

## **Reference Service Redesign: Does Incorporating Student Employee Feedback Increase Feelings of Empowerment?**

Nicole Trujillo and Rosanna Backen

*Norlin Library, University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, CO, U.S.A.; Nielsen Library, Adams State University, Alamosa, CO, U.S.A.*

Address correspondence to Nicole Trujillo, 1720 Pleasant Street, Boulder, Colorado 80309. E-mail: [Nicole.Trujillo@colorado.edu](mailto:Nicole.Trujillo@colorado.edu)

## **Reference Service Redesign: Does Incorporating Student Employee Feedback Increase Feelings of Empowerment?**

Student employees fulfill an essential role at all academic libraries, but budget and staffing cuts have made student work even more imperative at small, public institutions. This article examines a reference service redesign at Adams State University through the lens of the student circulation employees. Student employee feedback was directly incorporated into decision making and student perceptions about their role were examined before and after the redesign. The study found that while student feedback improved training and service ability, it did not increase student feelings of empowerment.

Keywords: student employee training, empowerment, service desk, circulation, iterative design, access services

### **Introduction**

Student employees form the backbone of circulation functions at the Nielsen Library at Adams State University. 96% of our employees are part of the federal work study program and 4% are paid for by campus employment funds. All circulation student employees are hired by the circulation supervisor, who is in turn supervised by the Access Services Librarian. Student employees staff the circulation desk during all operating hours and are responsible for general circulation functions, shelving and shelf reading, floor counts, and other duties as assigned. In addition to the circulation desk, there is a separate reference desk staffed by librarians, paraprofessional staff, and senior undergraduate, and graduate students from 9 am to 9 pm. The Nielsen Library also serves as the home of Academic Advising, Student Support Services, and the Grizzly Testing and Learning Center, which each have their own service desks with functions separate from the library. The multiple help desks and services in the building add a layer of complexity for circulation student employees who must determine the appropriate services and resources each patron needs.

This paper describes the process of redesigning one of those service points, the library reference desk, from a completely on-desk, in-person staffing model to a hybrid on-call/on-desk staffing model. In particular this paper investigates how including circulation student employee feedback in the redesign process addresses issues around increased reliance on the circulation desk as the main library service point. Though other stakeholders were included in the process, circulation student employee feedback was crucial for obtaining buy in from library staff and ensuring a unified library service point strategy.

## **Background**

Adams State University is a small public liberal arts institution in Southern Colorado, with a total full time enrollment of approximately 2,000 undergraduates and 1,300 online graduate students. Adams State is a designated Hispanic Serving Institution, with Hispanic students comprising 35% of total students as of 2015. The university is located in a rural, geographically isolated area; the nearest city, Pueblo, is 122 miles away. Like many small state-supported universities, Adams State has struggled with decreasing revenue and enrollment for the past few years. Approximately 49% (<https://www.adams.edu/news/oct1416.php>) of students are first generation in college. 91% (<https://www.adams.edu/finaid/>) of students qualify for some type of financial assistance, with 47% receiving Pell grants (S. Rhett, personal communication, May 1, 2018).

The Nielsen library circulation desk is open the longest of all the service points in the library, and is completely staffed by students. The overall circulation force is around 20, which allows for double coverage of the circulation desk at popular times of the day. However, minimum wage increases and a flat student employee budget means that

many times there is only one student employee at the circulation desk. If a student cancels and cannot find a replacement, emergency coverage is provided by the circulation supervisor.

### **Reference Service Redesign**

The reference service redesign was precipitated by two important events. First, the library has seen a reduction in library staff starting with the elimination of a full time librarian position in summer 2015 followed by the departure of the library director in fall 2016. The library director was succeeded by a part-time interim director for the first half of 2017 whose schedule did not allow time to staff the reference desk. Though a new director was slated to be hired for the summer of 2017, the library staff found that the extra hours staffing the desk were becoming increasingly burdensome coupled with the additional duties they were absorbing due to high staff turnover.

The second precipitating event was the steady decline of reference transactions, which reflect both national trends and decreasing enrollment (Miles, 2013; Ryan 2008). This decline, combined with the sheer number of service points in the building, led the library staff to contemplate reconfiguring the service model of the reference desk in the spring of 2017 to take effect by fall of 2018. The library staff tried various configurations before deciding on switching to an on-call staffing for the hours of 9 am to 11 am and 3 pm to 5 pm Monday through Thursday, and all day Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. These hours were chosen because they were times of low usage based on analysis of past reference transactions. An iPhone was purchased to supplement the landline reference phone and a task force devised procedures for carrying, answering, and transferring the phone. Patrons could page the on-call librarian by using the landline phone on the reference desk. Signage was created to inform patrons of what to do when

the desk was empty, and lanyards were adopted by on-call staff to identify them when they were not on the desk.

At the start of the reconfiguration, library staff expressed concerns about the change, including fears that it would reduce librarian visibility and require circulation students on the first floor service desk to answer more complicated questions. These fears inspired the authors to investigate other reference desk redesign case studies to find best practices and recommended methodologies.

### **Literature Review**

Academic libraries are moving away from traditional, desk based reference services and employing other models such as on-call, virtual, and roving reference. Lawson and Kinney note that discovery services seem to be able to meet the initial needs of students without librarian intervention (2015) while Chauvet, Barbous, and Liston found that 90% of questions fielded at the reference desk were from users seeking known information that did not require interpretation (2016). As libraries re-examine their reference desks many are combining these desks into a single service point. Venner and Keshmiripour note that multiple service desks can cause confusion for new students and create barriers to service (2016) while Frederiksen and Wilkinson argue that combining formerly disparate functions or units within the library is an innovative and effective way to manage resources and services (2016). Chauvet, Barbous and Liston also note the goal of diminishing barriers for students through fewer referrals, which leads to better problem solving and greater productivity for staff (2016). These advantages make the single service model an attractive suggestion for any library looking to redesign their reference desk.

However, the authors identified several barriers to implementing a single service model

at the Nielsen Library. A majority of the case studies examined adopted a single service point model because library renovations allowed for a reconfiguration of the building layout or the library was able to remodel their service desk (Sider, 2016; LaMagna, Hartman-Caverly & Marchetti, 2016; Allegri & Bedard, 2006; Penella & Dunn, 2015; Crane & Pavy; 2008). Nielsen Library lacked the funds to undertake a physical alteration. Also, many case studies only tangentially addressed the political implications of absorbing non-library units into a single service point (LaMagna, 2016; Sider, 2016). Nielsen Library lacked the political leadership necessary to combine the variety of units in the building. Furthermore, case studies were split regarding the effect of new configurations on staff time and cost savings. Some studies observed their single service point afforded librarians critical off the desk time and reduced overall staffing needs (Crane & Pavy, 2008; Chauvet, Bourbous & Liston, 2016; Venner & Keshmiripour, 2016), while other studies cautioned against underestimating the level of staffing needed to implement a new service point and the additional work required for training and staffing different types of services (Sider, 2016; Allegri & Bedard, 2006). These observations reflect the complexity inherent in a service point redesign and confirm the advice offered by Frederiksen and Wilkinson that library service desks all have distinct unique characteristics that need to be addressed before implementing a single-service point implementation (2016).

Amidst the complexity that emerged in the literature there were two themes applicable to the Nielsen Library's situation. One theme was a fear that removal from the reference desk would reduce librarian visibility and devalue their expertise. Another theme was a general concern about the ability of student circulation employees to handle a robust referral process. While many of the case studies emphasized iterative changes, communication, and training as methods to overcome these barriers, only

Lawson and Kinney's work specifically include student employee feedback as a method to address librarian fear and ensure service quality (2015). At Sonoma State University student employees were given new roles as "rovers" who could offer help to patrons in the stacks. To facilitate these new roles the librarians completely reimagined student training, and then sought student feedback on the training and new responsibilities using focus groups and surveys. Lawson and Kinney found that students generally preferred in-person training but tolerated online training as a refresher on certain tasks, and that students struggled to connect their library work to their future career.

Inspired by the methods for gathering student feedback employed in the Lawson and Kinney study, the task force decided to incorporate circulation student employee feedback into the reference service redesign. Including students as stakeholders in library design has gained acceptance over recent years. Meunier and Eigenbrodt describe the importance participatory design plays in library building remodels (2014). Marquez and Downey use the developing concept of service design to lay out specific processes and tools that involve a variety of user groups in the redevelopment of library services (2016). Both publications emphasize the importance of iterative design: making small changes to the service model throughout the design process using multiple types of stakeholder feedback. The publications stress how this process builds trust and understanding among stakeholders, empowering the community to effect change.

At the Nielsen Library, circulation students may not staff the reference desk, but library staff consider them key stakeholders in assisting patrons. By including circulation student feedback in the design process the authors aimed to investigate the following research questions:

Q1. Are students comfortable with answering questions in the new model?

Q2. Does including student feedback in the design of the new model have a positive effect on students' reported feelings of empowerment?

The first question would help the task force iteratively write and adjust protocols for student interaction with the new reference service model. The second question would then investigate the effect this process had on the students, to see if it moderated the sometimes painful experience of change.

## **Methods**

In spring 2017, the authors obtained approval from their Institutional Review Board for the study and started a Reference Model Change Log to keep track of any reference desk changes, the date changes were made, and the impetus behind each change. Additional items tracked included usability and dyadic interviews, where the authors interviewed two students together instead of each separately, and a pre and post survey constructed using a Likert scale.

### ***Usability Tests and Dyadic Interviews***

At the end of the spring semester in 2017, library staff began gathering feedback from student employees regarding the new reference configuration and its impact on their roles. In two usability tests, conducted at the beginning of the reconfiguration in June 2017 and again at the end of the process in November 2017, staff asked students to describe how they would answer a variety of questions about library services (Appendix A). Researchers conducted the dyadic interviews in response to student employee concerns regarding difficult patrons that arose from the first usability tests (Appendix B). Researchers chose to conduct these interviews as dyads instead of one-on-one interactions to facilitate a conversation between the students and allow for a more natural flow. Interviews and usability studies were recorded, and common themes were



generated in a report which researchers then discussed with the circulation supervisor in a face-to-face meeting.

### ***Surveys***

In the 2017 spring and fall semesters circulation student employees were given a ten-factor survey where they were asked to rate on a five point Likert scale their feelings about their ability to provide library assistance and effect change. Students were asked not to write their name on the test but to use the last four digits of their student identification numbers so that the authors could make comparisons between new and returning circulation student employees.

### **Results**

#### ***1) Are students comfortable with answering questions in the new model?***

To provide a baseline for this question, the authors conducted a spring usability test that focused on the students' ability to answer a variety of questions at the circulation desk, followed by a survey to measure student perceptions about their role as employees at the circulation desk. The usability test was analyzed individually by the authors who recorded themes and then met with the circulation supervisor to discuss those themes. The initial usability test brought to light several issues that would need to be addressed for the new reference service model to succeed. The first finding was that students preferred personal contact for answering questions and followed an unofficial chain of command when trying to find a staff member to help them answer a question. Students would look to a co-worker, then the circulation supervisor, then finally the library staff in the first floor offices to answer difficult questions. Student employees would contact the reference desk only as a last resort. Based on this finding, the task force made it a goal to improve referrals to the reference desk as the circulation supervisor and first

floor staff were not always available.

The second finding was that student employees were often the first point of contact for patrons and experienced many difficulties enforcing library policies. This discussion helped library staff make the decision to enlist more experienced student employees to staff the reference desk from 7-11 pm instead of from 7-9 pm, which was initially proposed. This finding also concerned the authors enough that they decided to dive deeper into the issue by conducting dyadic interviews.

The third finding was that student employees were generally aware of their knowledge limitations with the exception of questions related to technology. They were able to answer ready reference questions about finding library books and other materials fairly easily, and if they didn't know the answer they were quick to admit they would ask someone else for help. However, when asked technology-related questions specifically addressing guest printing and guest wifi access, a number of students gave incorrect answers. Further discussion with the circulation supervisor revealed that student employees had received mixed messages from library staff about technology issues. The authors consulted with the circulation supervisor to create a weekly circulation newsletter email sent to all library staff and student employees based on popular questions taken from the reference transaction form responses.

To further investigate the issue of difficult patrons, the authors conducted a follow up dyadic interview in the middle of the fall semester. Researchers interviewed eight students total, making sure to include the students that staffed the evening reference shifts. Interviews were then analyzed separately and the authors met to discuss emerging themes. The authors found that evening student employees faced different issues than those who worked during the day, including feelings of isolation from the

rest of the library staff, heightened security issues such as reserves theft, and disregard from fellow students when they tried to enforce regulations like closing time. All student employees interviewed indicated feelings of powerlessness when faced with a patron's anger about a policy or regulation and were reluctant to reach out to reference staff as they wanted to resolve the issue themselves. After discussing the issues with the circulation supervisor, the task force implemented the chat app Slack on circulation computers and the reference phone. Student employees could now summon reference staff at the touch of a button, rather than making a phone call. The emergent themes also served as justification for continuing to employ graduate students to staff the reference desk from 7-11 pm, as their presence was appreciated by the closing student employees.

Our follow up usability test, administered to student employees in the fall of 2017, found their skills for answering technology questions had generally improved and they were quicker to identify the reference desk as a point of contact. Student employees still preferred to turn to those physically nearby to answer questions, and further work needs to be done to make the reference desk the primary point of contact.

A comparison of the spring and fall 2017 surveys revealed that most responses showed no change with a few notable exceptions (Table 1). Student employees were slightly more likely to rate the questions "Q3. I can easily find answers to questions people ask me online." and "Q7. I find my work at the library challenging and engaging." as strongly agree. Student employees were slightly more likely to rate the questions "Q8. I find using the online library website confusing." and "Q2. It can be difficult to find a librarian to help me." as strongly disagree. Even for these questions the variation was small; only Q3 was significant on a Mann-Whitney U test. From this survey and from improvements noted in the post-usability testing, the authors concluded that students were more comfortable answering questions at the circulation desk after the service

redesign and subsequent training, but note that the improvement was slight and follow-up was needed to improve communication and training on how to serve difficult patrons.

***(2) Does including student feedback in the design of the new model have a positive effect on students' reported feelings of empowerment?***

Researchers created two survey questions that specifically examined how much control student employees felt they had over the change process: “Q9. I feel empowered to suggest changes to library procedure.” and “Q10. I do not feel like I have much say in how things are done at the library.” An examination of the pre- and post-test for Q9 revealed a slight increase from a mean of 2.67 (n=20) to a mean of 3 (n=17), a positive but small gain. Q10 showed an increase from a mean of 2.67 to a mean of 3.17, meaning student employees may have experienced a decrease in feelings of empowerment after the reference service reconfiguration (Figure 1). When examining the responses from only the returning students, researchers note there is the same general movement. However, when compared with all students, returning students were more likely to disagree with “Q7. I find my work at the library challenging and engaging” after the reference service reconfiguration.

To better understand the results we re-examined the usability tests and dyadic interviews. Returning student employees mentioned feeling isolated because of the decrease in library staff presence at the reference desk at night, which they noted led to breakdowns in communication. Also, the new training that library staff created from the iterative interviews heightened feelings of resentment, as some students found the training redundant. Furthermore, researchers may not have effectively communicated how they incorporated student feedback into the new reference service redesign.

**Discussion**

Overall the authors were pleased with an iterative design methodology that incorporated formalized student feedback to help reconfigure the reference service model. We found that conducting regular interviews and usability tests allowed us to not only change elements of the new model as needed but to justify those changes to stakeholders and colleagues. Iterative feedback was also instrumental in reshaping our training program for circulation student employees to empower them to provide better services to patrons. Additionally we found that continual, brief communication about changes, along with keeping open lines for feedback, helped smooth over many of points of contention the reconfiguration raised among library staff.

Library staff have decided to continue using the on-call/on-desk hybrid staffing method during the regular semester and have moved to a completely on-call staffing model during the summer and intersession periods. Staff now look to data, including reference interactions and gate and floor counts, to make informed service desk staffing decisions in order to balance patron needs with staff time and resources.

However, an iterative method in itself did not seem to increase feelings of empowerment about their work among circulation students. Further testing is needed to discover better communication tools, management techniques, and design-thinking methodologies that will ensure student employees do not feel like passive observants but rather as co-owners of change.

Student feedback proved to be the greatest change impetus in the service redesign. The circulation supervisor, in conjunction with the Access Services Librarian, has since developed a formal training plan and checklist for all new hires and mandatory customer service training each year for all new and returning student employees. The

supervisor has worked with the campus police department to arrange for walkthroughs of the library during finals week and has arranged for closing student employees to check in with campus police at the end of each shift to ensure their safety. Lastly, the supervisor has arranged monthly meetings with evening student employees to alleviate feelings of isolation and disconnection with the rest of the library. Access services staff are investigating student employee cross-training and peer to peer training models to continue to develop and empower student employees.

## References

- Allegri, F., & Bedard, M. (2006). Lessons learned from single service point implementations. *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*, 25(2), 31-47.
- ASU named in top 50 Colleges for Hispanic students. (2014, October 06). Retrieved from <https://www.adams.edu/news/oct1416.php>
- Chauvet, M., Bourbous, V., & Liston, F. (2016). Service matters: Single service point as a collaborative and professional learning initiative for service excellence. *Journal of Access Services*, 13(2), 80-90.
- Crane, J. & Pavy, J. A. (2008) One-Stop shopping: Merging service points in a university library. *Public Services Quarterly*, 4(1), 29-45.
- Financial Aid. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.adams.edu/finaid/>
- Frederiksen, L., & Wilkinson, B. (2016). Single service points in libraries: A review. *Journal of Access Services*, 13(2), 131-140.
- Lawson, N., & Kinney, M. (2015). Empowering students and expanding services: Sustainable staffing at the Sonoma State University Library. In S. S. Hines & M. Simons (Eds.), *Advances in library administration and organization: Vol. 33* (pp. 225-244). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- LaMagna, M., Hartman-Caverly, S., & Marchetti, L. (2016). Redefining roles and responsibilities: Implementing a triage reference model at a single service point. *Journal of Access Services*, 13(2), 53-65.
- Marquez, J.J. & Downey, A. (2016). *Library service design: A LITA guide to holistic assessment, insight, and improvement*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Meunier, B., & Eigenbrodt, O. (2014). More than bricks and mortar: Building a community of users through library design. *Journal of Library Administration*, 54(3), 217-232.
- Miles, D. B. (2013). Shall we get rid of the reference desk? *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 52(4), 320-333.
- Penella, J. & Dunn, C. M. (2015). Embracing the future on a budget. *AALL Spectrum*, 19(7), 1089-8689.
- Ryan, S. M. (2008). Reference transactions analysis: The cost-effectiveness of staffing a traditional academic reference desk. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 34(5), 389-399.

Sider, L. G. (2016). Improving the patron experience: Sterling Memorial Library's single service point. *Journal of Access Services*, 13(2), 91-100.

Venner, M. A., & Keshmiripour, S. (2016). X marks the spot: Creating and managing a single service point to improve customer service and maximize resources. *Journal of Access Services*, 13(2), 101-111.



Appendix A  
Usability Test

The library is examining different ways in which we can change our reference service. These changes will likely affect our circulation student workers. Since you are a current student worker we would like to ask you the following 5 questions about how you provide help at the circulation desk. This is not a test on your skills, but a way for the librarians to examine the variety of pathways students use to answer questions.

How would you help someone who is looking for a book on learning French?

How would you help someone who is looking for someone's office?

How would you help someone who wants information on free tax filing?

How would you help someone who would like to see when his or her checked out items are due?

How would you help a community member access the Wi-Fi? What about if they'd like to print or make copies?

Describe to the student the reference model changes:

Do you have any suggestions for this new model?

Appendix B  
Student Dyadic Interviews

Thank you for agreeing to speak with us today. We are doing this interview to talk about your role as front line staff and particularly to find out how we as librarians and supervisors can better support you. In particular, we've heard from various members of staff about difficult patron situations they have encountered and we want to see if that's true across all staff so that we can do better training around handling these situations. Would you be willing to answer a few questions for us?

Can you tell me about a time when you had a patron be rude, angry, or dismissive with you?

How did you handle the situation?

Did you seek help from library staff? Another student? Why?

Did it work?

Do you recall any other situations? (Go through the situations on a case-by-case basis)

Do you have any suggestions for us on how to make these types of situations easier for you to handle?