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Closing the Reference Desk: Increasing Number of Questions Answered, and Level of Librarian Embeddedness

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BACKGROUND

The Dana Medical Library is the academic health sciences library for the University of Vermont and the University of Vermont Medical Center in Burlington, Vermont. Personnel include 11 staff members, 7 library faculty members, and a director. The Library provides reference services via chat, phone, e-mail and face-to-face. Historically, the Library maintained separate Circulation and Reference Desks.

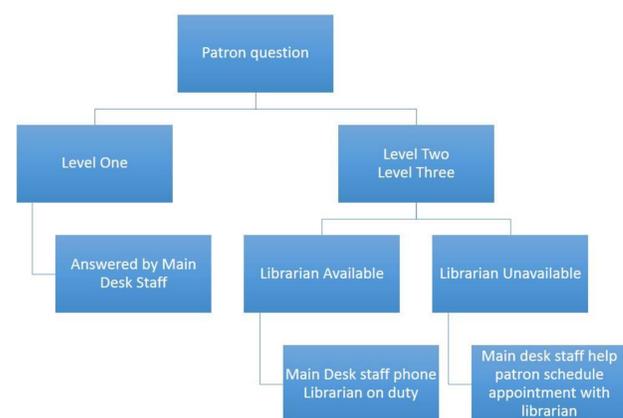
Previous quality improvement projects in reference services focused on standardization of skills across service points. A schema was developed to define types of reference questions, and three levels of expertise needed to answer them. Training was provided to librarians and staff so that all Level 1 questions were answered consistently and accurately at each service point.

Type of Question	Level 1 All staff	Level 2 Department knowledge	Level 3 Expert/Specialist
Reference	Conduct a simple catalog search	Assist patron in focusing or broadening search	Assist patron in creating an advanced search strategy
Tech Support	Assist patron in logging on to public computer	Need help troubleshooting UVM software program	Overseas access to mobile app for database
Policy	Questions about ILL, borrowing periods	Off campus access for special patron group	Copyright questions about licensed material
Circulation	Check out a book	Create new patron record	Forgive fees

In spring 2015, a library work group comprised of both library faculty and staff recommended that the library pilot an on-call reference model. The pilot aimed to address a number of problems with the current Reference Desk:

- Reference desk staffing shortages
- Duplication of effort— Librarians spent most of their time answering Level 1 questions that could also be answered by Main Desk staff
- A decrease in the number of questions answered at the desk
- Disruption in work of librarians during reference shift changes
- Reference Desk occupied needed patron study space
- Confusion for patrons on where to get help/which desk to approach

The pilot ran from August to December 2015. Two librarians did weekly shifts from their offices. They answered phone calls, email and chat reference questions. They were also on-call for more in-depth questions. The following procedure was developed:



Upon completion of the pilot and analysis of the results, it was recommended that the Library move to a completely on-call model. Starting in January 2016, a team was formed to manage the transition.

Main Desk/On-Call Team activities

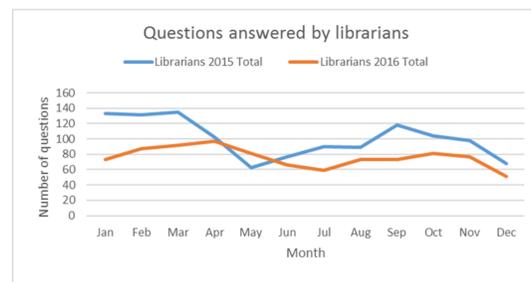
- Write reference policy and procedures
- Consider details of the handoff from the Main Desk to a librarian
- Survey patrons to find a logical name for the service
- Coordinate the removal of the physical reference desk
- Plan professional development strategies for both Main Desk workers and librarians
- Collect and analyze reference transaction data

METHODS

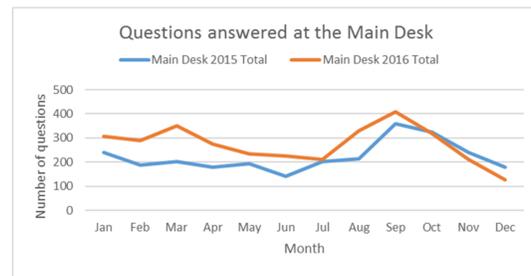
Dana Medical Library uses Springshare LibAnalytics to record data about reference interactions, research consultations, literature searches and liaison interactions. This data was analyzed using both LibAnalytics and Excel.

A six-question qualitative survey was distributed to 5 staff and 6 library faculty (11 total) who worked at the Main Desk or the Reference Desk during the transition of closing the reference desk and moving to an on-call model. The questions were open-ended and designed to assess the affective experience of staff in regards to the closing of the reference desk.

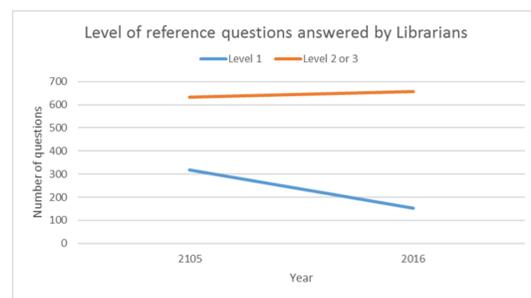
RESULTS



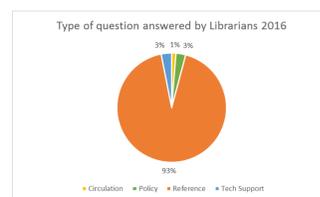
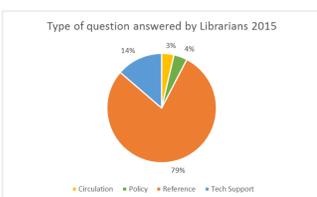
Overall questions answered by librarians decreased from 2015 to 2016.



Overall questions answered at the Main Desk increased from 2015 to 2016, with a similar monthly trend from year to year.



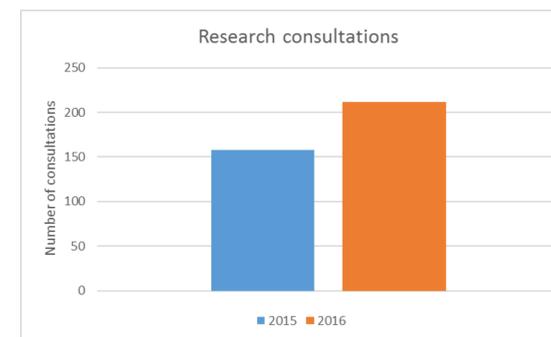
From 2015 to 2016, the number of Level 2 and 3 Reference type questions answered by librarians increased slightly, while the number of Level 1 Reference questions decreased.



Librarians working on-call answered more Reference type questions as a proportion of total questions in 2016 than 2015 (93% vs. 79%), and fewer questions of other types (Circulation, Policy, and Tech Support). In particular, Tech Support questions declined from 14% of overall questions to 3% of questions answered by librarians.



Librarian liaison interactions increased from 2015 to 2016, from 444 to 800 (80.1% increase). The number of reference questions librarians received directly from a liaison group patron also increased from 2015, from 345 to 407 (17.9% increase).



Research consultations rose from 158 in 2015 to 212 in 2016 (34.2% increase). These are Level 2 or Level 3 reference questions answered in-person by librarians with a duration of more than 20 minutes.

Survey

Nine out of eleven surveys were completed by staff and librarians -- an 81% completion rate. All responses reflected both the pros and cons of moving from a physical reference desk to an on-call model; no survey was entirely positive or negative.

The following most common responses were sorted into positive and negative comments about the transition to an on-call model.

Positive	Negative
Librarians have increased flexibility and time to do other work.	Librarians' sense of patron needs and issues is much diminished; librarians have less of an idea of "what's going on."
Quality of reference interactions in office with librarians is higher.	Less personal contact and cross-pollination of ideas around reference interactions between Main Desk and reference librarians.
Librarians answer fewer Level 1 questions.	Decreased visibility of reference librarians.
Librarians answer more complex questions, and have more research consultations.	Decrease in job satisfaction for some librarians and Main Desk staff.

DISCUSSION

While one initial concern about moving to an on-call model was the potential to "lose" patrons who had been accustomed to using the Reference Desk, data show that this concern was not borne out: closing the Reference Desk and moving to an on-call model did not reduce the overall number of questions answered at the Library.

As expected, overall questions answered by librarians declined, because Main Desk staff answered most Level 1 questions, with Level 2 and 3 questions referred to the librarian on-call. However, the number of Level 2 and 3 Reference questions answered by librarians increased. Main Desk staff answered most Level 1 questions, and most of the non-Reference type questions (Circulation, Policy and Tech Support). These trends indicate that the referral system is successfully routing questions to the appropriate service point.

While it is unclear if it is a direct result of moving to an on-call reference model, the amount of library Liaison activity rose from 2015 to 2016 in three key areas:

- Number of total interactions
- Number of reference questions received from liaison patrons;
- Number of research consultations (the majority of these are from liaison patrons)

Combined with survey results, it appears that librarians are using freed-up time for more high-yield liaison work.

While Main Desk staff and librarians have mixed feelings about the new service model, most of the goals of the project were met.

- There is now a single service-point for all patron inquiries.
- Librarians have more uninterrupted time for their work, and devote more time to higher-level reference questions.
- Space has been reallocated for patron study and group work.
- The first year of the on-call system saw an increase in questions answered over the previous year.

Several issues highlighted by the survey should be considered for future resolution. Librarians and Main Desk staff note that librarians are more isolated in the on-call model, and that there is less informal interaction between Main Desk staff and librarians. The Main Desk/On-call Team might address these issues through continued professional development, and librarians can seek out engagement opportunities with patrons. It will also be important in the future to assess the patron experience of the on-call system through surveys, interviews, or focus groups.

IMPLICATIONS

Closing the reference desk is a viable option to solve staffing and space challenges.

Considerations for implementing an on-call service model:

- Form an interprofessional transition team
- Provide professional development
- Monitor roll-out closely and respond quickly to issues
- Pay attention to affective issues for staff/librarians
- Bolster alternative access to reference services, such as scheduling software or librarian office hours