

The Hybrid Reference Desk: Changing Strategies for Changing Times

Abstract

Over the past several years, the discussion among librarians regarding the fate of the reference desk has increased in both volume and tempo. The range of opinions has varied, with some advocating its complete banishment, while others counter that the traditional reference interview at the reference desk is valid. This case study highlights some of the wanderings and waypoints of our reference desk journey at Virginia Tech. The library has traversed from a peak of four separate reference desks in the 80's, to the decision in 2000 to consolidate to one reference desk, and then, in 2008, to expand to two reference desks.

Introduction

Google. E-journals. E-books. Blogs. Wikis. Texting. Tweets. And yes, Watson the computer, on Jeopardy! With every digital advance, doomsayers foretell the demise of libraries. And, along with the libraries, the passing of the traditional services they offer. The title of an ACRL presentation states the mindset concisely: "Redesign Your Reference Desk: Get Rid of It!"¹

While the dismantling of the reference desk may fit the needs of some institutions, the University Libraries at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (hereafter Virginia Tech), has chosen a different option. After sojourning through various models, including subject specific reference desks, general reference desks, and tiered reference desks, we have adopted a hybrid approach to reference which maintains traditional subject separated desks while incorporating the innovative communication patterns of our students.

Our solution to the reference desk dilemma was to return to the subject based physical reference desks in order to provide a service point for traditional in person questions. But, staff members at the desk are also tasked with handling chat and text based questions, thus incorporating the new means of communication used by the university community. Chat users are able to select the subject area into which their question falls, and are routed to a staff member at the appropriate desk. Thus, those with questions in the areas of science, engineering, and medicine are routed to the SciTech desk, while the humanities, social sciences, and business questions are routed to staff in those areas.

While traditional reference interactions may be in decline, information consumers still have questions. Although some institutions may choose to get rid of the reference desk, in some cases the hybrid reference desk may be the most effective method to answer user questions.

The history and context of the Virginia Tech Libraries

Virginia Tech is a land grant university with a current enrollment of 30,000+ full time students. Unlike many universities, Virginia Tech did not embrace the branch library model. Other than branches for the Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine and the College of Architecture and Urban Studies, the university has concentrated its collections in one building, Newman Library.

The original Newman Library, a four story structure, was built in 1954, and a six story addition was completed in 1981. In the original 1954 building, reference service was provided by four desks on the four floors of the library: General Reference, Humanities, Social Sciences, and Science. Each subject group was a department within the library, with its own team of librarians. With the completion of the new addition in 1981, the same reference divisions were maintained, with general reference on the 1st floor, social sciences on the 2nd, humanities on the 3rd, and science on the 4th floor (with collections on both the 4th and 5th floors). The 6th floor held tech services and library administration.

The passage of time brought with it decreased staffing and tighter budgets. By 1996 the reference desks had been reduced to two, the humanities/social sciences (on the 2nd floor) and the science (on the 4th). In 2000, a building was constructed adjacent to the library with a bridge connection to the library on the 4th floor level. At that time, the library administration decided to reorganize reference services. The science reference desk on the 4th floor was closed and a directional / information / circulation desk was placed at the new bridge entrance to the library. The two existing groups of librarians (science and social science / humanities) were combined and all were assigned to a general reference desk on the 1st floor of the library. If library users asked subject specific questions beyond the ability of the librarian at the reference desk, they were referred to subject specialists.

In the period between 2000 and 2008, although the reference desk usually remained on the 1st floor, it had several configurations. For most of the time, it was just inside the main entrance of the library. This generated many directional questions from patrons entering the building, but the high traffic flow made it difficult to answer reference questions. To deal with this, at peak traffic times the desk was staffed by both a librarian and a staff member or graduate student. For a while, the reference desk was located behind a “welcome” desk, (an attempt at tiered service), and for one semester the reference desk was relocated to the 2nd floor, (another attempt at tiered service).

In 2006, a new Director of Research and Instructional Services was hired for Newman Library. Upon review of the reference services being offered, she began making plans for the reopening of the science reference desk. Librarians were divided into two teams: BHSS (Business, Humanities, and Social Sciences); and SciTech (Science, Math, Engineering, Agriculture, Medicine). In May of 2008, after an absence of eight years, and in conjunction with a reconfiguration of Newman Library, Virginia Tech again had two fully staffed, subject specific reference desks. The BHSS reference desk was reopened on the 2nd floor, adjacent to a new

entrance to the library. The SciTech reference desk was reopened on the 4th floor of the library, only a few feet from the spot it had been in eight years earlier.

Overview of the reasons for the merger and split of the reference desks

For at least the past fifteen years, since the time the WWW has become a force to be reckoned with, the library profession has been discussing and lamenting the decrease in questions asked at the traditional reference desks. The role of the reference desk in the modern library was debated, with some advocating for its complete abolishment, while others defended its worth.² Sometimes the debate turned personal, and those who desired to retain the traditional desk were ridiculed and characterized as being hopelessly out of date.³ At the very least, most libraries recognized that change was inevitable, and began modifying reference desk services, even if they did not abolish the reference desk. The Virginia Tech libraries opted for modification, merging the humanities/social science desk with the science desk in 2000. The primary reasons for this merger were as follows:

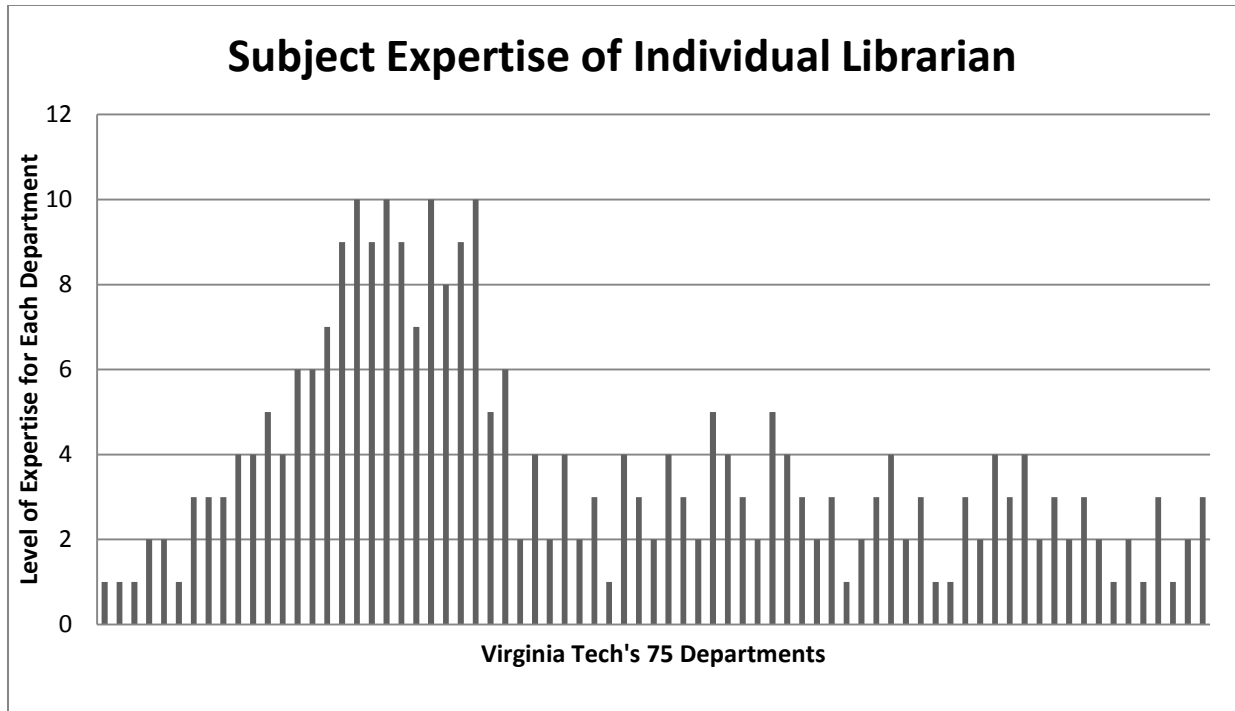
- One stop shopping at a general reference desk would provide more convenient service for patrons, with little need for referrals. Rather than requiring users to go to two different reference desks for their questions, one reference desk would answer all queries. Librarians would maintain their subject specific duties in collection development, instruction, and liaison within assigned academic departments. However, at the reference desk, the expectation was that librarians would shed their subject specific garb, and assume the role of a generalist, able to answer questions in most subject areas.
- Because many of the reference questions asked at the desk were general in nature, such as the location of items in the building, the use of the online catalog, or the verification of a citation, the usefulness of subject specific desks was questioned. Because many questions did not require subject based expertise, why have subject based desks?
- The decreased number of reference questions being asked made it unnecessary and inefficient to have two reference desks. Over the past 15 years there was a significant drop in walk-up reference questions. Although the determination that reference counts had reached an unacceptable level was a subjective one, there was no argument that reference desks were not as busy with walk-ups as they had been in the past.
- The change of traffic patterns within the library caused by the addition of the bridge from the adjacent building provided an opportune time to change the reference services. Any change in library services will be greeted with dismay by at least some of the users. Linking the change in reference services to a change in access to the library, while at the same time substituting a directional desk on the 4th floor in place of the science reference desk, ameliorated the change.

All of the above reasons for merging the desks were valid, at least in part. However, they did not encompass the complete reference picture at Virginia Tech. During the eight years that Newman Library functioned with a single reference desk, it became apparent that equally valid reasons were in existence for returning to the dual desk model. The primary reasons for retiring the general reference desk concept and returning to subject specific desks were eightfold:

- Subject specific desks provided librarians with a smaller subject set to master. With 30,000+ students, and 145 graduate level programs, it was difficult, (some would say impossible), for librarians to be aware of all the basic resources in every subject area which Virginia Tech offered. Although librarians could usually start patrons on a subject based search, there were too many times when nagging doubts were present about the quality of the advice given. The gulf between music and mechanics, between physics and philosophy, and between forestry and Freud was too great for many librarians to span. This difficulty was exacerbated by the fact that many librarians were only permitted to work at the reference desk for four hours per week. Such a minimal reference desk load made it difficult to keep up with the myriad of databases offered by the library.
- Returning to the subject specific desks improved morale by allowing librarians to work more closely to their areas of subject expertise. At Virginia Tech the staff in the SciTech area have degrees in geology, engineering, zoology, equine sciences, physics, and agriculture. On the business / social sciences / humanities side, most of the librarians have degrees in their subject areas, and many have advanced subject degrees. It was clear that most of the librarians preferred to work in fields somewhat related to their area of expertise. Enabling them to do this created a significant change in attitudes. Just as the chemistry librarian felt uneasy answering questions about Shakespearean sonnets, so too, the English librarian felt uneasy answering queries in the field of civil engineering. The classic mismatch occurred when the engineering librarian was asked to help a patron find the lyrics to *Animals Crackers in My Soup*. On both sides of the academic spectrum there was a collective sigh of relief when librarians could concentrate on disciplines with which they felt the most comfortable.
- The subject separated desks enhanced the interdisciplinary expertise of the librarians. Most public services librarians at Virginia Tech have vertically integrated job responsibilities, meaning that they cover collection development, instruction, reference, and liaison work for their assigned departments. However, the academic departments within which the librarians work have interactions with other departments on campus. The return to subject based desks has increased the interaction between librarians in similar fields, and thus enhanced their awareness of the broader scope of their assigned subjects. On the SciTech team, this is most clearly illustrated by the librarians involved with the life sciences. This broad category is actually covered by four different librarians working in three different colleges: Agriculture and Life Sciences; Natural Resources and Environment; and, Science. The switch to a subject based team has caused greater awareness between these librarians of the overlap and

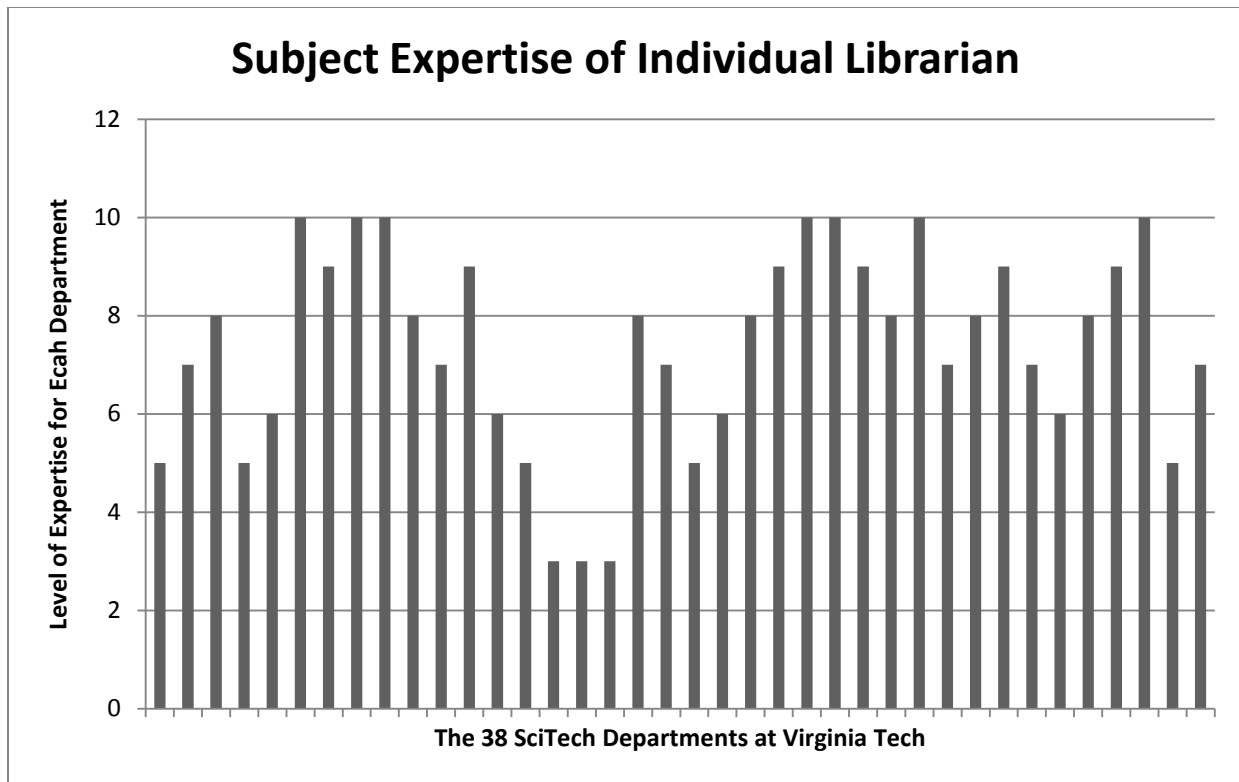
similarity of their departments and the interdisciplinary nature of their research. Thus, by becoming more aware of other related departments, the librarians are able to contextualize their assigned departments within the university structure and thus provide better service.

- Changes in the work flow of librarians over the eight year term of the single general reference desk made separate subject desks more feasible from an efficiency standpoint. When the reference desks were merged in 2000, librarians were still somewhat “connected” to their office, both because of the paper records they used, and because of the computer files housed on their personal computers. While additional tasks could be done at the reference desk, it often entailed moving piles of paper records to the desk. As some have noted^{4 5}, a mountain of paper between the librarian and the user could be off putting. Over time, changes in the digital environment made those paper mountains almost obsolete, and allowed librarians to do many of their tasks at the reference desk workstations. Whether it is pulling up book approval lists, revising documents, or modifying web pages, the convenience of flash drives and networked computing now enables librarians to access much of their individual work at the reference desk computer. While librarians at Virginia Tech still occasionally bring paperwork to the reference desk, it is a fairly rare occurrence. And, because we realize that users can be hesitant to approach librarians who appear to be busy, we have a policy against librarians bringing their laptop to the reference desk. Librarians are free to do whatever work they desire while at the desk, but for the most part it centers on that which can be accessed through the reference desk workstation.
- Although the reasons given above centered primarily on benefits to librarians, the split desks also provide patron benefits. The first of these is the increased likelihood of receiving the highest quality, in depth, subject based assistance at the desk. In the former configuration, the general reference desk was staffed by 18 librarians. Therefore, the probability that a patron would talk to the librarian who was the liaison to a particular department was slightly more than 5%. Furthermore, because each librarian was responsible for knowing a little about every subject area, few librarians received in depth training in areas outside their main areas of expertise. The task of knowing something about everything was difficult enough without the additional burden of knowing a lot about several things. For illustrative purposes only, the subject expertise of an individual librarian at the general reference desk might look like this:



The seventy-five bars represent the departments at Virginia Tech. The total area covered by the bars illustrates the total amount of time that an individual librarian can dedicate to learning about and staying current with the reference resources. Librarians would be expected to allocate most of their time to learning about and staying current with their own subject area, and those most related to it. Thus, they would have in depth knowledge in their assigned fields and good knowledge of related fields, because of the time invested in those areas, but limited knowledge in the majority of the others. With so many subject areas to cover, few librarians felt that there was time to obtain in depth, or even good knowledge in subjects completely outside their assigned or related areas. Thus, at the general reference desk, the chance that patrons would find a librarian who had in depth cross training in a particular subject was small.

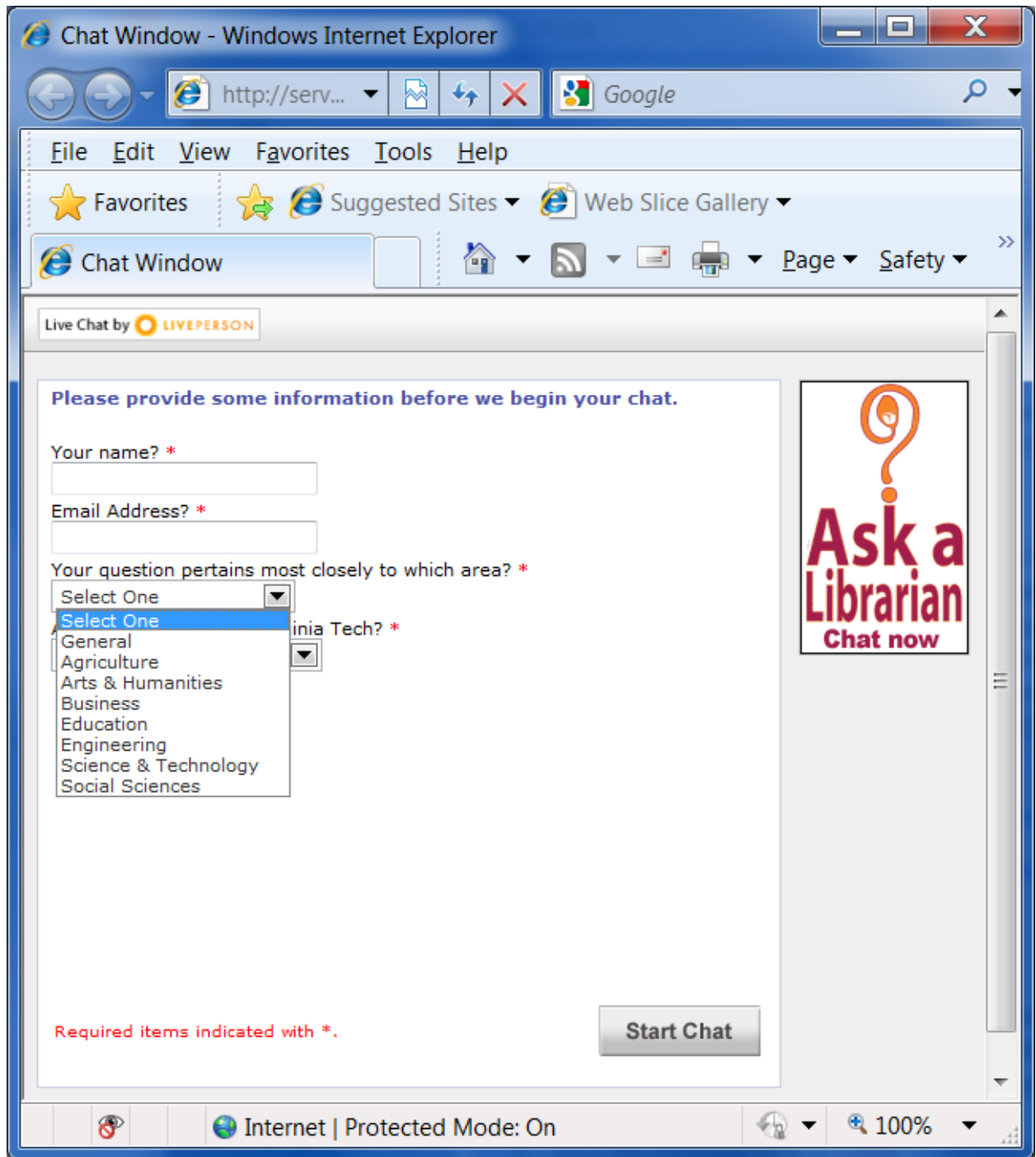
With the separation of the desks, the number of librarians assigned to each desk was decreased by half. Thus, once a user arrived at the correct desk, the chance of meeting the librarian from a specific subject area was doubled, to at least 10%. Also, because the librarians at each desk had fewer subject areas of which to be aware, the time they could spend learning about each one was increased. Consider the following graph:



The 38 bars illustrate the 38 departments within the SciTech areas of Virginia Tech. The total area covered by the bars, illustrating the total time that a librarian can devote to staying current with library resources, is the same as in the previous graph. However, because the number of departments is decreased, librarians are able to dedicate more time to each subject area, and become more proficient in answering questions related to each department or subject. Therefore, when a patron arrives at the subject specific desk, the chances are greater that a librarian with in depth knowledge will be there to assist him or her.

- In the time since the SciTech desk had been removed, four group study rooms had been constructed on the 4th floor, as well as an area for centralized photocopying and printing for the building. In addition, one of the study rooms was equipped with a flat screen monitor and TeamSpot software, and additional public workstation hubs were installed. The 4th floor had become a high traffic area of the library, but there was no service point for users to contact a librarian for assistance. The reestablishment of the SciTech desk on the 4th floor of the library placed a reference point where the students were located.
- Since the time when the reference desks were merged, virtual reference had shown a steady growth via the chat service. While in-person reference questions can be answered in a somewhat leisurely manner, the same is not true in the online mode. Also, although in-person reference questions can be referred to a subject specialist, it is not always easy to do that in

the virtual setting. Users expect a quick response to their online queries. The ability of librarians to do this is most apt to occur when librarians have a manageable group of databases for which they're responsible, and can answer the chat questions based upon their personal knowledge of the subject resources. As illustrated below, the Virginia Tech Libraries has configured the chat service so users select a subject area when they log in.



The chat is then routed to the librarian at the desk that corresponds to that subject area. Agriculture, Engineering, and Science & Technology are routed exclusively to the SciTech Desk, while the Arts & Humanities, Business, Education, and Social Sciences are routed exclusively to the Business, Humanities, and Social Science Desk. The General category of questions is routed to both desks and can be picked up by anyone. If for some reason one of the desks is shut down, there is an override log in which allows the person staffing the lone desk to pick up all chats regardless of subject area. For the normal operating routine, this division of online questions according to subject area has enabled librarians to interact proficiently and quickly with patrons in the subject areas in which they are most comfortable.

- The division of the desks has enabled more targeted training for student workers. Both the SciTech and the BHSS desks have one graduate assistant that staffs the desk alone from 9:00 PM to midnight on Sunday through Thursday. In the past, training the students was extremely difficult. Although it is not yet easy to train the students, it is manageable. By first introducing them to basic resources such as Web of Science, Engineering Village, and ProQuest, and then building on that foundation, we can orient them to the scitech information world.

Looking at the numbers

The above reasons for reinstating the subject specific reference desks are valid. Still, the numbers need to be examined. Has the number of questions decreased so greatly that it trumps any other argument that might be given?

At Virginia Tech, transaction statistics have been collected in various ways over the past several years. Since January of 2009 we have used an online survey form to record both reference and directional interactions. Previous to that time, paper log sheets were used. For the purposes of this paper, statistics from 2002-2003 to 2009-2010 are used. Statistics previous to 2002 are unusable because the directional and reference transactions have sometimes been comingled. Also, previous to 2002 some of the reference points were staffed by circulation personnel, and reference / directional questions were not kept strictly separate from circulation questions. In the years since 2002, even though we have moved from a paper to an online format during that time period, we have been quite consistent in the way transactions are recorded.

The table below shows that there has been a decrease in Total Reference from a peak of 19,440 in 2005 to 13,617 in 2010. This decline in Total Reference is directly parallel to the decline in In-Person Reference transactions over the same period. While In-Person Reference is declining, the LiveRef chat service is remaining steady or showing slow gains. (The dip in LiveRef numbers for 2008 was the result of a glitch in transaction reporting from our chat provider.)

	In-Person Ref	LiveRef	Total Ref	Total Directional
2003	15,929	1,782	17,711	27,780
2004	15,321	2,598	17,919	25,128
2005	16,086	3,354	19,440	24,921
2006	15,018	3,472	18,490	21,136
2007	12,185	2,957	15,142	16,663
2008	11,163	800	11,963	15,872
2009	11,550	3,291	14,841	11,055
2010	9,689	3,928	13,617	6,607

Some would argue that the growth in LiveRef questions, along with the decrease in In-Person questions bolsters the claim that the reference desk is a left over relic from bygone days. However, while the In-Person questions are decreasing, they still tally at more than twice the number of the LiveRef. Users still ask more questions at the reference desk than through virtual chat.

An additional consideration is that as the number of LiveRef questions increases it becomes more important to provide prompt, high quality responses. Virginia Tech has always scheduled LiveRef coverage with librarians, just as it schedules reference desk coverage. If a librarian is required to dedicate scheduled time for LiveRef, it seems more efficient to schedule that time at a physical reference desk where in-person reference questions can also be answered.

Of tangential interest is the decrease in Directional queries shown in the above table. While Total Reference questions for 2010 are at about 70% of their peak in 2005, Directional questions for 2010 are at only 24% of their 2003 levels. This decrease in Directional questions is an excellent development. Improved signage and a more open configuration have made the library more user friendly.

The number of reference questions asked at the SciTech desk location indicate that it is a definite success. The SciTech desk opened in May of 2008, near the end of the statistical year.

	SciTech Ref	Other Ref	Total In-Person
2003	0	15,929	15,929
2004	0	15,321	15,321
2005	0	16,086	16,086
2006	0	15,018	15,018
2007	0	12,185	12,185
2008	338	10,825	11,163
2009	3,516	8,034	11,550
2010	3,333	6,356	9,689

While reference questions asked at Other Ref service points in the library decreased during the last reporting year, questions at SciTech stayed relatively level.

What is the future of the reference desks at Virginia Tech?

As the physicist Niels Bohr remarked, “Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future.”

With regard to the reference desks at Virginia Tech, the task of prediction is not “very difficult”, but closer to the impossible. The benefits of better service for the users combined with better morale for librarians seem to bode well for subject specific desks in the near future. Reference texting will begin during the spring semester, but it is unclear what effect that will have, if any, on current reference statistics. Queries may simply change from one format to another, without any increase, or there may be a jump in questions as the library taps into a new pool of users. As the library strives to become the place on campus for students to gather and work on group projects, will reference desk queries increase? Or, will the increased number of online resources lead to a decreased number of library visits? These and other questions remain to be answered in the years ahead.

Conclusion

Virginia Tech has had multiple reference desk configurations over the past decades. While the general trend has been a reduction in reference points, the consensus among public service librarians at Virginia Tech is that it is possible to over consolidate. When this occurs, librarians are stretched over too many subject areas and thrust into disciplines in which they have little or no expertise, resulting in a decrease in the quality of reference service. While a smaller university, or one in which the subject matter is more uniform, might be able to provide quality reference service with one reference desk, Virginia Tech found it impossible to do. The present configuration, consisting of two subject based reference areas, seems to be the ideal model for our situation.

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