

Access Services

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Access Services

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SURVEY RESULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In 1991, SPEC Kit 179 *Access Services: Organization and Management* documented the emergence of a new trend in ARL member libraries. Over the course of a decade, a variety of services related to providing access to library resources were being brought under one administrative umbrella. That department was typically called "Circulation," though a growing number of libraries began to use the term "Access Services."

In the spring of 2005, this follow-up survey was conducted with the intent of tracking developments and trends in access services since 1995. Seventy-seven of the 123 ARL member libraries (63%) responded to the survey, indicating an ongoing interest in both the topic of access services and the functions of access services departments. The survey results presented here also show a steady evolution in department name from circulation to access services and an increasing relevance of this department's functions to library users.

Background

All but three of the seventy-seven libraries responding to the current survey have a discreet department that has primary responsibility for circulation and other activities related to accessing collections. Sixty-three of these departments have either the word "circulation" or "access" in their name. The decade between 1995 and 2005 saw a marked decrease in the number of departments identified solely as "Circulation," though: 39% of

the respondents used that name in 1995 compared to only 14% in 2005. The survey responses indicate that at least eight libraries changed the department name to "Access Services" in each five-year period between 1991 and 2005; the single largest increase was during the period 1996 to 2000, when fifteen institutions changed names. In addition to the increasingly popular "Access Services," other names for these departments include "Borrower Services," "Collection Services," and "Resource Support Services."

Changes in Department Activities

While there is no single prototype for the range of services provided by these departments, there is a set of five services that has remained core under the circulation/access umbrella from 1991 to 1995 to 2005: circulation; stacks maintenance and shelving; billing; entry/exit control; and reserve services, both print and electronic. A smaller but consistent number of circulation/access services departments have also had responsibility for retrieval from off-site shelving, study-carrel registration, and library security since 1995.

Between 1995 and 2005, a growing number of circulation/access services departments absorbed other traditional library units and took on responsibility for new services. Some of these changes, such as the increase in circulation/access services departments that have responsibility for current periodicals (+19%), microforms (+28%), the information desk (+38%), and interlibrary loan (+39%)

are likely the result of organizational restructuring. The increase in the number of these departments offering on-campus document delivery (+100%), circulation of laptops (+200%), and electronic reserves (+269%) is certainly attributable to the wider adoption of new services made possible, in part, by new technology. It also indicates that circulation/access services departments are responding to the demands of students and faculty in the “we want it wherever we are” environment and that libraries have become more service oriented as a whole.

In addition to these activities, a number of respondents reported an array of other offerings such as services for users with disabilities, catalog maintenance, computer lab maintenance, shipping and receiving, copyright clearance, in-house printing, and copy card sales, to name a few. Only a handful of respondents reported handing off an activity to another department in the past ten years; these include small declines in the number of circulation/access services departments that now have responsibility for entry/exit control, study-carrel registration, photocopy services, preservation, lockers, and distance learning.

As units were combined and services added, service points were consolidated. Forty-two respondents reported that multiple services were offered from 55 separate service desks in 1995. These were most often either the former circulation desk, reserves desk, or reserves/current periodicals desk. Fifty-four respondents reported that there were 81 consolidated service points by 2005. Between 1995 and 2005, eight respondents reported that single-service desks merged to form multi-service desks and at least twelve others reported that brand new multi-service desks were created. At eight of the responding libraries multi-service desks split to provide different combinations of services; in two cases some services left the access services department. Thirty-six combined desks added services such as interlibrary loan/document delivery, media, laptop circulation, and other responsibilities; only three dropped any services. Service-desk of-

ferings remained the same from 1995 to 2005 at nineteen libraries.

On average, staffed service-desk hours increased across the board between 1995 and 2005. At most of the responding libraries any increase (or decrease) was just a few hours per week. The most dramatic increases were reported by a handful of libraries that have combined multiple services at one desk and staffed it all (or most of) the hours the building is open. For example, one library increased service-desk hours from 82 per week to 160 per week. Other large jumps were from 101 to 133, 102 to 154, 105 to 133, and 107 to 146 hours per week.

Automation has had a significant impact on the staff workflow in circulation/access services departments over the past decade. With the exception of entry/exit control and accounting, which were fairly well automated by 1995, and stacks maintenance, which remains fairly unautomated, survey respondents reported increases of between 100% and over 600% in the automation of every staff activity. The substantial increase in the automation of some processes, such as notices, billing, bindery, and the submission and management of interlibrary loan requests (109%, 125%, 135%, and 158% respectively), is probably a reflection of the normal rate of development and adoption of suitable software. The jump in automation of offsite storage retrieval requests (420%), on the other hand, is more likely attributable to the increase in the number of libraries that rely on storage facilities to manage overcrowded stacks and maintain access to low-use items than it is to the fact that the requests themselves are automated.

Between 1995 and 2005, library users also benefited from an increase in automation. The majority of respondents now offer online “do-it-yourself” renewals, ILL requesting, storage-retrieval requesting, and document delivery. Forty-one percent offer self-service circulation. Library users may also make multimedia reservations, register for study carrels, submit materials for reserves, and place holds and recalls online.

Staffing and Reporting Relationships

Though about half of the respondents reported that the supervisor of the circulation/access services department has a title of Head of Access Services or Head of Circulation Services, the specific titles vary widely. Nonetheless, the titles and the reporting relationships indicate that these individuals hold high-level management positions. Two-thirds report to an assistant or associate dean or director in their libraries; 21% report to a library dean or director; 13% report to the head of a division or a branch library.

Roughly equal numbers of respondents reported that the number of positions in the circulation/access services department increased, decreased, and stayed the same between 1995 and 2005. Slightly more respondents reported an increase in the number of student assistants and a decrease in the number of support staff. Librarian and other professional positions were more likely to stay the same. On average, there are two librarians and two and a half other professionals in each department. The bulk of the department is made up of support staff and student assistants, about 23 of each.

As the functions associated with circulation/access services departments have increased, become more automated, and arguably more complex, so has the need for staff to become versed in a greater variety of functions. With the steady-state or decline in staffing, the amount of cross-training of staff has increased: 82% of respondents indicated that staff were trained to perform at least two functions in 2005, as compared with only 34% in 1995. Similarly, the survey results show a decrease in specialization from 1995 (79%) to 2005 (36%). At the same time, the respondents' comments make clear that even today some staff focus on specialized areas of expertise while others are generalists.

Budget

Half of the circulation/access services departments have a distinct operating budget and half do not. All but one of the operating budgets covers stu-

dent wages. The majority of these budgets include funds for salaries, office supplies and equipment, and printing or copying. Other budget categories include equipment rental and repair, telecommunications, postage, travel and training support, and contracts. All but a few of the department heads manage the wage budget and many manage supplies. Only about a quarter manage equipment, personnel, or other budget categories. Budgets range from \$66,000 to \$4,000,000 with an average of \$668,220. There seems to be a correlation between the very highest budget levels and the number of support staff, but that does not hold true for the lower budgets.

Service Evaluation

The responding libraries use a variety of techniques to evaluate the effectiveness of circulation and access services. Almost all of them track the number of circulation transactions and most track the use of other services. Seventy percent of respondents have used the LibQUAL+™ survey to solicit user satisfaction feedback on these services. Other techniques for gathering user feedback include focus groups, interviews of both internal and external users, comment cards and suggestion boxes, and usability studies, among others.

Conclusion

The 1991 SPEC survey defined access services as the department responsible for "physical access to library collections." The operation of current access services departments has evolved, transforming existing services and adding new ones—primarily due to technological innovations and to the priority placed on meeting user demand for delivery of services and resources. While still the locus for physical access to print collections (circulation, stacks and storage maintenance, reserves), access services is expanding its mission to include not only *access* to physical and electronic collections, but also *delivery* of these resources, regardless of whether they are licensed, or held locally, remotely,

or consortially. This trend was brought about partly by the evolving nature of information storage and the access-vs-ownership library model, and partly by the advances in technology that streamlined the requesting process for users and facilitated request management by staff.

Access services departments have both responded to and transformed the ways users identify, request, and receive resources remotely and have also maintained the competing priority of assisting users in the library. Combining service points, expanding hours of service, and cross-training staff have enabled access services departments

to broaden the array of services provided, and of physical items circulated, such as videos and laptop computers.

As emerging technology and the trend toward automation continues to have an impact on how users interact with the library, and on the library's ability to provide access to resources, access services departments will continue to evolve by combining service points and previously discreet departments; adjusting hours of service and staffing; and constantly revising procedures to better serve users.