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Nothing is Permanent but Change: The Journey to Consolidation and Back

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Abstract

Responding to a staffing shortage and assessment of usage data, eight of Hale Library's nine service desks were consolidated into one service point. Fourteen months later, the Libraries conducted an assessment of the consolidation using reference transaction data, responses to a survey administered to Libraries' staff, and responses from a student focus group. The assessment revealed many logistical and staffing challenges with the new desk. As a result, a separate service point for reference was created directly outside the consolidated desk. Our statistics indicate that this was a successful change.

Keywords: Reference, consolidation, patron service, assessment, training, service desks

Debates about whether or not reference is dead are not unique to today; discussion on the issue has continued for decades. Many different solutions have been created to address the problem of low reference statistics, ranging from redefining reference services to removing the service altogether. One solution has been to consolidate all service points into one desk. As university libraries may be considering this option, there is a need for an evaluation of the solution, including how a consolidated desk affects reference statistics and what effects a consolidated desk may have on the library staff and patrons. Kansas State University Libraries (KSUL) consolidated eight service points in 2009, creating a one-stop service point. After one year with this consolidated model followed by an assessment of its effectiveness, the Libraries chose to partially “de-consolidate” in August 2010 by establishing a reference station in front and to the side of the consolidated desk. Now, a year later, this paper describes the process involved in assessing the consolidated desk, the results of that assessment, and also the results of an assessment of the partially de-consolidated desk. It discusses lessons learned and provides suggestions for other libraries that are considering complete consolidation of service desks. It also addresses the potential for using a partially de-consolidated desk as a way to revive reference services.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea of consolidating service points in a library setting results from the reported trend of declining reference service use – a trend that is not new to our profession. A review of the literature about reference, reference services, and reference desks yields a substantial number of

published articles and conference proceedings that address declining reference statistics and ways to solve the problem, which began over twenty years ago.

Reasons suggested for the decline in use of reference services use range from placing blame on the librarians to arguing that technology has made reference librarians, and thereby reference as a whole, obsolete. Examining librarians themselves as a cause of declining reference, Ewing and Hauptman (1995) argue that reference was always done incorrectly and that the whole idea of a reference interview was without merit. Miller (1984) states that causes of declining demand for reference service such as inaccuracy were largely due to librarians who were overworked because of new services and expectations put upon them.

Echoing Miller's sentiments, Campbell (1992) argues that librarians need to be allowed the time and resources required to learn what their users want and need from libraries – an argument for time off the desk that was enhanced by Summerhill's (1994) claim that reference desks were not cost-effective because highly specialized librarians sit doing nothing while waiting for patrons to approach. Tyckoson claims in 1999 that, after fifteen years of trying to fix the problem and discover the root causes, the state of reference services was still the same.

As users' needs and desires related to reference services changed, librarians began discussing technology's effect on reference. Lewis claimed in 1995 that traditional reference was already dead and librarians needed to move "to make the electronic library a reality" (12). Rettig (2003) highlights the technology needs and skills of users, especially those in academic libraries, and

calls for library services to be changed accordingly. Bell (2007) examines the “technology killed the reference desk librarian” idea.

The discussions of technology in the literature led to many solutions intended to arrest the decline of demand for reference help services. Technology solutions in the form of “electronic libraries” or “digital libraries” began to appear as one solution with a focus on moving entirely to an electronic or digital reference system (Lewis 1995, Ferguson and Bunge 1997). Cook (2006) expands the idea of an electronic reference system into a discussion of providing virtual services to patrons and communicating with them using the new tools of the day. Extending the argument that technology can solve the problem, others argue that technology will allow libraries to completely eliminate the reference desk – an idea first advanced by Ford in 1986, and echoed by Hallman (1990) and Carlson (2007). Carlson argues that the reference desk can be removed and replaced with alternatives such as text messaging, instant messaging, roaming reference, and satellite reference. Kennedy (2011) advances the argument by stating that new “technological solutions to resource discovery and resource acquisition have grown more sophisticated and ever more user-friendly over the years; now most every action in the modern academic library can be performed without the need of mediation: from catalog and database searching to tracking down full-text documents, images, videos, and audio; from material self-checkout to click-through interlibrary loan requesting” (322). As the mediation of old – the reference librarian role – is no longer necessary, these articles argue that technology may have, in fact, killed the reference desk.

Librarians heard these early calls for change and many pursued new models with the goal of reinvigorating reference. One alternative to the reference desk mentioned in recent literature is a roaming reference model (see Pitney and Slate [2007] for an example model in a public library

system). Closely related is satellite or mobile reference stations away from the library building. Kuchi et al. (2004), based on results from an experiment using a satellite reference station at a campus center, recommend that other libraries look further into the option (although they do not report success in their own experiment). In recent years, more university libraries have been providing case reports of satellite, mobile, or outreach reference (Schmehl Hines 2007, Fitchett and Upjohn 2008, Aguilar et al. 2011). In one case, a group of librarians and library students started a “radical reference” service in which they served the community with satellite and virtual reference (Friedman and Monroe 2009).

Another approach is to work within the library walls but to change the set-up of the reference desk and/or to redesign staffing models. New staffing models are not new ideas to the field as both Shapiro (1987) and Massey-Burzio (1992) discuss developing a tiered reference service. Massey-Burzio additionally recommends using “consultation spaces” where reference librarians could meet individually with patrons. Changing the design of the reference desk to include consultation spaces or “front-line” desk workers (an idea raised again by Bugg and Odom in 2009) led to the implementation of an “Information Commons” (also not a very recent idea; see Beagle 1999) in which the physical space of the library changes to juxtapose technology and reference. Heikkila-Furrey et al. (2007) describe a reference station placed among the students within the InfoCommons where librarians can offer intensive assistance to patrons while being in the same space as the students. Strong (2006) explains that this integration of two worlds should not just be physical but that it also should include services: face-to-face and virtual. Strong states that the new design of the physical space calls for renewed discussion of what constitutes appropriate staffing for service spaces. One option is to use only reference librarians to work a

desk in the new space (Fitzpatrick et al. 2008). Another is to use separate desks, one with library staff for information/reception questions and one for in-depth interactions staffed by reference librarians (Bugg and Odom). Banks and Pracht (2008) provide an overview of library choices in staffing while Ryan (2008) discusses whether staffing a desk with librarians is a cost-effective approach.

The literature related to solving the problem of reduced demand for reference service ranges from suggesting training librarians to give better “customer service” for the patrons to eliminating the reference desk completely. The University of Connecticut eliminated reference services completely and instead built a “Learning Commons” area that is staffed by “high-level information technology (IT) students who are trained to provide basic information services” and who contact librarians when needed through online communication (Kennedy, 323). Throughout the articles discussing alternatives to the traditional reference desk (see Rieh 1999, Carlson 2007, and Watstein and Bell 2008 for good summaries and overviews of changes), ideas of eliminating the reference desk and either redesigning it or using alternative reference services recur and are debated. The possibility of consolidating service desks beyond just reference and information has not been mentioned often in these discussions. There are two notable exceptions. The first is Meldrem et al. (2005) who present their experiment of eliminating the reference desk and using a “one-stop shopping” model for patrons, in which patrons were provided with “walk-up” service and referred to the appropriate location or librarian. They conclude that the new model provides good service for patrons while also giving more time to librarians for further research, supervision, and other related duties. More recently, Wang and Henson (2011) detail their Combined Services Area Project in which reference, circulation, and technology support services

will be consolidated. The authors explain the long process of completing a large-scale project and discuss training issues, tiered referral processes, and the importance of evaluation and assessment throughout the process.

THE DECISION TO CONSOLIDATE

After conducting a LibQual survey and focus groups related to strategic planning in 2007, KSUL formed a task force to address comments from patrons about confusion in deciding which service desk to use in the building. The task force, consisting of the heads of the Social Sciences/Humanities, Science, Government Publications/Microforms, and General Information Services (Circulation/General Reference) departments, was formed in 2008 and charged with simplifying access to reference services in Hale Library. The task force gathered data and made a report with suggestions about consolidation. In May 2009, KSUL consolidated eight of the nine service desks on Hale Library's 1st, 2nd, and 3rd floors into a single service point. The desks consolidated included Information (Reception), Circulation, Reserves, Reference, Science Reference, Government Publications/Maps/Microforms, Multicultural Reference, and Interlibrary Services. The Special Collections desk was not consolidated, nor was the Information Technology Help Desk, which is a separate unit and does not fall under the Libraries' administrative structure. This decision was based largely on a desire to simplify access to services, which was a need expressed in several survey and focus group comments patrons had contributed in recent years. An additional goal was to improve the speed and efficiency of patron services by reducing the number of referrals from one desk to another.

Prior to initiating this dramatic consolidation, the committee examined transaction data recorded at Hale Library's main reference desk and the three specialized reference desks on Hale Library's 1st, 2nd, and 3rd floors. This analysis revealed that from July 2008 to June 2009 the three specialized reference desks received only 1,468 questions, which was less than 10% of the number received at the main reference desk (15,250 questions). Based on that most recent year of data, the task force concluded that the expected increase in the number of reference questions at a consolidated desk would not overwhelm that desk's resources.

All service points were consolidated into the Circulation Desk on the 2nd floor, the main entry floor of the library. The Circulation Desk is approximately 50 feet from the entrance gates and is built into a wall. The counter is almost four feet deep, set into an opening of a wall that is twenty feet wide. Following consolidation, all service staff worked behind the desk where there were four different computers. In addition to the computers at the service desk, there were work stations set behind the main counter. Students and staff worked the front counter desk and a reference librarian was stationed at a back cubicle. If patrons were in need of reference assistance, the staff at the front would refer to the librarian at the back. The librarian would then either walk up to the counter to assist the patron or walk out from behind the counter to help the patron out in the public area. During busy times of day, the reference librarian would also help at the front counter. A photograph of the desk setup appears in [figure 1](#).

ASSESSING THE CONSOLIDATED DESK

When KSUL created the consolidated service desk, there was also a stipulation that the newly created desk be assessed at least once per year. In May of 2010, the head of KSUL's Undergraduate and Community Services Department formed a task force charged with assessing the workflows taking place at the consolidated desk as well as the quality of the services being delivered from the desk. The task force chose to conduct a holistic, multi-faceted assessment that would combine quantitative data, documents, video footage, and qualitative data from both patrons and staff. In August of 2010, the task force submitted a report summarizing its findings and recommending that a separate reference station be created in the public area of the 2nd floor near the consolidated desk based on the following results:

Quantitative Data

KSUL has been counting transaction numbers for circulation, reserves, and bill and fines services for several years. Since mid-2008, it has also been recording data about all reference and directional transactions. The assessment task force examined all the available measures for both a pre-consolidation period (Sept. 1, 2008- April 30, 2009) and a post-consolidation period (Sept. 1, 2009-April 30, 2010). The measures were: (1) Hale Library's total gate count; (2) total number of charges and discharges in Hale Library; (3) number of in-person reference questions at all desks in Hale Library except Special Collections and the Information Technology Help Desk; (4) number of reference questions received via e-mail, IM, or phone at all desks in Hale Library except Special Collections and the Information Technology Help Desk; and (5) the average

length of reference transactions at all desks in Hale Library except Special Collections and the Information Technology Help Desk.

Text Documents and Video Footage

One of the most conspicuous impacts of the consolidation was a dramatic increase in the amount of information each student worker at the desk was required to know. To document this change, the task force compiled a list of all of the policies, procedures, and topics the former circulation student workers were required to know before the consolidation and a list of all the policies, procedures, and topics they were required to know after the consolidation. Another conspicuous change was the amount of time required for a staff person to walk from behind the desk to a door exiting the staff side of the library to the patron. To document this change, the task force recorded staged video footage of a reference transaction.

Staff Survey

After obtaining IRB approval, the task force sent an electronic survey to all current staff and to those student employees who had either worked at one of the pre-consolidated desks or who currently worked at the consolidated desk. The survey contained four short-answer questions: (1) What do you consider to be the benefits of the consolidated help desk for patrons? (2) What do you consider to be the benefits of the consolidated help desk for library staff? (3) What do you consider to be the challenges of the consolidated help desk for patrons? (4) What do you consider to be the challenges of the consolidated help desk for library staff? A total of forty-three out of one hundred and ten people responded to the survey.

Focus Group

After obtaining IRB approval, the task force contacted professors and instructors of Expository Writing, Introduction to Psychology, and Chemistry 1 courses to recruit students willing to participate in a focus group. The focus group consisted of seven students, and it was facilitated by the head of KSUL's Faculty and Graduate Services Department. A member of the assessment team recorded the session and transcribed the recording. The facilitator asked the following questions: (1) Have any of you ever used the library help desk here? (2) For those of you who have not used the Hale Library Help Desk, why do you think that you didn't use the Help Desk? (3) For those of you who have used the Library Help Desk, what made it easy or hard for you to come to the desk? (4) For those of you who have not used the library help desk, do you think you will ever want to or need to use the help desk? (5) For those of you who have used the library help desk, what were your thoughts about how you were treated there? (6) For those of you who have not used the library help desk, is there anything that would encourage you to use it?

IMPACT OF THE CONSOLIDATION

After implementing and assessing the combined desk, we discovered that there were many positive and negative outcomes. This section will present the positive consequences, illustrated with quotations from our student focus groups and staff surveys.

Staff Knowledge

Combining reference, circulation, reserves, government publications, and ILL staff meant that workers were able to learn more about each area. Cross-training allowed development of additional skills. This was beneficial to the patrons because more people were available who could answer their questions. It also allowed a broader understanding of the library mission as a whole. One respondent in our survey stated, “I feel a lot more confident handling questions from reserves, circulation, reference, and general information than I was before. It's nice to have experience in all of these areas to know how to better help patrons. It's also nice to have employees from the different departments on hand to help answer questions I couldn't answer on my own.” Another noted, “staff become more knowledgeable about the full scope of library operations, policies and procedures. Consequently they are better able to help patrons and better equipped to participate in decision making in teams and committees.”

Appreciation of Each Other's Jobs

Staff learned that their colleagues had jobs that were very challenging; as a result, they developed an appreciation of the amount of knowledge that was required for each position. A survey respondent explained it as, “living in someone else's shoes (in other words, ‘circulation’ staff know what it's like to do ‘reference’ work and ‘reference’ staff know what it's like to do ‘circulation’ work, [the combined reference desk] eliminates false boundaries between departments, [and] makes for a more egalitarian working arrangement.”

Less Run-around for Patrons

Before consolidation, patrons were sometimes confused about which of our nine desks could best help them. With the combined desk, there was one place that patrons could go to get their questions answered. As noted by one of our survey-takers, “for the patrons, it works well because it is 'one-stop shopping' ... if they're returning a book, picking up an ILL, and checking on a reserve item, it works really well for them.”

More Consistent Coverage

Before consolidation, if the reference staff person had to go to another area of the library to help a patron, the desk was left empty. After consolidation, with the circulation staff always on-call behind the desk, this concern was alleviated. “Having backup [is a benefit], so if you have to leave that space physically in order to help a customer further, there is someone who can step in to cover for you,” explained one of our staff.

We also discovered some significant drawbacks to the consolidation. These drawbacks were also illustrated by our surveys.

Too Much to Learn

While staff developed an appreciation for the amount of knowledge necessary for each job, some of that appreciation came through frustration at being asked to learn it. For the students in particular, being asked to learn all of the reference information as well as all of the circulation

procedures was overwhelming. Our documents comparing the different knowledge required of students pre- and post-consolidation illustrated this fact. It also became confusing when different staff members had different levels of training. One survey respondent reflected, “1. It is very difficult to keep up with all the policies and procedures and knowledge required to provide excellent assistance for all the services offered at the desk. 2. Many staff are uncertain what procedures they are authorized to perform or who is authorized to perform them. 3. There are some tasks that staff are not authorized to perform, but that students are. This is awkward and frustrating for some staff.”

Inadequate Answers to Reference and Complex Circulation Questions

Both reference and circulation staff found it overwhelming to competently learn to handle all transactions. We discovered that many students, despite training, often did not perform adequate reference interviews and did not have the skills to uncover the complexity of some reference questions. Conversely, reference staff had trouble remembering the steps in complex circulation procedures that they did not perform on a regular basis. A comment from the assessment survey explained, “those benefits create drawbacks because of the lack of quality of reference service provided from well-meaning people who may not know the answers to the multitude of questions they receive.”

Poor Logistics

Because we consolidated at the former circulation desk, we were behind a large wall-like structure that separated staff from patrons and was not designed for easy egress. Although it had been our service ethic to go with the patron to a computer to help them or to the stacks to show them how to find books, it became very difficult to continue that mode of service. It took about fifteen seconds to get out from behind the desk to the patron side, during which time the staff person was out of sight of the patron. This amount of time seems very long to a patron waiting for help. We used a video of a reference transaction to illustrate this point. One of the comments from the student focus group stated, “I think I used this more [the former reference desk] because they were out with us kind of as opposed to that wall. It’s like a long separation. I’m in architecture so I care about how it’s designed, but when it was stuck out there with us it felt a part of us and it was less intrusive, I guess, to go talk to them.”

At the former reference desk, our side-by-side set-up allowed us to work with the patron while the patron had control of the computer and could learn the process as we helped them. We no longer had dedicated reference computers at the consolidated desk, and were often unable to find a computer in our busy InfoCommons to sit at with the patron. Even for short transactions, the depth of the desk (almost four feet) made it extremely awkward to swivel the desk computers to show the patron. A survey comment noted, “patrons who have extensive (or even moderate) needs may look at the desk configuration and infer that we are not interested in providing such assistance. The size of the counter and the lack of monitors that face the patron side of the counter convey the message that the counter is for quick assistance. They may conclude that we do not offer extensive one-on-one instruction or consultation.” Another stated, “[we] lose many teachable moments during reference transactions, it becomes much easier (and at times

necessary) to just give patrons information, like a book's call number, instead of showing them how to get the information for themselves." Our inability to provide our former quality of patron service may help explain our drop in reference statistics. As shown in [figure 2](#), the number of in-person transactions at Hale Library's Help Desk decreased from 10,153 between Sept. 1, 2008 and April 30, 2009 (pre consolidation) to 7,129 between Sept. 1, 2009 and April 30, 2010 (post-consolidation). This was a drop of nearly 30%. Although this was only one year of data, the dramatic drop in reference questions, combined with the overwhelmingly negative feedback from the survey, indicated that we had not yet arrived at the ideal solution and the configuration of the desk needed further revisions.

Lack of Reference Service in Other Locations

Hale Library is very large, with the main part of its collection spread over four floors. Before consolidation, we had multiple service points on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd floors. Following the consolidation, the only service point was on the 2nd floor, making it difficult for patrons to get assistance in the rest of the library unless they could find an available computer to send an IM question to staff. One student in our focus group noted, "since you have 3 stories here [we actually have 5], if you are on the 3rd story you don't want to come down here." And in our staff survey, we learned: "As a patron, the consolidated help desk is more frustrating than it is a benefit. As a patron, it is more helpful when I need help with Gov Docs to have someone on the 3rd floor. Instead I have to go to the 2nd floor ask for help, they call someone to meet me on the 3rd floor, then I have to go back to the 2nd floor to check out the item."

CREATING OUR SOLUTION

After assessing the consolidated desk and confirming the benefits and drawbacks of its configuration, a task force was created to propose a new desk arrangement. It was very important to us that we not lose the many benefits of our collaboration, while at the same time being able to return to our former level of excellent customer service. The task force met to create new solutions, with the constraints that it would be a temporary, trial solution not involving any construction.

The plan proposed by the committee retained the consolidated desk in its current location, with students and staff still performing circulation, reserves, and interlibrary loan services at the desk. In addition, the plan called for the creation of a small reference station directly in front and to the side of the consolidated desk. This plan was approved by KSUL administration and then implemented in August 2010. The reference station was created using pre-existing tables, a podium that we borrowed from our security staff, and computers that we still had from the former reference desk (see [figure 3](#) for a photograph of the setup). The reference station is staffed with one or two staff, depending on the time of day. The table allows for sit-down, side-by-side reference, while the podium allows reference staff to be at eye-level with approaching patrons, and is more welcoming than the large consolidated desk. The reference staff are out from behind the big desk and are able to easily see and greet approaching patrons. Because this station is right next to the consolidated desk, consultation between reference and circulation staff is easy; at the same time, as reference staff are not trapped behind the big desk, they can easily

move around to help patrons. The plan preserved the benefits of circulation and reference staff working in close proximity to each other.

The problem of lack of staff on other floors was addressed in several ways. A phone was installed in the third floor microforms area that allows patrons to call the reference desk directly. In addition, more advertising for our IM and text messaging reference services was created. These solutions made it easier for patrons to get assistance on other floors of the library.

ASSESSING THE NEW DESK CONFIGURATION

The report submitted by the consolidated desk assessment task force specified that the partially de-consolidated desk would be used for approximately one year and that assessment efforts would continue. We assessed the new desk arrangement in several ways:

LibQUAL+ Survey

In April 2011 (approximately eight months after the partial deconsolidation), KSUL sent e-mails to all K-State faculty and graduate students inviting them to take ARL's LibQual Lite survey. The Libraries also posted a link to the survey on its home page. More than 2200 surveys were completed. Each respondent answered several demographic questions, one of which asked which of K-State's six libraries he or she uses most frequently. Each respondent then responded to a series of items addressing perceptions of service quality, information control, and library space.

KSUL's Service Quality Librarian presented the Undergraduate and Community Services Department with a customized analysis showing data only from respondents who indicated that Hale Library is the library they use most often. Nine items from the survey were statements related to service quality. Although none of these specifically mentioned the Library Help Desk, the fact that the Library Help Desk is one of only two service desks in Hale Library makes it likely that many of the respondents were envisioning interactions with the Library Help Desk when they responded. For these items, respondents were asked to use a 1 (low) to 9 (high) scale to indicate the minimum level of service they would find acceptable, the level of service they want, and the level they believe the library currently provides. On six of the items the gap between the perceived level of service and the level they want was quite narrow (less than 0.3). For the remaining three items, the gap was between 0.3 and 0.4. Overall these responses suggest that the Library Help Desk is providing service very close to the level our patrons desire.

Staff Survey

To gain further insight into perceptions of the partially de-consolidated help desk, we administered a short survey containing five short-answer questions to all one hundred and ten members of KSUL's staff in August 2011, one year after the partial deconsolidation. Four of the five questions asked staff to indicate what benefits and challenges the new desk setup has for staff who work at the new desk and for patrons. The fifth question asked individuals who worked at both setups to compare the two.

Thirty-two individuals (29%) completed the survey. Collectively, the respondents identified more distinct challenges (twelve) than distinct benefits (five) for staff who work the desk. The vast majority of the mentioned disadvantages referred to physical problems with the furniture and space layout. These included: lack of work space at the podium, exposure of cords, necessity to set-up laptops each morning, lack of convenient access to the phone from the podium, difficulty helping patrons on a computer away from the podium, the access service desk being too wide to work with patrons, and lack of comfortable seating. The remaining disadvantages were that it is too easy to get distracted by conversations with nearby staff and that separation of services can be frustrating for evening and weekend reference staff because they are not cross-trained on circulation. The majority of the benefits focused on the proximity of access and reference services. These benefits included: ease of consulting with other staff, ease of referrals between access services and reference, and the ability to learn by overhearing transactions at the other desk. The other benefits mentioned were: it is easy to help patrons, and reference and access are recognized as having distinct needs.

With regard to patrons, the staff respondents identified the same number of benefits and disadvantages: six of each. The disadvantages were: patrons do not know which desk to go to for which type of need; the podium is imposing, there is insufficient space for patrons to work with staff, there are too many cross referrals between reference and access services, and there is no help on other floors. The mentioned benefits were that it is easy to know where to go to get help, reference staff can work for extended periods of time with patrons, reference help is visible from the entrance, it is clear which desk to approach for which type of help, and collectively the two stations are never abandoned.

Seven individuals responded to the question asking them to compare the consolidated desk to the current set-up. Five of the seven indicated a strong preference for the current set-up. The other two said that they saw advantages and disadvantages to both.

Number of Transactions

The number of transactions at the Library Help Desk rose dramatically after the new reference station was created. As shown in [figure 2](#), the number of in-person transactions at Hale Library's Help Desk increased from 7,129 between Sept. 1, 2009 and April 30, 2010 (consolidation) to 10,153 between Sept. 1, 2010 and April 30, 2011 (partial deconsolidation). This was an increase of nearly 46%.

DISCUSSION

Our transaction data and anecdotal evidence show a sharp decline in number of transactions post-consolidation and a resurgence after the partial deconsolidation. After assessing the partially deconsolidated desk, it seems clear that the decisions to consolidate and then partially deconsolidate were the primary causes of the dramatic changes in our reference statistics. We are aware of no other major environmental changes (e.g., massive enrollment jump at the university, significant changes in the curriculum) that could have explained the changes. We are convinced that the physical space was inadequate to handle the level of demand and dissuaded patrons from asking involved questions. As our patrons are now back to actively using our reference desk, a

story that not many academic libraries can tell, we think that partial deconsolidation was a step in the right direction. Other libraries may find that their physical setup allows for successful complete consolidation. However, it would require a plan for extensive and thorough staff training.

CONCLUSION

Although it did not solve all problems seen with the consolidated desk, the new desk setup was able to address many of the major problems, while maintaining the benefits such as the close proximity with staff from Circulation and Reserves. While this desk was a good solution for us with our unique logistics, it is possible that other libraries with open desk setups and an extensive training period will be able to successfully consolidate all of their services. One important lesson we learned was that even the best of staff intentions cannot overcome inadequate furnishings not specifically designed for reference. Our borrowed podium, while more flexible than the monolithic circulation desk, has turned out to be an imperfect solution. Although we are still in close proximity to each other and are able to consult easily, we have lost some of the benefits of cross-training. In addition, it is important to remember that any major change, no matter how positive, may result in significant staff stress.

Overall, the decision to move reference out of the consolidated desk proved to be the right decision for our libraries, increasing our reference statistics and staff satisfaction. During our next assessment cycle, we plan to use additional surveys and focus groups as well as transaction data to further assess how well our current setup is meeting patrons' needs. As we continue to

create and develop new ways of providing the best service for our patrons, our assessment may begin showing that we need to create a new solution for our desk setup. Possibilities that we have considered exploring include more of a roaming reference model, a desk design with permanent furniture, and working toward a more ADA-compliant design. Having now consolidated and de-consolidated our services, we believe our administration, staff, and patrons will continue to be supportive of our changes in order to reach our goal of doing everything we can to provide the best patron service for Kansas State University.

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Figure 1



Hale Library's Consolidated Help Desk (May 2009 – Aug. 2010)

Figure 2

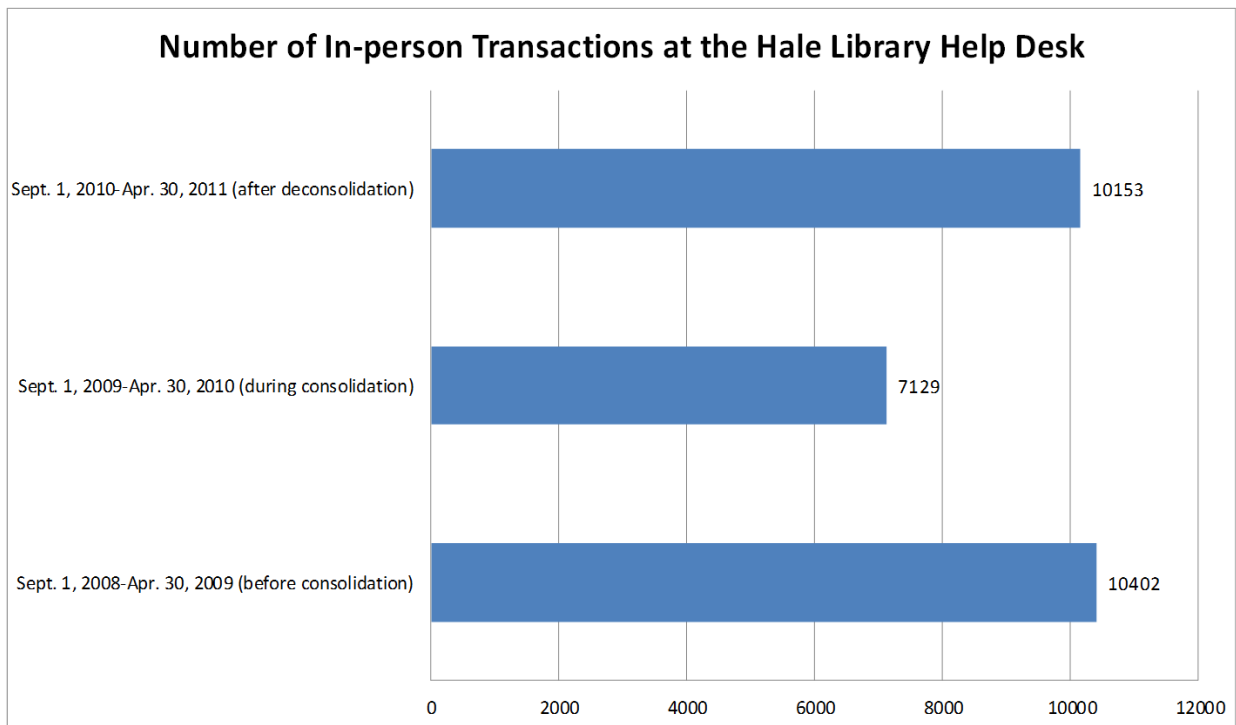


Figure 3



Hale Library's Partially Unconsolidated Help Desk (Aug. 2010 – present)