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### Facing the Future: New directions for the reference desk based on findings from mixed-methods survey of United States academic libraries

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# Facing the Future

New directions for the reference desk based on findings from a mixed-methods survey of United States academic libraries

ACRL, April 2021

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Ashley Lierman, Instruction and Education Librarian



# Outline

- Background
- Reference Landscape
- Takeaways
- Directions for Future Research



**Interactive portion of the presentation:**



<http://tiny.cc/eorutz>



# How to participate

## [Reference Model and Users](#)

Please answer the following, you can provide any identifying information you would like or leave that column blank. If a blank row does not exist, please add a row.

What is your pre-Covid reference model? Do you think your users are best served by this model? Why or why not?

Institution ( <b>optional</b> , but can provide for context, ie liberal arts college, research university, etc)	Pre-Covid Reference Model (ie traditional standalone desk, information commons, shared services, no desk)	Are your users best served by this model? Why or why not?
Research University- R2 ~20k students	No Desk	Yes, librarians are able to work on other projects and our requests are triaged by Access Services



# 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



# Background Data



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## Definitions

Reference Questions- non-directional questions requiring help

Directional Questions- questions asking about where something is located (either physical item or place)

Traditional Reference Desk- stand-alone reference desk where a librarian sits for a scheduled period of time and waits for users to approach with questions

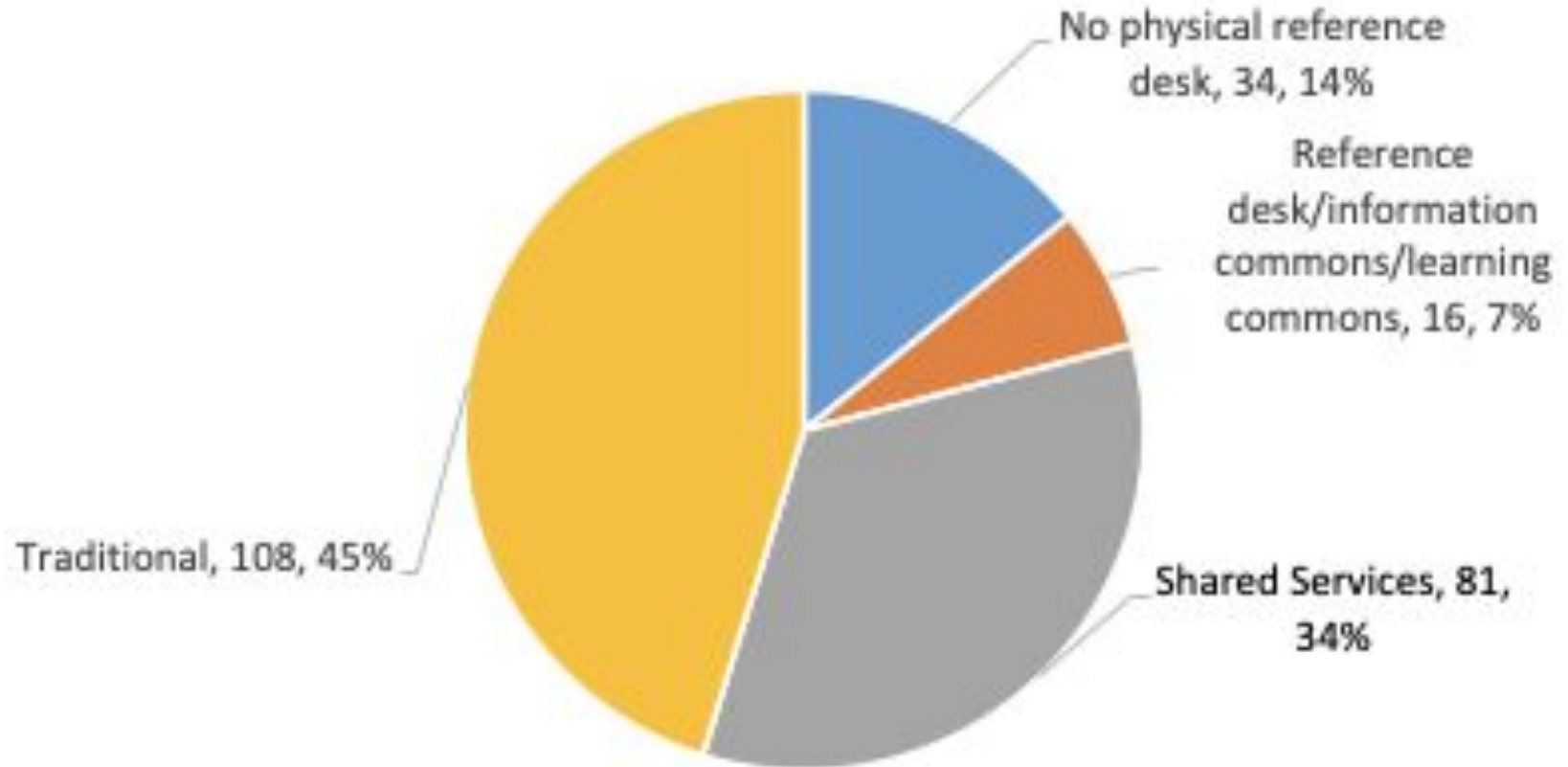
Shared Services Desk- a desk providing reference services in combination with other services such as circulation or technology help

Info Commons- a reference desk as part of a suite of technology-focused services





# Survey Respondents: Current Desk Model



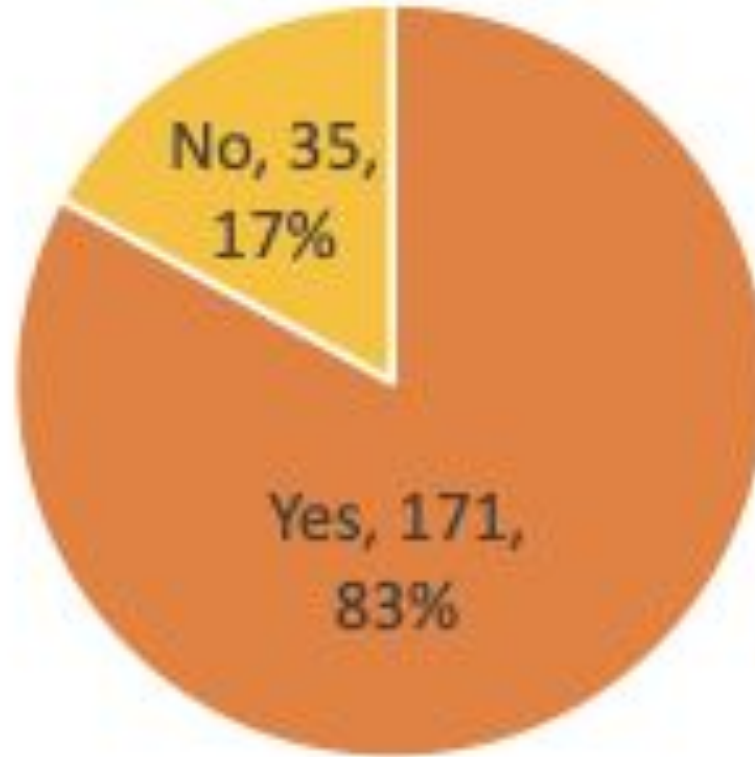


## Reference Patterns

- Statistics show while some people are using different desk models, the traditional reference desk is still prominent
- The majority of reference desks use librarians to provide reference services
- The majority of libraries had 1-4 librarians staffing the reference desk

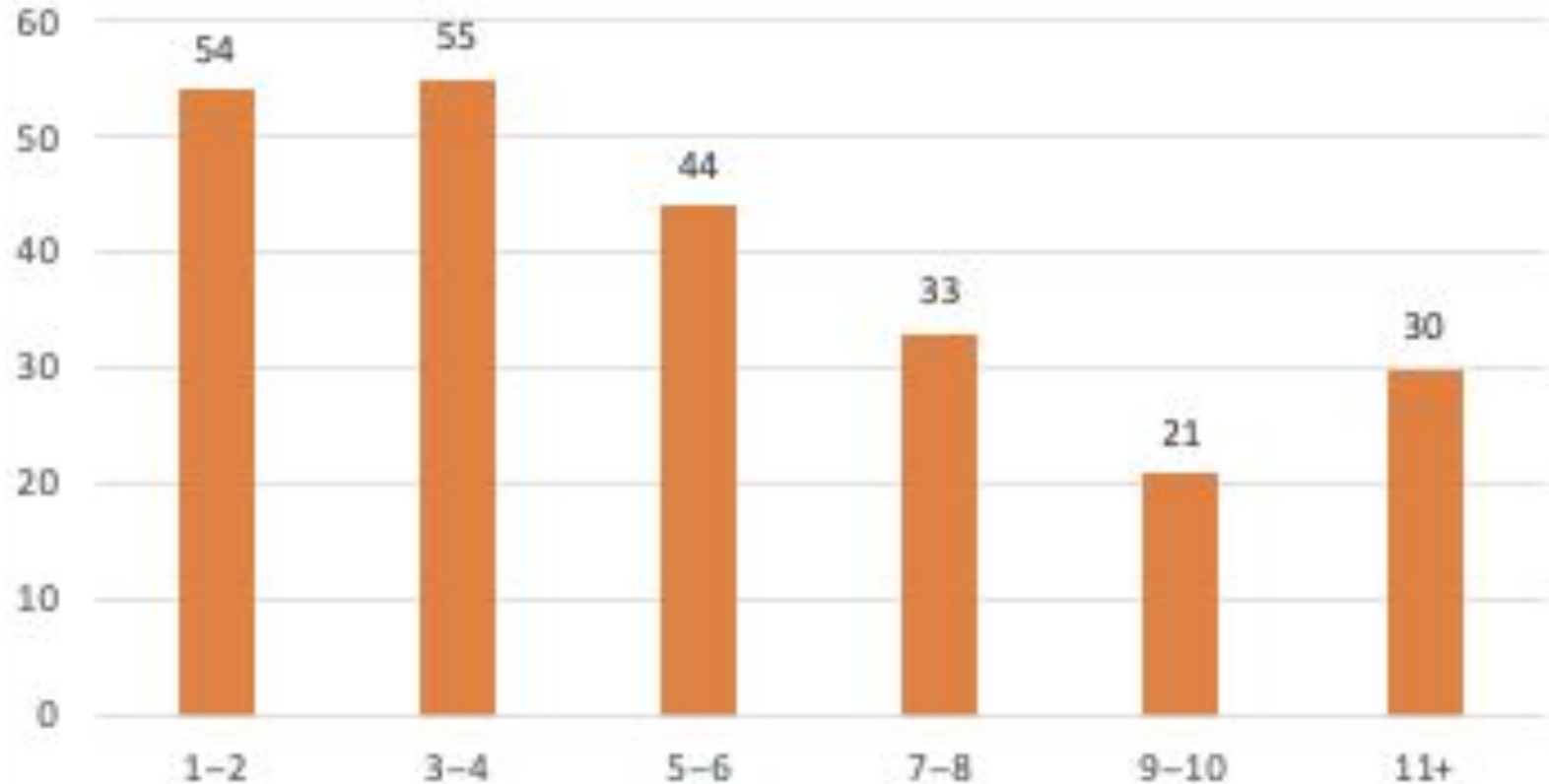


## Survey Respondents: Do librarians staff the desk?

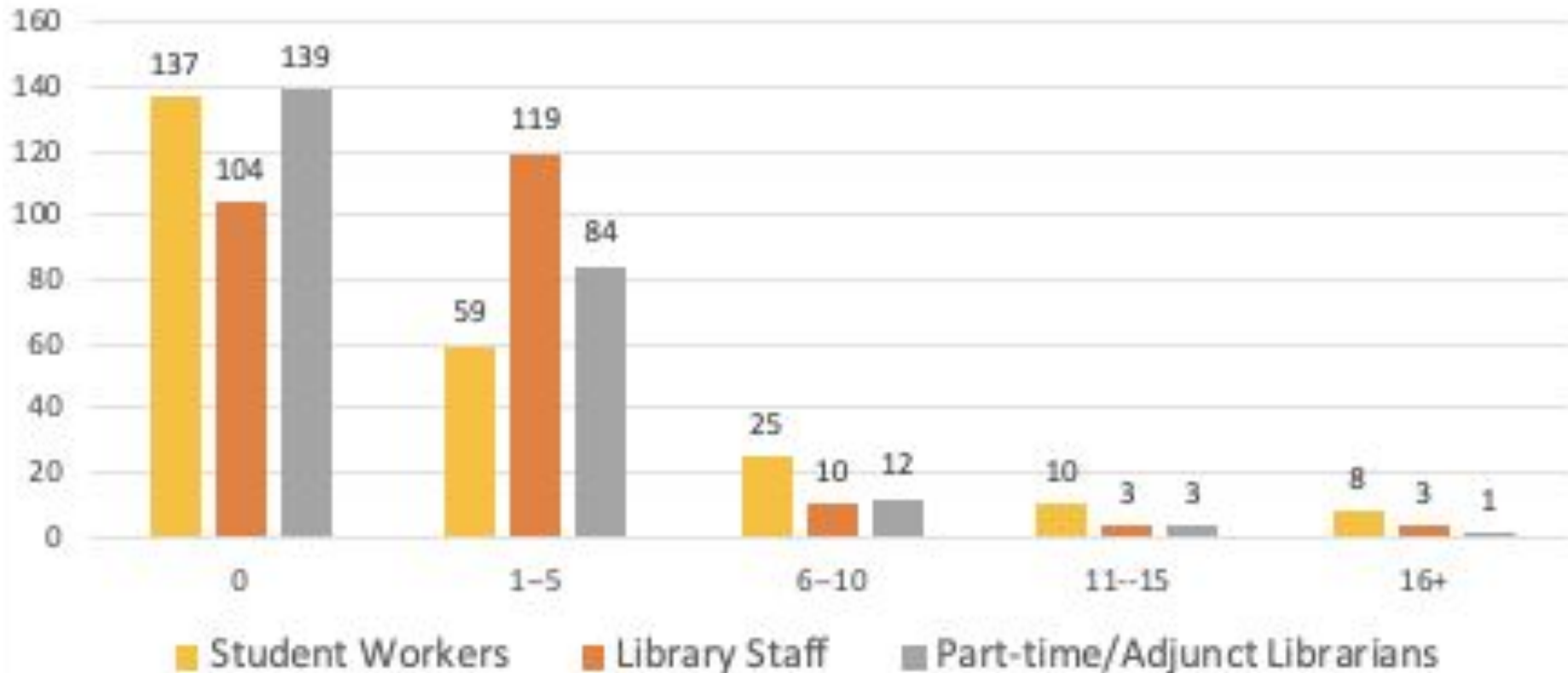




# Survey Respondents: # of Librarians providing reference

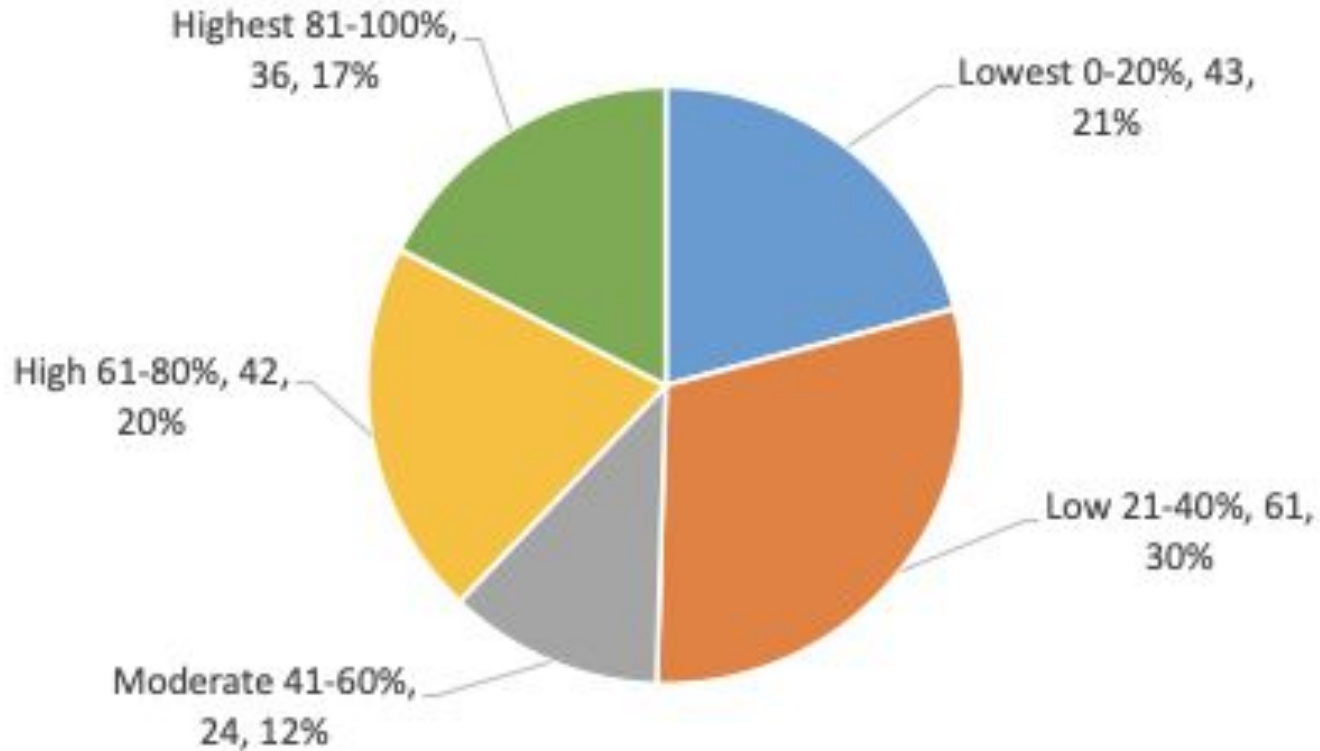


# Survey Respondents: # of Non-librarian Staff at the Reference Desk





# Survey Respondents: % of Reference Questions asked



■ Lowest 0-20% ■ Low 21-40% ■ Moderate 41-60% ■ High 61-80% ■ Highest 81-100%



## Questions asked at the Reference Desk

Our scale for measuring % of reference questions: five categories: lowest (0-20%), low (21-40%), moderate (41-60%), high (61-80%), and highest 81-100%)

- 51% of reference questions asked at reference desk are deemed low/lowest category. (n=104 out of 206)
- 37% of respondents think their reference desk gets mostly reference questions (n=76 out of 206)
- 12% answered moderate range (n=24 out of 206)

*Note: 33 respondents do not have a reference desk, no answers*



## Questions asked at the Reference Desk

- No correlation between # of librarians who provide reference services and the % of reference questions received.
- The larger the student population, the more full-time librarians answer reference questions.
- Libraries with higher numbers of staff (non-librarians) providing reference were more likely to perceive a higher percentage of reference questions asked at the desk (rather than directional questions).





## Interactive Question #1

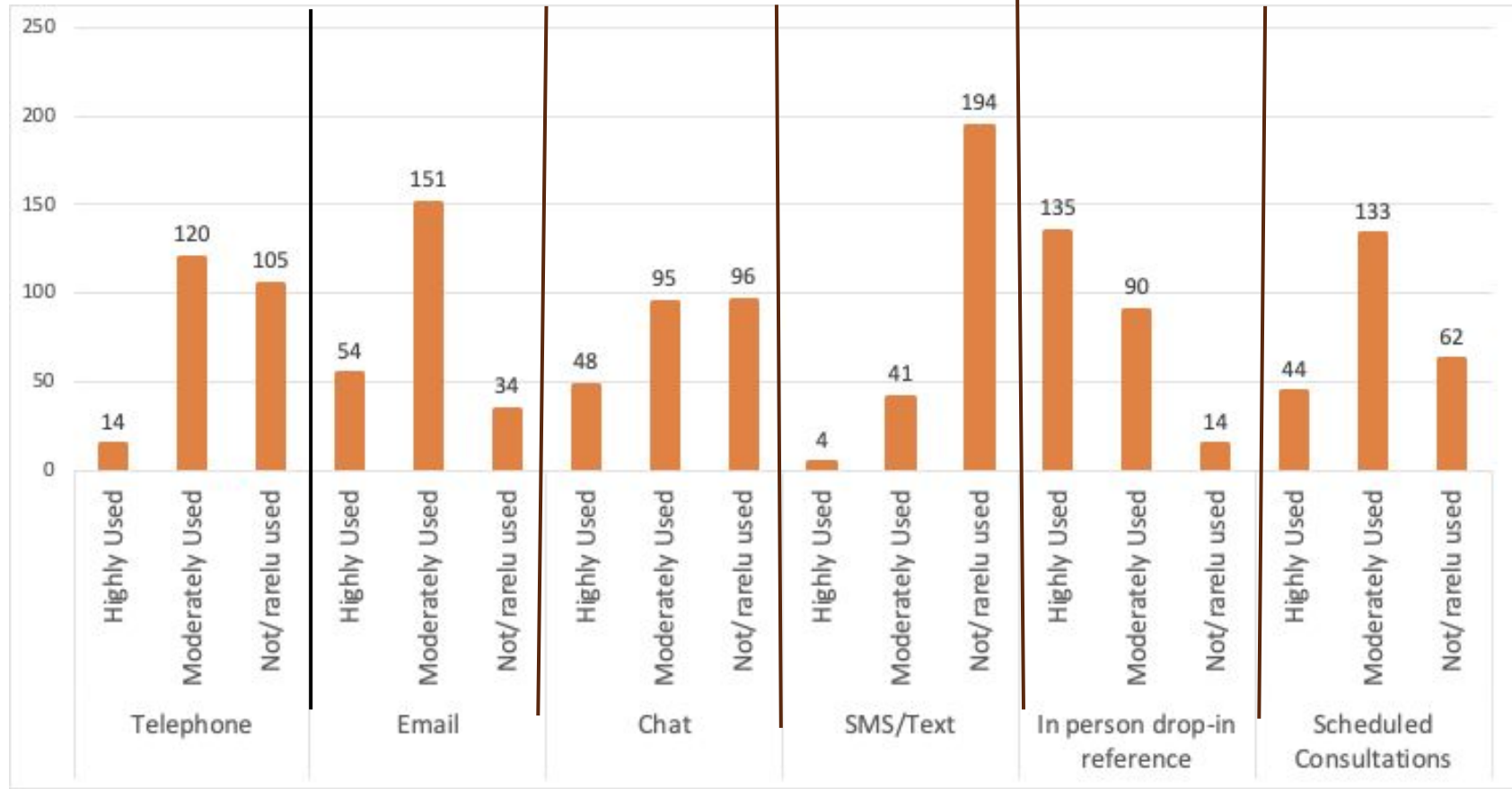
What is your pre-Covid reference model? Do you think your users are best served by this model? Why or why not?



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# Librarian's Perceptions of Reference Service Use





## How Librarians are contacted for help

- By far, the least likely used form of reference is Text/SMS with over 81% saying it's rarely or never used
- Telephone is next with nearly 44% of respondents saying it's rarely or never used, followed by chat at 40%
- Respondents rate in-person drop-in reference as the most used, with 56% of respondents saying it was highly used and 38% saying it was moderately used
- Email is next with almost 23% of respondents stating its highly used and 63% of respondents state it is moderately used



## Reference Desk Usage

Of those with a physical reference desk who state that in-person drop in reference is highly used:

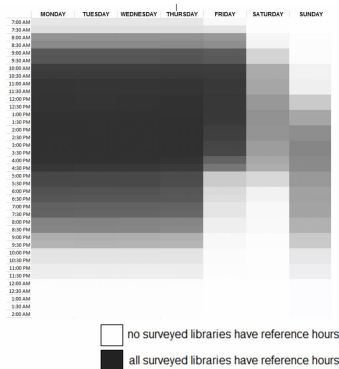
- Nearly half of the respondents (47.5%) say that 40% or less of the questions asked at the desk are reference questions
- Less than half of the respondents (40%) say that the questions asked at the reference desk are mostly (60% or above) reference questions



# Reference Desk Hours

- Reference hours are remarkably consistent, very similar patterns
- Few libraries had Friday night hours
- For weekends, Saturday mornings and Sunday afternoons are popular for holding reference desk hours
- Most reference hours stopped by 9 pm Monday-Thursday

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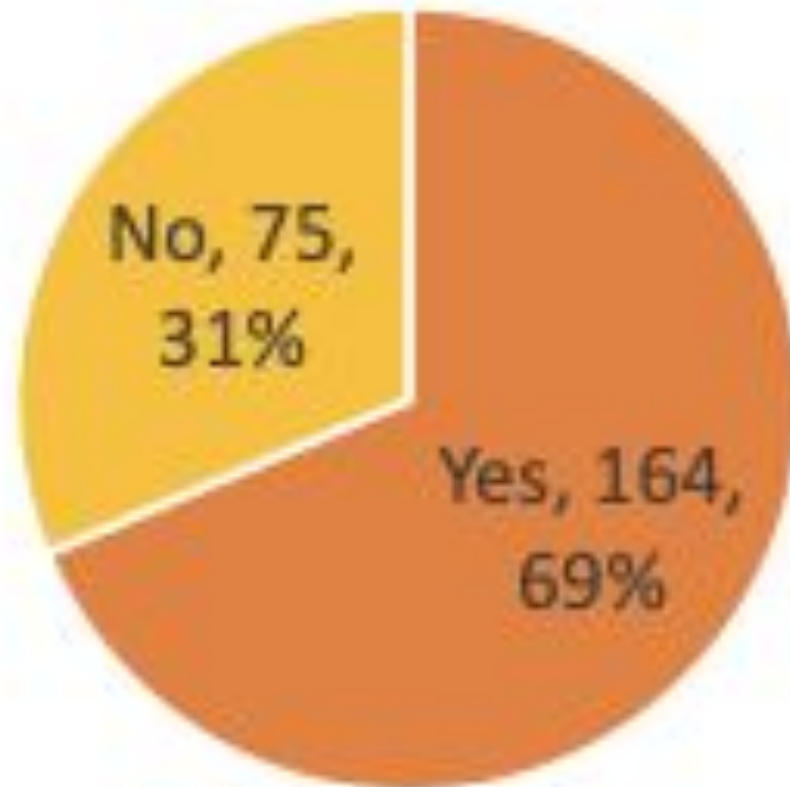
## Interactive Question #2

Do you or any of your colleagues feel strongly about keeping or eliminating the traditional standalone reference desk? Why or why not?



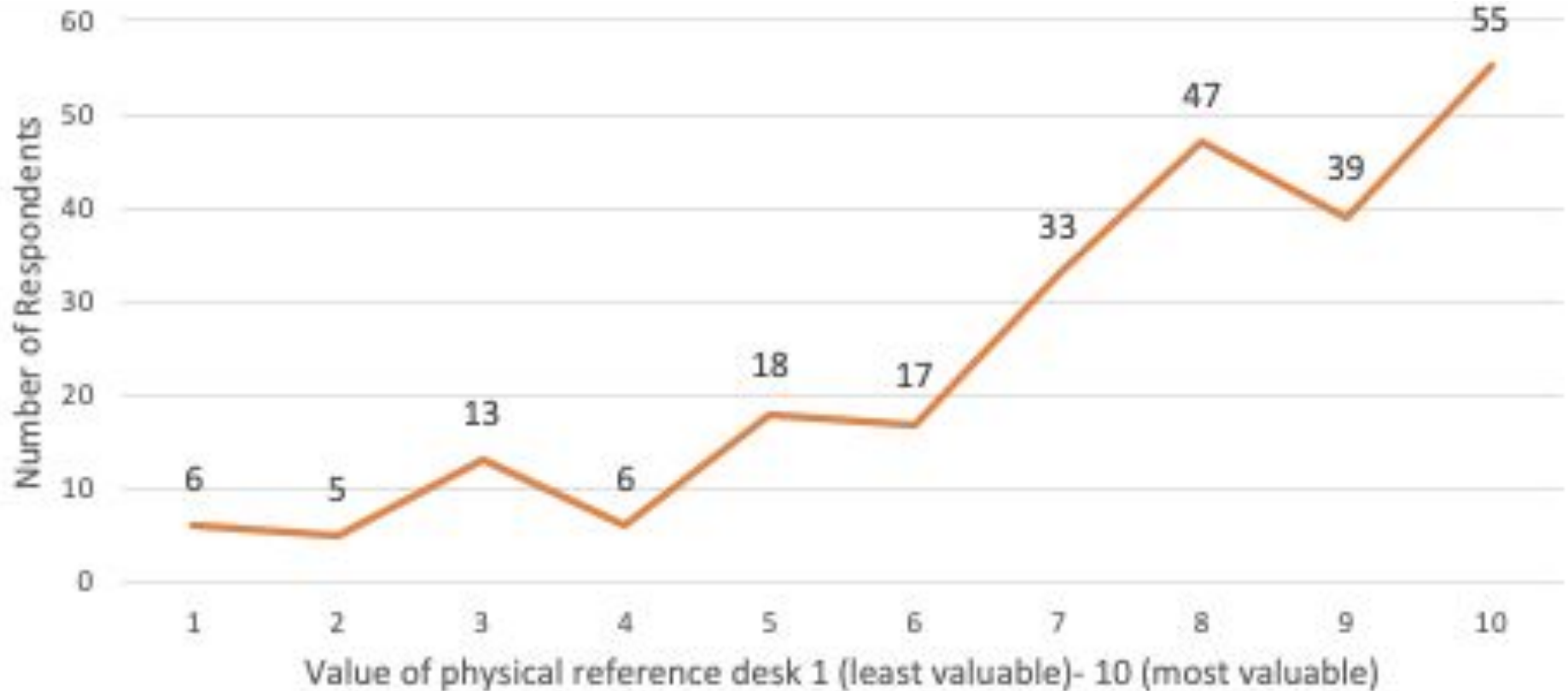
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# Survey Respondents: Is a physical reference desk necessary?





# Survey Respondents: Value of a physical reference desk







# Librarian perceptions of value and necessity

- 59% of respondents rank the value of a physical reference desk at 8 or above
- 10% of respondents rank the value of a physical reference desk below a 3
- 69% of respondents believe a physical reference desk is necessary, 31% believe it is not necessary
- Of respondents who said a physical reference desk is NOT necessary, 43% still ranked value of reference desk at a 6 or above, and only 19% ranked value below a 3



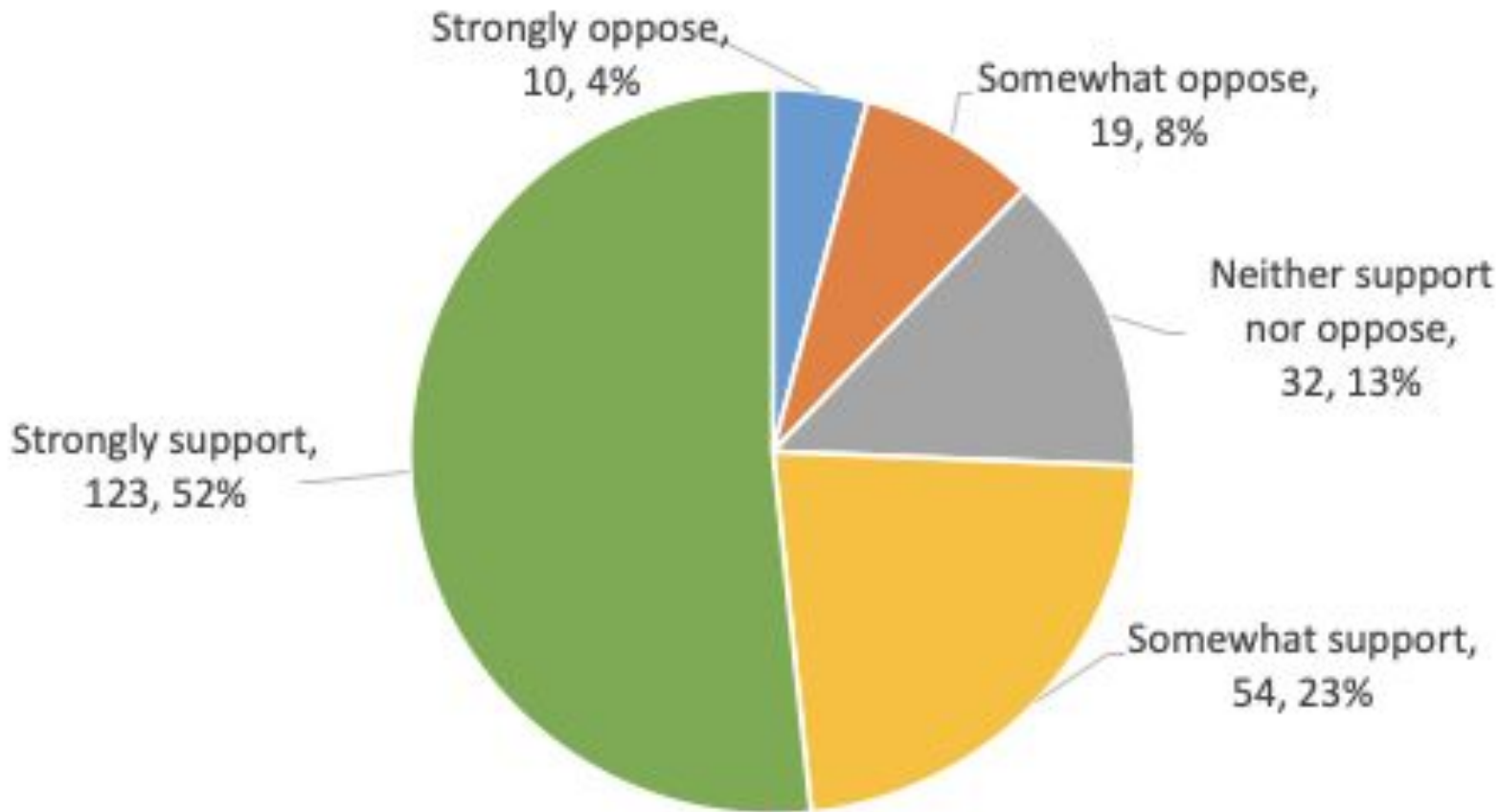
## Interactive Question #3

What have you learned from your reference services' transition/response during the Covid pandemic? Did you discover or embrace new ways of delivering reference services?



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





## Future of Reference Services

- Statistics show approximately 75% of respondents support maintaining a physical reference desk
- Strong positive correlation between supporting maintaining a physical reference desk and the value they placed on the desk (6 or above on a scale of 1-10)
- Respondents overwhelmingly thought a reference desk was necessary and strongly or somewhat supported maintaining a physical reference desk
- Of the 75 respondents who don't think a physical reference desk is necessary, 48 (64%) ranked its value at a 5 or higher



# 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?

## 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.”

30

“...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.”



## Interactive Question #4

Where do you see reference services in 10 years? Could any of your future ideas for reference be implemented now? What is keeping you from implementing them?



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## Directions for Future Research

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



## Contact Information

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# Questions?

<https://forms.gle/Xurgx9jmxekUmDBP6>

