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Reframing Reference Services: Perceptions and futures of the reference desk, findings from a mixed-methods survey of United States academic libraries

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Reframing Reference Services:

Perceptions and futures of the reference desk, findings from a mixed-methods survey of United States academic libraries

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Outline

- Background
- Statistics
- Takeaways
- 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)
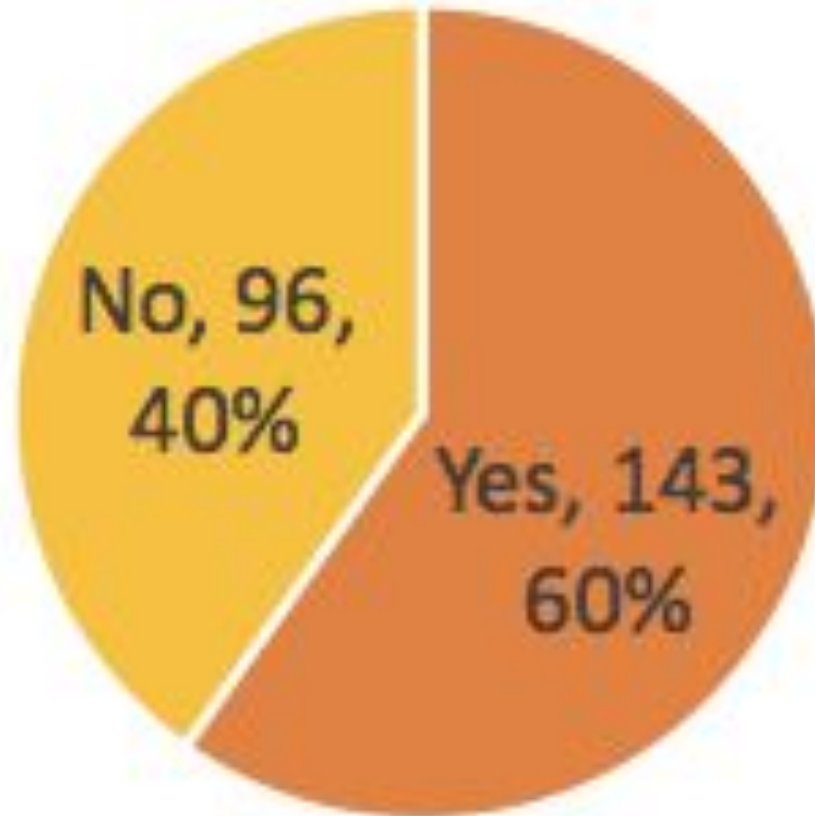- Made slight changes to survey based on initial data collection
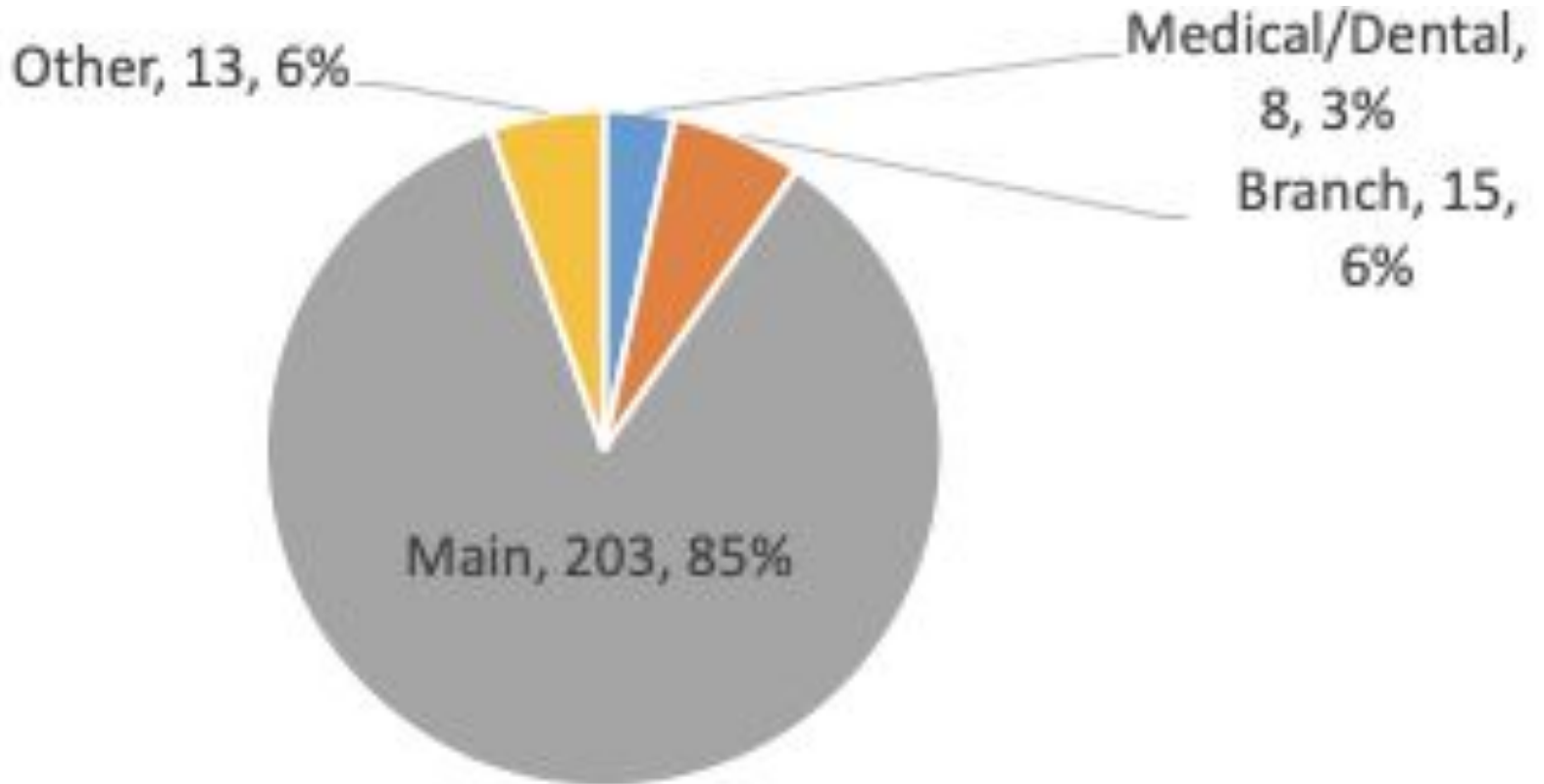
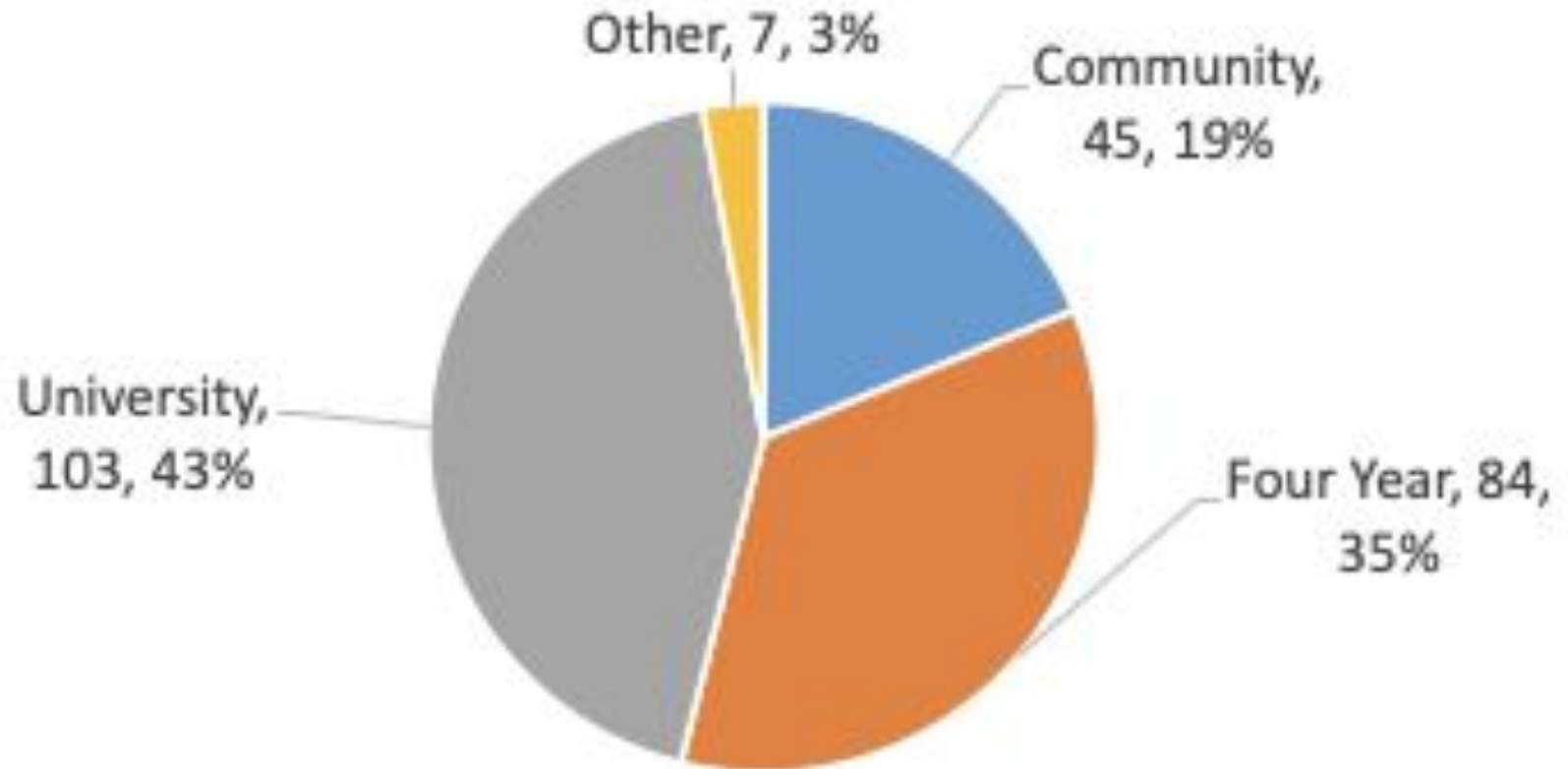# Survey Respondents: Public vs. Private
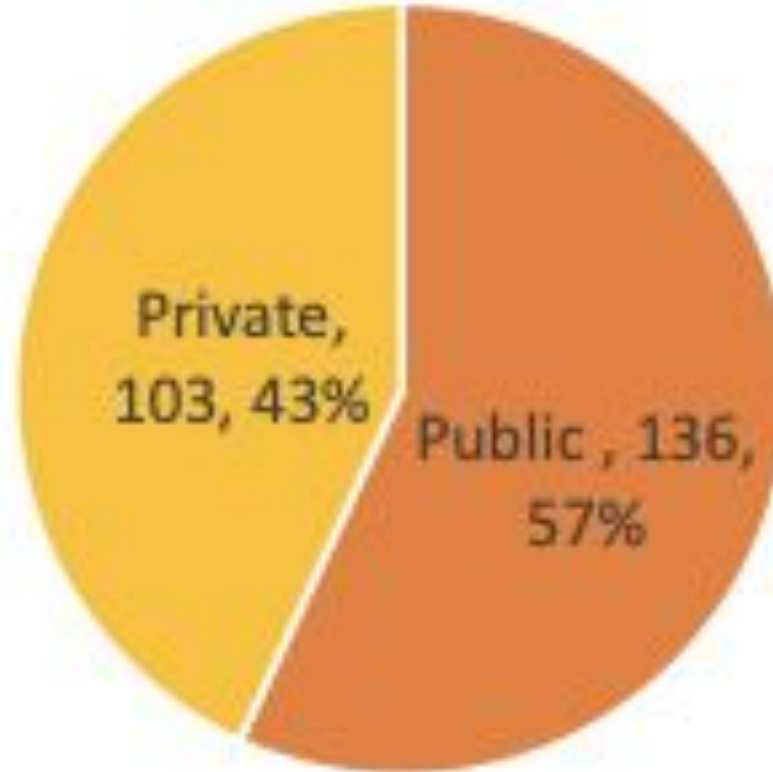
Survey Respondents: Faculty Status

Survey Respondents: Type of Library

Other, 13, 6%

Medical/Dental, 8, 3%

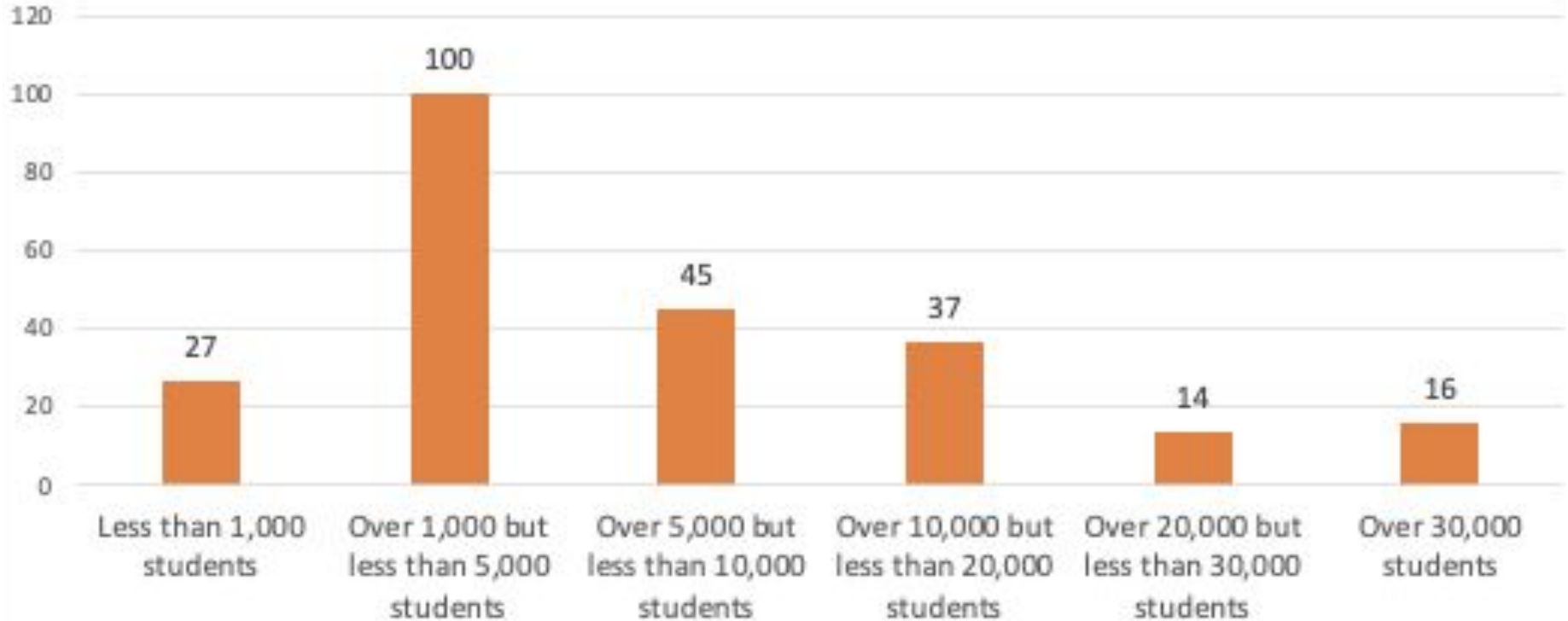Branch, 15, 6%

Main, 203, 85%

Survey Respondents: Type of Institution
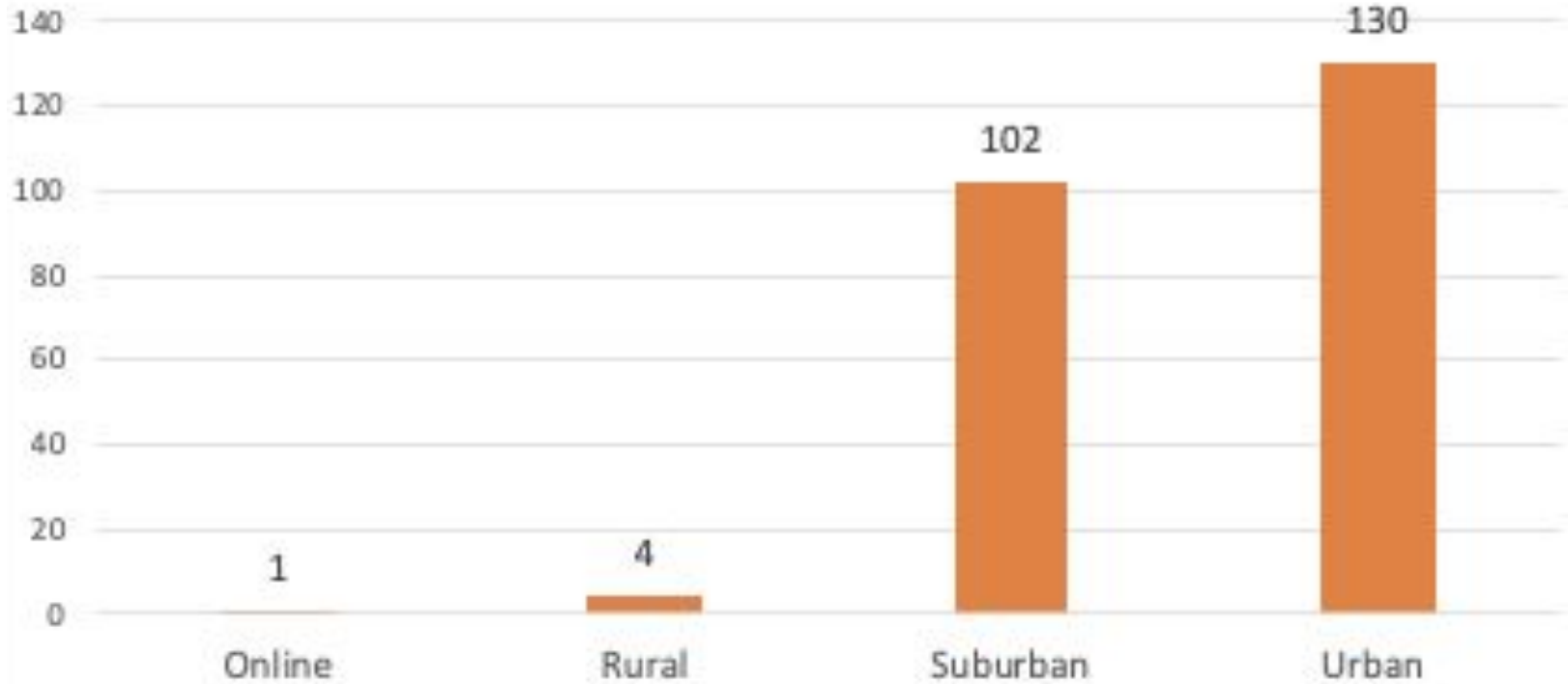
Survey Respondents: Student FTE

Survey Respondents: Urban/Suburban/Rural

Rural: 2,500 or less   **Suburban: 2,501-49,999**   **Urban: More than 50,000**

Source: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural/2010-urban-rural.html

Survey Respondents: Regional Breakdown

West, 27, 11%
Midwest, 60, 25%
South, 68, 29%
Northeast, 84, 35%
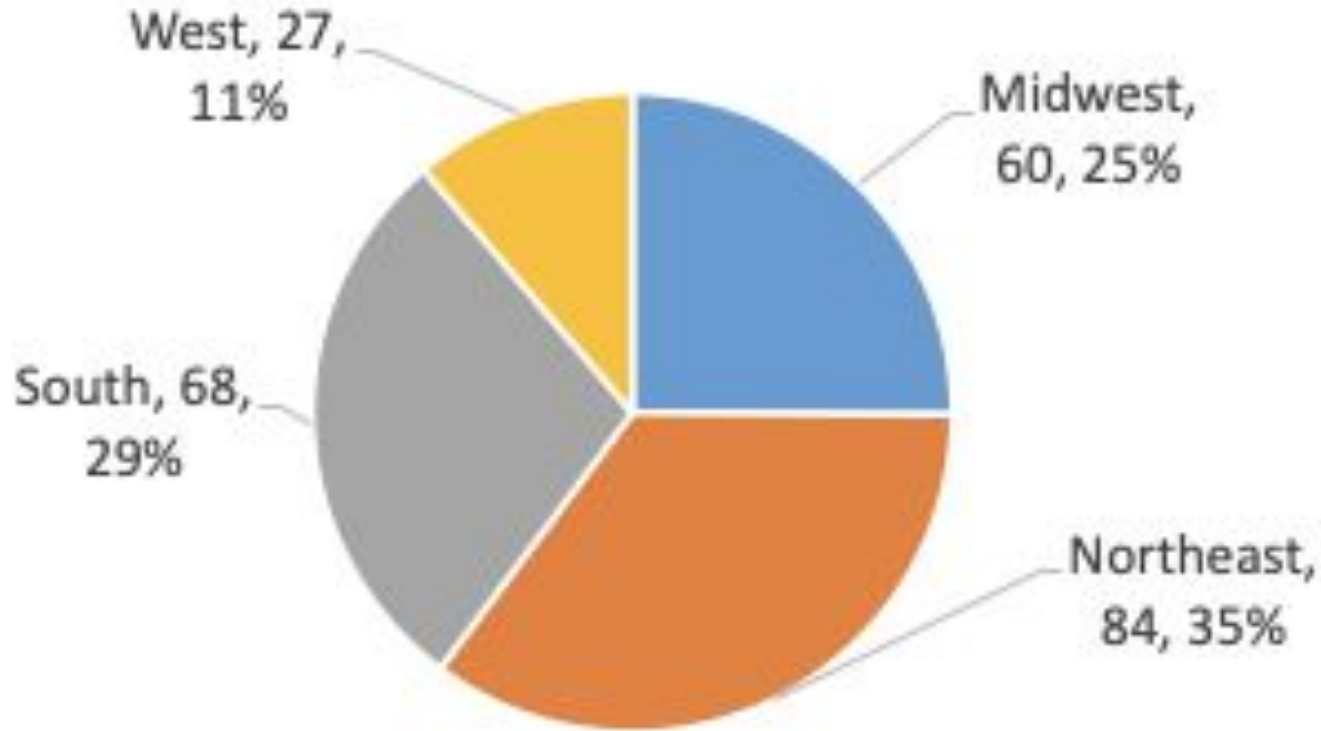
Source: https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf

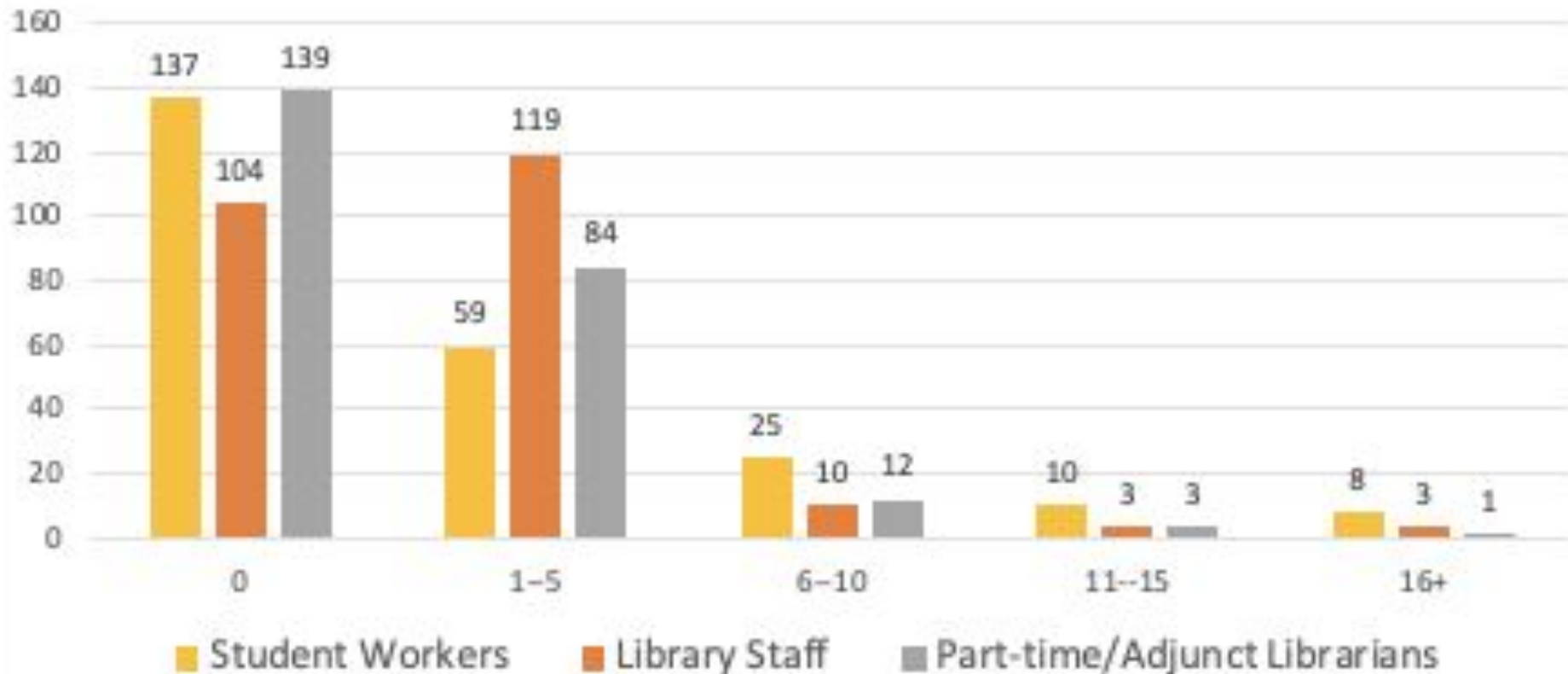Do you have student workers (undergraduate or graduate) answering reference questions?

Do you have library staff (non-librarians) answering reference questions?

Survey Respondents: # of Non-librarian Staff at the Reference Desk

What are pros or cons of using non-librarians to answer reference questions?

How many full-time librarians provide reference services? 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8; 9-10; 11+
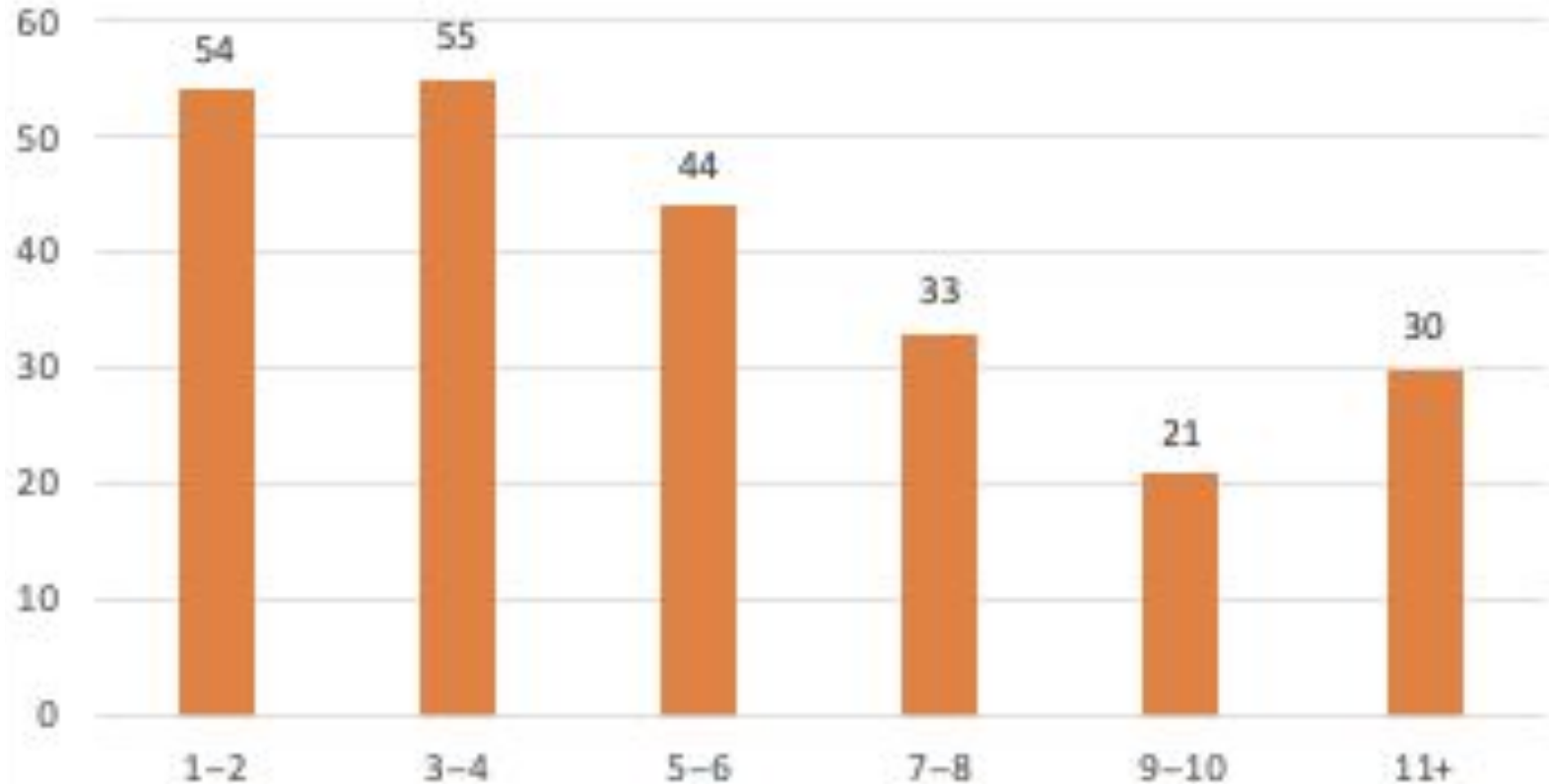
How much time do you spend in a typical week on answering reference questions (in person, virtual, email, etc.)? 0-20%; 21-40%; 41-60%; 61-80%; 81-100%

Survey Respondents: # of Librarians providing reference

What is your current reference desk model? No current physical reference desk; Traditional; Share Services; Information Commons

Survey Respondents: Current Desk Model

No physical reference desk, 34, 14%

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

Shared Services, 81, 34%

Traditional, 108, 45%
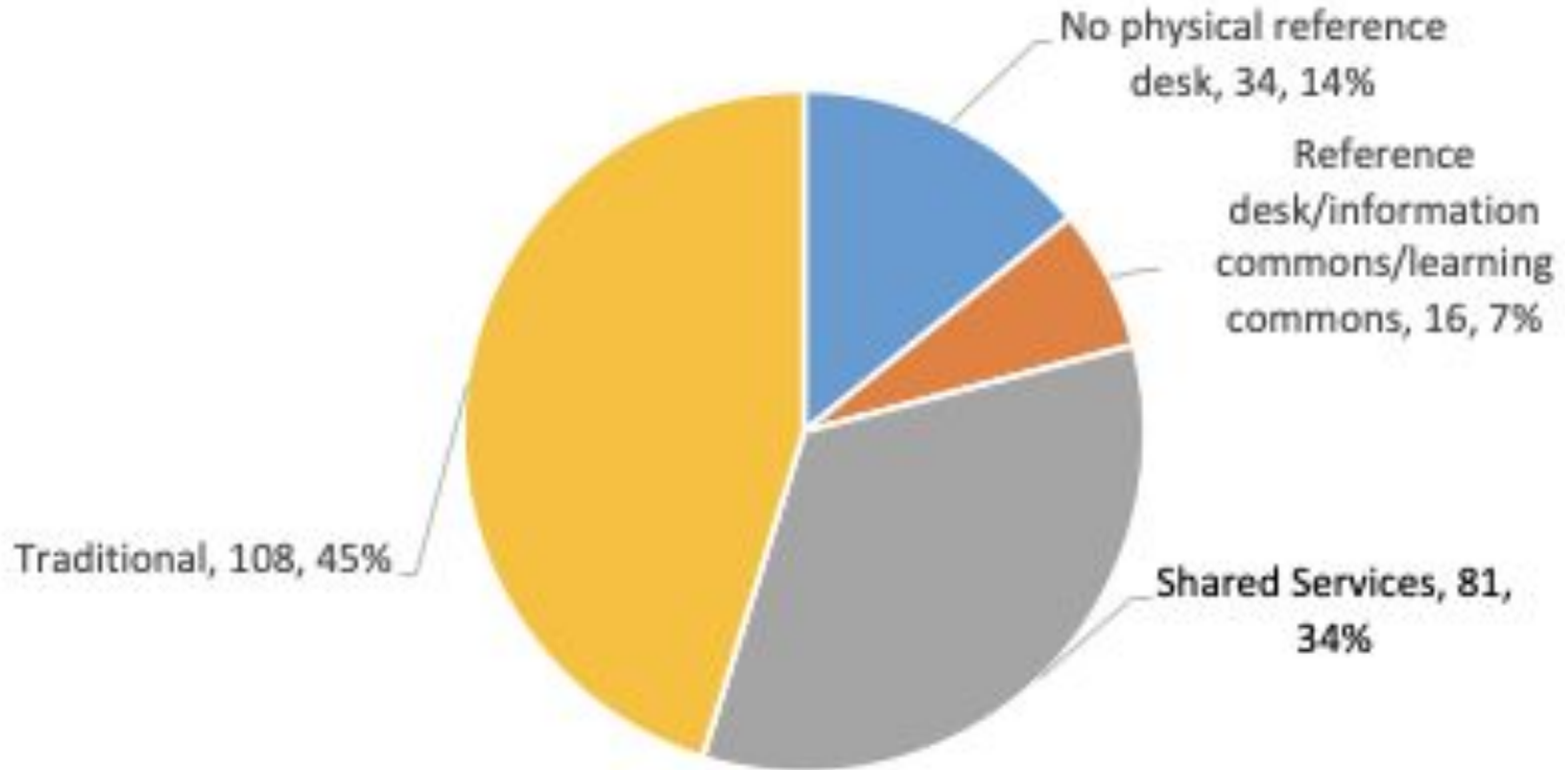
Do Librarians staff your reference desk (if applicable)?

Survey Respondents: Do librarians staff the desk?

No, 35, 17%

Yes, 171, 83%
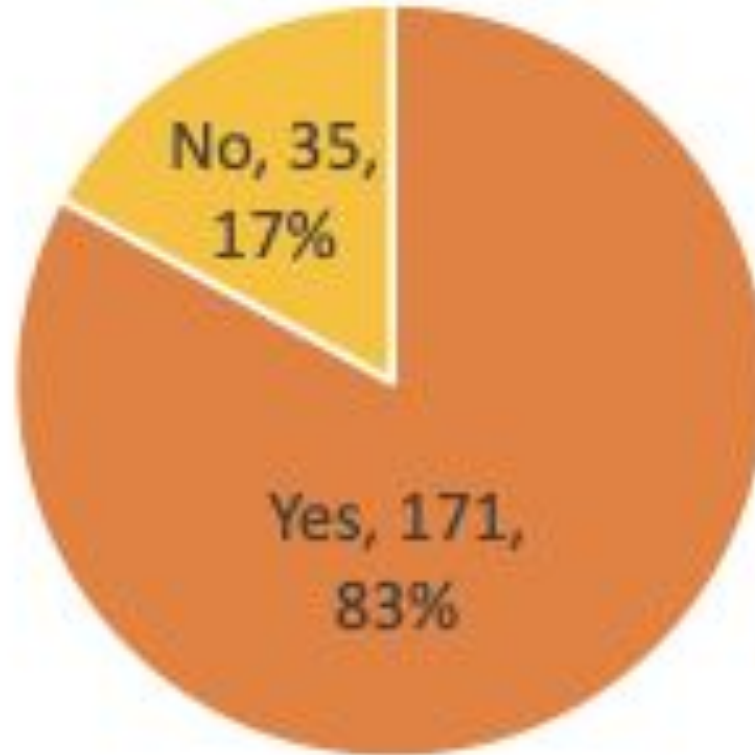
What are the origins of your current desk model?

What percentage of the questions asked at the reference desk are reference questions (this excludes directional questions, like asking about the printer and where the bathroom is located)? 0-20% 21-40% 41-60% 61-80% 81-100%

Survey Respondents: % of Reference Questions asked

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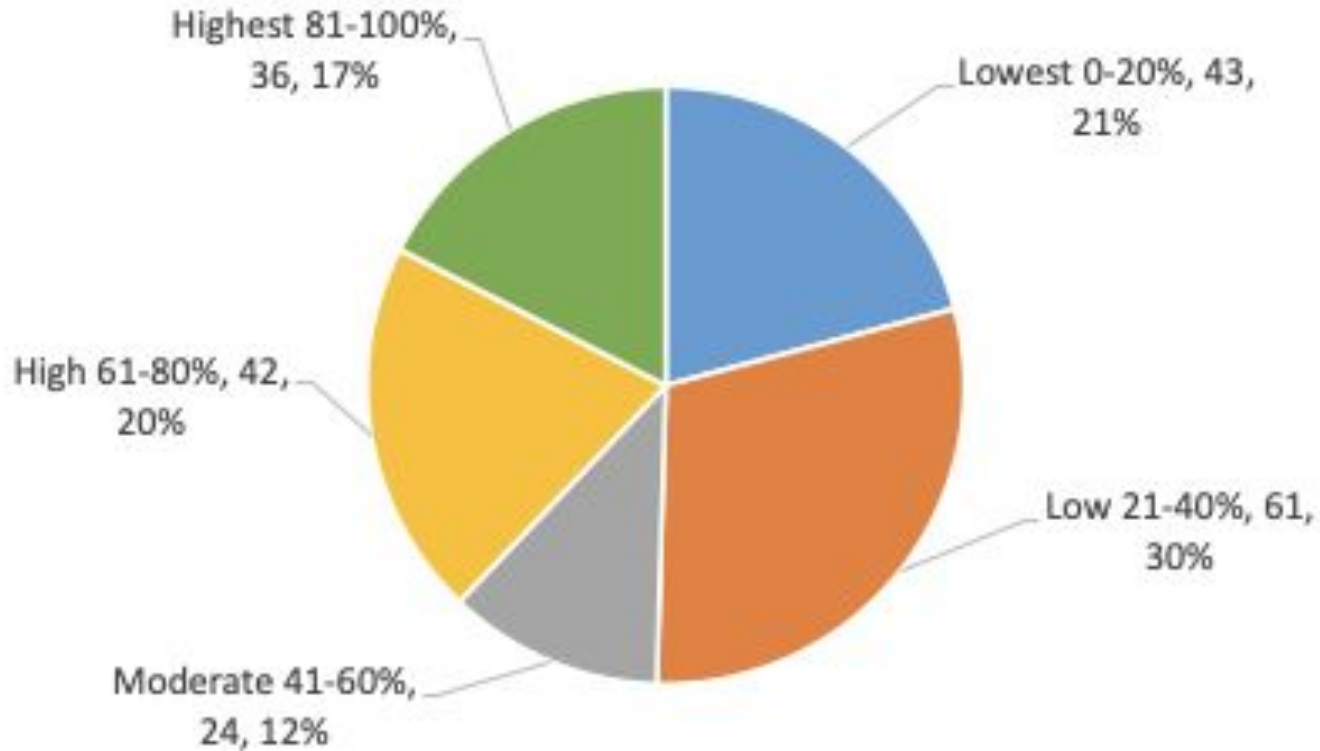
■ Lowest 0-20% ■ Low 21-40% ■ Moderate 41-60% ■ High 61-80% ■ Highest 81-100%

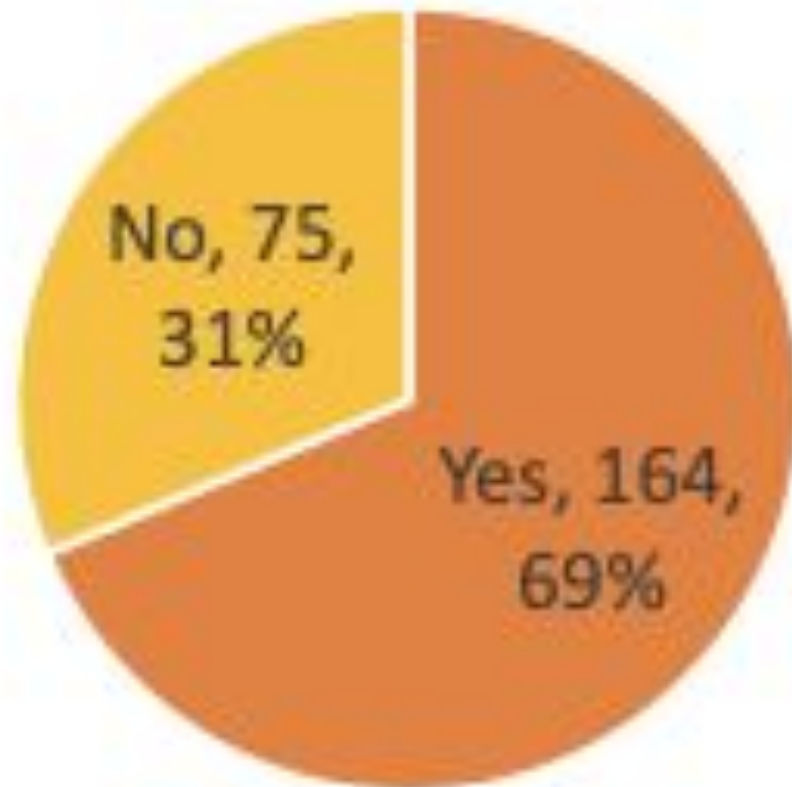How if at all do you track statistics on your reference questions? Do you make any changes based on the statistics (data-driven decision making). What have you learned?

Is a physical reference desk necessary?

Survey Respondents: Is a physical reference desk necessary?

No, 75, 31%

Yes, 164, 69%
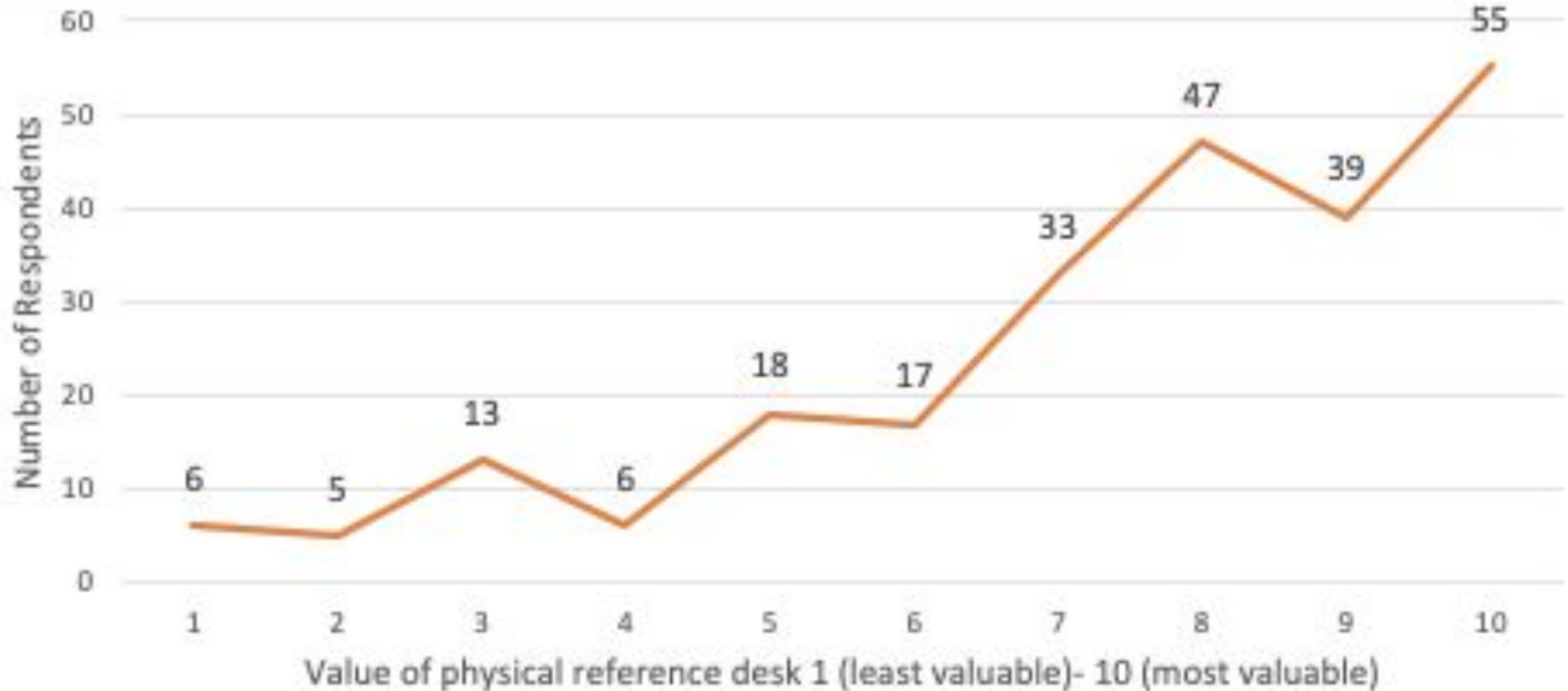
From 1 (least valuable) to 10 (most valuable) how much do you value a physical reference desk?

Survey Respondents: Value of a physical reference desk
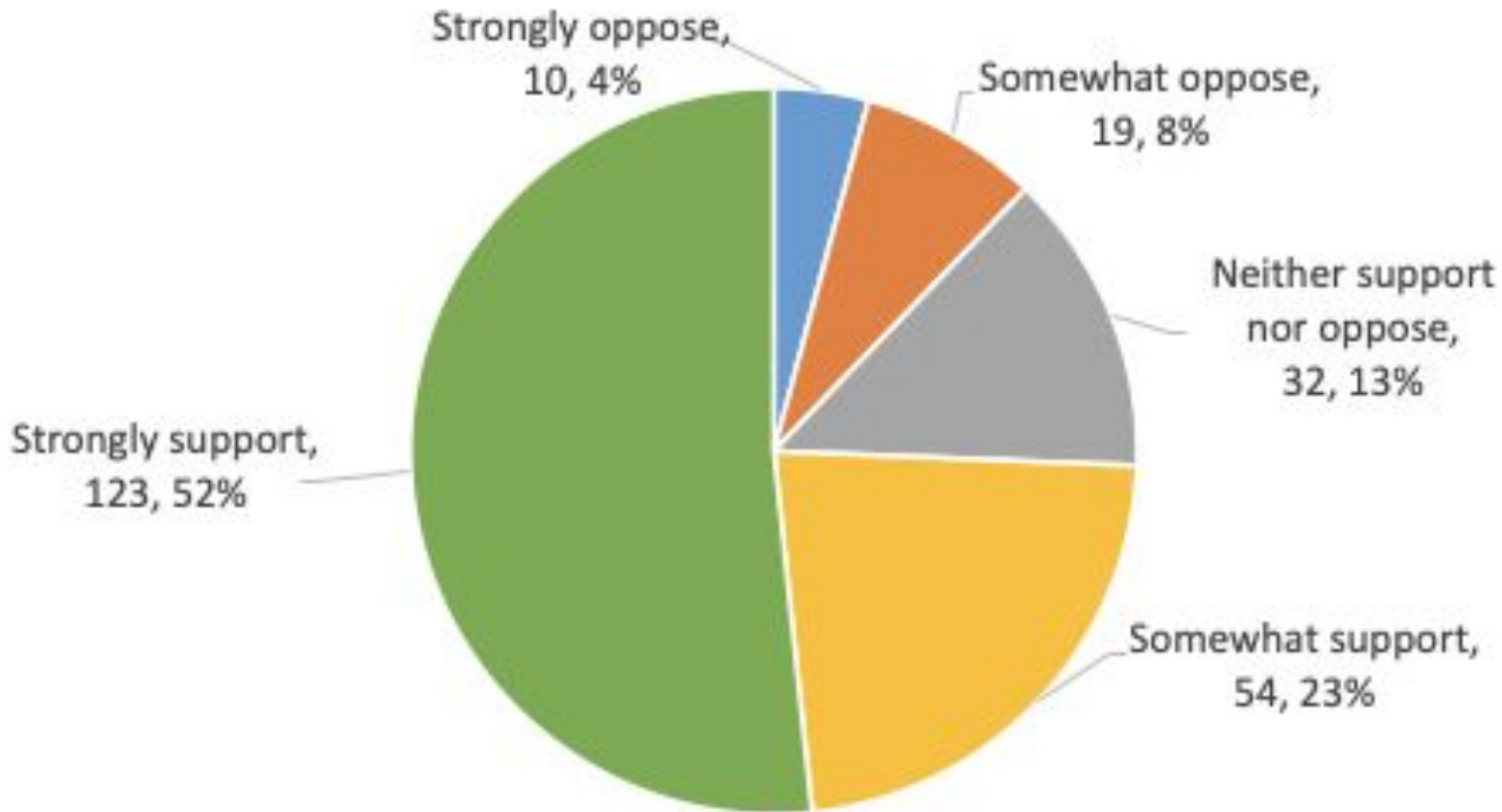
Do you support maintaining a physical reference desk? Strongly Support; Somewhat Support; Neither Support nor Oppose; Somewhat Oppose; Strongly Oppose

Survey Respondents: Do you support maintaining a physical reference desk?

Since the pandemic has driven services online, what has been your reference experience? Are you getting similar questions? What are the commonly asked questions? Has your pandemic experience changed your perspective on the need for a physical reference desk?

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Takeaways

- Statistics show while some people are using different desk models, the traditional reference desk is still prominent
- 37% of respondents think their reference desk gets mostly reference questions
- 59% of respondents rank the value of a physical reference desk at 8 or above
- 10% of respondents rank the value or a physical reference desk below a 3
- Statistics show approximately 75% of respondents support maintaining a physical reference desk

Directions for Future Research

- International Survey
- Student needs assessment
- Perceptions vs reality
  - Short follow-up survey for detailed reference stats
- Engage staff in conversation

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