
Peer-Reviewed Article

Exploring the Viability of the Oregon State University Library Concierge: A Ten-Year Review of Wayfinding and User Needs

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ABSTRACT

Wayfinding and navigating new spaces often create confusion, frustration, and anxiety for users. From architectural features to the lack of a service design lens in planning, there are many complex factors to navigate the built environment. Oregon State University's main library (Valley) is not unlike other larger research libraries with this issue. OSUL created its first temporary flexible concierge station in Fall 2015, at the library entrance for the beginning of terms. The idea of a concierge station at the beginning of term was to provide, particularly new users to campus, quick answers or referrals and in turn, to alleviate the pressure on the two public service points on the main floor. Over time, we have made assessment-driven changes based on what has been learned, along with consistency and best practices. Now, ten years later, is the concierge still viable, useful, and desirable service?

KEYWORDS

user experience, wayfinding, concierge

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Introduction

Wayfinding and navigating new spaces often create confusion, frustration, and anxiety for users. From architectural features to the lack of a service-design lens in planning, there are many complex factors to navigate the built environment. Oregon State University's (OSU) main library (Valley) is not unlike other larger research libraries with this issue, particularly over the last few years - from COVID closures to renovations and changes to services points. Back in the Fall of 2015, Valley Library created its first temporary flexible concierge station, set up in the library entrance at the beginning of terms. As described in the research article "Personalized Wayfinding Help" from 2018 (Filar Williams), the idea of a concierge station at the beginning of term was 1) to provide particularly new users to campus, quick answers or referrals and 2) to alleviate the pressure of long lines at the two public service points on the main floor. Over time, we have made assessment-driven changes based on what has been learned, along with consistency and best practices. Now, ten years later, is the concierge still a viable, useful, and desirable service? Are the evergreen directional questions still the main questions asked? What has changed regarding wayfinding in our physical spaces in the last ten years? Is the welcoming nature of this temporary concierge still a reason to continue this service?

Literature Review

Wayfinding is the study of how humans use a variety of information - from signs to visual clues - to orient themselves and navigate in a space (Mandel, 2018, p. 1). Challenges to find your way in the built environment include unique architectural features, new additions to older buildings, not applying service design in planning, lack of incorporating learning space research, and of course personal experiences of the user (Arthur & Passini, 2002). Libraries often intimidate new or potential users through their size, complexity as well as unfamiliar tools and technology. In a 2020 study in of academic libraries in India, Rakshikar and Powdwal, found most participants in university libraries felt that wayfinding was complex and not self-oriented even after attending library orientation, with the complexity of library buildings and lack of appropriate signage. Many people have spatial anxiety - a feeling of psychological anxiety or physical distress when wayfinding (Su et al., 2021). Most university library studies share that users feel confusion and stress navigating large library spaces (Mellon, 2015; McPherson, 2015; Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, & Bostick, 2004). Overall library anxiety has always been a concern and issue with new students coming to a large university building, but by improving wayfinding systems users will feel less stress and frustration when navigating a building (Arthur & Passini, 2002).

Dr. Lauren Mandel is a leading researcher on library wayfinding (Mandel, 2018) and in 2020 she conducted a review comparing the different methodologies used in wayfinding research in library buildings. Reviewing over 26 research articles, Mandel summarized which

methods were used to research wayfinding in all libraries, uncovering relationships between library type and method, along with determining the efficacy of the chosen method, uncovering that wayfinding research was primarily for evaluation purposes. Either for app development, evaluating facilities signage, or understanding how people wayfind in libraries, the most common methods for wayfinding research were signage inventories and surveys followed by interviews, task completion, and then observation. Most studies used multiple methods – as they should, since one method does not provide a full picture (for example, observations cannot tell you “why”). Mandel’s research is foundational for any library looking to improve the user experience, but it focuses mainly on public libraries. A key researcher for academic libraries looking at signage, wayfinding, and marketing is Mark Polger who has a few key resources to note. His article with Stempler, called “Do you see the signs?” (2013), outlines the steps involved in a comprehensive signage audit, providing a foundation for creating a signage policy, best practices guidelines, and a branding strategy for future signage. A follow up article with Stempler (2014) weaves together theory and practice of signage in an academic library considering signs as “living documents” that can adapt as libraries shift to create meaningful experiences for library users.

Digital wayfinding, such as through interactive digital displays, kiosks, and mobile apps, is where digital user experiences intersect with physical wayfinding. A key survey in 2020 by Wilkinson and Breneman reviewed 37 U.S. academic library websites, finding that 97% had some kind of digital representations of physical spaces. These are predominantly floor plans, and most were poorly designed, with non-accessible content and a lack of comprehensive information to facilitate the user journey. As many people use their mobile phone to find their way, the lack of accessible, useful floor plans online or mobile friendly versions, affects their wayfinding and experience. The 2021 academic library study in China by Su et al. used eye tracking software to research how users find their way from various types of signage and visual clues. They found highly anxious users ignored visual clues and used directional signage, but others less anxious found their way with visual and route strategies, concluding that spatial anxiety and environmental familiarity are multifariously influential to a user’s wayfinding behavior performance. Agarwal and Lawrence (2014) demonstrate and share the benefits of an interactive Web-based wayfinding tool being more welcoming and scalable in large buildings to improve the user experience.

Libraries have tried many strategies to improve wayfinding for their users, as noted above, from online floor plans, and navigation tools, to in person signage or rethinking service points. As Johnston and Mandel (2014) note, the remembrances of signs decrease when the number of contained words increases. This lands well with Misenhelter (2017) who suggests ways academic libraries can improve wayfinding by addressing three key areas (visual literacy, wayfinding, and signage) through a 3-stage process – holistic signage redesign, adding in a color-coding system and creating standard recognizable images or symbols. This might also help

with cultural differences - a United Kingdom university library study (2022) by Scaife and Walton, who researched international students' wayfinding through signage, indicates that visual and color can help with navigating but more so, cultural differences rely on spatial arrangements, decision making, and navigational behaviors. Schoonover and Kinsley's (2014) study showed that for wayfinding help, users ultimately preferred human interaction as the most frequent "tool." When describing remodeling and signage updates in their library, McMorran and Reynolds (2010) observed that users would seek a human to ask the same question that was literally on a sign they pushed aside or moved past to get to a service point.

Most of the literature on the usefulness and need of concierge services falls within hospitality, retirement communities, office buildings, and stores (Withiam, 1993), with little focused on concierge services in libraries. Libraries have similarities to these industries with some key components of their work providing customer-driven wayfinding solutions and responding to directional needs. An example article is by AlFattnai et al., who discuss the creation of a physical booth called the "Research Concierge Desk" within a medical center offering on-site, free, and direct consultations to researchers, thereby improving accessibility to data clinic services while clinicians are busy (2024). Maj et al. (2024) implemented a concierge device equipped with an advanced chatbot assistant in a mall as a friendly guide to help users around the large space. At Fletcher's library, way over a decade ago, they eliminated a desk altogether and had a concierge like roaming Help Zone area – "Some libraries have one desk, and other libraries have multiple service points. At the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Library there is none" (2011). The Stanford University Libraries initiated a Library Concierge Project in November of 2011, but this initiative was not physical location but library wide training so all library staff could answer general library questions no matter where they were in or around campus (Bourg, 2013). Rodriguez et al. point out the changing nature of Access Services, sharing that more libraries are shifting from quick transactional desk services to improving the holistic academic library experience - a more concierge style, with library staff in various spaces and areas to support users where and when they need it (2017). Walker (2024) shares how their public desk shifted from busy transactions with users, to more concierge style questions and referrals since the pandemic lockdown time. A 2022 article by librarians Buljung et al. at the Colorado School of Mines explores (but had not yet implemented) the concierge or boutique model idea to provide individualized, flexible, value-added services within the larger scope of the library. Though there is not a lot of literature on academic libraries providing concierge like services, the author suggests that this is happening at the various iterations of service points in libraries but not often shared in the literature.

Background and Changes over time

A concierge station in our library is a flexible, movable desk that can be rolled out into the lobby when staffed to provide a welcoming service as people enter to assist or direct them as needed. In the early years of the concierge, a lot of time was spent learning and iterating how to

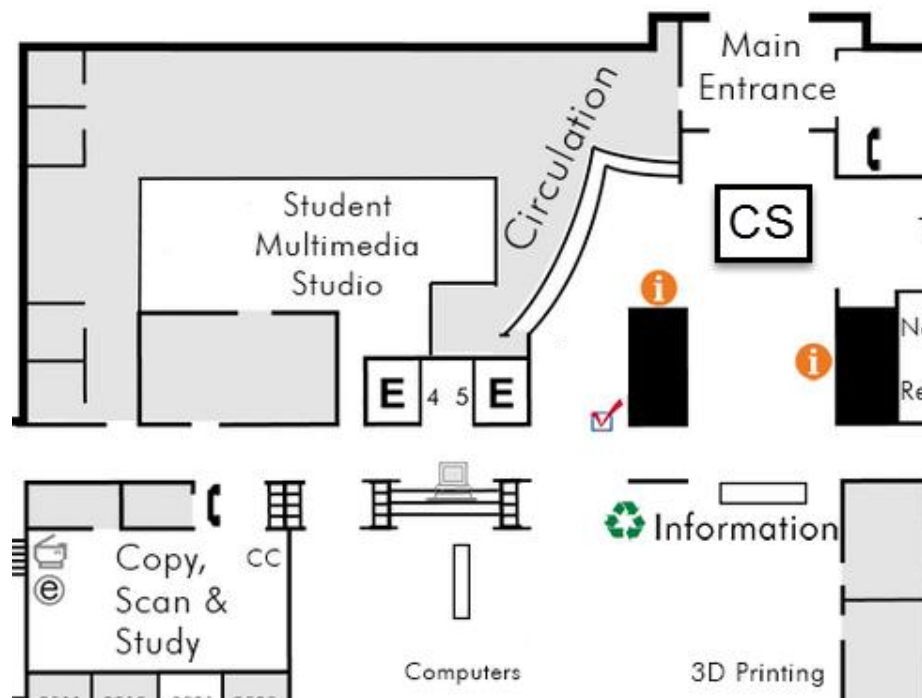
run a service as well as set consistency in staffing and support. Now a decade later, it's an easy to run smooth operation with new people onboarded as needed. The service continues to get staff volunteers from all library departments, often two cross departmental people. The Valley Library used to offer this service for three quarters, for only a day or two after fall term – we are a quarter school, with 10-week terms. Fall term has the most new students arriving to campus and hence is the most critical time for a concierge service. We have now eliminated Spring term concierge and sometimes Winter term is skipped. We have simplified some of the intake, added key resources and bought an actual desk with casters that lock, and a desktop that can be raised or lowered to make it more accessible. The first iteration was originally an old podium with caster wheels we put together ourselves.

Staff volunteers are coming from every department in the library – not just public services. Staff voluntarily sign up for shifts and pair up frequently with folks in other units. With this diversity in roles, staffing the concierge desk offers a wide range of knowledge and skills providing those seeking help even more. This also means staff are interacting with people they might not normally, allowing for spontaneous connection for learning and growth. Staff volunteers are also from all classifications, e.g., faculty, administrators, staff, and student staff. Even library building partners (such as IT Media Hub and our Writing Center) staff have assisted at the concierge. Filling the slots with volunteers has not been a problem, but if it is, the flexibility of this service means we just simply do not offer it that hour and users go directly to the standard desks.

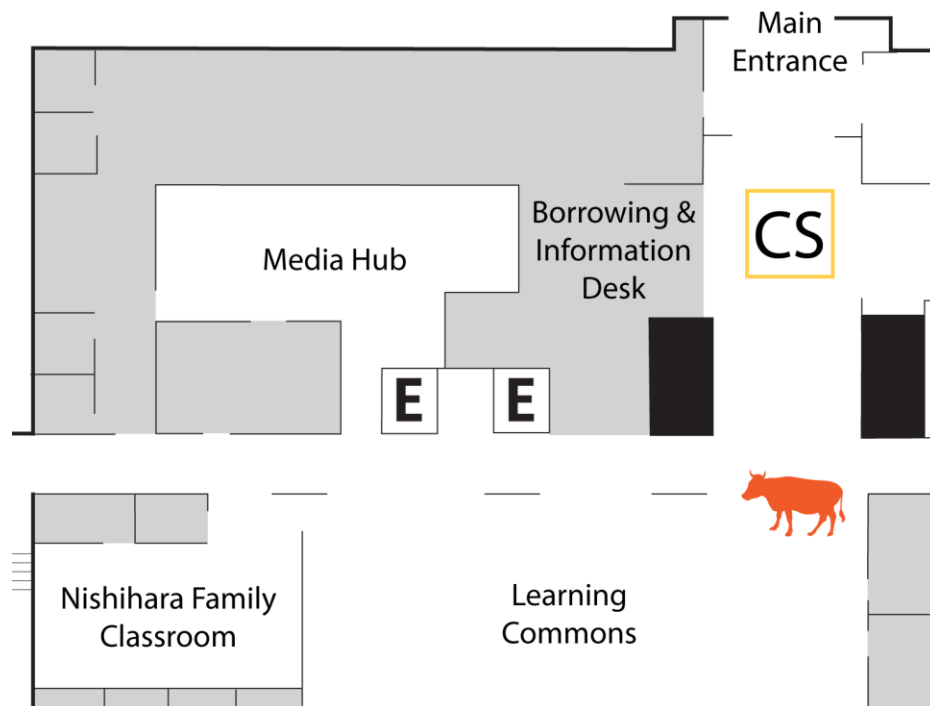
During the early years, the data collection process involved jotting down questions being asked at the station on sheets of paper, with date and time. After the 2018 study, we added in a few frequently asked topics to allow a check mark tracking instead of writing out each question. This made it both easy on the staff to simply mark the sheet, but this also means the staff code the questions through their interpretation as to what category the question fits (ex: “how do I print from my own laptop” and “can I print for free in the library” could both be listed under “printing;” but are actually different themes - a how-to and a policy question.) These and other factors will be discussed later in the article.

Figure 1

Floor map demonstrating the location of the temporary concierge service station (CS) in 2015.

**Figure 2**

Floor map demonstrating the location of the temporary concierge service station (CS) in 2025.



A lot of changes in space have occurred since the last concierge data analysis (see Figures 1 and 2). Campus IT, who shared the main desk with the circulation unit, moved across the quad outside of the library building, though a small unit “Media Hub” stayed in the library, but shifted down the hall. A new partner space, a Writing Studio, was implemented on the main floor of the library adjacent to our busy learning commons. A new open classroom (Nishihara) on the main floor grew from a no longer needed “copier room” and is now used for classes or meetings but also open to students when not in use. STEM tutoring expanded on third floor and the library piloted a graduate commons area on sixth floor. As the most heavily used place on campus for printing, the library’s printer relocations to a few different spots over the years impacted the visual sight line of printers when students walk into the building. Even more impactful to the main entrance was the combining of the two service points. We no longer have the information and circulation desks but have one area called Borrowing & Information. This service point expanded where our circulation suite used to be, with two approachable spots and four flexible desks, yet slightly tucked off to the side of the entrance.

Another impactful change since 2018 was the COVID-19 pandemic. Like most libraries, in those early years our library was physically closed for the pandemic and then opened but in a very limited fashion. When we finally opened fully, our concierge was severely needed. We not only had new students enrolling that year, but for a year and a half none of our students were physically onsite. In addition, many students (along with much of the general population) were also learning how to enter public spaces in general. There is lots of literature discussing the impact of COVID, but for this data analysis we are using this pandemic as one of the many complex factors affecting the possible questions asked. When COVID hit, the library shifted from a small, mostly physical course materials collection to digital and started a process to allow students to request course materials – this and other factors discussed later in the article potentially impacted the questions asked.

A Library Spaces Manager was hired in 2017 and helped create more consistency with signage and wayfinding for the building. They developed color coding signage for the main floor and better elevator and stairway directional signage throughout the building, all things to improve library wayfinding. Using handouts, social media, and print and digital signs to promote tutoring and study spaces around the building has perhaps contributed to better awareness of these and other services.

Methods: Assessing User Experiences & Themes

With ten years of concierge staff recordkeeping notes of questions asked at the concierge station, the first step was to consider what years of data to analyze. I decided to look at the most recent two years of the concierge service at the time of this writing: Fall 2023, Winter 2024, and Fall 2024 (there was no winter 2025 concierge offered). This included almost 1000 pieces of

data before any initial review; by eliminating irrelevant data (e.g., “Can you make it stop raining?”), the total data points to analyze were 772.

Over the past ten years, we have developed a more structured method with categories to help in collecting questions asked. We still use paper for intake (often those staffing the desk do not even have a laptop) with date and time noted but have a list of the frequently asked topics for a quick check mark, only jotting down questions asked when they fall outside this range. These questions are put into a spreadsheet by a staff member at the end of each term. Reviewing the questions during the early years of the concierge service, we determined that offering a few key categories of the most frequently asked questions would save time for those staffing this service. Current categories or themes are: Printing, Computers/Tech, Library Directional, Campus Directional, Library Policies, and Course Reserves. Many of these are themes from the first data analysis of the concierge service, now allowing those staffing to simply mark a category without having to write the actual question. Staffers fill in an actual question or a few words of what was asked as needed if it does not fall into a listed category. Because of the current, more-structured intake, early analysis is happening on the spot as the people staffing the concierge service are determining where the question falls. Now, analyzing the current data from the concierge is a much simpler process.

For the initial concierge analysis described in the 2018 article, inductive analysis was used through a constant comparative method. This method (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Fram, S., 2015) involved an iterative process where research team members first identify themes individually and then discuss themes, in order to find consensus and then determine shared themes to apply across the data. Four main themes were derived from this process -- directional, technology, finding sources, and library policies -- with a total of seven total themes/subthemes. In 2025, I reviewed the last two years of concierge data, using a theoretical thematic approach. Since this study was a follow up to a previous one looking at the same service, I chose to apply the same themes from the last time, while analyzing the data. This deductive or top-down thematic approach allows for a quick yet more detailed analysis of some aspects of the data since they match the overall existing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2015). It was also a much smaller data set. As the researcher who analyzed the original data and now the current data, I am considered expert enough to tackle this analysis without a team. An undergraduate student employee did help give input on coding and grouping topics for items that fell outside of the set themes.

Using the initial research subthemes, which aligned closely to the concierge service current intake sheets, a student employee conducted a first pass using these seven original subthemes. For those not fitting, they created a couple new categories of their choosing including a miscellaneous one. Miscellaneous questions that did not seem relevant were eliminated from the coding. The original themes were: Directional (Library directions, locating library study spaces or tutoring, Campus directions); Technology (Library technology, Non-

library technology); Finding Sources; Library policies (Library policies and supplies, Food and drink policy). Overall, the top four buckets of themes remain, though a few subthemes were shifted or eliminated.

The number of hours staffing the concierge desk has shifted over the years, streamlining to only the most critical hours to offer this service. In Fall 2015, the concierge service was staffed for 49 hours, whereas Fall 2023 was only 29 hours and Fall 2024 was 26 hours (winters 2016 and 2024 were the same at 9 hours staffed). In the first analysis of the concierge data showed on average, about 23 questions were asked per hour; in recent review about 17 questions per hour – slightly less, but overall, a high per hour number.

Results and Discussion

I categorized the data from 2024/2025 into the themes from the original study. Reviewing the 2015-2016 data with the recent analysis of data, the same themes are applied but with the newly added subthemes. Overall, the “non library technology” and “food and drink” had no questions asked in those areas in the current analysis, but course reserves/materials rose up.

Table 1

*Themes derived from questions asked by patrons at the concierge service station (Fall 2015/Winter 2016 terms, comparing to Fall 2023/Winter 2024 terms). * Indicates a new subtheme*

Theme (subtheme)	Number of questions (% of all questions asked)	
	2015/16	2023/24
Directional	551 / 40%	378 / 49%
Library directions	273 (20%)	322 (42%)
Locating library study spaces or tutoring	141 (10%)	24 (3%)
Campus directions	137 (10%)	32 (4%)
Technology	422 / 30%	235 / 32%
Library technology	318 (23%)	235 (32%)
Non-library technology	94 (7%)	0 (n/a)
Finding Sources	275 / 20%	97 / 13%
Course Materials *	59 (21%)	79 (10%)
Finding Other Materials *	216 (79%)	18 (3%)
Library policies	130 / 10%	61 / 8%
Library policies & supplies	82 / 7%	61 / 8%
Food and drink policy	48 / 3%	0 / n/a
Total number of questions	1368	772

Directional

Directional questions have remained at the heart of the concierge service. This is still the main reason people approach this concierge desk, with almost half of the questions asked being directional. The directional questions can easily be handled by any staff with simple maps and referral sheets. This saves time for both the user and the main desk staff. The user can ask a quick directional or referral question, not having to wait in a line or find their own way in a large overwhelming building. Mandel (2018) notes that getting directions was a frequently observed wayfinding behavior, with getting help directly from a staff member a second behavior observed. The concierge meets this need as the user's experience will be less anxious and more pleasant and the desk staff can spend more time with complex questions or transactional interactions.

In the early days of the concierge service, directional questions were also the most asked (40%). Currently, nearly 50% are directional questions, but interestingly the *library-specific* directional questions went from 20% to 42% of all questions asked, making this subcategory by far the majority of directional questions asked. Questions asked specifically about study spaces and tutoring have decreased from 10% to 3% and campus directions from 10% to 3% currently. Why the shift? Potential reasons could be the library's increase and expansion of its services promotion campuswide, along with the hiring of a library spaces manager to help with consistency and improve signage to help promote our services as well. Campus tours, which used to come into the library building during their tour, no longer happen, so a student's first time in the library might be that first week of term. Not having visited the library before arriving on campus for the first time further impacts new students' directional navigation and can cause more anxiety coming into a large library building. Tour guides also have changed their script. (J. Marquitt, personal communication, November 13, 2025). They are now sharing information on the Library of Things to borrow, course reserves, and tutoring services, which might explain why these are key questions asked now by students at the concierge. When considering reasons for the decline in campus directional questions asked (down from 10% to 4% of questions asked), there is no clear explanation for this change and more research would need to be done to unpack why that question type has declined. Regardless, majority of questions asked at the concierge are primary directional or referrals for users, which was also indicated in the literature review.

Technology

The theme of technology remains at 30% of all questions as it did 10 years ago in the concierge data review. The major shift lies in the subthemes. In the last article, the theme of technology included library and non-library technology questions. This original data was from 2015- 2016, when the campus IT Service Desk was next to Library Circulation, sharing the same long desk, lending out equipment, and helping with technical support to OSU students. This IT Service pointed relocated across the quad to another building in 2017, and the desk service point was now only for library circulation. The result of this move is seen in the recent two academic

year data review of fall 2023 and fall 2024 questions asked – almost all tech questions asked related to library technology. Students back in 2016 had been used to the walk-up service desk in the library, perhaps not even realizing they were separate entities at times and would be requesting technology the library did not have to lend. Now, years since that shift, and post COVID times, current students are not expecting campus IT in the library. At the same time, the library expanded its technology and grew a library of things offering much more tech tools than in the past. There are items now added to the library collection that were “non library tech” in the last iteration.

The previous thematic analysis did not indicate the need for a subtheme of printing, but now it is its own category on the concierge intake sheet. Printing questions come not only at the start but throughout the year, leading to the creation of a quick and easy desk handout about printing and a how-to poster near the printers. The concierge now captures “printing” as a stand-alone category as well. Review of the earlier data on printing shows that it was asked about the same back then (232 out of 318 = 73%) as it is now (184 out of 235 = 78%).

Finding Sources

The “finding sources” theme includes finding a known book/item (such as pleasure reading), resources for research, and course materials. Questions asked in this theme went down from 20% to 13% of total questions asked over the last decade. With easier access and better interfaces, students now do much of their searching and research online or through peers and not in the traditional or more formal librarian or instructor interactions (Qayyum, 2018). The searching students are often doing is for course materials (and sometime pleasure reading at the start of the term). The bookstore works closely with the library to help students find low or no cost materials and have shifted their display in the OSU Beaver Store bookstore. Current undergraduates experienced a major shift during COVID times, searching and discovering information and research materials on their own, and not in person. This research behavior is also most likely seen in the current data analysis compared to ten years ago though more research is needed to understand the story behind the numbers.

In the earlier review of the data, “course materials” was not drawn out into a subtheme of its own under the theme of Finding Sources. Course Reserves/Materials is now its own category on the concierge intake sheet, and this theme has grown to 81% of the Finding Sources theme (10 % of all questions asked). For this review “Course Materials” is now its own subtheme under Finding Sources theme. More questions asked related to course materials is potentially due to a few aspects: the growth of the library’s Course Reserves program in recent years (including preemptively buying unlimited-user license ebooks when available for any course materials listed that term); statewide mandates pushing for more low/no cost course materials as well as OSU’s Open Program messaging instructors campus wide; our non-profit bookstores catalog promotes to students alternative library course material; a shift in library policy to allow

students to request their course materials directly; syllabus statements informing students to check with the library and other campus support services for course materials. These factors indicate we should see a rise in students asking about course materials compared to the analysis carried out ten years ago.

Library Policies

“Library Policies” includes questions about supplies, for example asking for envelopes or stickers. In the early review, library policies were 10% of all questions asked and had two subthemes: “policy and supplies” (7% of library policies) and specifically “food and drink policy” (3% of library policies). Now library policies dropped to 8% of all questions asked, with no “food and drink” questions. The main reason for this shift is the concierge intake sheet now has “Library Policies” as a theme to check mark - in the past it was not, and staff would need to write in the question asked. Some of the marks for library policies could be related to food or drink but there is no way to know. Hence for this analysis it is taken off as a subtheme.

Conclusion & Future Considerations

Questions users are asking at your library tell a story. Our story is about creating a welcoming environment every year as new students come to the university and enter the physical library. Users may be okay wayfinding on their own; they may only be asking a question because we happen to be standing there; they may discover what they need through other means, but we still find this service viable and useful. Offering a flexible concierge service as a quick approachable means to get help also provides a sense of belonging to users particularly new to the space. Directional questions are still the evergreen questions asked. Improvement in signage and promotion are helpful, but students still want to talk to actual people. The welcoming and convenient nature of this early-term concierge service is still a reason people approach to ask questions that they might be able to discover on their own. Reviewing sampling of ten years of a library concierge service data shows how viable, useful, and desirable a service like this still is.

The concierge service has helped shift our library culture to a more user-centered service model. We have taken the idea of a mobile station to various uses, such as asking quick questions of our users (called a Tiny Café) to gain insight into what they know and understand to better design our services. People working at the concierge desk over the years have seen the benefit of this station. When library staff work at the concierge desk, it helps them to practice this user centered approach and apply this lens to all the work they do. The current concierge service data review shows it is now mainly a welcoming place for directional questions and referrals as it is intended to be. A periodic check of data asked over time is always useful to uncover potential user experience issues. In general, the data analysis of the recent questions asked at the concierge are relatively the same from ten years ago, despite changes in space, policy, and services. And it continues to be a useful wayfinding and empathy-building tool for a

better user experience in our library. At various intervals, we can take time to explore changes in the data to check how current users experience the library spaces and services through questions asked. Even without a change in the built environment nor with any policies changes, new students arrive every year on campus, making a concierge an easy to implement, user-focused flexible service any library could offer. Make it easy and friendly for the staff as well as the users.

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