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Reference Desk Models at the University of Georgia Libraries: An RSIG Presentation by Kristin Nielsen

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Reported by Sandra E. Riggs

Reference librarians attending conferences often find that some of the most useful information comes from asking colleagues, "How do you manage the reference desk at your library?" At the 2013 GaCOMO conference, the Georgia Library Association (GLA) Reference Services Interest Group (RSIG) took advantage of the diversity of models available at one institution to offer a presentation on reference desk models by Kristin Nielsen, Head of Reference at the University of Georgia (UGA) Libraries.

The University of Georgia Libraries includes four library buildings on the UGA campus in Athens: the Main Library, the Science Library, the Richard B. Russell Jr. Special Collections Libraries Building, and the Miller Learning Center. There are also smaller on-campus libraries, reading rooms, and materials collections.

Ms. Nielsen provided a comparison of reference desk models used at three of the UGA library buildings: Main, Science, and the Miller Learning Center (MLC).

The Main Library collections include: humanities, arts, social sciences, maps, government documents, and circulating media. The Science Library collections include: science, technology, and agriculture. While the Miller Learning Center has a reading collection, it primarily functions as a learning commons with

classrooms, technology lending, and study space.

Reference Services and Trends

UGA Libraries offer many types of reference services, which are designed to meet the unique needs and traffic patterns of each building. They include:

- Face-to-face (FTF) service at reference desks,
- Phone reference at Main and Science Libraries,
- Chat reference based at MLC with backup and selected hours covered by Main and Science Libraries,
- Text reference at Main Library,
- Individual consultations, and
- Office hours.

Main Library Reference Room Until 2012

In-person and phone reference have evened out after years of decline. Chat reference numbers are steadily rising. Text reference has never been heavily used. Individual research conferences have remained steady. The number of classes has remained steady, but the number of students taught has dropped.

Main: Renovations for a Traditional Model

The Main Library reference desk has the most traditional service and staffing model at UGA.

There are a significant number of FTF reference transactions. Main Library reference desk staff answer more FTF (about 20,000/year) and phone (about 5,000/year) questions than Science or MLC, and 60 percent of questions asked are reference questions. There is more use by the general public at Main, heavier use of the print collection, and a wider array of databases used than Science. Circulation desk traffic is also brisker than at Science.

Full-time librarians and one reference paraprofessional staff the Main Library reference desk during the day. Reference librarians from Main and the Miller Learning Center have scheduled shifts; along with one cataloger. Three specially trained student assistants provide coverage for weekend and night shifts.

However, the physical space at the Main Library presented several challenges. The only visible service desk at the library entrance was the security desk. Circulation and reserves were in a recessed section midway down the main hallway. The reference room was at end of the main hallway. Students were using workstations as lab computers as frequently as for library research. The shrinking print

Main Library Services Desk 2012-present

Main Library Reference Desk 2012-present

reference collection meant less need for a designated reference room. This led to a renovation in summer 2012 that moved the security, reference, and circulation desks to the front lobby area. As a result, students entering the building would approach a visually unified service area.

Science: Renovated to Combine and Cross-Train

At the Science Library, quicker transition in the sciences to digital resources meant lower FTF transactions (approximately 6,000 per year) and phone transactions (approximately 400 per year). Approximately 50 percent of questions asked are reference. There is a rising demand for librarians to provide Endnote training. The Science Library has increased emphasis on outreach: office hours, individual consultations, etc.

Like the Main Library, the Science Library had separate areas for circulation and reference. There were also special considerations when thinking of the Science Library as a place. Science is the closest library to newer dorms, recently refurbished dorms, new fraternity houses, and the student athletic center. Like the Main Library, the

challenges of the physical space led to changes and renovations. Science added space for a writing center and a silent think tank. The interior space received updates to the color scheme, furniture, carpet, and signage.

The Science Library combined the service desks but retained separate service points for circulation/reserves and reference questions. Each area cross-trained in the basics: locating items, checking out materials, helping with GIL Express, and printer and workstation troubleshooting.

Science Library Reference Desk Until 2012

The Science Library reference desk is staffed by a wider range of staff including full-time Science Library reference librarians, two Main Library reference librarians, one reference paraprofessional, one Miller Learning Center reference librarian, librarians and full-time staff from the Access Services department, librarians from the Science Collections department, and shared student assistants.

Science Library Circulation & Reserves Desk Until 2012

MLC: Collaboration Beyond Library Units

The Miller Learning Center (MLC) is a collaborative effort of the University Libraries, Enterprise Information Technology Services (EITS), and the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). The MLC building opened in 2003 with the expectation that it would be a popular study spot—it is. It was also expected that in-person reference questions would migrate there—they did not. Most FTF questions are directional or technical. Only 6 percent are reference questions. However, there was substantial growth in chat reference service.

MLC librarians work reference shifts at Main or Science in addition to their time at the MLC help desk, referred to as 3C (central) due to its floor and location. Three other desks on the same floor offer technical help and are staffed by EITS student assistants, who are called EITS student consultants. The other desks include: 3E (east), which provides technology checkout; the Digital Media Lab (DML), which contains specialized audio-visual editing and recording tools; and 3W (west), which provides assistance for a cluster of Mac workstations.

Library staff at 3C are always paired with a student consultant, who focuses on printing, workstation, and directional questions. The MLC librarians and reference paraprofessional monitor chat reference and answer FTF reference questions. Reference librarians from

the Main and Science Libraries choose to take shifts at the MLC. While the Main and Science Libraries monitor chat during some periods, and are able to accept transfers during busy times, almost all chat reference questions are answered by MLC library staff. Over five years, chat statistics grew, then stabilized:

FY 09 2,712
FY 10 3,653
FY 11 3,682
FY 12 6,747* (*put chat widget on library homepage and switched to RefChatter)
FY 13 6,569

Nuts & Bolts

Scheduling in each model is driven by collections and student use. Each building has a designated staff person who is responsible for making up the weekly desk schedules. Student assistants and librarians/staff from other buildings and departments usually have set hours each week. Once the schedule is distributed, it is the responsibility of each individual to make swaps, except in cases of illness or emergency.

Training is tailored to the needs of each location. New full-time hires meet with each subject reference librarian for training and also answer practice questions in areas relevant to the clientele of their building. Chat training is done by the Virtual Reference Coordinator, who is based in the MLC. Additional training occurs as needed, such as circulation cross-training at the Science Library.

Assessment incorporates some standardized gathering of statistics in addition to location specific assessment projects. There is a standard online form for research librarians to record instruction sessions, research conferences, and chat reference. Each location has its own method for recording desk transactions. Main Reference records every question as directional, ready reference, in-depth reference, or printing/copying/tech training. The MLC and Science Library provide Google forms for librarians. At the MLC, the EITS consultants also record statistics on paper during specified sampling weeks. Building coordinators or schedulers can examine hourly and daily usage patterns and make adjustments accordingly.

Science Library Service Desk 2012-present

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