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Reference Reborn: Challenges Facing Academic Libraries in New Jersey and the Nation, Update 2020

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Reference Reborn:

Challenges Facing Academic Libraries in New Jersey and the Nation, Update 2020

VALE January 8, 2020

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Outline

- Background
- Statistics
- Themes
- Statistical Takeaways
- Questions
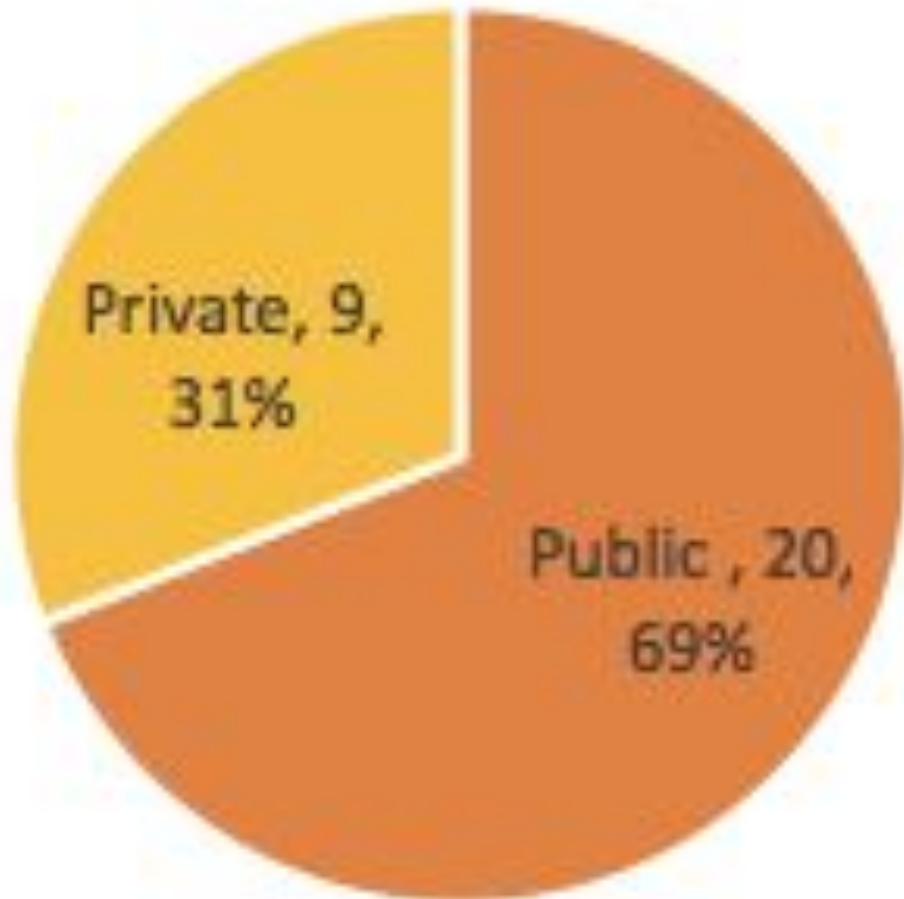- Directions for Future Research

Background

- Purpose:
  - Environmental scan to investigate our reference model
  - Librarian attitudes and perceptions of a physical reference desk
- Initial survey of NJ public university/colleges in Fall of 2018 (10 respondents), presented at VALE January 2019
- National Survey of university/colleges in Spring of 2019 (239 respondents)
- Made slight changes to survey based on initial data collection
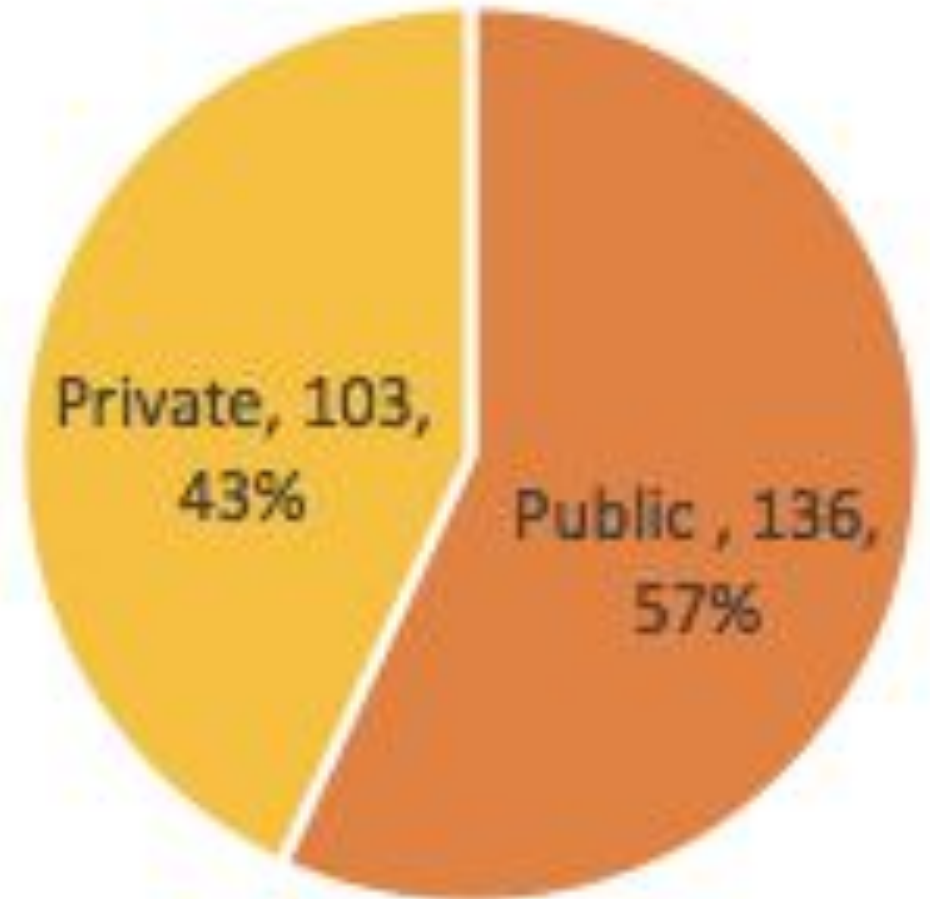
Survey Respondents: Public vs. Private
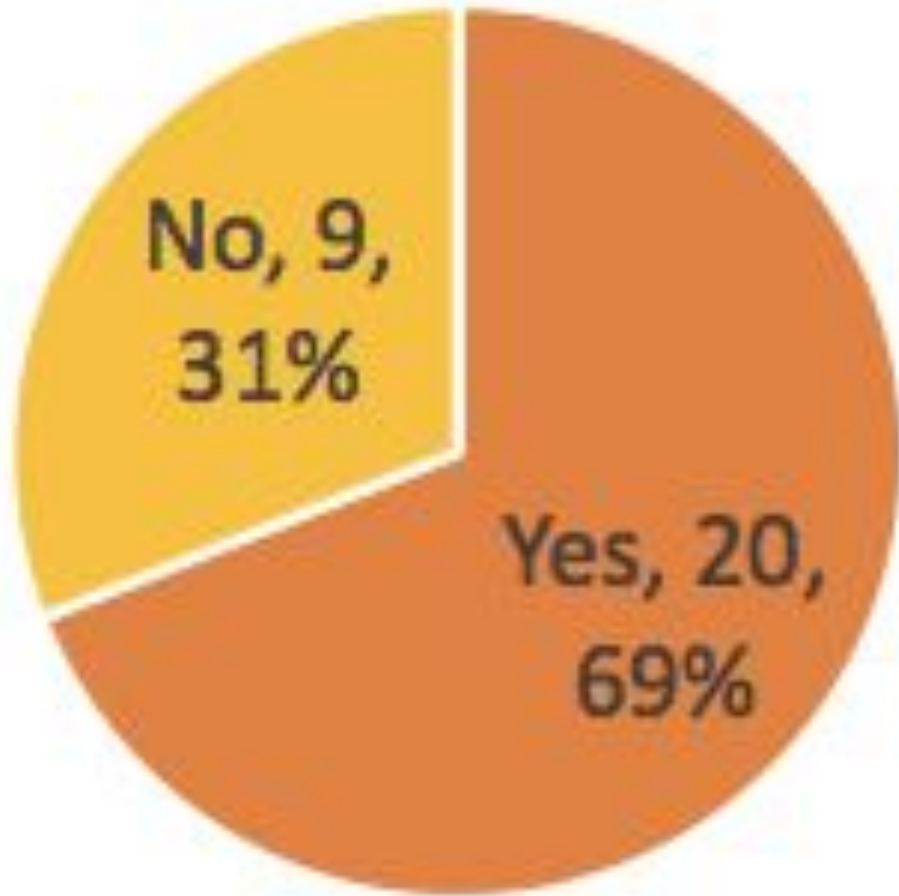

NJ

Private, 9, 31%

Public, 20, 69%

US

Private, 103, 43%

Public, 136, 57%

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Survey Respondents: Faculty Status

NJ

No, 9, 31%

Yes, 20, 69%

US

No, 96, 40%

Yes, 143, 60%
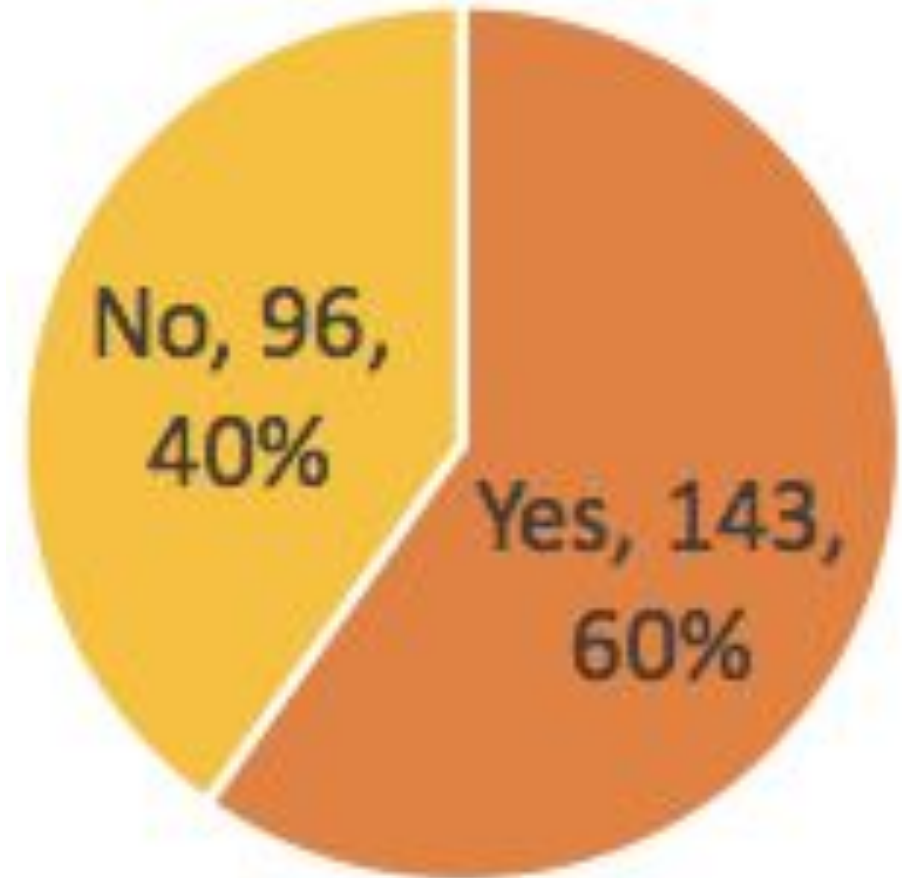
Survey Respondents: Type of Library

NJ
Medical/Dental, 2, 7%
Branch, 2, 7%
Main, 25, 86%

US
Other, 13, 6%
Medical/Dental, 8, 3%
Branch, 15, 6%
Main, 203, 85%
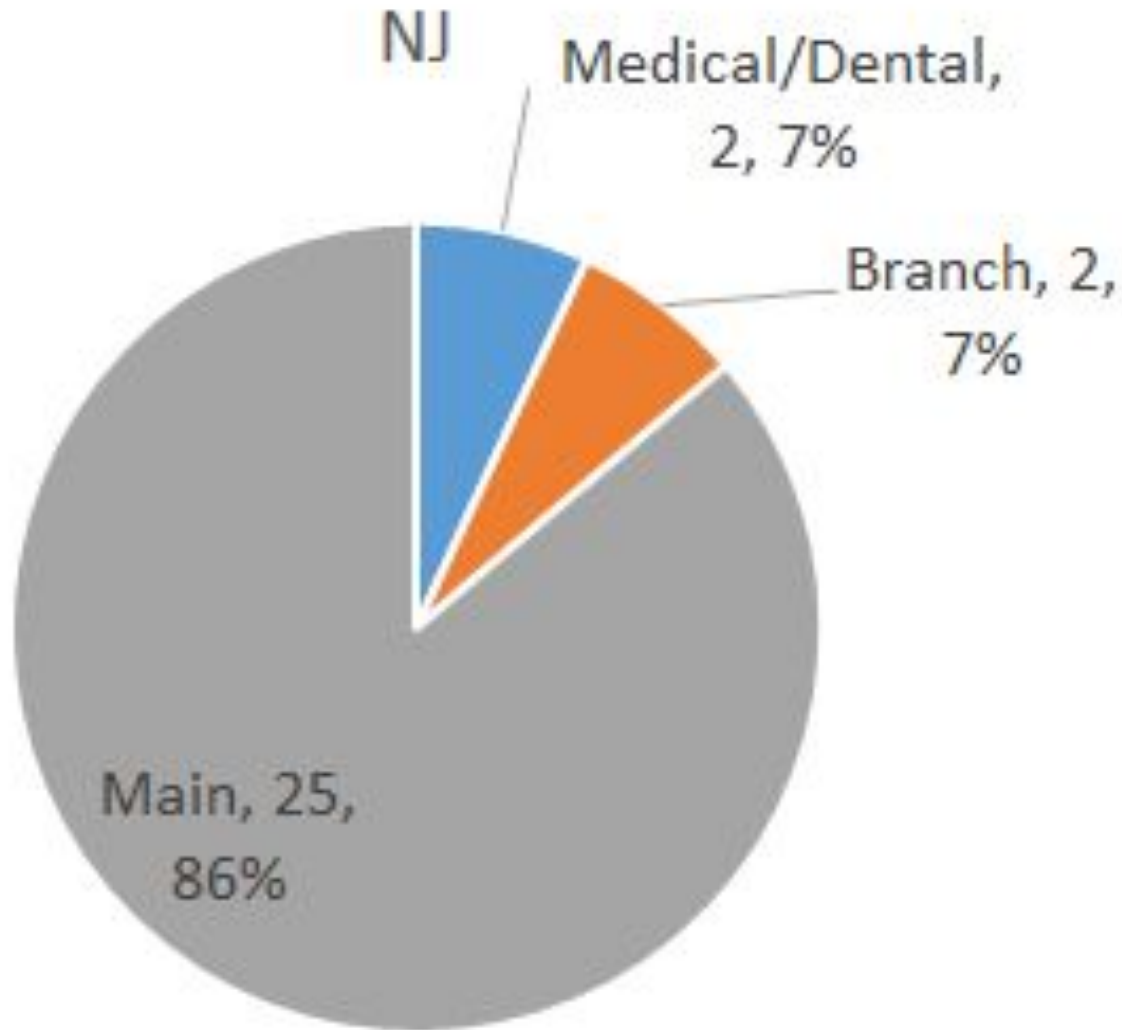
Survey Respondents: Type of Institution

NJ

Other, 0, 0%

University, 10, 34%

Community, 11, 38%

Four Year, 8, 28%

US

Other, 7, 3%

Community, 45, 19%

University, 103, 43%

Four Year, 84, 35%
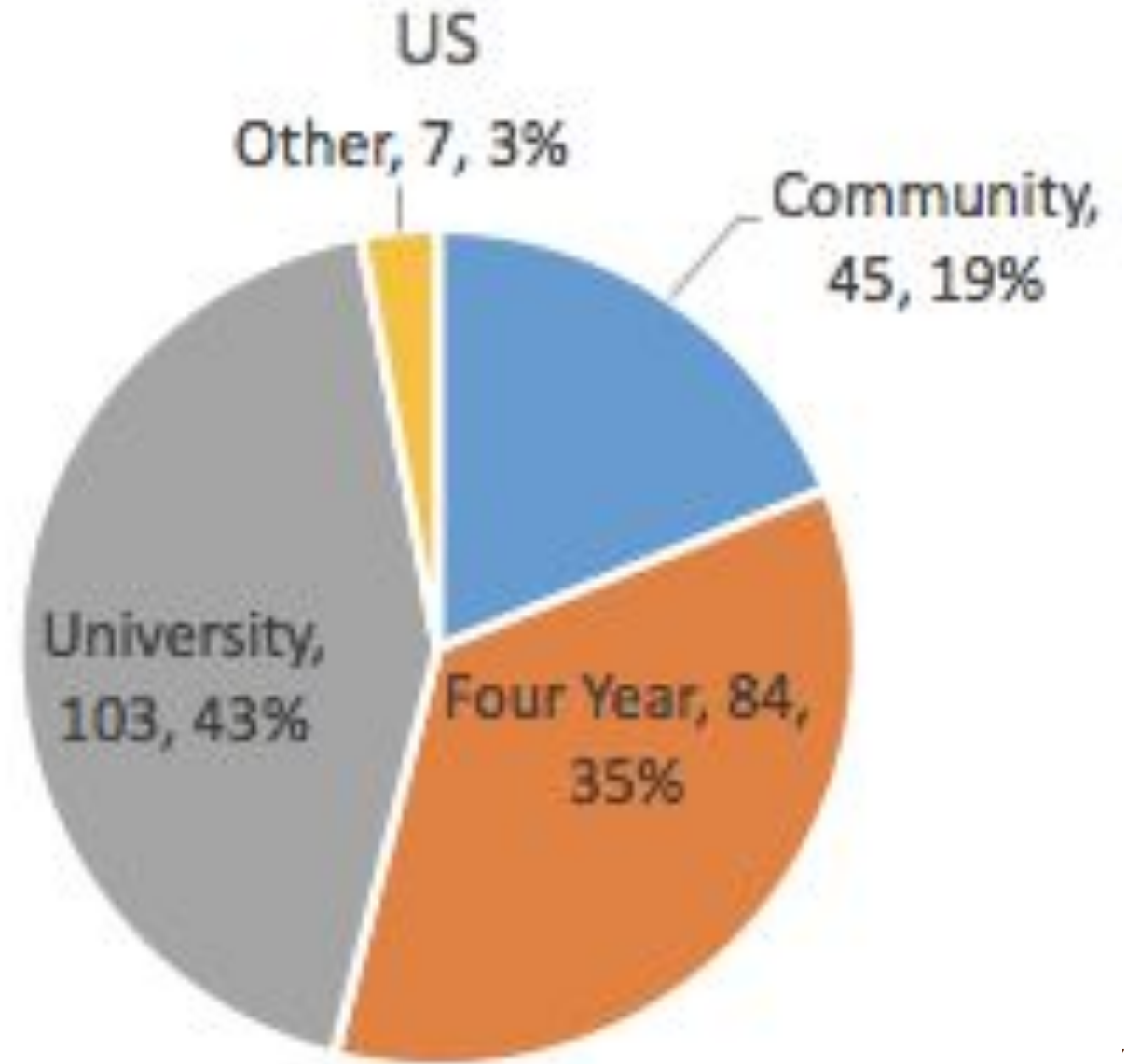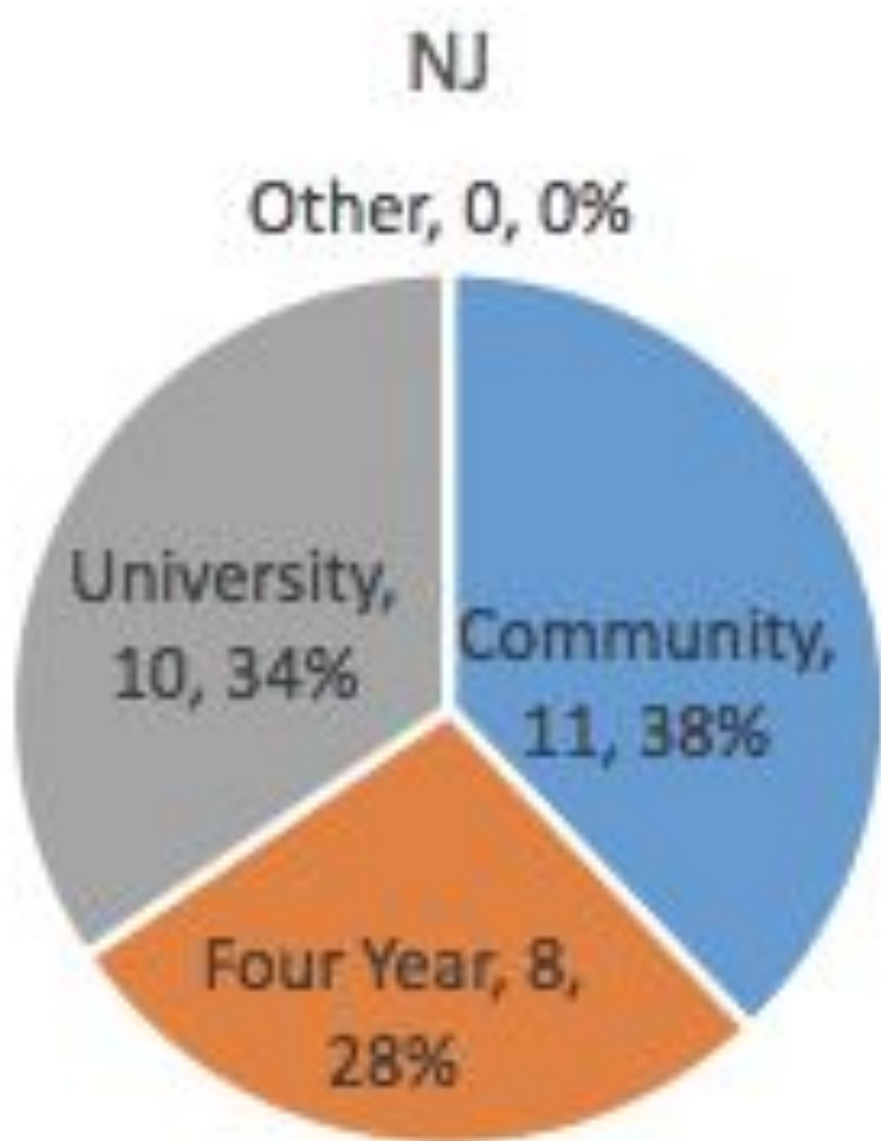
Survey Respondents: Student Population Size (FTE)
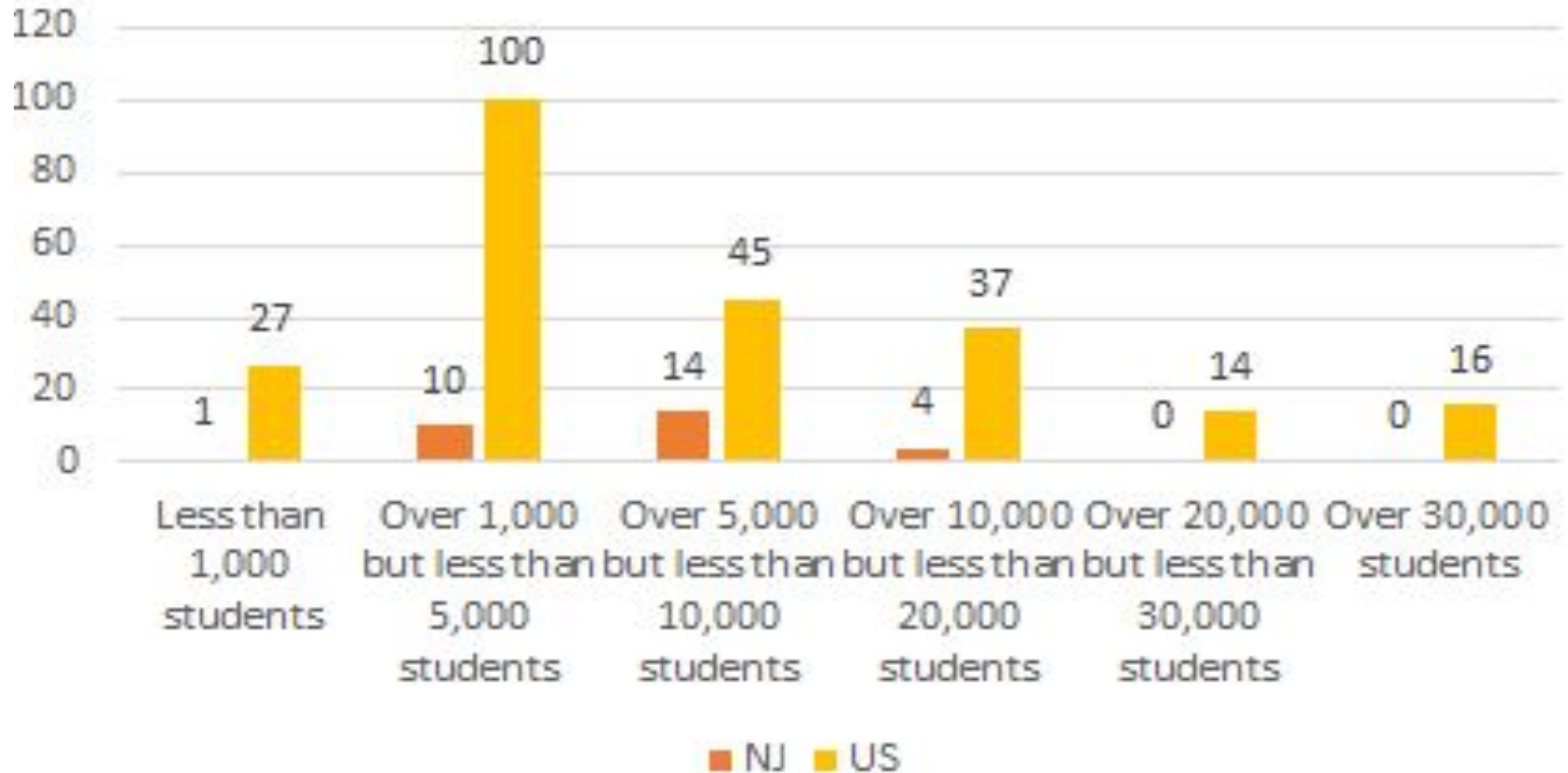
Survey Respondents: # of Student Workers
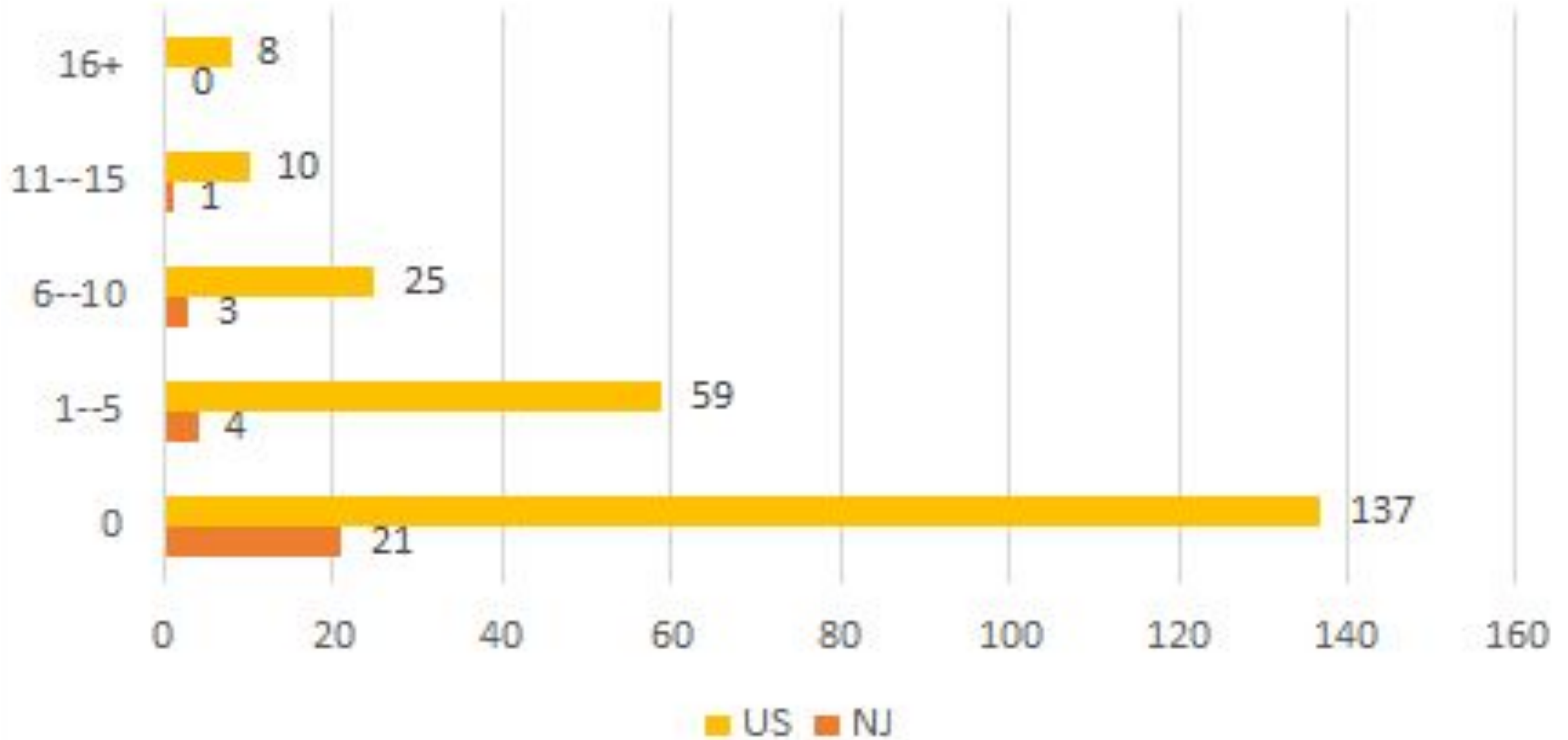
Survey Respondents: # of Library Staff (non-librarians)
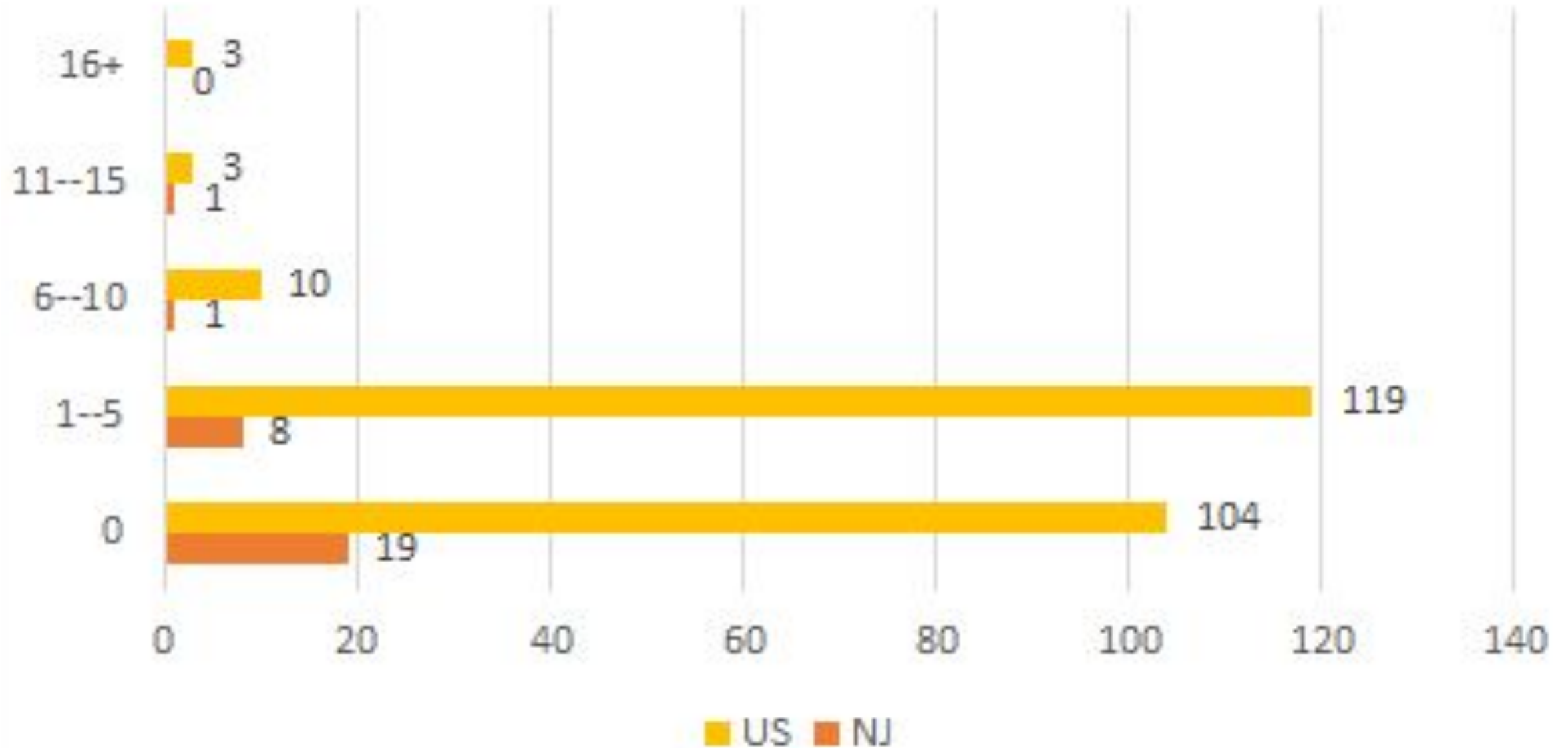
Survey Respondents: # of Part-time & Adjunct Librarians

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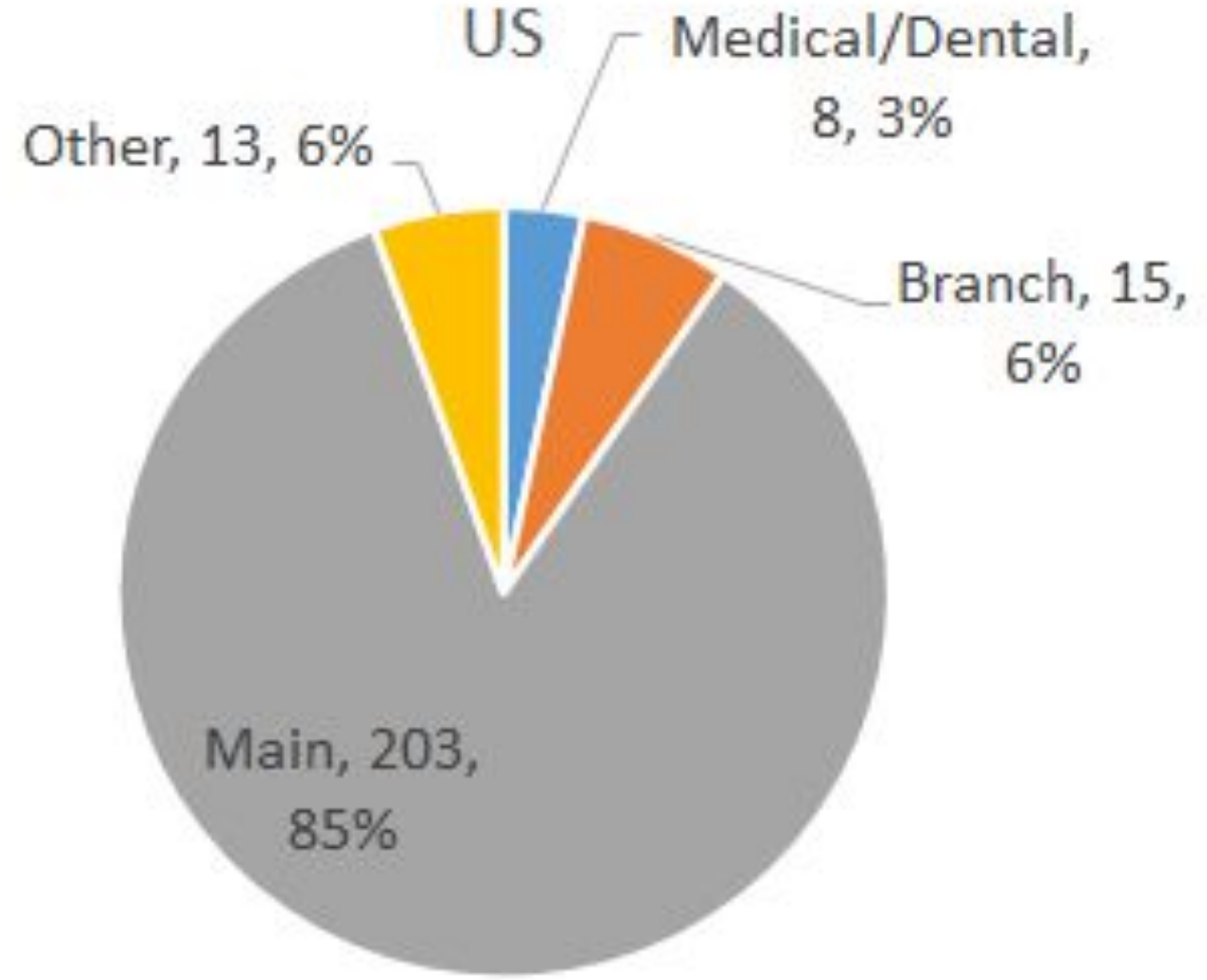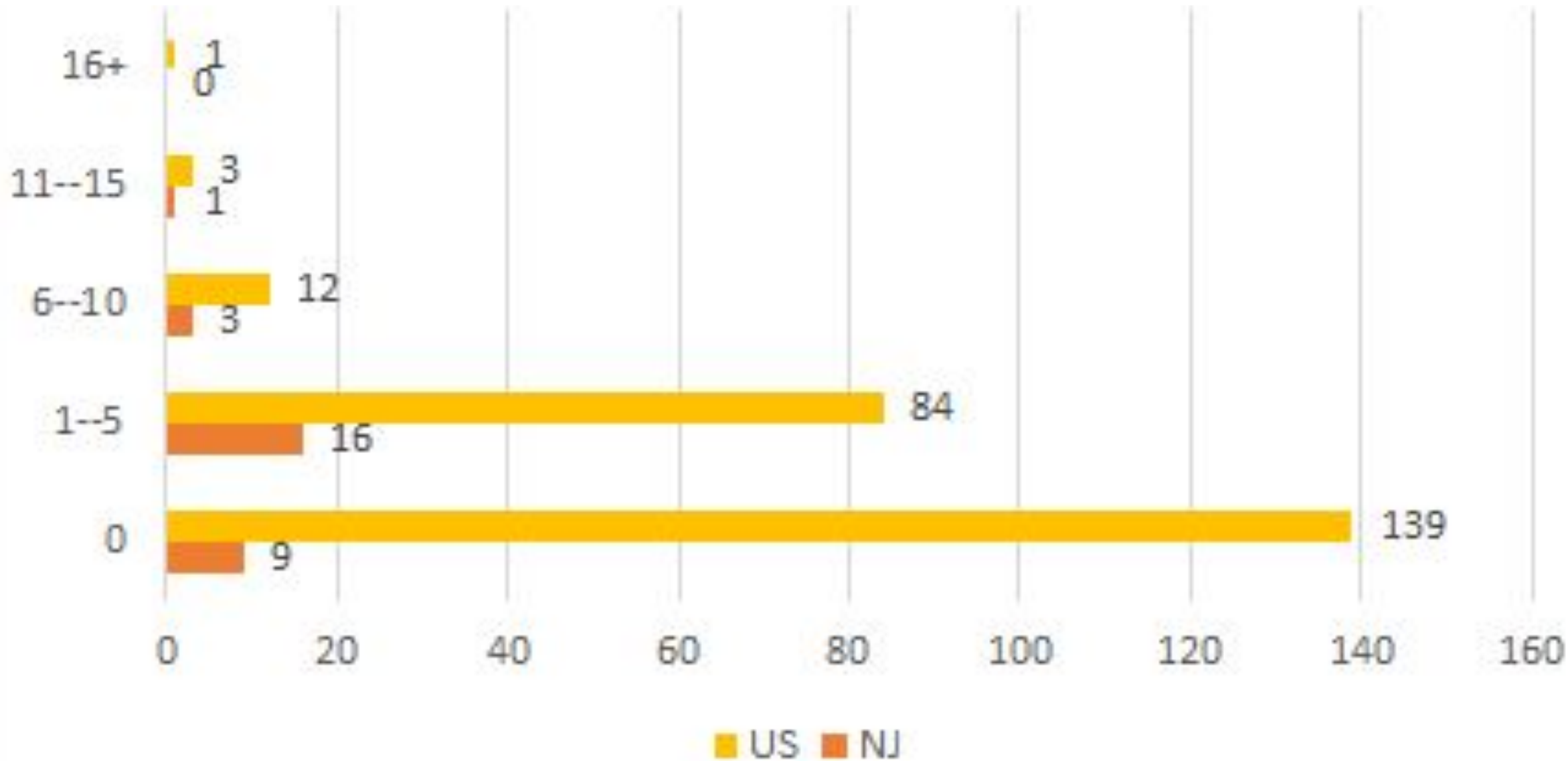
Survey Respondents: # of Librarians providing reference

Bar chart showing number of survey respondents by number of librarians providing reference, comparing NJ (orange) and US (yellow).

Category	US value
1	18
2	36
3	29
4	26
5	27
6	17
7	14
8	19
9	12
10	9
11	5
12	8
13	1
14	3
15	2
16	5
17	0
18	2
19	2
31	1
51	1
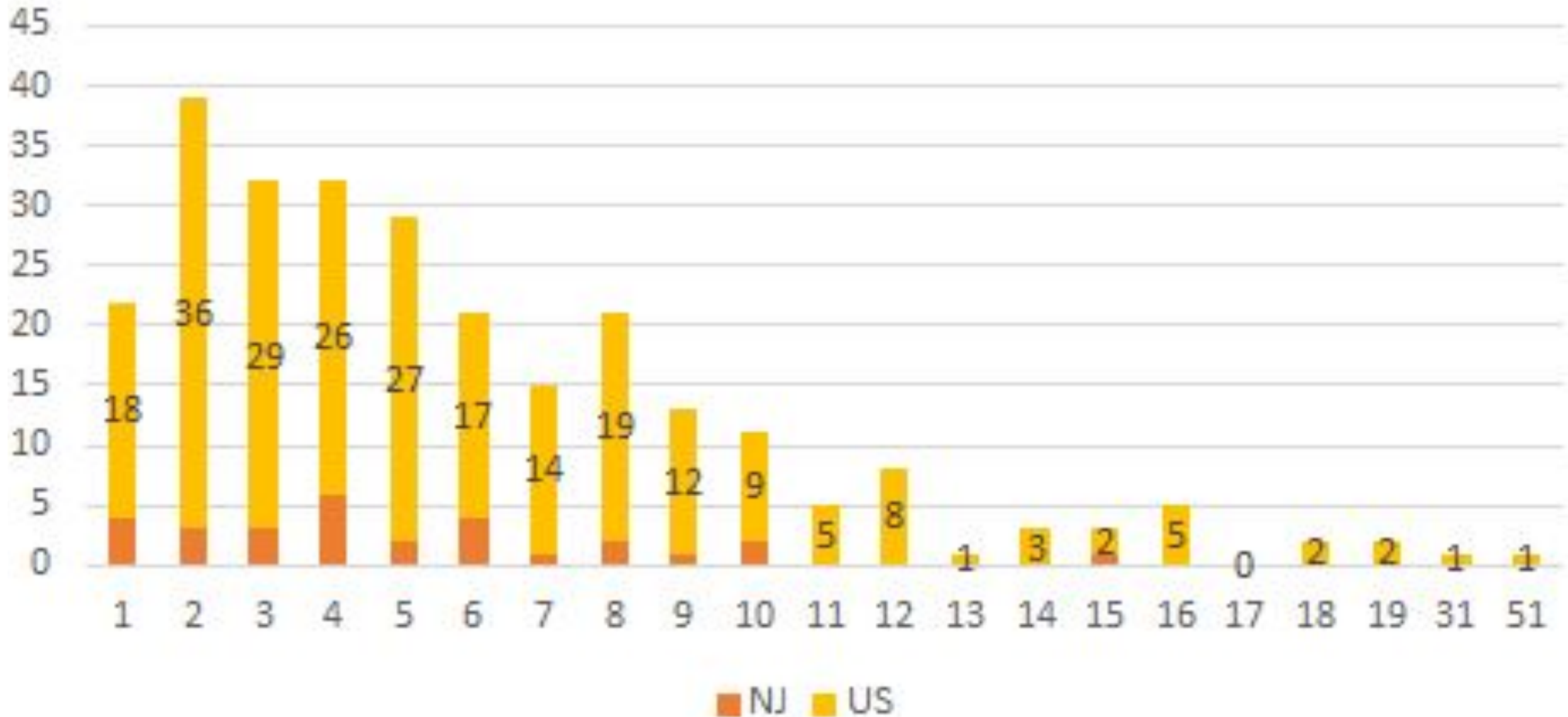
NJ   US

Survey Respondents: Current Desk Model

NJ

No physical reference desk, 3, 10%

Reference desk/information commons/learning commons, 2, 7%

Traditional, 17, 59%

Shared Services, 7, 24%

US

No physical reference desk, 34, 14%

Reference desk/information commons/learning commons, 16, 7%

Traditional, 108, 45%

Shared Services, 81, 34%
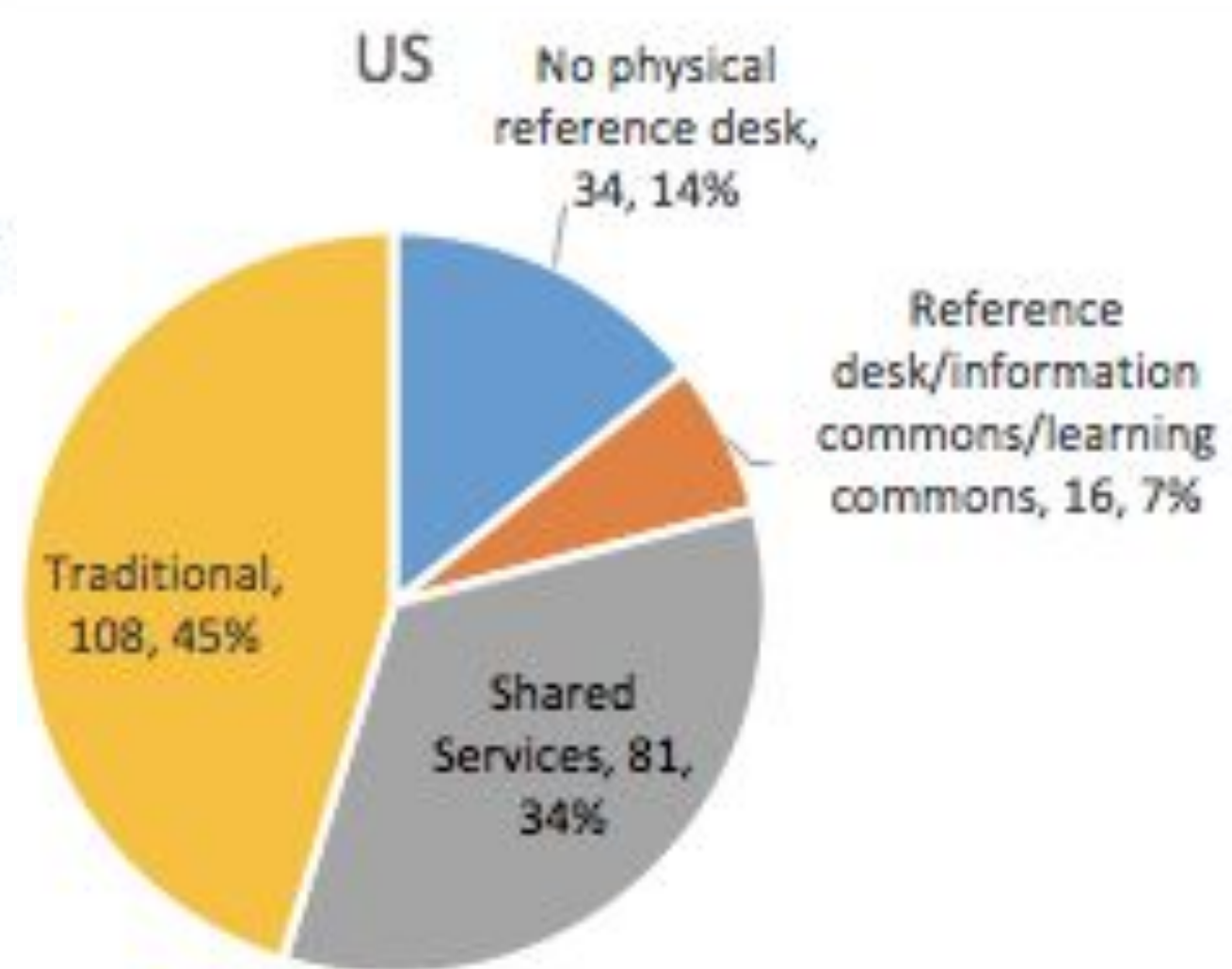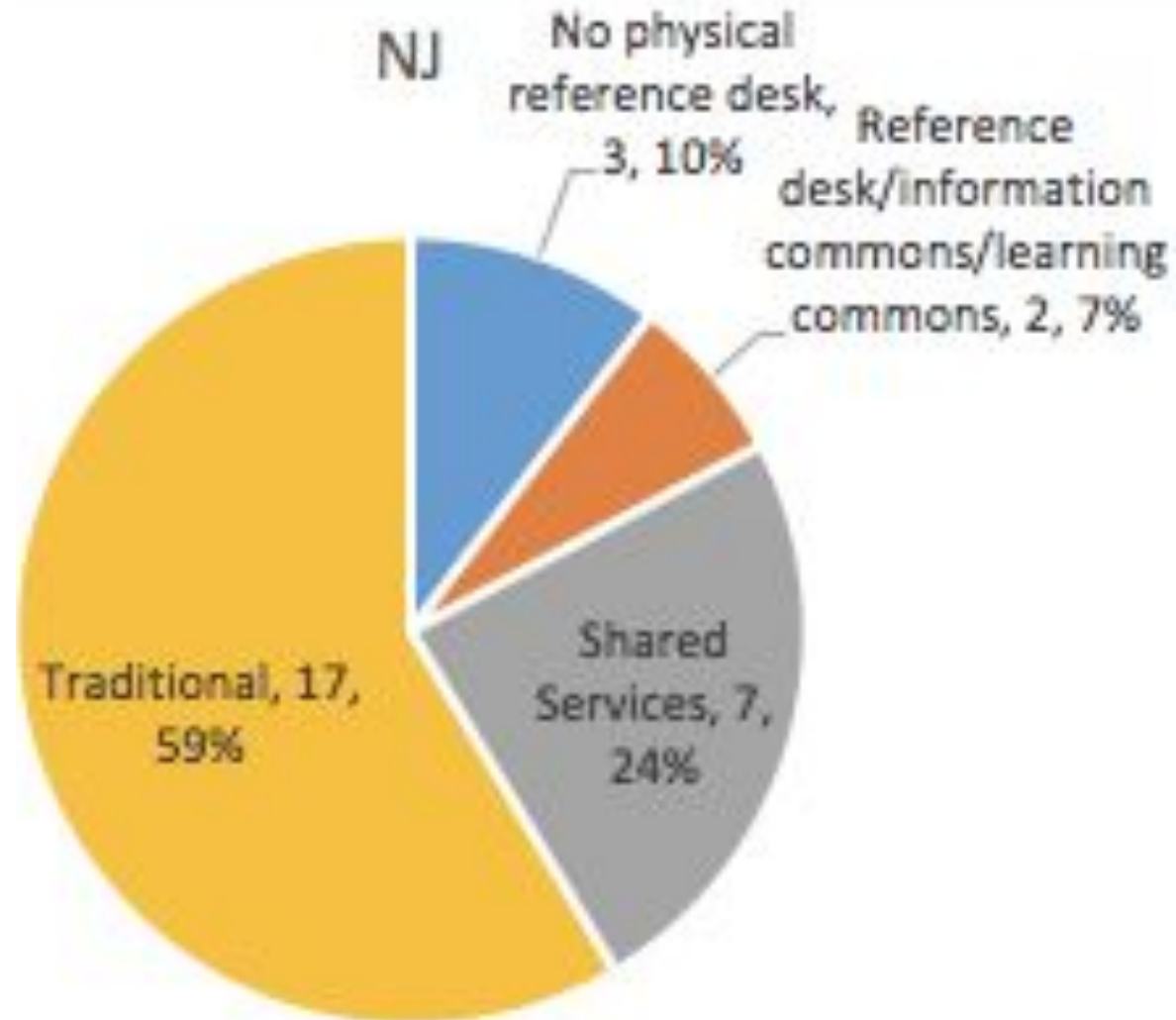
Survey Respondents: Do librarians staff the desk?

NJ

No, 2, 7%

Yes, 25, 93%

US

No, 35, 17%

Yes, 171, 83%
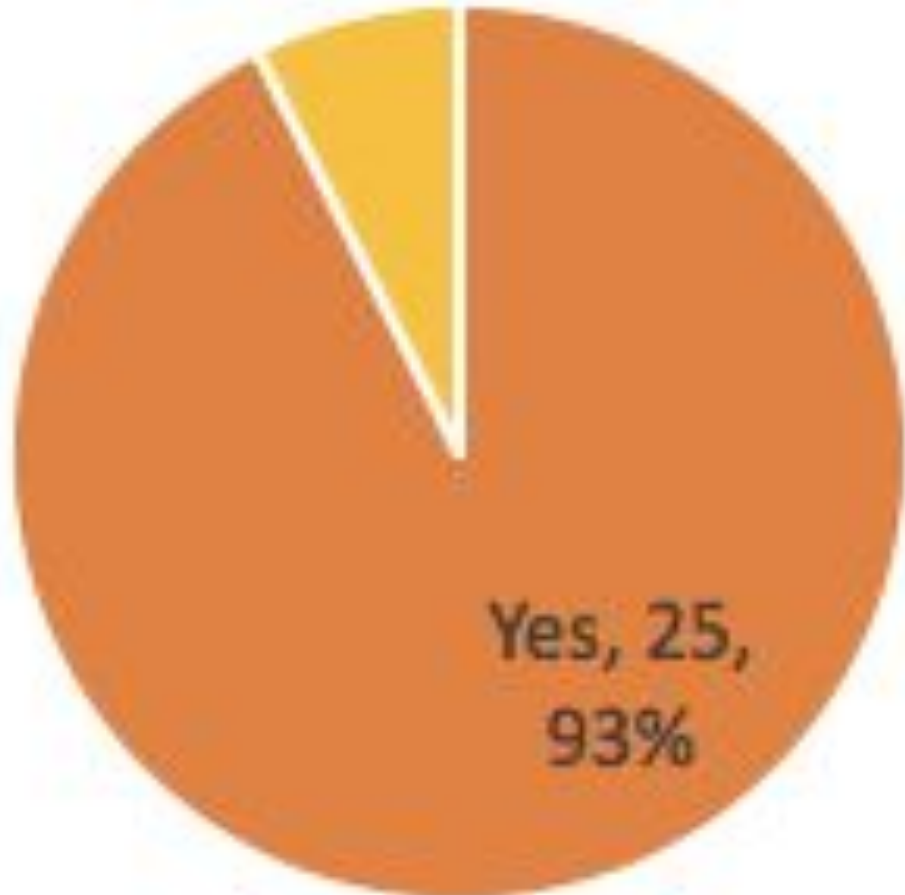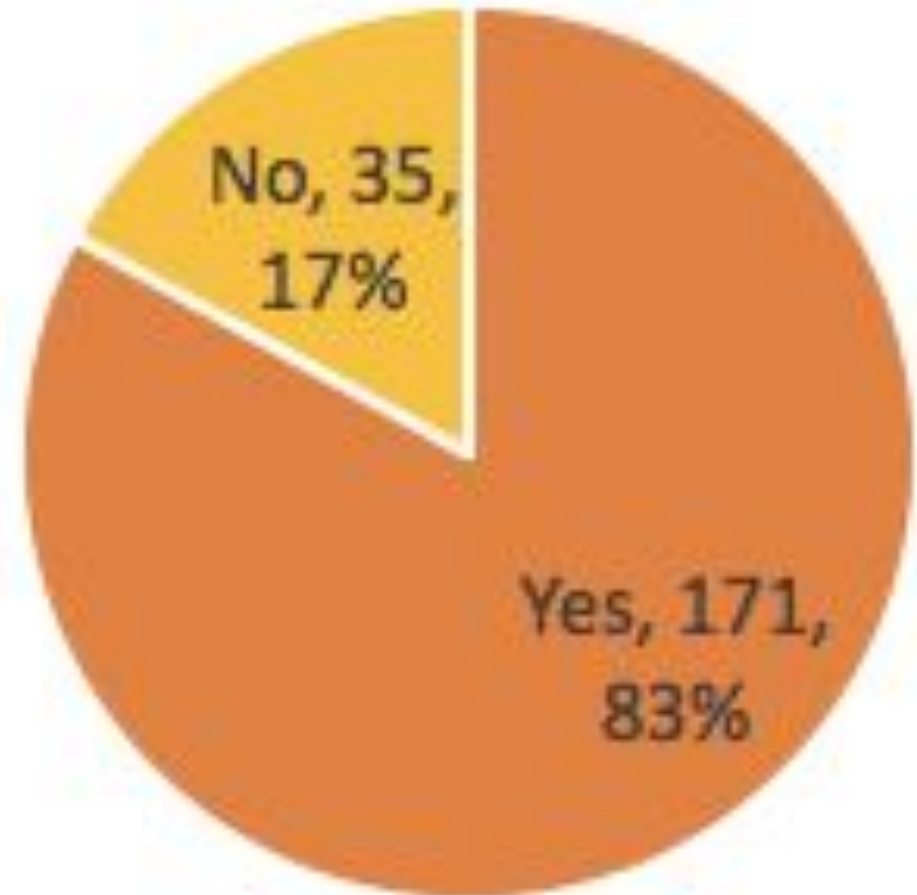
Survey Respondents: % of Reference Questions asked

NJ

US

Lowest, 2, 7%
Highest, 3, 11%
High, 7, 26%
Low , 11, 41%
Moderate, 4, 15%

Highest, 36, 17%
Lowest, 43, 21%
High, 42, 20%
Low, 61, 30%
Moderate, 24, 12%
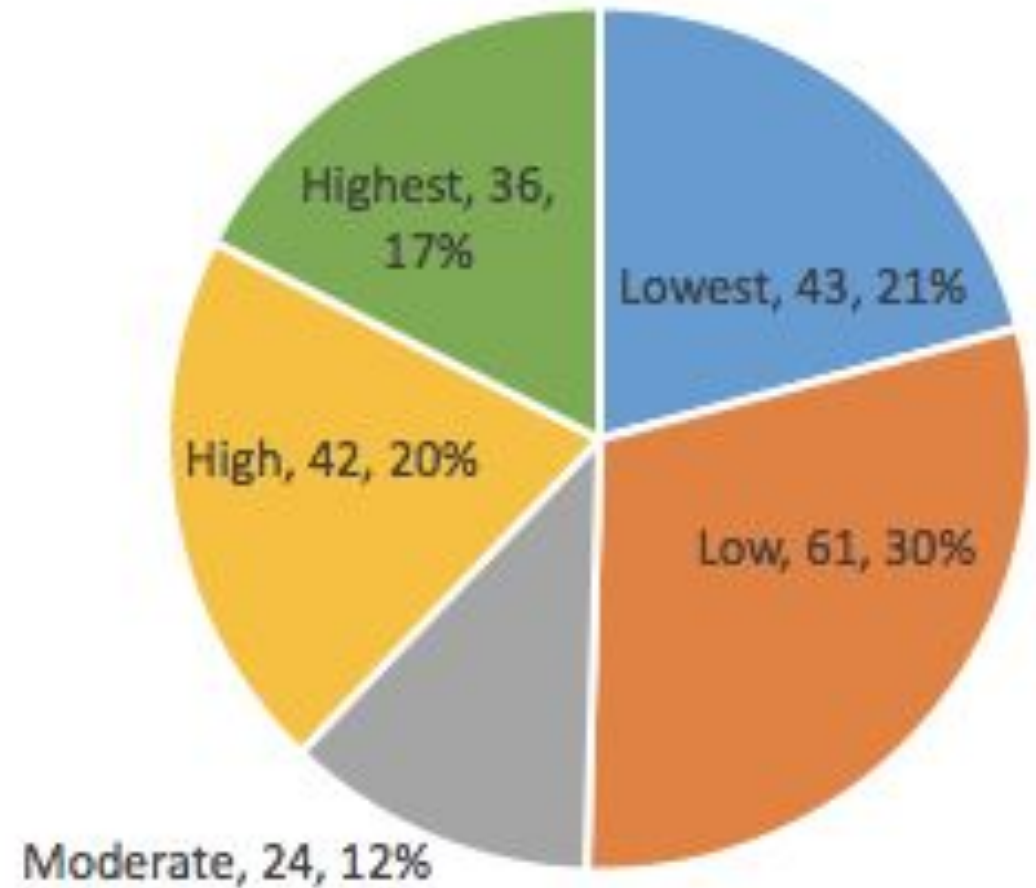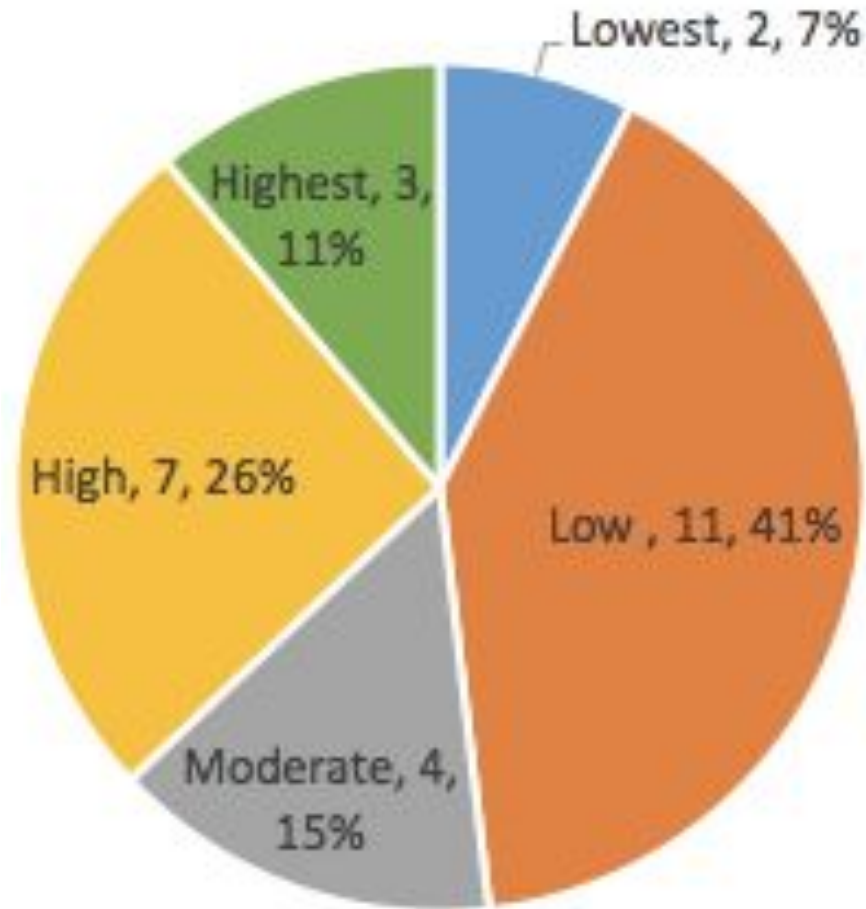
■ Lowest 0-20% ■ Low 21-40% ■ Moderate 41-60% ■ High 61-80% ■ Highest 81-100%

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Survey Respondents: Value of a physical reference desk
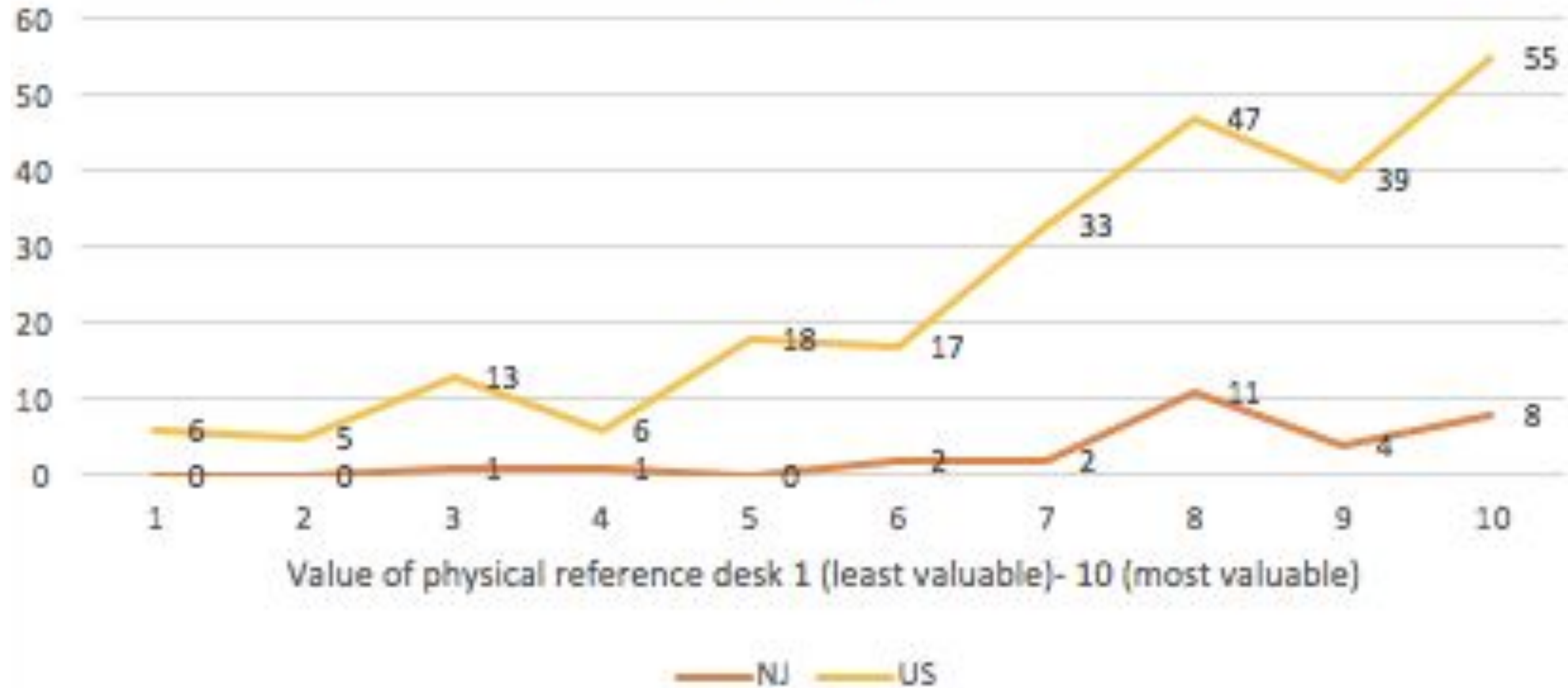
Survey Respondents: Is a physical reference desk necessary?

NJ

No, 5, 17%

Yes, 24, 83%

US

No, 75, 31%

Yes, 164, 69%
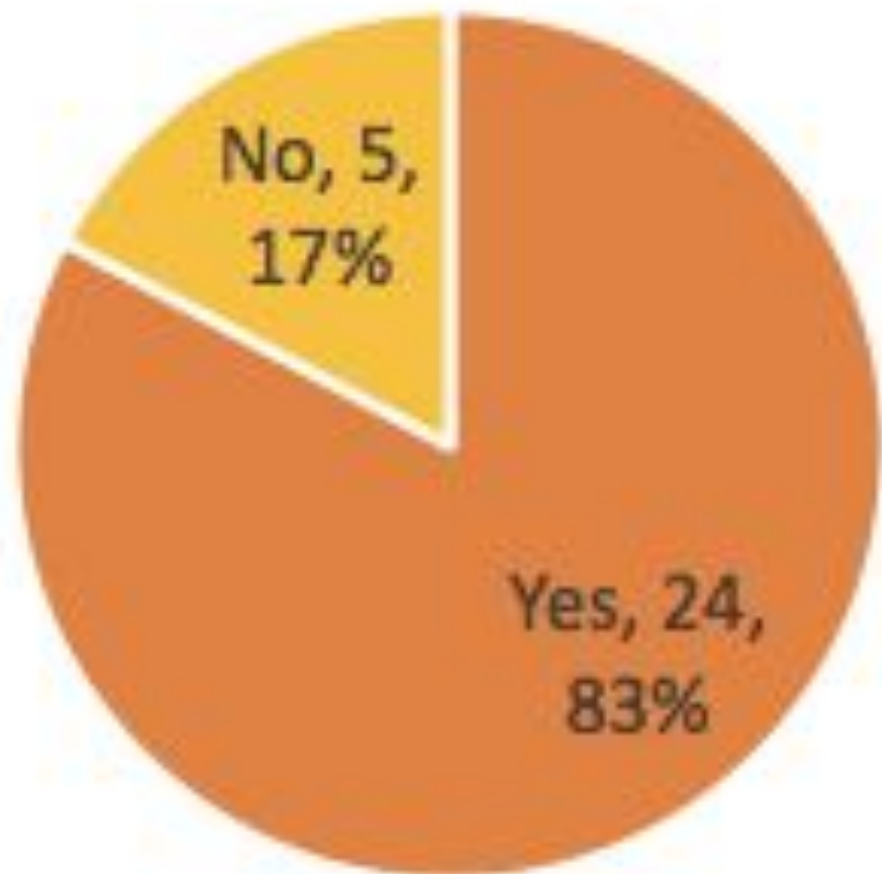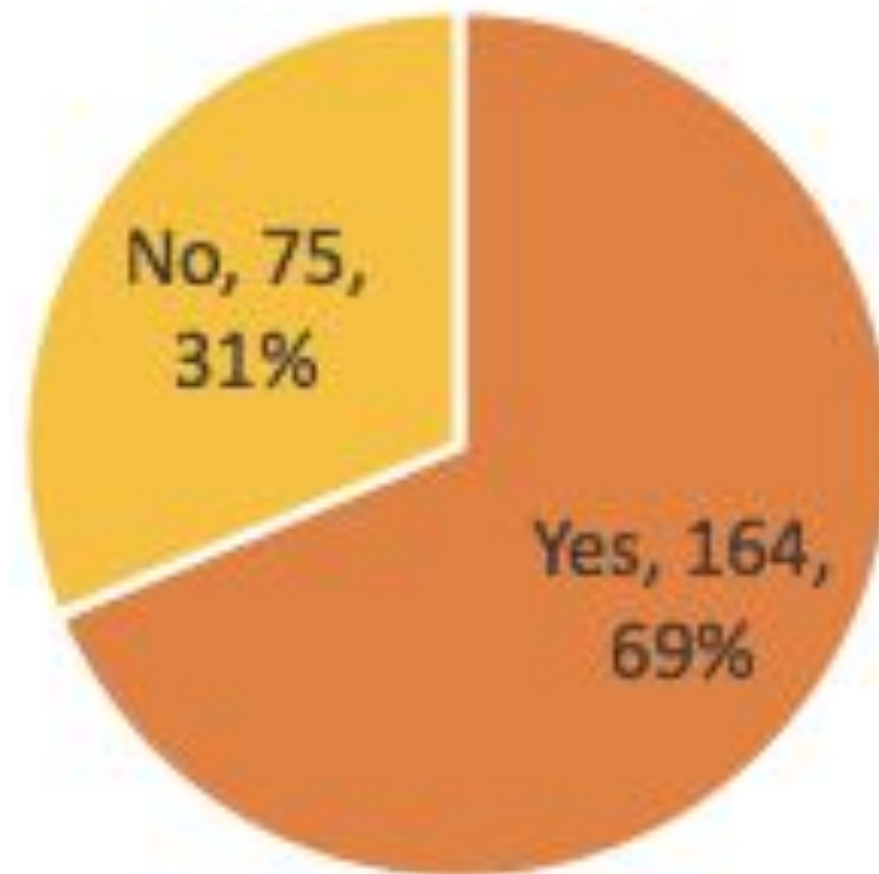
Survey Respondents: Do you support maintaining a physical reference desk?

NJ

Strongly oppose, 3, 10%
Somewhat oppose, 0, 0%
Neither support nor oppose, 4, 14%
Somewhat support, 4, 14%
Strongly support, 18, 62%

US

Strongly oppose, 10, 4%
Somewhat oppose, 19, 8%
Neither support nor oppose, 32, 13%
Somewhat support, 54, 23%
Strongly support, 123, 52%
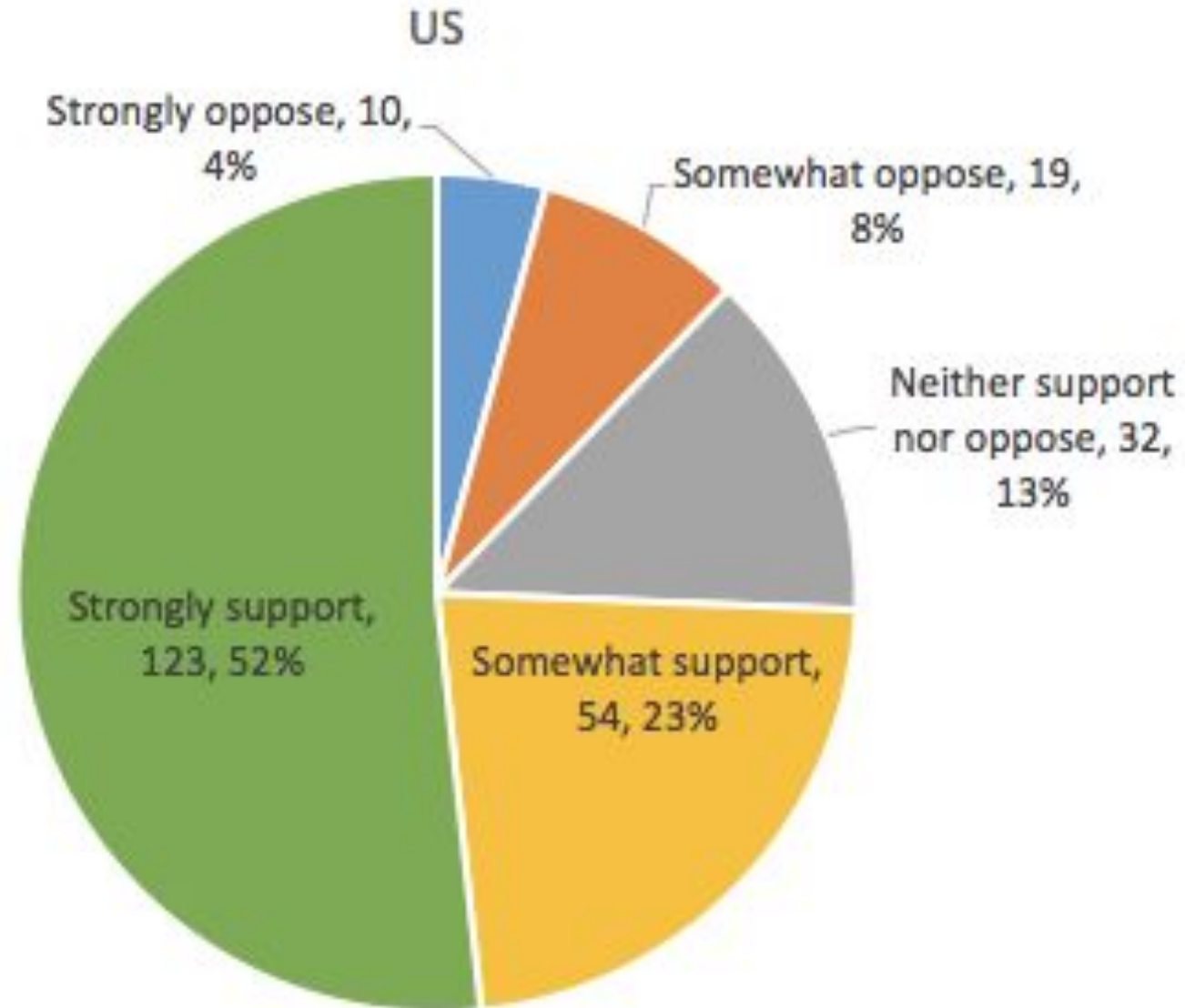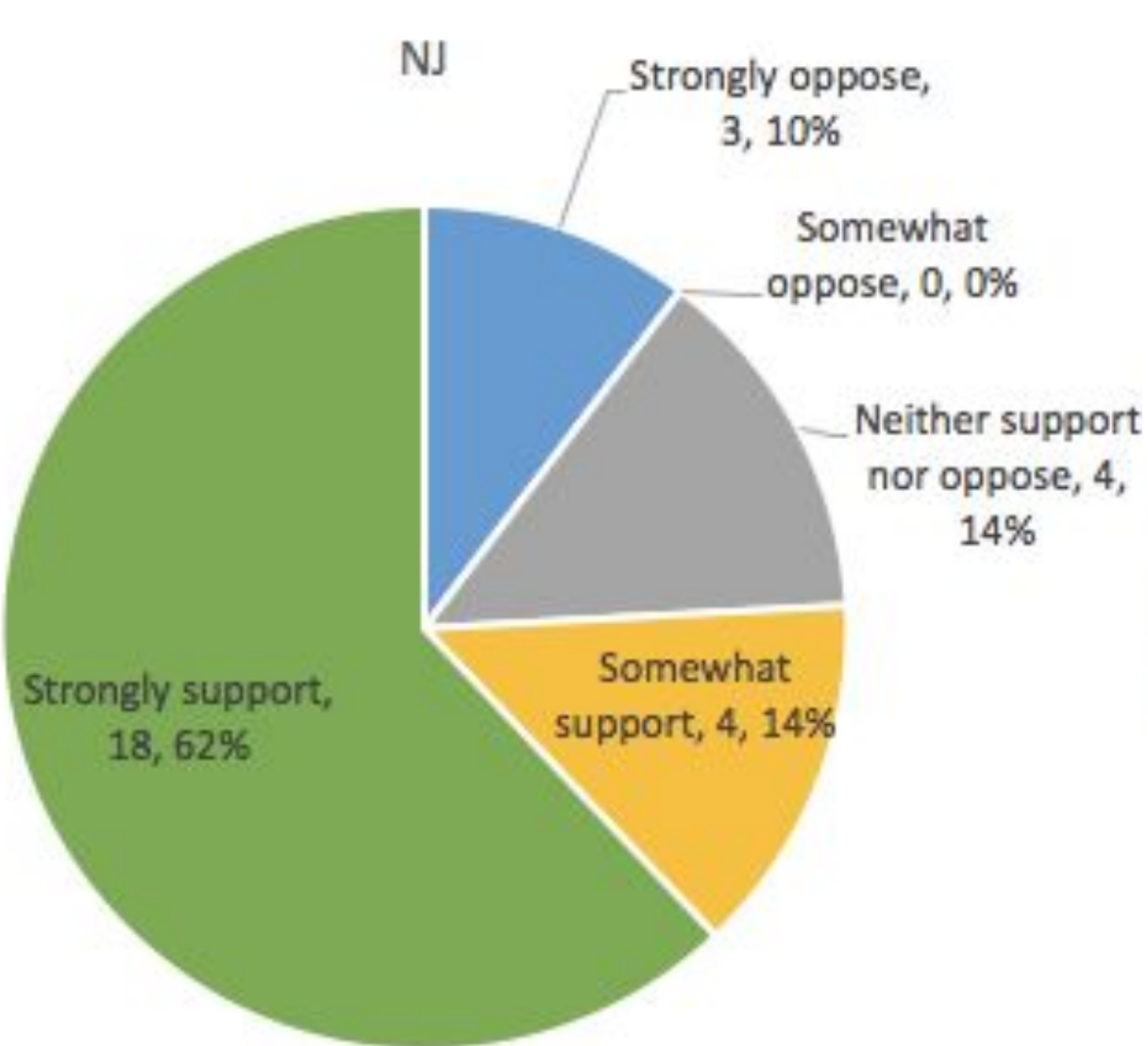
Themes

Why do you think a physical reference desk is or is not necessary in a library?

Theme: Visibility and reference desk as a connection point

*"Most importantly, it's the **only thing our university administrators can really see us doing**. We have to staff the reference desk. In fact, we have in our union contract that a faculty librarian be available all but 3 hours of the day the library is open. It's an easy way to **advocate for what we need in terms of staffing**."*

*"It does not have to be a reference desk, but a **physical desk** - reference alone or shared - is an **important indicator** for students where to ask questions."*

*"It is **good for students to see a librarian at the desk**. If they see one and they have a burning question, they would most likely come to the desk (esp. if the **librarian has a welcome smile**) instead of emailing, calling, or making an appointment with a librarian."*

*"It points out the **physical presence of a professional librarian**. It gives people a **face-to-face experience**. It's much more personal. We prefer not to rely on student employees nor paraprofessionals to assist people in order to **maintain the value of a professional librarian**. We do not have enough regular contact with academic departments nor classes to rely on consult-only reference assistance."*

Why do you think a physical reference desk is or is not necessary in a library?

Theme: Not enough questions to justify a desk; desk intimidating to users/not open during all hours of operation

*"I think a **reference desk intimidates some students**. In our library instruction, we tell students that if they have a question to stop by and we strive to have a welcoming atmosphere. But what is happening is that students are not always available to meet or stop by with a specific librarian. **Limiting availability** is one thing that turns some of our students away from using the library."*

*"A lot of these classes occur at night or are online, which is **not compatible to our librarian hours**. If they need assistance at night, they can Chat or speak with one of our part-time circulation supervisors and if they need research assistance, they are directed to reach out to their liaison librarian. In the end, **they are more likely to call or e-mail their liaison librarian**."*

Why do you think a physical reference desk is or is not necessary in a library?

Theme: Library flow and design; non-librarian desk staffing

*"Another dilemma that we see at both of our campus libraries is that the **reference desk takes up prime real estate** in the libraries... More and more students want to work at large tables in order to spread out and we have noted that we could fit more group study tables in our reference nook if we 1). **cut down the size of the desk** or 2). **get rid of it all together**. At the smaller branch...the **desk takes up space** that could be used for additional computer workstations or even a group study table."*

*"Most students who want **in-person help will ask at the first service desk** they see, which is usually the circulation/access services desk. From there they **can be directed to a librarian** if necessary."*

*"...Although the model may need to change and become more of a **hybrid where students, interns, and staff** cover the desk. I think librarians should still cover the desk during potentially busy times, for example, the beginning of the fall semester when students are beginning to orient themselves to both the library and campus."*

In the future (10 years out), where do you see reference services going?

Theme: Embrace new space including virtual; make changes to service models and investigate student needs

"On demand and online."

*"I feel that reference services will be **more mobile within the library**. Instead of a traditional desk, perhaps librarians could have a reference docking station…The goal being that a librarian can be more centered inside the library, a hub, so students can access the librarian a bit better…**reference needs to expand** and be on all floors of libraries so that students get get access without having to uproot themselves from their work areas."*

Continuing to be at point-of-need, however that is defined (chat services, email, inside LMS, physically inside the library, physically outside the library wherever students and faculty are found).

*"**Intuitive, precision search tools** that are easily used by the average academic patron will become a significant need in academic libraries. This will become an important area for research and development in the future."*

*"I would like to see **reference be more targeted** to specific needs and integrated into the classroom setting **via the syllabus**."*

In the future (10 years out), where do you see reference services going?

Theme: Anxieties over losing reference

"Downhill, alas.Google is winning."

*"I feel that in the future reference desks are going to be **phased out due to "cost-cutting" measures :("***

*"...As more and more digital information becomes available, the **shotgun approach to searching** via discovery tools like Proquest's Summon or Ebsco's Discovery Service will become more problematic as patron are more **overwhelmed** with the amount of results... with many **off target** results."*

*"...if prognosticators have their way and **in-person** reference service is eliminated, the **student experience will be greatly diminished**."*

In the future (10 years out), where do you see reference services going?Please specify

Theme: Desk Models and Staffing

*"...I see the **appointment-based model** that we enacted three years ago continuing -- perhaps enhanced with **virtual services (also scheduled) via Adobe Connect** or the like….we've seen a decrease in the number of directional questions, and an **increase in in-depth reference interactions**...this model has allowed us to provide a deeper level of assistance while developing rapport and relationships with students in a face-to-face context…"*

*"I think ultimately there will be **one point of service**--circ, reference and technology all at one spot. It can be confusing to users (and costly) to maintain separate service points. A **high % of hours are being staffed by students** at all three points--that will likely see some consolidation in the future."*

*"I think **access services staff** will handle in-person/virtual front line questions and refer more complicated research questions to subject librarians."*

*"...Our belief that in-person reference/research services is vitally important is **unwavering**."*

*"Students still need the guidance of an expert for good searches, information literacy and support. There will **always be a need** for this type of in-person, hands on help."*

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Statistical Takeaways: Reference Model and Staffing

- National statistics show they are shifting from a traditional reference model
- NJ has lower usage of student workers/non-librarian staff
- NJ has a higher reliance on part-time/adjunct librarians
- Not many librarians providing reference
- Both NJ and National statistics show 37% of respondents think their reference desk gets mostly reference questions

Statistical Takeaways: Value

- 59% of National respondents rank the value of a physical reference desk at 8 or above
- 79% of NJ respondents rank the value of a physical reference desk at 8 or above
- 10% of National respondents rank the value or a physical reference desk below a 3
- 3% of NJ respondents rank the value of a physical reference desk below a 3
- Both NJ and National statistics show approximately 75% of respondents support maintaining a physical reference desk

Directions for Future Research

- National Data Presented at ALA in June 2020
- International Survey
- Student needs assessment
- Perceptions vs reality
  - Deepdive in statistics (ACRL statistics, new modes of data collection)
  - Engage staff in conversation

Questions for Discussion

- Should we keep a desk if just over ⅓ of questions are reference?
  - How does this affect other things librarians are doing across campus?
  - Does the evolving role of the reference librarian merit maintaining a physical reference desk?
- What is the librarian intrinsic value of the physical reference desk? How is it helping our students and our community at large?
- Comments did not always mirror the data in conjunction with value rankings. How does language/wording affect your opinions?
- What do students want?
- Conservative projections for the future. Can we as a profession use more imagination?

Contact Information

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