How less is truly more: Merging library support services

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How Less is Truly More:  
Merging Library Support Services

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Abstract:

In the summer of 2010, to provide a “one stop shop” service point to Woodruff Library patrons, the Circulation, Reference, and Learning Commons (LC) desks merged into the unified Library Service Desk (LSD) under Access Services. Last year, due to organizational changes in the library and IT, and anticipated support needs of the new LC spaces and technologies, Student Digital Life opened a separate LC Technical Support desk. The lessons of the year of the two desks, funding considerations, and the persistent goal to streamline the experience of our patrons, resulted in transitioning the functions of the LC desk to LSD, thus evolving it to new organizational and operational levels.

Key Words:

User Services
Access Services
Technical Support
Merged Desk
How Less is Truly More: Merging Library Support Services

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2010, to provide a “one stop shop” service point to Robert W. Woodruff Library patrons, three separate Circulation, Reference, and Learning Commons desks merged into one unified Library Service Desk (LSD). In 2014, due to organizational changes in the library and IT and the anticipated increased support needs of new spaces and technologies, a separate Learning Commons Technical Support Desk was created. The lessons of the year of the two desks, funding considerations, and the persistent goal to streamline the experience of our patrons resulted in transitioning the functions of the Learning Commons desk back to the LSD, thus evolving the latter to new organizational and operational levels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past two decades, numerous articles covered the subject of the merged desk. Most of these publications addressed the merger of the circulation and reference stations in the academic library. Some of the articles dealt with the merger of entire academic and public libraries and the effect that the merger had on determining the needs for customer-patron transactions.¹

To a significant degree, the existing publications focused on the use of nonprofessionals to provide a service that has traditionally been handled by the professional librarian, such as the Reference desk.² The Woodruff Library, however, sought information on merging the Circulation, Reference, and Learning Commons desks with the goal of offering technical support along with the circulation and reference functions on the combined desk. The rational used by Lehigh University in 1996 to merge its libraries, computing, and telecommunications services into a single organization is still valid today. With access to
databases, the scope of reference work has changed, extending beyond the traditional library resources into the realm of technology.

McKinstry and McCracken reported on combining the Reference desk with the Computing Center in order to serve the needs of those students who choose to work on their papers in the computer lab. As they noted, students do not differentiate as to whether their question is an informational or a technical one; they just know that they need help. According to the authors, the cultural differences and communication between the Reference desk and the Computing Center staff presented the biggest challenges in the process.

**BACKGROUND**

The Robert W. Woodruff Library of today consists of several buildings constructed over 70 years and is connected by bridges, floors, and hallways. The first such building, the Candler Library, opened in 1926 on the campus Quad. Although envisioned as a dedicated library, the building served various functions from the beginning and throughout its history. In 1969, Robert W. Woodruff Library opened with the 10-level stacks tower, moving the library collection out of the Candler building. The next wave of changes came in 1998, when the Woodruff Library expanded with CLAIR (Center for Library and Information Resources), a renovation of existing spaces, and an addition of new ones, which included the construction of a bridge connecting the Woodruff Library and the old Candler Library buildings. In 2003, the newly restored lobby and Matheson Reading Room, now accessed via the bridge, opened in the Candler Library, bringing the Library’s original charm back to life.

During these many changes, the entrance to the Woodruff Library changed as well. When the Woodruff Library originally opened, its entrance was on Level 3, ground level on that side of the building. The Circulation desk was placed on this entrance level, while the Reference Desk was located on Level 2. As the CLAIR addition was built in 1998, the library entrance moved down to Level 2, ground level on the
other side of the building, whereas the Circulation Desk remained on Level 3. This modification created confusion for those library patrons, who would take the elevator down from the stacks tower to Level 2 to exit the building only to find out that they had to go up one floor to check out their materials first. The Reference Desk remained on Level 2, now co-located with a Learning Commons service point created that year. An additional Learning Commons satellite desk that handled certain specific support issues was set up on Level 1.

THE MERGER

In order to eliminate the inconvenience and confusion for the patrons, and, of navigating through multiple desks on multiple library floors, a combined Library Service Desk opened on Level 2 in summer 2010. The LSD provided the following services:

• Reference
• Consultation space for subject librarians
• Learning Commons support (computers, printers, MFPs, GS rooms)
• Directional assistance
• Circulation
• Writing Center tutoring space

LSD continued to staff the Learning Commons satellite desk on level 1 during the peak hours.

Although this combined desk served its function successfully, it was destined to further evolve due to the Library and IT merger into the Libraries and IT Services in 2013. Through this merger, the Woodruff Learning Commons service ownership, formerly a function of the Library Services Division, transitioned to Student Digital Life (SDL)—an IT team, which supported student spaces and technology across
campus. With these changes, LSD continued to maintain the physical spaces and to provide basic technical support in the Learning Commons, escalating support issues to SDL as needed.

**THE UN-MERGER**

With the creation of Libraries and IT Services and SDL taking ownership of the Learning Commons, in the summer of 2013, a task force comprised of the major stakeholders—LSD, SDL, and Library Facilities—was created with the goal of renovating and updating the Library spaces to better serve the changing needs of Emory students. The task force focused on the renovation of the entry floor, Level 2, to create the NextGen Learning Commons. This renovation took place during the summer of 2014.

Traditional clusters of fixed desktops, which physically barred peer interaction, were replaced with rows of computer workspaces capable of accommodating both individual and collaborative work. Old wooden tables and chairs were replaced with modern mobile and comfortable furniture to create an informal Bring Your Own Device environment for both individual and team work. To support students’ use of their personal devices, a robust wireless coverage was complemented with abundant access to power, providing electrical outlets for every seat in the space. The new space featured a number of whiteboard surfaces, wall mounted and mobile, to facilitate students’ creativity and team-based problem solving. Additions of casual and comfortable soft seating invited the students to “land” and chat with friends, blending their academic work and social engagement. One of the conference rooms in the area was converted into a student space that provided highly sought-after presentation practice and web conferencing services in a variety of settings.

Due to the transitioning of the Learning Commons to SDL, as well as the anticipated increased support needs of new spaces and technologies, a separate SDL service point, the Learning Commons Technical
Support (LCTS) desk, replaced the former LSD satellite desk on Level 1 of the library in the fall of 2014. The LCTS desk became primarily responsible for supporting the Learning Commons technology and assumed a new responsibility of maintaining a welcoming environment for library users by cleaning and re-staging the furniture and technology continuously throughout the day. LSD staff continued to support walk-up services on Level 2 and engaged LCTS student staff when the level of support requested at the LSD exceeded LSD support capabilities.

THE RE-MERGER

The evaluation conducted following the academic year of the two-desk service model being in operation showed that statistically, as seen in Figure 1, the numbers did not justify the expense of the two desks. Due to its location on the entrance floor of the Library, as well as the location of the campus’ largest printing hub of seven printers and over 40% of the library’s student computer workstations in close proximity to the desk, the LSD continued to handle most of the technology support issues:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of transaction</th>
<th>Student Digital Life</th>
<th>Library Service Desk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning</td>
<td>12725</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>1859</td>
<td>2231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directional</td>
<td>3130</td>
<td>3251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
<td></td>
<td>2973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation</td>
<td></td>
<td>15204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>17714</td>
<td>23659</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Desk Open Hours             | 88                   | 93                   |
| Avg Students per hour       | 3                    | 2.4                  |
| Avg Trans per hour          | 5                    | 7                    |

[Figure 1: Fiscal Year 2015 (Fall 14/Spring 15) Transactions]
In an attempt to re-evaluate and improve the existing service model, over the course of several months the staff conducted phone interviews with other institutions to establish the best practices and learn from the experience of the teams managing student staff. Institutions contacted included peer libraries and institutions that had presented at recent conferences:

- Perkins Library/ Duke University
- Taylor Family Digital Library/University of Calgary
- Hunt & Hill Libraries/North Carolina State University
- Olin Library/Washington University

The questions presented at these interviews focused on service, training, and student staff management and sought to discern the common features that resulted in successful service. The question list included the following:

- Do you tier your services and support?
- How do you manage referrals?
- How are handoffs managed between tiers?
- Who provides training?
- How is training success evaluated?
- Who manages the student staff?
- Who hires, fires and schedules student staff?
- Who manages and owns the student staff budget?
- What is or is not working well?

Following the analysis of the obtained information and based on the lessons learned during the year of the two desks, the LSD and SDL decided to move forward with an Integrated Service model, bringing
LCTS student staff and support responsibilities to the LSD on Level 2 in the summer of 2015. All LSD students, now including many former LCTS student workers, were trained in all service aspects of the previous two desks. As the merger of the desks took place immediately after the Spring Commencement, those students who worked through the summer had the benefit of learning new skills during a fairly quiet period of time. Those who came back in the fall were given a two-day orientation and then immersed into their new role on the desk. The existing two LSD student coordinators collaborated with the SDL Learning Commons coordinator to train and supervise student staff in all the aspects of the integrated service. Through several meetings, the supervisors worked out the logistics of how the duties would be split.

In terms of financing the student staffing of the new support model, the decision was made that rather than splitting student staffers between the two departments, a portion of the SDL student budget was moved over to the LSD and all students were hired out of LSD budget. The supervisors worked together on creating the questions for job interviews, establishing work policies and procedures, conducting group and individual student training, discussing daily operations of the new service model, and developing strategies on its improvement. The LSD Student Coordinator directly manages student workers’ scheduling, attendance, and desk supervision, and is assisted by the Night & Weekend Supervisor and the SDL Learning Commons Coordinator. The LSD Student Coordinator, assisted by the Night & Weekend Supervisor, is also responsible for training all students on basic circulation and reference operations of the desk. The SDL Learning Commons Coordinator is responsible for student training on all aspects of the Learning Commons technical support and space maintenance, including printers, computer workstations, AV technology, Group Study room reservations, some aspects of personal device support, zoning (described below), and more.

**THE BENEFITS**
For the patrons, the benefits have far outweighed any problems that arose. With the new integrated model, they now have a consistent support experience. Patrons are no longer being sent between two floors and desks for help with, in their mind, one and the same issue. The collaboration between the two library units has also contributed to the quality of user experience as it became easier to present a joint request to library administration for improvements without the necessity to negotiate in terms of each other’s separate “territories.”

Financially, the integration allowed a considerable cost reduction in the student budget. While LCTS desk had scheduled three students at all times due to the frequent space maintenance and for contingency in case someone calls out sick, the LSD, which also had several full time employees working in the area and able to step in when needed, usually staffed one to three students depending on the time of day. Now, having evaluated the support needs and statistics collected during the year of the two desks, the LSD schedules two to three students on the desk each hour, which effectively reduced the student budget formerly needed to maintain LCTS by 60%. The student work time at the desk is now spent more efficiently. Rather than waiting for a patron to come by for assistance between the regular Learning Commons space maintenance, the students are handling circulation and other desk functions. Also, the savings in the student budget gave SDL the necessary funding to staff a service point in the new MediaLab that opened in August 2015.

Another side benefit arose when LCTS vacated Level 1. The space formerly occupied by the desk was given to Student Technology Support (STS) staff that provides free technical support and assistance with various student-owned devices. Prior to the relocation of STS to the Library, the students with such support needs would be sent to an off-site computer center, which was often inconvenient for the student who needed help here and now.

LESSONS LEARNED
After about a month of working on the new integrated service desk, the student workers were surveyed. The survey included the following questions:

- Are you given the support needed to do your job well? Do you know how to refer questions to appropriate staff members? Are reporting lines clear?
- Was your training adequate? Are there areas you need additional training or clarity? LSD students: training on new Learning Commons responsibilities. Former LCTS students: training on LSD responsibilities (Circulation & Reference).
- Have you received any positive or negative feedback from patrons about the merged desk services?
- Is there anything else you’d like to add about the merger? From either the student employee or patron perspective.

Most of the responses were very positive; however, a few issues were pointed out. Some student workers felt it was unclear who they were to report to during certain times of the day; specifically, during the hours of 10 am – 5 pm there were seemingly many people giving orders, which was overwhelming to some. Also overwhelming to some were minor tasks given by different supervisors, which, as the students perceived, did not clearly align with their job description. Some noted a tendency of simple tasks becoming difficult due to the lack of explanation or thorough direction. Comments included:

- I do get confused sometimes on which staff members to ask certain questions
- Anything that comes up is always taught on the job quickly and easily
- I would have like more through training on Pharos (printing) and network connectivity issues
- Zone maintenance wasn’t very clear but corrections have been given so now I know
- Want to know what should be handed off to staff
• It’s just remembering it all that’s difficult

Following up on the survey comments and staff observations, the number of scheduled Student Assistants was increased for those hours when more support was needed. Admittedly, certain times of the day continue to be troublesome with finding enough coverage, primarily the opening 8 am shifts. The mandatory group orientation sessions at the beginning of the semester are followed up with one-on-one training as determined by a supervisor or at the request of the student.

A major concern to the integrated teams was the confusion of students as to who they are to take direction from or report issues to. The staffing model on the LSD has a Desk Supervisor assigned at all times. The team has determined that if other staff see a need that should be addressed, the issue should be brought to the attention of the assigned Desk Supervisor, who would then direct the student employees. Likewise, the students have been encouraged to bring all issues to the Desk Supervisor, who would then determine if the issue needs to be elevated.

The team also adjusted zoning expectations. Since the time of LCTS, the Learning Commons has been divided into three zones. Zone maintenance includes cleaning computer hardware, wiping desk surfaces, erasing whiteboards, resetting the furniture, checking the paper and toner levels and clearing paper jams in the printers, refilling the office supplies and fixing jammed staplers, etc. Also, as LSD student assistants wear uniform purple shirts (another feature adopted from LCTS desk) with the Library logo, they are easily identified and approached by library patrons for assistance while they are out zoning. Originally, each zone was to be maintained every 30 minutes. It has been discovered, however, that during the peak hours a student could go through a zone in five to ten minutes being reluctant to clean around users occupying the tables and computer stations. Listening to students’ feedback and observing the activity levels in the library suggested that zoning every 60 minutes would be optimal.
The Zoning Chart, as seen in Figure 2, was also improved. Originally, each student working the shift had to check off a zone to show who is currently responsible for each zone. This method did not allow for the Desk Supervisor to tell when actual zoning took place and whether it was time to revisit a zone. Thus, the check mark was replaced with the time the zoning was last completed. Now the Desk Supervisor or incoming student can easily tell which zone needs attention next.

At the request of the student workers, zone checkoff sheets have been created outlining all the steps necessary to properly maintain each zone. These sheets have been laminated and are kept by the zoning chart for students’ reference. In order to ensure the required quality of zoning, the SDL Learning Commons Coordinator walks through the zones at different times each day checking on the level of maintenance and following up with the responsible students as needed. Statistically, although the LSD now handles all support issues including those formerly covered by LCTS, the comparison (Figure 3) between Fall 2014 (the year of the two desks) and Fall 2015 semesters did not show an increase in numbers for the integrated service model.
This suggests that many of the transactions counted separately at each of the two desks were in fact duplicate records created when patrons with the same support issues were sent from one location to the other. Additionally, STS, which is now located on Level 1, answers some of the directional and technology support questions. Finally, since LSD students now handle all support issues formerly divided between two desks, they are busier, especially during the peak hours, and thus more prone to omitting a statistical entry of an interaction.

**GOING FORWARD**

Going forward, the library will continue to support the Integrated Service model via a single desk. Currently, a possibility of co-locating LSD with STS is under discussion with the goal of improving the navigation of patrons between the two services. Supervisors will continue to assess the staffing levels to ensure the right number of student staff is scheduled at any given time, as well as to further develop service policies and procedures, and to improve student training.

