others who are fully trained who can fill in. The service desk is fully staffed when it is busiest so patrons are helped in a timely manner. All staff understand that helping patrons is the top priority so they work together to provide a seamless delivery of outstanding service.

Creating a welcoming atmosphere at the combined services desk is another form of customer service. This is done by creating zones of awareness. Desk staff are trained to be aware of the zones (areas) they are staffing. This not only means being aware of patrons walking up to the desk, but also looking out for those patrons who may be lost or unsure of where they should go in the library. Making eye contact and asking if someone needs help, extend customer service beyond the immediate desk area where staff are sitting.

Providing multiple ways for patrons and staff to give feedback helps improve services offered at a single service point. Feedback from meetings and online suggestion forms enable managers to offer additional checkout services at the Library Services Desk such as calculators, headphones and phone chargers, which convey to patrons that the library is there to help them succeed in their classes. Whether it is a textbook they are needing from reserves, assistance with finding resources on a topic or a phone charger to charge their phone in the library, the Library Services Desk has staff ready to help. Having students come to the desk letting staff know how the service they provided helped them in their classes

is an affirmation of how a single service point can help libraries improve customer service. Through our Ask Us service we received several comments from patrons regarding the comprehensive service they received at the Library Services Desk.

Conclusion

A challenge for academic libraries is to show their value in a constantly changing information environment. Academic libraries can no longer assume students will naturally seek them out. Showing a library's value by providing effective service in a welcoming environment can be done with a single service point for public services such as circulation and reference. Public services staff are often the first people patrons interact with when they come into a library. The service patrons receive at that time will determine whether the patron will return. Having well trained staff at an easily found service desk enables patrons to receive the assistance they need in a timely manner.

As S.R. Ranganathan, the famous Indian philosopher librarian, stated "libraries must save the time of the user" (Holt, 2010). One of the greatest end results of merging the several services to a single service point is saving patrons' time. However, libraries should not stop here. Libraries should constantly think about changes that benefit patron's time. This is only possible with continuously communicating with patrons and constructively assessing library services.

Creating a single service point requires much planning, training and follow up. How staff react to a change such as this can make a difference as to whether or not the implementation is successful. Having engaged managers who are willing to "get in the trenches" with staff and provide hands on leadership is critical. Explaining the why's of change, providing avenues for feedback and finding solutions are also important for managers to keep in mind when approaching a project such as merging service desks. The end result of merging service points is a welcoming, effective means of providing excellent customer service at a single service point patrons can readily find. The single service point provides managers with

the opportunity to empower staff by reallocating their time to modernizing services and positively impacting customer service.

Merging service points at the UNT Libraries was a very successful endeavor. The keys to the success of the Library Services Desk involved including feedback from staff members, creating cross-training initiatives, empowering staff to be innovative, and communicating change effectively. For academic library managers, combining service points enables them to utilize staff and resources more effectively. It is a best practice mechanism to enhance the knowledge base of library staff and provide comprehensive service to patrons.

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