

# Exit Desk Usage Study

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Fall Quarter 2009

**Northwestern University Library**

**Prepared by Tom McMahon**

During the Fall Quarter of Academic Year 2009-2010, statistics were taken to assess the usage of the Main Library's Exit Desk. As the Exit Desk had previously not kept usage statistics outside of gate counts, it is hoped that this study will enable the library to obtain a better perspective on the utility of maintaining such a public service point as well as to gain a better understanding of the information seeking behaviors of its user population.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Statistics were taken Monday through Friday between 12:45pm and 4:45pm, beginning on September 21 and ending on December 11. These periods of observation were punctuated by the observer's daily breaks, as well as weekly shifts at the Main Circulation Desk, during which the Exit Desk was staffed by security personnel and no statistics were taken. Additionally, no statistics were taken on one day the observer was ill (11/12/09), as well as two days during which the library was closed for Thanksgiving Break (11/26/09 and 11/27/09). Gaps in observation have been noted in daily transaction logs and were taken into consideration as the data were analyzed. Given these incongruencies in observation times, it was decided to assess use of the Exit Desk in terms of questions taken per hour (QpH) as opposed to per day or per week.

Questions received at the Exit Desk fall into three general categories for the purpose of this study:

**-Directional** – In which the patron simply wishes to know a location. Some examples of directional questions include<sup>1</sup>:

- Where is Deering?
- How do I get to the computer labs?
- Where is the Norris Center?

**-Policy** – In which the patron wishes to know the rules governing the use of the library. Examples include:

- How late is the library open?
- Can I come in if I am a Loyola student?
- Is food allowed in the library?

**-Procedural** – In which the patron wishes to know how to make use of the library's resources. Examples include:

- How can I print something?
- How do I find books/articles/CDs/DVDs?
- How do I check out a book?

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that this study includes questions about destinations both within and outside of the library.

In addition, the category of **Other** was used to denote patron inquiries that did not fit neatly into the preceding three categories. Examples of such questions include:

- What time is it?
- Could you check the weather for me?
- Could you look up a phone number for me?

A form was created to document all interactions between the observer and library patrons. The form (**SEE Appendix A**), was used to record the information regarding the time, category, essence and answer/destination for each transaction at the Exit Desk.

Given that the Exit Desk does not serve in a capacity to directly support academic research, responses to questions usually result either in an immediate answer clarifying library policies, procedures and locations, or a referral to an area of the library where the patron's needs can be met.

At the end of Winter Quarter, the recorded results were compiled and analyzed, yielding the following data.

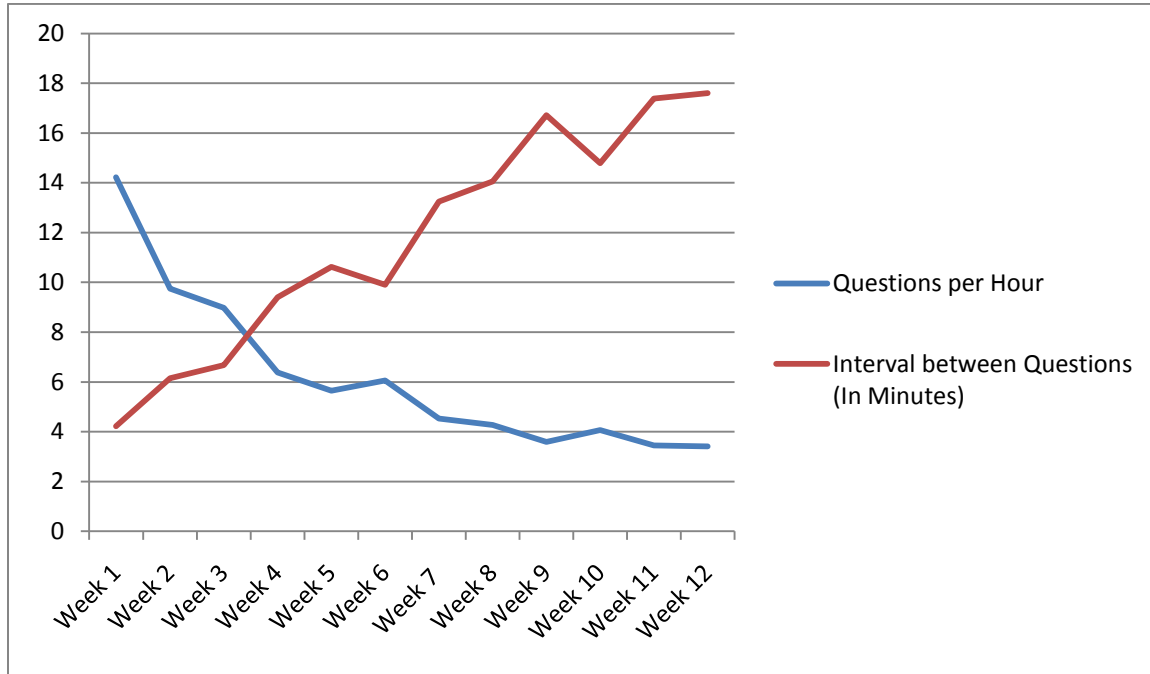
## **THE DATA**

### **1. GENERAL USAGE**

Observation totaled 197:40, or 11,860 minutes, during which the Exit Desk received and answered 1,244 patron inquiries. This translates to an average of 6.33 questions per hour, or one question every 9.5 minutes.

As illustrated below in **FIGURE 1** and **TABLE 1**, the usage of the Exit Desk in terms of QpH varied drastically throughout the quarter, with patron interaction being especially high at Week 1 and consistently falling thereafter. Week 1 saw the Exit Desk taking an average of 14.22 QpH, translating to one question every 4.22 minutes. By the end of the term, the Desk only received 3.41 QpH, with the interval between questions growing to one every 17.6 minutes.

**FIGURE 1 - Variations in QpH over Fall Quarter 2009**



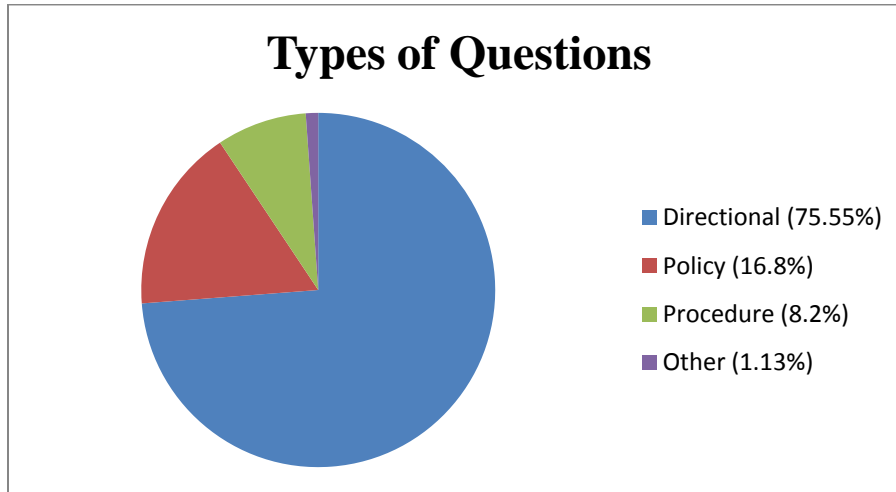
**TABLE 1 – QpH over Fall Quarter 2009**

Week	Number of Questions	Time Observed	Questions Per Hour	Interval Between Questions
1	263	18:50	14.22	4.22 min
2	169	17:20	9.75	6.15 min
3	137	15:15	8.98	6.68 min
4	108	16:55	6.38	9.40 min
5	97	17:10	5.65	10.62 min
6	101	16:40	6.06	9.90 min
7	80	17:40	4.53	13.25 min
8	64	15:00	4.27	14.05 min
9	61	17:00	3.59	16.71 min
10	43	10:35	4.06	14.79 min
11	61	17:40	3.45	17.39 min
12	60	17:35	3.41	17.60 min

## 2. TYPES OF QUESTIONS

**FIGURE 2.1** and **TABLE 2** show the breakdown of the categories of questions. The majority of the questions received were directional in nature (73.55%), followed by policy-related (16.8%), procedural (8.2%) and other (1.13%). Though the preponderance of directional questions is not surprising, the fact that approximately 25% of inquiries received are non-directional in nature identifies the Exit Desk as a versatile point of public service.

**FIGURE 2.1**

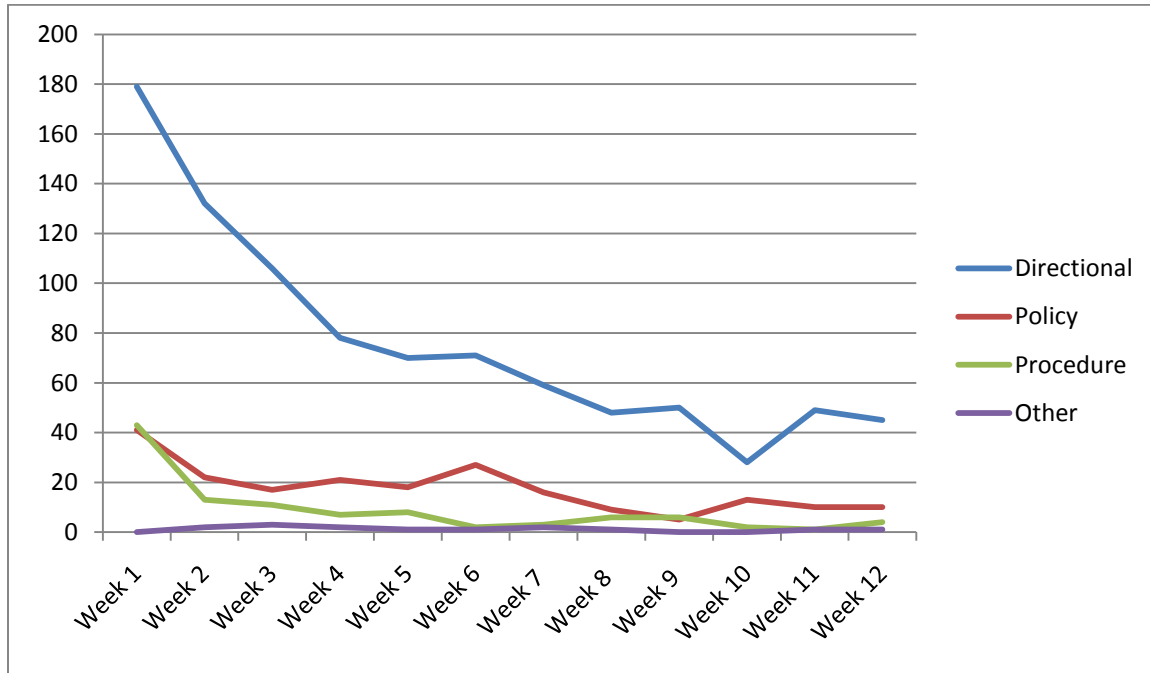


**TABLE 2 - Types of Questions**

Week	Directional	Policy	Procedure	Other	Total
1	179	41	43	0	263
2	132	22	13	2	169
3	106	17	11	3	137
4	78	21	7	2	108
5	70	18	8	1	97
6	71	27	2	1	101
7	59	16	3	2	80
8	48	9	6	1	64
9	50	5	6	0	61
10	28	13	2	0	43
11	49	10	1	1	61
12	45	10	4	1	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>915</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>1244</b>

**Figure 2.2** illustrates that all types of questions experienced a general decline over time. This decrease could be explained by patrons' increasing familiarity with the library as the quarter progressed. Directional questions saw the most precipitous drop, though it should be noted that the sharp decline at Week 10 can be attributed to the fact that statistics were not taken on Thursday and Friday that week due to closures for Thanksgiving Break. Slight reversals of downward trends near Weeks 5-7 as well as Weeks 10-12 may correlate with increased traffic during Midterms, Reading Week and Finals Week.

**FIGURE 2.2 – Types of Questions over Time**



### 3. TOPICS OF INQUIRY

After the statistics had been collected, further analysis of questions asked was performed to determine the most common topics of inquiry that arose during interactions with patrons. This analysis resulted in the following list, which has been annotated with some example questions:

#### Most Significant Subjects of Inquiry (Number of Referrals)

1. Hours / Access (111)
  - When does the library close?
  - Are the general public allowed in?
  - What are your weekend hours?
  
2. Classrooms (90)
  - Where is room 4722?

3. Return Locations / Policies (89)
  - Where can I return books?
  - Where is the book drop?
  - Do I need to bring CDs back to the Music Library?
4. Finding Resources (87)
  - How can I find books/journals/CDs/scores?
5. Locating Other Campus Buildings / Units (68)
  - Where is the Norris Center?
  - Where is
6. Employment (52)
  - How can I apply for a job at the library?
  - Where is the Personnel Office?
7. Privileges (44)
  - Can Loyola students borrow books?
  - Can alumni obtain computer passes?
8. Deering (40)
  - How do I get into Deering?
9. Lost & Found (39)
10. Music (36)
  - Where is the Music Library?
  - Where is the Listening Center?
11. Printing (34)
  - How do I use the printers?
  - How much does printing cost?
12. Reference Classroom (32)
  - Where is the Reference Classroom?
13. Core / Reserve (27)
  - Where is the Career Center?
  - Where is the Writing Place?

14. Food / Café (25)  
-Where is there a Starbucks on campus?  
-Is there a café in the library?
15. Restrooms (24)
16. Computers (22)  
-Does the library have and Macs?  
-How do I get to the basement computer labs?
17. Checkout / Circulation (20)  
-Where can I check out books?  
-Where can I pay fines?  
-Where is the Circulation Desk?
18. Copiers (19)  
-Are there copiers in the library?  
-How much does it cost to make a copy?
19. Multimedia Center (19)  
-Where is the Multimedia Center?
20. Study Space (19)  
-Where are there group study rooms?  
-Where can I find a quiet study space?

#### 4. AREAS OF REFERRAL

A similar analysis was performed on all referrals recorded from patron interactions to ascertain the most common destinations to which patrons were referred after visiting the Exit Desk<sup>2</sup>. This analysis resulted in the following list, which has been annotated<sup>3</sup> with various reasons for referral as examples:

##### Most Significant Areas of Referral (Number of Referrals)

- |  |                     |
|--|---------------------|
| 1. Circulation   | (166)               |
| -Returning books                                       | -Paying fines       |
| -Lost & found  | -Checkout           |
| 2. Information Commons                                 | (135)               |
| -Guest NetIDs  | -Posting approvals  |
| -Printing  | -Restrooms          |
| 3. Personnel / Administration                          | (62)                |
| -Library employment                                    |                     |
| 4. Core/Reserve  | (57)                |
| -Materials on reserve                                  | -Group study rooms  |
| -Quiet study space                                     | -Popular literature |
| 5. Reference   | (52)                |
| -Research help / help locating library resources       |                     |
| 6. Music   | (49)                |
| - CDs  | -Music scores       |
| -Listening center                                      |                     |
| 7. Library Privileges                                  | (45)                |
| -Questions about access for public / LUC/ U of C, etc. |                     |
| -Carrel reservations                                   |                     |
| 8. Multimedia Center                                   | (43)                |
| - DVDs / VHS tapes                                     |                     |

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that this analysis includes only destinations within the Main Library and Deering.

<sup>3</sup> If no annotation is given, it should be assumed that the referral is in response to a direct inquiry, i.e. "Where is X?"

9. Deering <sup>4</sup>	(38)
10. Reference Classroom -2699B	(29)
11. Lower Level Computer Labs -Macs            -MediaWorks -Computer classrooms	(26)
12. 3E -Help locating classroom -Help locating a call number	(25)
13. Plaza Café -Coffee        -Food	(23)
14. 2E -Academic technologies	(16)
15. Archives	(15)
16. 3S -Help locating a classroom -Help locating a call number	(15)
17. 3N -Help locating a classroom -Help locating a call number	(15)
18. Africana	(14)
19. Art -Help finding art materials    -Color copier	(14)
20. Project Café	(12)

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<sup>4</sup> This category includes referrals that did not involve a specific request for Art/Archives/Music/Special Collections on the patron's part. These referrals were mostly in response to patrons who were not aware that Deering no longer has its own entrance.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study entailed the observation of a significant point of public service for an average of 16.5 hours each week for twelve weeks. As this only represents a small fraction of the Main Library's hours of operation, the study may be missing significant trends in usage that occur at times other than weekday afternoons.

## **CONCLUSION**

The usage data yielded from this study illustrate that the Exit Desk plays a unique part in serving library patrons. In addition to its role in ensuring proper checkout of library materials, it serves as a valuable resource for patrons who might be unfamiliar with the structure of the library and the services it provides. Given its position and high visibility, the Exit Desk is often the initial point of contact between the library and patrons, especially first-time visitors. As such, it would be useful to integrate the Exit Desk into the library's pre-existing usage tracking system so as to obtain a fuller profile of our patron population.

