Consulting Detectives: How One Library Deduced the Effectiveness of Its Consultation Area and Services

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Managing multiple service points, including those of external stakeholders, has been a challenge for Albert R. Mann Library at Cornell, given the varying hours of service, lack of visibility and awareness about service points, and the limitations of shared space. In the fall of 2015, after a comprehensive investigative report, the library piloted a new consultation area that brought together several consultation services that had been scattered throughout the library—including library reference, GIS, writing help, and data and statistical services—to help alleviate these issues. Hear how the library used a mixed-methods approach involving surveys, space observations, and transaction data analysis to design a centralized consultation area and measure the effectiveness of the new location and service design. The results have indicated both user and staff satisfaction with the new space, suggested valuable improvements, and impacted our final recommendations for consultation services and eventual plans to transition to a new consultation reference model. This paper will be useful to any library considering its own public service and space redesign.

Introduction and Purpose

In recent years, a trend in academic libraries has been to combine service points in an effort to provide patrons with a "one-stop shopping" experience. The decision to integrate service points is frequently motivated by staffing concerns,[1] a decrease in both circulation statistics and reference interactions,[2] and the desire to create a more seamless user experience.[3] The most successful models seem to be those that attempt a pilot of their new service model prior to full implementation, as well as those libraries that solicit opinions and feedback from staff in order to create a sense of "buy-in" from those who would be most affected by the changes.[4] Many of these attempts have been less than successful, however, due to challenges with the cross-training of students and staff,[5] and the fact that while these libraries often combine reference and circulation staff at a single location, the actual services have not

been fully integrated.[6] With this backdrop in mind, we assessed the service point model at Albert R. Mann Library at Cornell University, consolidated our circulation and printing help desks, and piloted a new consultation area to improve the current model for the benefit of both patrons and staff.

Design and Methodology

Albert R. Mann Library, which serves the colleges of agriculture and life sciences and human ecology at Cornell, had three main service points on its first floor: a large circulation desk that checks out books, course reserves, interlibrary loan items, and a variety of technology and A/V equipment; an information and research help desk by the front entrance to the library that provides reference assistance; and a printing help and poster printing service desk called the Stone Center help desk located between our most active classroom and our public computing area. Over time, the library had also partnered with other university groups, such as our writing center and statistical and data help services, to offer consultations at various stations around the library during specified hours.

Noting the declining numbers of reference transactions, confusion from patrons on where to go for various services, and the need to free up librarian time for ever-increasing outreach, instruction, and liaison endeavors, a task force was appointed to examine library service points and make recommendations regarding consolidation or relocation. The Service Point Task Force was particularly interested in deciding whether and how to consolidate some combination of the three main service points in addition to improving the visibility of the library's internal and external partner consultation services. The task force approached the issue of whether and how best to integrate the various service desks within the library with an assessment plan that included: a literature review; site visits to institutions that had implemented a consolidated reference model; focus groups and interviews with students and staff; student

surveys; and a prototype of the reconfigured space to see what adjustments needed to be made before purchasing any new furniture or technology. The initial literature review and site visits left task force members excited about changes to come and full of ideas about potential improvements.

In February 2014, the library's assessment and communication unit helped facilitate several focus groups with our library users and staff to learn what worked in terms of signage and desk configuration, as well as the issues users encountered when trying to figure out which desk to approach for what service (see Figure 1). Users were asked where they expected to find help with various services (e.g., research help, checking out items, printing a poster, etc.) and gave their feedback on the current configuration, much of which contradicted ideas that the task force had formed and served as a reminder of the importance of understanding user needs before making any changes.

In fall 2014, the task force did quick interviews and surveys to get feedback on patrons' opinions regarding service point signage and terminology. We found that at circulation, if users knew what that term meant (which was not guaranteed even though the majority of our respondents were upperclass or graduate students), they expected to be able to check out materials (especially books; though some knew about laptops, course reserves, study rooms, and other equipment, some were unaware that other items are available) and find or get help with everything (including basic research help, known item searching, directions, and policy questions). Our information and research help desk was clearly a place where respondents expected help with: research papers and projects—not just known item searching but help finding unknown items; starting research and picking databases or resources; thinking about research techniques, particularly searching catalog and databases; and getting personal attention from a librarian or someone who could answer questions about directions and basic library information—call number locations, hours, etc. Respondents were generally confused about the purpose of our Stone Center help desk; they had a vague idea it was a desk for computing, printing and software help, but were not sure. They also conflated our library workshop classroom and our computing center (both confusingly called Stone).

Key findings and recommendations

Key focus group findings:	Key recommendations:
• When patrons know where to find the services they need, separate service points with service-specific workflows best serve both patrons and staff. • There was a general lack of understanding among patrons and student staff about the function of the Information and Research and Stone Center help desks as points for reference and research assistance. • Undergraduate students are not comfortable getting research help at the Information and Research help desk because it is highly visible and in a relatively quiet space, meaning their conversation might be audible to nearby students. • All patron and staff groups identified as important a quickly accessible and highly visible first point-of-contact near the entrance for directional questions and quick reference help.	• Improve signage directing patrons to services, including a list of services available at each desk. • Revise staff training to include an understanding of services provided at all service points. • Move in-depth reference and research services to an area with ample workspace, technology, low barrier seating, and minimal audibility to surrounding areas. • Revise and implement payment procedures for poster printing at the Stone Center help desk. • Merge Stone Center and circulation services at a central point near the technology. • Replace the current Information and Research help desk with a stand-up, simplified desk ("concierge desk") near the library entrance within sight of the circulation desk, staffed during all library hours with highly trained student staff and/or reference assistants.

Findings from Pilot Consultation Area

Armed with this information, in June 2015 the library consolidated the poster printing and circulation desks, cross-trained staff, and put up new, eye-catching signage, which not only improved discoverability of our services but also increased our desk coverage, having only one service desk to manage. In the fall 2015 semester, we repurposed furniture and technology to create a pilot consultation area on the first floor near the library entrance, with workstations for all of the various consultation services housed in the library, as well as informal consultation space with soft seating and mobile LCDs. Throughout the semester, a couple of iPad stands were placed by the entrance and in the back of the consultation area. These displayed a survey that users were encouraged to take before leaving the area (they could also take a card with the link to the survey or were e-mailed later as part of a consultation follow-up). Thirty people completed this survey from October to December 2015. At the end of the semester, all staff (library or external consultants) who worked in the consultation area were also e-mailed a survey asking what worked and what needed to be improved; 12 staff members completed this survey. We also had our student reference assistants use our Suma mobile space assessment tool to track how many people or groups used the consultation area after 6:00 p.m. when the

area became open study space. Finally, we did an analysis of reservations for the consultation area and of entries in our homegrown public services statistics system.

The preliminary survey of staff and users of the new consultation area, as well as space observations, found that the consolidation of service points was an improvement in service. Both patrons and staff found the new area to be comfortable and useful, and the dual screen monitors at tables were more popular than our soft seating. Our lowest rankings were on noise level, signage and discoverability, and privacy (see Figure 2). Besides actual consultation questions, most other questions related to discoverability of the area and consulting services, identifying consultation hours and specific desks, and arranging consultations (see Figure 3). Only a limited number of people throughout the semester (15 people and 14 groups) took advantage of this area for open study after 6:00 p.m., though anecdotally we knew students were using any unoccupied workstations during the day, leading us to believe that there is a demand for this study space, but its availability was not evident enough. Finally, the number of consultations taking place in the area exceeded the number of actual reservations, indicating, along with anecdotal feedback, that the reservation and calendaring system was difficult to use.

This feedback resulted in the following modifications and recommendations for the next iteration of the consultation area:

- More acoustic and visual privacy and noise reduction was needed.
- The space should be more distinct from the rest of the first floor.
- Better technology is necessary—faster desktop computers with dual monitors and remote desktop capabilities; LCDs for screen sharing/ collaborative work should be "plug and play."
- Improved digital signage and discoverability of services (i.e., when consultants are in/out, when area is available for public use) was necessary.
- A simplified calendaring/reservation system would be beneficial to staff.

Consultation Area 2.0

The Service Point Task Force put together a proposal in the spring of 2015 to address each of the key recommendations from our assessment of the pilot space and make improvements to the

layout, technology, and furniture to increase the effectiveness of the services offered in this space.

1. **Acoustic and visual privacy**
   To address these ongoing issues, we have purchased sound-dampening panels that we will make mobile so that they can be moved around the consultation area as necessary to help cut down on visual and acoustic distractions. These panels are designed for high-traffic public spaces, and are made from durable fabric that can absorb up to 95% of echo, reverberation, and mid- to high-frequency sounds. In addition to the acoustic panels, window tinting film on the classroom windows facing the consultation area would provide a greater degree of privacy to patrons in both areas.

2. **Distinct space**
   Using new furniture in a complementary color scheme will help patrons identify the consultation area from the rest of the first floor and will make the space easier for patrons to find when they come to Mann looking for these specific services. The furniture we have selected is durable and versatile, similar in design to much of our furniture but with colors and finishes that set it apart from our other spaces. We also enclosed the space (while still maintaining a level of visibility from other library service points) using shelving for our current periodicals, installed a reading area directly around the consultation area, and removed the busy, noisy public computing area from this part of the first floor. This will not only help make the area more distinctive, but also will help with noise reduction. We are also recommending a collaborative workstation with an LCD for screen-sharing to accommodate larger groups.

3. **Better technology**
   One of the biggest complaints we received from staff working in the consultation area is that the technology is too slow, and that they frequently have problems connecting to their office computers via remote desktop. To help solve this problem in a cost-effective way, we have proposed purchasing thin client computers (lightweight computers purposely built for remoting into a server) with dual monitors running Desktop Everywhere, a service offered by Cornell Information Technologies (CIT) for a monthly fee that allows departments to offer their users a full desktop environment.

This arrangement means the computers will consume less power and have a lower price point. This also allows us to push updates, patches, and software centrally through Cornell Information Technologies (CIT) instead of on each machine, saving staff time and effort. As we have mentioned, we also recommend a mounted LCD in our collaborative workstation with a simplified connection setup for seamless screen sharing to support group work.

4. **Digital signage and discoverability of services**
More consulting services have been added to the consultation area since its pilot in fall 2015, giving us a total of seven different consulting services working out of this area (though we hope to add more in the future). Patrons reported that finding the specific services they were looking for was somewhat difficult, and the consultants requested more prominent signage for their workstations. Rather than having just one display at the entrance, we plan to incorporate digital signage at each of the workstations that would display not only the name of the service, but the hours/availability of the consultants as well. By using tablets and stands at each workstation, with digital signage specific to each service, we believe we can improve the discoverability of these services. We also plan to switch from using a homegrown hours management system to using LibCal, a calendaring and event management platform from Springshare, for managing the hours for consulting services.

5. **Simplified calendaring/reservation system**
Reference librarians have expressed some frustrations with using Outlook for reserving the consultation area workstations. Additionally, the consultants for the external services are not currently able to make reservations for their workstations, so library staff are responsible for making all reservations. Switching to LibCal for managing these reservations, as well as hours management, would lessen the burden on library staff, and would allow us to manage the hours for all the services and workstations in one system. This change would also give us the option of making these workstations reserveable by the general public after 6:00 p.m., when the consultation area is open for use. The Service Point Task Force will continue to work with Mann reference staff and the consultants from

the other services to streamline the calendar/ reservations/ hours management workflows.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

The investigation and improvements to the service points within the library are an excellent example of the use of a mixed methods approach to assessing user needs and spaces/services. However, as with much of the assessment that libraries do, this project was done with a particular budget, timeline, and desired outcome in mind, and a lot of time and effort was spent to collect the necessary data. In future service design changes, more lightweight methods like customer journey maps, quick interviews, and additional methods, such as those from Service Design Tools (http://www.servicedesigntools .org/), will allow us to gather feedback with a lesser investment of time than focus groups or site visits.

Additionally, literature reviews and site visits sparked great ideas but those ideas often did not match the desires of our particular user community. As tempting as it might be to introduce services or spaces because it appears to be a national trend, it is important to remember that no other institution can do the work for your library; each library's user community requirements may be different.

Choosing research methods that will get the answers you need is critical. Our signage surveys and quick interviews on what people thought they could do at each desk and what names they might suggest were somewhat useful in identifying the disconnect between what users expected to do at each service point and what was actually possible; however, beyond that initial identification, users often did not have great suggestions about what the desks should be called and these methods did not help us make any decisions about consolidation. Using mixed methods can help address multiple or complicated research questions; a single approach might not give you the data you need but a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods should give you a more holistic picture of what changes are necessary.

Making changes on a pilot or preliminary basis can help trial a new service or way of doing things without having to invest significant funds before knowing if it will be successful. However, even the promise of temporary changes can be overwhelming if it is a service point that affects a number of staff. Make changes one step at a time, and building buy-in

and momentum with staff who see the success of previous changes can be helpful.

Finally, listening to what the data from multiple mixed methods are telling you can lead to space and service changes that can improve the efficiency and utility of the entire library. The success of our experience with the consultation area is prompting us to look at other changes in services, like the use of reservable consultations and more reservable spaces and equipment in the library, and we will continue to make sure that our patrons' feedback is incorporated in ways that make the library an efficient, personalized experience for all.

Note: for pictures of the new combined circulation and technology desk, consultation area, and proposed consultation update, see our presentation at http://libraryassessment.org/bm~doc/andrews-consulting-detectives.pdf.

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Endnotes

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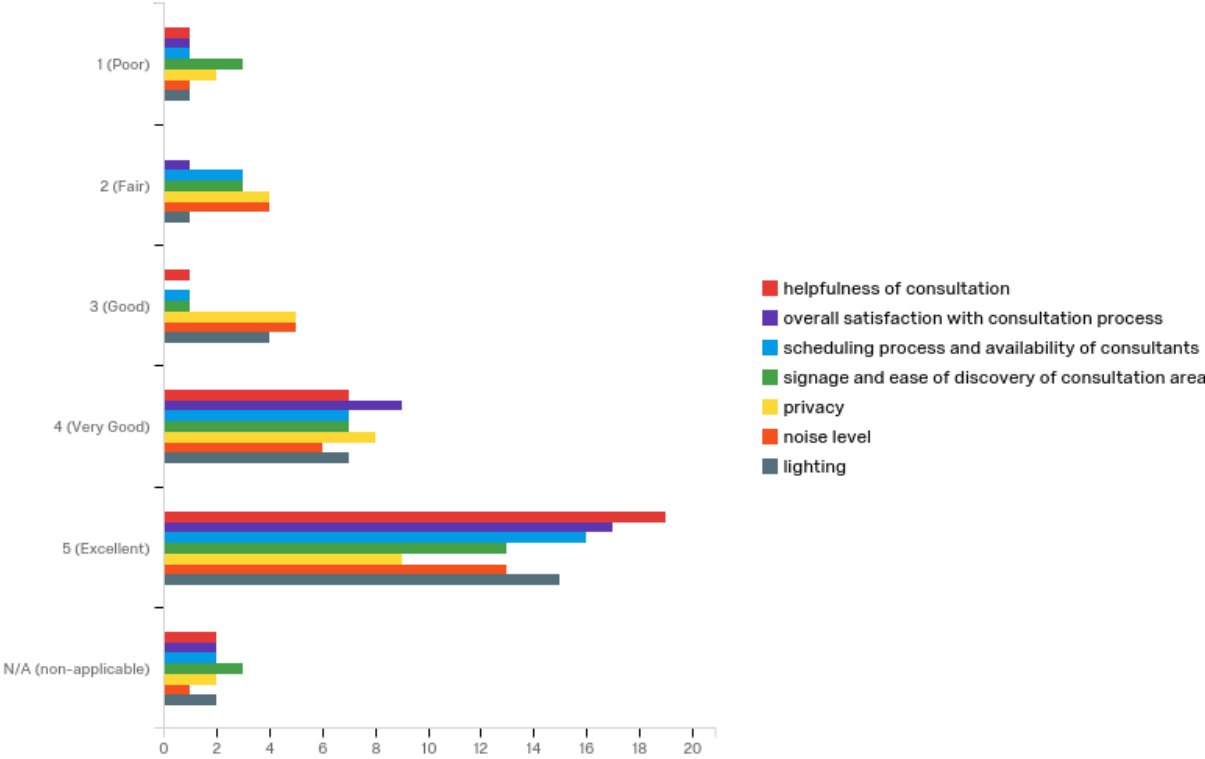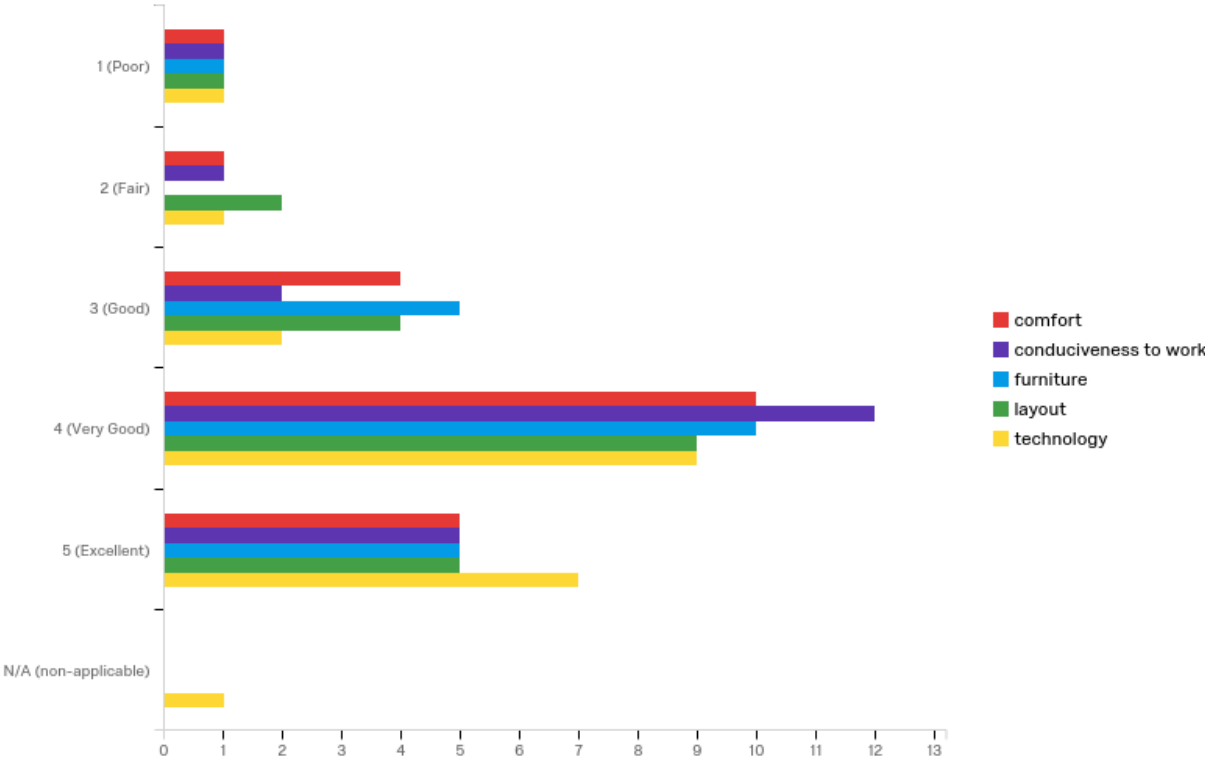
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6. Wang and Henson, "Change," 89–98.

Figure 1: Focus groups

Stakeholder group	Type of interaction	Number of participants
Student staff (UG & GR)	Focus group	9
UG patrons	Focus group	5
GR patrons	Focus group	4
Circulation staff	Structured discussion	12
Reference staff	Structured discussion	7

Figure 2: Rating of Consultation Desks and Experience by Users

Figure 3: Questions about Consultation Area

No. of ?s

Consultation: 40
Directional: 32
Requests/Set Up: 21
Hours: 8
Tech/Admin: 4