

A Close Look in the Mirror: Evaluating the Implementation Fidelity of a Consolidated Service Point at a Research Library

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This paper describes an evaluation of the implementation of a consolidated service point and model in an academic library at Virginia Commonwealth University. In August of 2013, James Branch Cabell Library adopted a new model for providing research assistance, circulation, and media services in which all services were provided from one consolidated service point. After one semester, an evaluation team set out to analyze the “fidelity of the implementation”: the extent to which what was actually implemented is what was envisioned in the plan for new service model. Did the implementation mirror the model as it had been designed? The evaluation was formative in nature, focused on improving the quality of the implementation and making refinements to the service model as necessary. We explain the methods, results, and subsequent recommendations that emerged from the evaluation. Additionally, we explicate the importance of assessing the quality of implementation of library services and programs.



Introduction: Assessing Implementation Fidelity

This paper describes a highly useful model for formative evaluation that is infrequently mentioned in library literature. Program process and program implementation evaluations place equal emphasis on the importance of assessing a program’s process as well as its product to fully understand its value and how it might be improved.¹ In the early stages of a program’s life cycle, it is particularly useful to evaluate the extent to which the implementation of the service mirrors its original design.

Assessing implementation fidelity is an often overlooked step in the process of evaluating services and programs. While user feedback is important, it does not provide a full picture of services offered and how they might be improved. Assessing implementation fidelity allows us to identify implementation shortcomings or inconsistencies, which serves as a useful complement to user feedback and provides a clear path for improvement of services. While user feedback is crucial, focusing first on whether or not the model was implemented as intended helps discern between implementation problems and problems with

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the model itself (an ‘implementation failure’ versus a ‘theory failure’). The importance of this distinction cannot be overstated as libraries refine, transform, and in some cases, eliminate services. In an age of high accountability to stakeholders, it is increasingly important for libraries to possess deep understanding of our services so that we can thoughtfully leverage user feedback in concert with our own knowledge of the complexity of our offerings.

Background

In August of 2013, the library adopted a new model for providing research assistance, circulation, and media services in which all services were provided from one consolidated service point. The new service point—referred to as ‘the Desk’—required a holistic revision to the library’s service model to ensure that questions of all types and levels of complexity could either be handled at the Desk, or referred to the appropriate person or department. While the Desk itself is staffed exclusively by paraprofessional staff (who had previously worked in reference, circulation, and media/reserves), librarians and other departments throughout the library are an important part of the service model and are available “on call” for a set number of hours per week to handle more complex questions immediately. During hours in which librarians are not on call, Desk staff refer patrons to librarians or other departments for follow-up via email or a consultation. Patron questions of all types (not just those designated as ‘reference’) are categorized in three levels based on a continuum of complexity, time required, and effort expended.

Several factors contributed to the decision to implement a consolidated service point at Cabell Library. First and foremost, the goal was to better serve patron needs by creating a streamlined entry point to most services in the library. Library administrators, librarians, and front-line staff were concerned about the ‘ping-pong effect’ that library users sometimes experienced as they were directed to multiple desks to complete a single transaction. It remained unknown whether or not users actually followed through with

going to the recommended service points, which was also a point of concern.

Another reason for moving to the new service model was the shift of librarian focus away from the reference desk and towards outreach instead. Academic libraries across the country, including VCU, have seen a decline in reference desk transactions over the past two decades.² Simultaneously, librarians have assumed a more proactive, engaged role in providing research assistance and teaching research and information literacy skills than in the past.³ While librarians therefore previously spent a notable amount of time at research assistance/reference desks, waiting for students and faculty to come ask questions, they’re now spending more time providing in-depth research consultations, teaching classes, and collaborating with faculty to develop their curricula. Both trends—declining desk statistics and the changing roles of librarians—have resulted in the library community’s interest in ‘freeing’ librarians from the reference desk so that they may focus on expanding these robust services for students and faculty.⁴ These national trends are consistent with what has happened at Cabell Library in recent decades.

In response to these trends and concerns, the management team developed a new model for the provision of research assistance, circulation, reserves, and access to media collections from a consolidated service point. The new service point—‘the Desk’—opened on August 1, 2013, after approximately four months of planning.

The New Service Model

The new service model consists of three levels of service, each of which is designed to answer questions of varying degrees of complexity and time required. Each level is also characterized by the location, immediacy, and person/people best equipped to answer each question (figure 1). The model was developed to give staff and librarians heuristics for categorizing questions in order to best determine how and by whom they should be answered. The complexity of each question helps Desk staff determine the man-

ner in which a question should be answered, and by whom. When staff determine that a particular question should be answered by a librarian or by someone in another library department, they notify the scheduled librarian “on call” or refer the question using an online form. This model was influenced by tiered reference models described in the literature, as first by Brandeis University librarian Virginia Massey-Burzio in 1992⁵ as well as the READ Scale.⁶

The depth of service at each level can be characterized by imagining a continuum of time, expertise,

and effort expended, with Level 1 at the lowest end of that continuum, and Level 3 at the highest (figure 2).

Staff at the Desk can request that an on-call librarian come speak with a patron for a one-on-one consultation at any time during our staffed on-call hours by using our dual-purpose online form. This dynamic form allows staff to easily see who is available on call, and to send a chat request for them to come in person to the Desk to speak with the patron. Outside of on-call hours (which total approximately 27 hours per week), Desk staff can also use this form to submit a consultation request on the patron’s behalf, giving a short synopsis of the research need, and directing it to a specific librarian or department, by subject/topic, or when in doubt, to the library’s general information e-mail account (where it will be forwarded as appropriate). The form generates an e-mail both to the patron and to the matched librarian/department, prompting the librarian to contact the patron to schedule a consultation or to provide assistance through some other medium.

Evaluation Questions

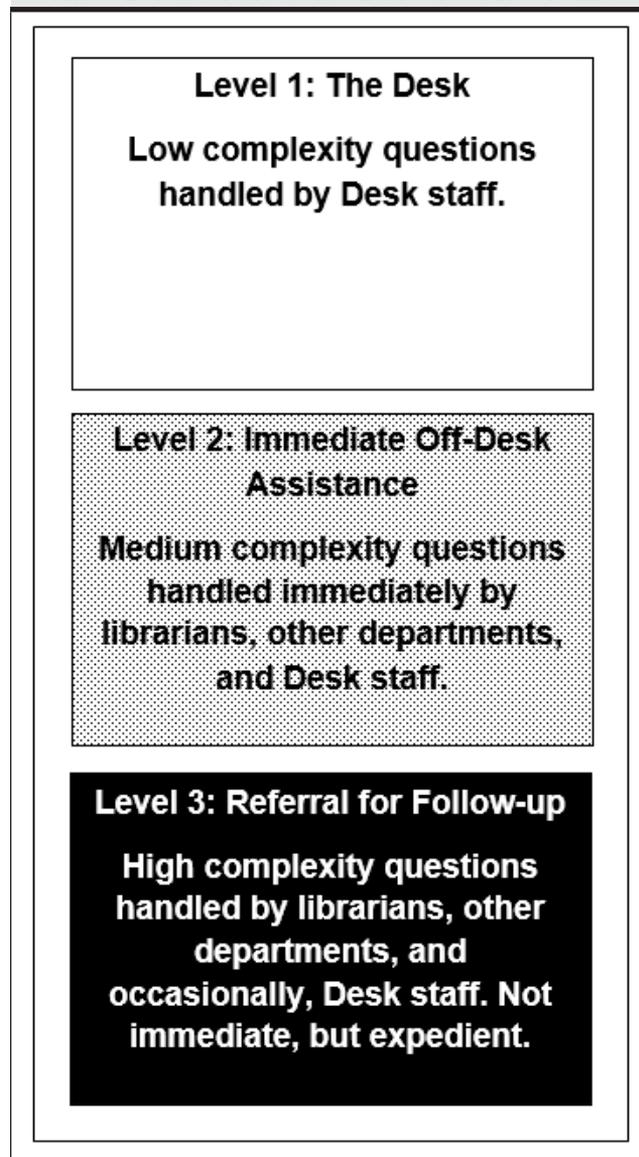
The purpose of this evaluation was to determine whether or not the implementation of the new service model is what was intended when it was designed, with an eye toward improving the fidelity with which the model is being implemented. We intended to tease out, when possible, potential reasons for discrepancies in the theoretical service model versus the practical implementation and offer a list of recommendations to the service model’s management team to reconcile differences.

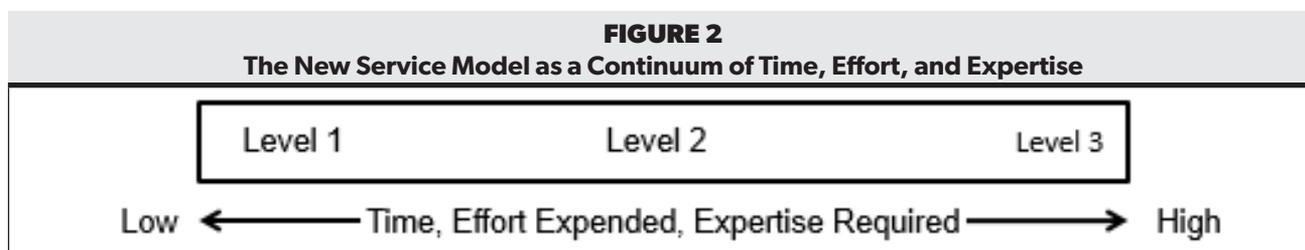
We sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do staff and librarians define and identify Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3 questions?
2. How are staff making referrals from the Desk?
3. To what extent are staff and librarians accurately recording statistics of answered questions?
4. What are staff’s and librarians’ perceptions of the implementation of the consolidated service point thus far, including its strengths and challenges?

FIGURE 1

Three Levels of the Consolidated Service Point





Although we sought to answer these questions, we anticipated from the beginning of the evaluation that our approach would need to remain flexible so that we could be free to explore questions that proved important over the course of the evaluation.

Methods

We used a mixed-methods design comprised of secondary data analysis, observations, a survey, and focus groups in order to gather needed information. We also spent an approximate total of 4.5 hours at various times of day informally observing the happenings at the Desk, the purpose of which was to give us adequate context for what happens on the Desk to better understand focus group discussions and/or responses we received in surveys. We also used the observations to start the focus group discussions.

Twelve librarians and 12 paraprofessional Desk staff were eligible to participate in the evaluation based on their affiliation with the service desk model. The only members of the service model who were precluded from participation were members of the management team who implemented the model and the evaluators (three people total). Of the eligible participants, eleven librarians and nine staff took electronic surveys, which were tailored to each group. Eight librarians and eight staff participated in the focus groups. For scheduling convenience, two focus groups were held for staff, and two were held for librarians.

All participants consented for their responses to be used not only for the purposes of internal improvement, but also to be shared more broadly within the library community, with their anonymity and confidentiality preserved. We used simple quantitative data analyses, such as frequency distributions, to analyze closed survey questions. For qualitative data gener-

ated by the surveys and via the focus groups, we used thematic content analysis to identify and examine themes within the data.

Finally, we reviewed foundational documentation drafted and used during the new service model's implementation. We used these documents to determine what was originally envisioned. We also analyzed regularly recorded statistics indicating the nature and frequency of transactions fielded in the new model in order to understand the type of traffic the Desk experiences, and to estimate the extent to which statistics were accurately being recorded in the new environment.

After we finished data analysis, we held open forums for all who work within the model to discuss the results. Although most attendees had received some preliminary evaluation findings from surveys and observations during the focus groups for the purposes of stimulating conversation, this was the first opportunity for evaluation participants (and others) to see the body of data in full. The main goal of these forums was not only to increase participants' awareness of the major themes that emerged from the data, but more specifically to solicit their input and responses to the data as we moved into the phase of writing recommendations for our final report for VCU Libraries' management and administration.

Results & Discussion

The data collection methods yielded a rich body of data which allowed us to thoroughly answer our evaluation questions.

To What Extent Do Staff and Librarians Understand the New Service Model?

Survey data demonstrated that librarians and staff

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were not always on the same page about how the model should work. Notable sources of confusion included what constitutes a Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3 question and the purposes and goals of the model. Many evaluation participants—especially paraprofessionals responsible for staffing the Desk—believed the main motive of the new service model to be cost-saving for the library, although that had never been an intended outcome.

To What Extent Are Staff Following the Correct Procedures for Making Referrals from the Desk?

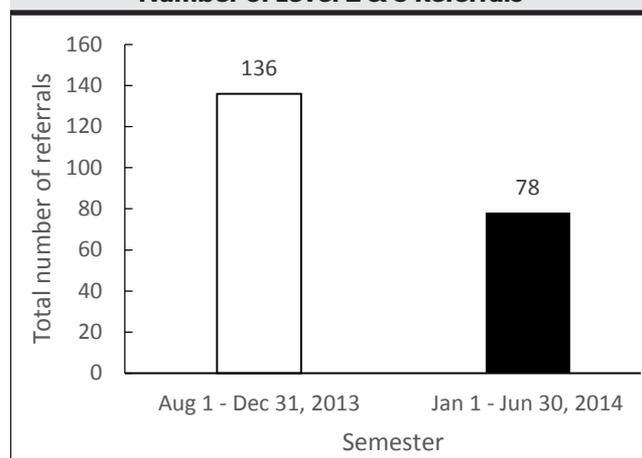
In the focus groups, this question opened the door to a multi-layered series of issues related to making referrals from the Desk to librarians, staff, or departments. Our observations of the Desk identified several instances in which a referral was warranted and a librarian was immediately available, but the referral was not made. Data from focus groups and surveys suggest that this issue was likely influenced by confusion about what comprises a Level 2 or Level 3 question, which subsequently reduces the likelihood of knowing when to make a referral. On the survey, Desk staff indicated a high level of confidence regarding how and when to make a referral, but some staff also indicated that they only sometimes made a referral when not sure if a patron's questions have been fully answered.

This information, combined with a low number of referrals from the Desk during the year in which our evaluation was undertaken (figure 3), suggests referrals were not being made from the Desk as often as they should have been, which was a source of concern for the librarians awaiting the referrals, both in terms of their ability to be a part of the model and because they were concerned that patrons might not be receiving quality service in all instances.

These referral numbers 'seemed low' to most involved in the model, including the evaluators, but no statistics had been previously kept regarding number of referrals made from any service desk to librarians or other departments for more in-depth assistance. Regardless, the significant drop in the number of referrals—a 43% decline—between fall and spring semester was concerning. However, the most compelling data that referrals were not happening as frequently as they should was Desk staff's acknowledgement via the survey that they did not always make referrals even when they weren't sure that patrons' needs had been fully met, as well as the evaluators' observations of the Desk.

While we were able to get a sense of how referrals were being made from the Desk, we were only able to partially understand and speculate as to why referrals seemed to be happening infrequently and with hesitation. In focus groups, Desk staff indicated that patrons were often, but not always, receptive to being referred. When patrons were not receptive to a referral, they often cited time constraints. Librarians perceived that several things might be contributing to the low number of referrals. They wondered if the low number of hours that librarians were on call each week compared to when the Desk was open resulted in Desk staff simply being in the habit of fielding questions on their own more often than not. Librarians speculated, too, that Desk staff were not adequately trained to know when to make a referral. They also believed it possible that the Desk was so busy and congested that patrons would be unlikely to approach the Desk with an in-depth research question. Finally, some felt that it was plausible that Desk staff's skills in answering research

FIGURE 3
Number of Level 2 & 3 Referrals



questions were becoming more sophisticated, and thus they were increasingly able to field Level 2 questions on their own, without the assistance of a librarian.

To What Extent Are Staff and Librarians Accurately Recording Statistics of Answered Questions?

It was essential for evaluators and library management to know to what extent statistics about questions fielded in the new service model were being recorded accurately. While statistics of this nature are a useful way to understand trends in the way any service point is operating regardless of how long that service has been in place, it is especially important to have accurate statistics in the early stages of a new program as staff, librarians, and management are constantly seeking ways to improve and tweak the new model, and/or the way it is being implemented.

Based on survey data, collected statistics, and focus groups, we discovered that statistics for patron inquiries in the new service model were being underreported. While the number and type of questions answered by librarians corresponded closely with the statistics they recorded for those questions, Desk staff were underreporting both the number of questions as well as downgrading the complexity of the questions in their reporting. This was likely due to multiple factors: confusion about how to classify a question (as discussed above); extreme busyness at the Desk during certain hours; and a statistics-tracking tool that required multiple steps and keystrokes to complete, which made the form too onerous to use during peak times when pressure to attend to a long line of waiting patrons is high. It was much easier for Desk staff to report Level 1 questions as opposed to Level 2 questions, which partially explains the phenomenon of downgrading the complexity of questions received when answered. Some Desk staff also reported that they did not see the point in investing time in reporting statistics that they perceived would not be used.

Based on the formative nature of this evaluation, we made a change to our statistics-reporting proce-

dures mid-evaluation to streamline the statistics-recording process. This made reporting Level 2 and Level 3 questions much easier for Desk staff. That, combined with reminders to regularly report statistics, led to increased consistency of statistics reporting even while the evaluation was in progress.

What Are Staff and Librarians' Perceptions of the Implementation of the Consolidated Service Point and Model, Including Strengths and Challenges?

This question yielded the richest body of data. A number of themes related to this evaluation question emerged, including:

Concerns about the Quality of Service Users Receive at the Desk

These concerns were due to (1) a perceived lack of training of Desk staff who came to this new model from more traditional service departments (circulation, research, and media/reserves), despite plans for an ongoing training program; (2) high volume of activity at the Desk; and (3) inadequate staffing.

Perceived lack of training for Desk staff was a concern for the staff themselves as well as librarians. While robust training was offered immediately before implementation, training of a similar nature was not offered on an ongoing basis. Additionally, hires who were on-boarded after the model was in place received very abbreviated training.

While all parties expected the Desk to be a bustling and active service point, the volume was often more than staff could handle while still providing a high degree of quality. This was exacerbated by not having enough staff on the Desk at certain times of day. The comments regarding 'inadequate staffing' spoke not only to the perception that more staff should be hired, but also to the original staffing plan not being implemented. When the model was designed, the intent was for a minimum of two full-time staff to be on the Desk 24 hours a day, with a third person on the Desk during peak times. Partway through the implementation process, the 'third person' model was

abandoned, perhaps due to the challenge of designing a schedule for a 24-hour service point while balancing staff members' off-desk responsibilities. This speaks to the fact that managers of the new service model were also stretched thin in terms of workload, and struggled to fully address all aspects of implementation fully. This was a likely contributor to staff feeling overstretched on the Desk.

Ambivalence about the Success and Viability of the Desk and Its Service Model from Both Librarians and Staff

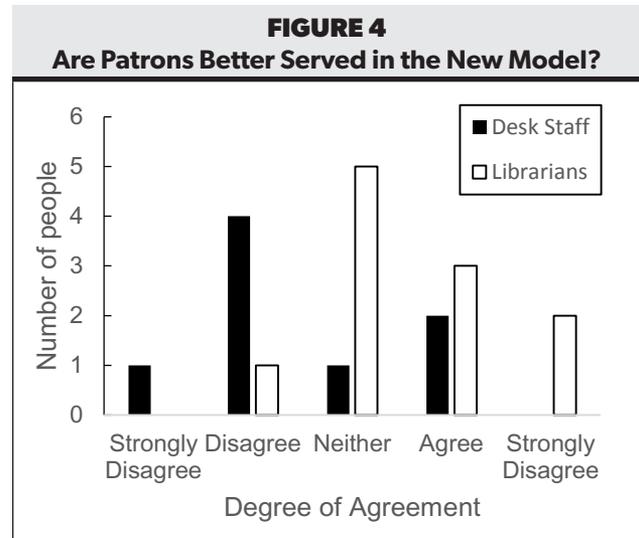
Some staff felt that the model didn't sufficiently reduce the 'ping-pong effect' of users bounced between service points/staff, since some Desk staff considered referrals to the librarian on call for immediate assistance or for follow up at a later time to be the same problem. Some felt that not having librarians immediately available on the Desk created an unnecessary 'buffer' between library users with research questions and the expertise they required or desired.

Librarians reported that both they and some of the faculty with whom they work were concerned about the quality of service at the Desk, and that in at least a few instances, librarians were advising students to bypass the Desk and contact a librarian directly with questions. Some concern was related to the sense that Desk staff lacked needed expertise as a result of inadequate training, and other concerns arose from the high level of congestion and long lines to get service at the Desk, as previously mentioned.

Generally, both Desk staff and librarians were ambivalent about whether or not patrons are better served in the new service model than they were when the same services were offered from three separate desks, as demonstrated in figure 4.

Most Librarians Felt They Had Increased Time in the New Model to Devote to Teaching, Outreach, and Providing In-Depth Research Assistance

While librarians are scheduled to staff a service (chat or on-call) for only a few hours less per week than they were before the new service model was imple-



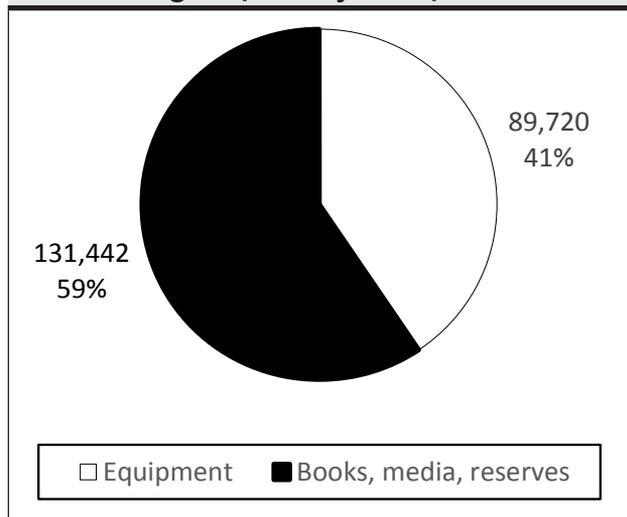
mented, they are now able to use much of this scheduled time working on service responsibilities, etcetera, as they're able to staff these services from their offices rather than at a busy public desk. Additionally, staff only refer the less-frequent, higher-level questions to librarians and handle lower-complexity ones (such as troubleshooting equipment) themselves. This is a positive outcome of the Desk model, as part of the goal was to allow librarians to participate in more in-depth and proactive forms of librarianship than the traditional reference model allowed.

Other Themes

Over the course of the evaluation, a number of other themes emerged that were not directly related to the initial evaluation questions, including:

1. Too many equipment transactions. An overwhelming number of equipment transactions (laptops, headphones, etc.) diminished quality in other areas at the Desk. This impression was confirmed by the evaluators' observations on the Desk, by comments from staff and librarians during focus groups, and by statistics from our integrated library system (figure 5), which indicated that more than 40% of lending transactions at the Desk were for laptops, headphones, etcetera, as opposed to books or media.

FIGURE 5
Circulation Statistics for
August 1, 2013 - June 30, 2014



2. Unequal workloads. While some staff felt overworked in the new model, others felt they did not have enough to do. Some staff went so far as to say that when they were not on the Desk or staffing a service such as chat/text, they had no responsibilities to fill their time.
3. Desk staff as a group experienced very low morale related to the transition to the new service model. Some felt that they were not adequately included in the planning process, and some simply did not feel that new service model was a good service for library patrons. Staff felt strong tension between their desire to provide high quality service, and their feeling that the Desk was too busy for them to devote adequate time to each person. Some expressed that while management and administration sometimes seemed to listen to their concerns about the new service model, they did not perceive them as being adequately responsive. Additionally, classified staff who had previously worked in research, circulation, and media/reserves departments were moved into the newly created Information Services department,

and although the expectations for all staff changed (and, as many perceived it, increased), there was no immediate examination of salary equity based on changes to job responsibilities. This resulted in some staff feeling overworked, underpaid, and undervalued by the organization.

Open Forums on Preliminary Findings

The evaluators shared initial evaluation findings in two sessions with the staff and librarians involved in staffing the service model (excluding management and administration), and asked two main questions of attendees: do these findings ring true to you, and where do we go from here? The forums were participatory, encouraging staff and librarians to review initial findings in order to assist evaluators in developing recommendations to improve the implementation.

After ensuring that we had accurately captured the scope of perceptions and data about the consolidated service point, we synthesized suggestions from staff and librarians in order to develop recommendations to library management and administration for how to improve the model. Not only did this feedback improve our recommendations, since we had useful input from the employees who best know the model, but it also led to positive feelings about the evaluation itself. We received numerous comments in focus groups, through surveys, and in the preliminary findings/recommendations sessions that expressed gratitude to the evaluators and to management/administration, as the commissioners of the evaluation, for seeking to understand employees' perspectives and concerns, and for being committed to improving the model.

Recommendations and Improvements

The recommendations put forth by the evaluators have resulted in several improvements to the implementation of the new service model since summer 2014. The changes are too numerous to list here, but some particularly notable improvements include:

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- Eliminating headphone lending and instead providing earbuds that are freely available. This does not require interaction with staff and thus reduces Desk traffic.
- Transferring more than half of the library's laptop inventory to automated laptop vending machines in order to reduce Desk traffic. Plans are in progress for the entire inventory to be transferred to additional kiosks.
- Re-balancing responsibilities of Desk staff to ensure more equitable workloads. The majority of Desk staff now spend 70% of their work time on the Desk, which enables thicker staffing during peak times of day (see next bullet).
- Implementing the original staffing plan for the Desk: during peak hours, two staff are stationed at front workstations to assist patrons, plus a third staffer is at a back workstation providing support, processing returns and holds, answering the phone, and available to leave the Desk to assist patrons personally or to assist with equipment problems. This allows greater freedom to provide individualized, off-Desk assistance to patrons as needed.
- Establishing regular meetings for Desk staff, which include continual training on elements of the new service model.
- Encouraging Desk staff to make referrals if at all unsure about whether or not the patrons' needs were met.
- Hiring of four hourly employees to supplement staffing needs on the Desk during overnight and weekend shifts.

Conclusion

Evaluating the implementation fidelity of the consolidated service point proved an invaluable step in understanding the nature of the service and how it can be improved. Based on the data gathered during the evaluation, evaluators concluded that while some aspects of the implementation of the Desk and the new

service model were successful, there were numerous problems that indicated some degree of implementation failure. Acknowledging deficits in the way the service model was operating created the opportunity to improve it considerably, and many improvements have been made since then. At the time of this writing, the evaluators are beginning plans for a second phase of the evaluation, which will revisit the implementation/process fidelity of services offered from the Desk to assess whether or not changes made have led to improvement, as well as focus on user perceptions of the consolidated service point.

Notes

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