

Finding Our Value in Lower Usage Numbers: An Examination of Reference Services & Demand Driven Acquisitions

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Presented at the California Academic & Research Libraries 2016 Conference
March 31 - April 2, 2016
Costa Mesa, California

Abstract

This paper explores two case studies which involve new services that might be impacting the usage of traditional library services: 1) how online, self-service reference options might impact traditional reference services, and 2) how a demand driven acquisitions (DDA) e-book program might impact interlibrary loan borrowing requests (ILL). Both of these case studies show the positive potential of decreasing numbers: when one service suffers it may well be due to the addition of new, more responsive user-centered services. This paper calls into question the practice of focusing on increasing numbers and siloed categories of usage as the best way to measure value. We recommend alternative measurements of value, ones that take into consideration the quality, impact, and interplay of the services and resources libraries provide, without privileging quantity.

Introduction

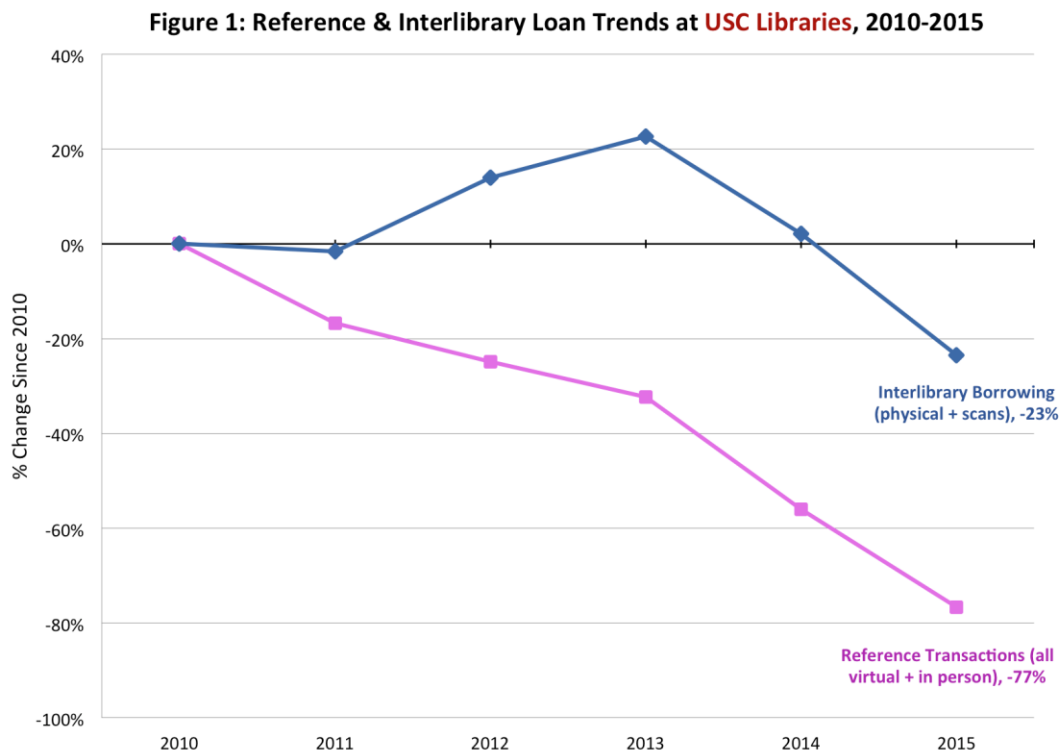
In a July 2015 ACRL blog post Judith Logan wrote: “the fundamental goal of reference work should be self-destruction. We know they want to be able to do it themselves, so we should be working proactively to make the library system so easy that they don’t need us to navigate it.” At first glance, this suggestion seems radical, but Logan was not the first to make it. In 2003, Lipow reasoned that, “point of need reference service [is] something to be considered after the building’s signage or the finding aids or the collections fail the user” (p. 31). The notion that reference services are a point of last resort and that we should strive to make it unnecessary is especially relevant in an era when traditional reference desk statistics have been steadily declining since the 1990s (ARL). Instead of seeing this decline as bad news, we might choose to interpret the lower usage to mean that libraries are more effectively and proactively meeting users’ needs *before* they are compelled to seek us out for help.

The idea of willful self-destruction is reminiscent of a theory in business and innovation circles: in order to innovate and stay relevant, businesses must be willing to cannibalize formerly successful products and services (Chandy & Tellis, 1998). To apply Chandy & Tellis’ logic to libraries requires that we

break out of the natural human trait that propels [us] to use yesterday’s bag of tools to solve tomorrow’s problems. [Libraries] must do so today, while they still have options, not tomorrow, when they will have nothing left but a useless bag of tools. They must be willing to cannibalize before there is nothing of value left to cannibalize. Cannibalization is clearly a difficult and painful thing to do. It requires [libraries] to swim against the tide of organizational inertia. (p. 485)

It has been well documented that librarians can be slow to embrace change (Deiss & Petrowski 2009, p. 3; Oakleaf, 2010, p. 29). Continuing to view traditional library services as sacred and inviolable puts us in a defensive stance, rather than one that is open to innovation and reinvention. Chandy & Tellis (1998) recognize that “there is a natural instinct to preserve rather than destroy past investments” (p. 485) but it is this destruction that is vital in determining a library’s enduring value and success.

To explore these ideas in more depth, we looked at two traditional library services at the University of Southern California Libraries (USC Libraries) that have been experiencing a drop in usage: reference services and interlibrary loan (ILL) borrowing requests. At USC, reference transactions have been steadily decreasing since 2010, while ILL requests began to decline in 2013 (Figure 1).



We were interested in investigating what other services might have been introduced during this time period that may be contributing to the declining usage of these once core services. Our hypothesis was that the decline in these services might be, in part, explained by new services being offered that are inadvertently cannibalizing them by offering more proactive, immediate, and online assistance to our users.

Case Study Number #1: Declining reference services and the rise of self-service reference options

The future of the reference desk is a long-standing topic in library literature, often eliciting strong opinions on both sides. There is a general recognition that the reference desk functions as symbol of our values and identity and as such, removing it could also remove our *raison d'être* (Bright et al., 2015, p.118). User StevenB (2007) of the *ACRL*Log argues that it is because the desk is only a symbol that it can and should be abolished. He emphasizes that abandoning the reference desk does *not* mean getting rid of reference

services. He points out that “real reference” is not currently happening at the reference desk, where we mostly answer questions about printers and computers. Most in-depth reference interactions are happening away from the desk in classrooms, departments, and dorms.

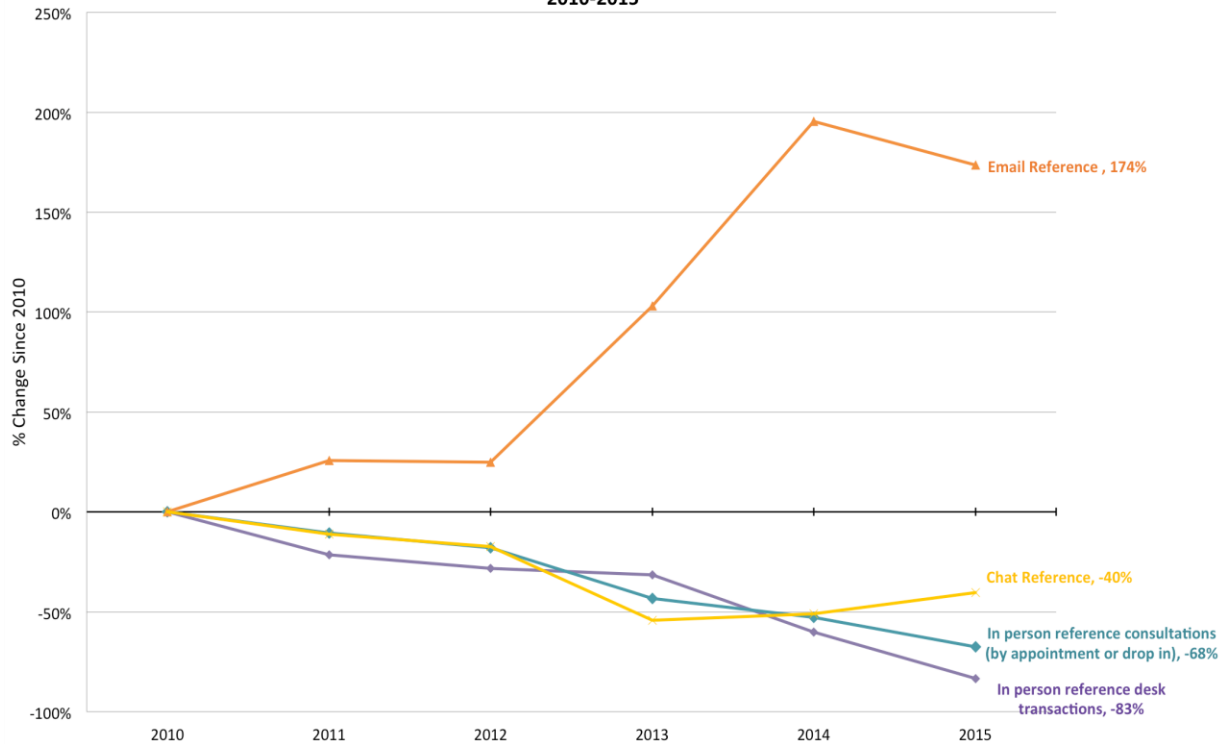
As the number and complexity of reference transactions decreases, many librarians are finding the desk to be an outdated service point (Miles, 2013). Staffing shortages also raise questions about the desk’s return on investment. One argument in favor of keeping the reference desk is that it promotes and values human-to-human interaction. In fact, Nolen (2010) found, in reviewing the literature debating the future of the reference desk, that both sides value the high touch, human interaction that takes place there. It seems likely that the key to resolving this debate involves forging new, alternative symbols of value(s) and identity for librarians and libraries.

Reference Services at the USC Libraries

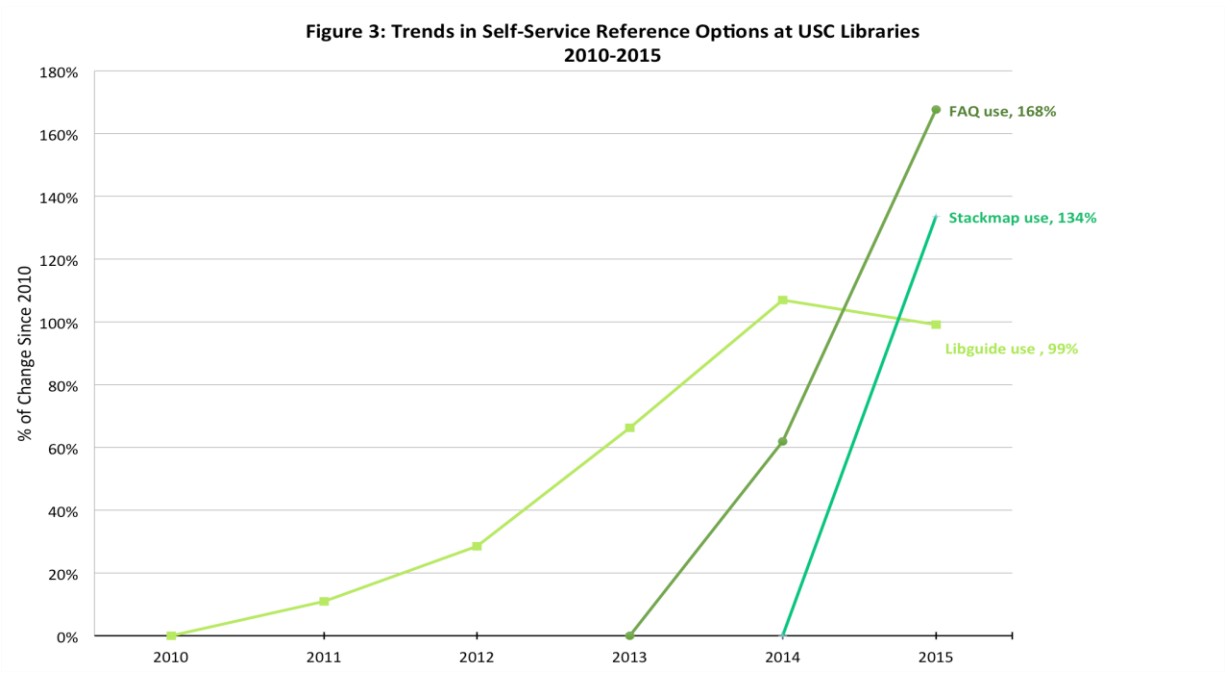
At USC there are twenty libraries on two campuses. The flagship library on the main campus is Doheny Memorial Library (DML), which also houses the main general reference desk. In addition, there are currently two specialized reference desks on the main campus: one in the Science and Engineering Library and the other in Special Collections. Over the last two years, the number of staffed reference desks has been reduced. Formerly there were two general reference desks, and three specialized reference desks. In replacing one of these specialized desks, a new model of on-call reference service is being experimented with. Amidst these changes a new task force was convened in 2015 to oversee and re-envision general reference services at USC Libraries.

The first step taken by the reference task force was to discontinue participation in QuestionPoint’s 24/7 collaborative virtual reference services. In its place was launched a locally monitored chat and email service using Springshare’s software. Figure 2 shows the usage of the various reference services (email, chat, in person consultation and reference desk transactions) provided at USC over the last five years. With the switch to a locally monitored chat reference service in 2015, librarians now monitor and respond to chats while staffing the DML Reference Desk (50 hours/week). Despite switching from collaborative to local chat, the number of interactions has actually increased, suggesting that users prefer exchanges with USC librarians and staff. Another cause for this increase may be due to the placement of chat widgets across the library’s website and in various databases, giving users the option to get assistance at the point of need without having to navigate to the Ask-a-Librarian webpage.

Figure 2: Reference Service Trends at USC Libraries
2010-2015

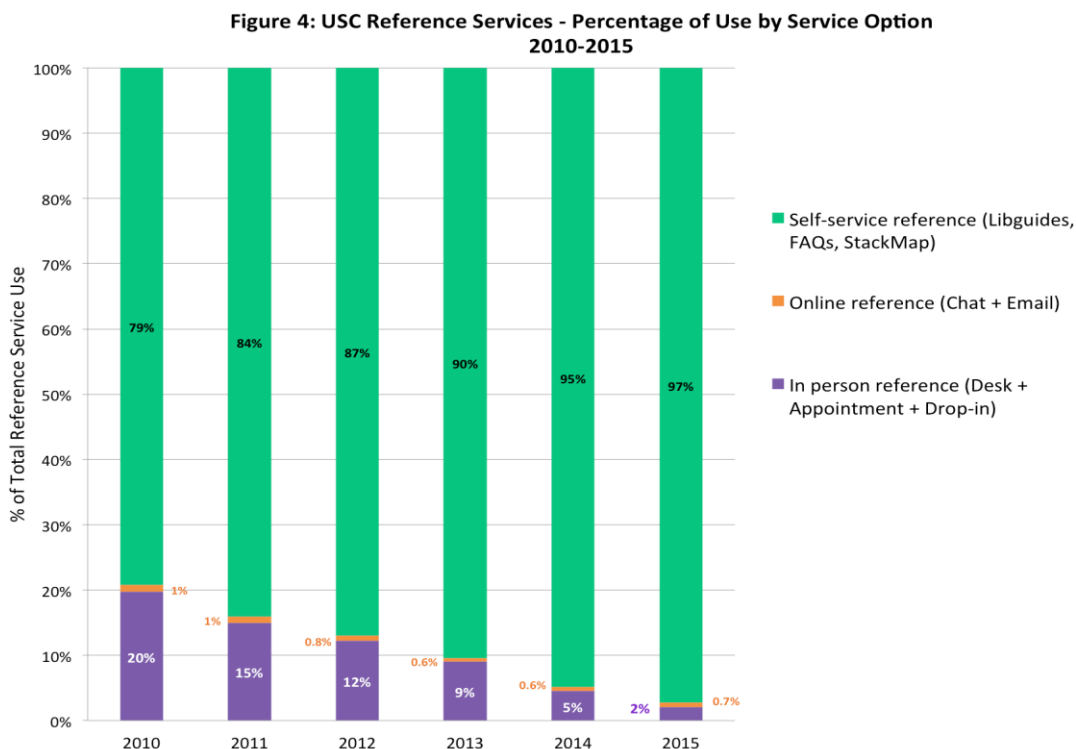


Since 2008, USC Libraries have been striving to offer more intuitive systems and online services for our diverse users. These include LibGuides in 2008, the discovery system, Summon, as the default search option in 2010, LibAnswers knowledgebase of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) in 2013, StackMap (an application that provides maps and directions for locating items on the shelf) in 2014, and a complete website redesign in 2015. Three of these systems are what we refer to as “self-service reference options”: Libguides, LibAnswers FAQs, and StackMap. StackMap, for example, eliminates the need for new users to ask for help in finding books in DML, a notoriously challenging building to navigate. Prior to the implementation of StackMap this had been one of the most frequently asked questions encountered at the DML Reference Desk. Since their launch, these three self-service reference options have all experienced consistent and dramatic increases in usage (Figure 3).



LibGuide usage likely experienced minimal decline in 2015 for two reasons: 1) during our upgrade to LibGuides v.2, 12 percent of our guides that were orphaned or outdated were removed, and 2) the new website redesign provided a more intuitive user experience, which made some guides unnecessary.

When viewing usage of self-service and traditional reference services (in person, email, and chat) side-by-side, we can see an evolution in how users are engaging with various reference options (Figure 4).



If one of the goals of reference services (and information literacy instruction) is to create independent and self-sufficient researchers/learners, then we are moving in the right direction. Our users are increasingly able to answer their own questions and independently navigate our libraries and resources. It is not that librarians and reference assistance are no longer needed; it is that our traditional service points and roles are not as necessary as they used to be. Instead of putting so much time and energy into staffing physical desks, librarians might better serve our users by focusing on improving and expanding self-service options.

Case Study Number #2: ILL & Demand Driven Acquisitions (DDA)

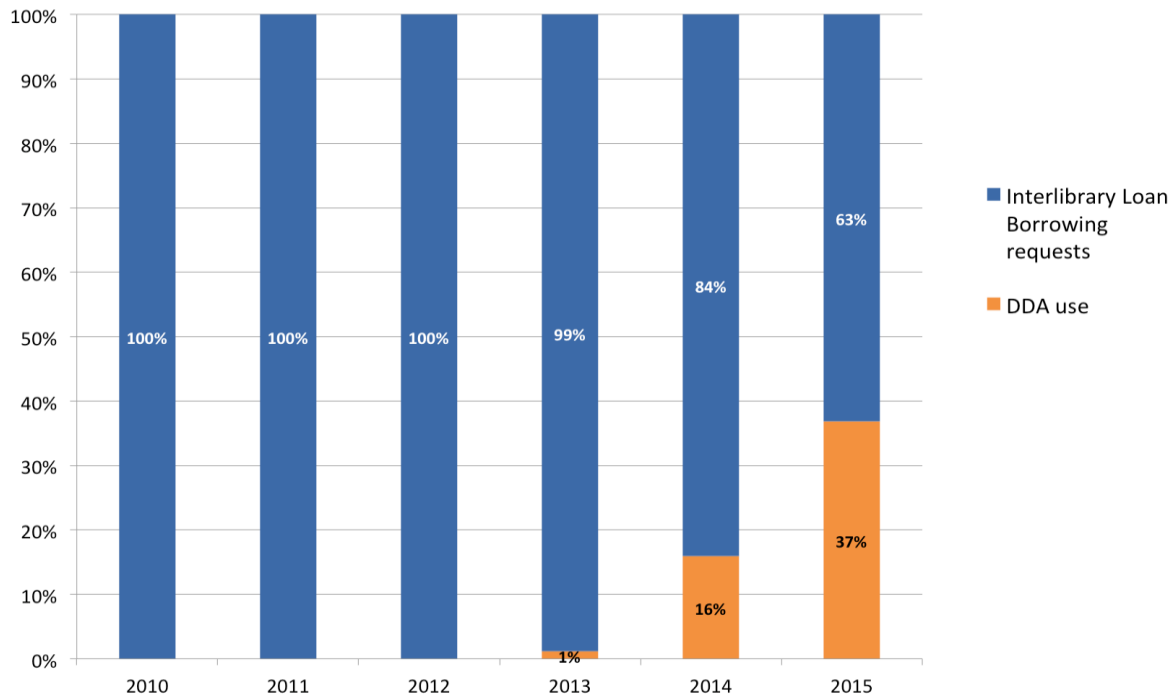
DDA is the practice of adding a large number of records for titles that are not currently owned to a catalog or discovery system. Titles are purchased only when they receive use. The strength and appeal of DDA is that it “enables acquisition at the point a title is needed, rather than buying speculatively and holding in anticipation of use” (Lugg, 2011, p. 7). DDA extends the library’s budget while simultaneously expanding access to content. All of this happens seamlessly and invisibly to users, unless they might notice that there is now more content available.

USC Libraries began experimenting with DDA in 2013. During a small pilot, approximately 9,000 EBL e-book records were added to Summon for users to discover. During this pilot, any use of an e-book that lasted five minutes or longer or that involved downloading or printing triggered a purchase. The second iteration of DDA at USC was launched in 2014 with a larger budget and approximately 25,000 additional titles added to Summon. Titles were still purchased on first use. In 2015, USC Libraries began paying for two short-term loans (STLs) before an e-book title was purchased on the third use. Ebrary titles were also added to the DDA pool, expanding it to more than 38,000 titles. In addition, our ILL staff began manually adding titles to the pool as requests for titles came in that were available on Ebrary or EBL platforms.

DDA has its roots in ILL requests (Goedeken & Lawson, 2015, p. 207). Many libraries began purchasing ILL-requested titles if the cost was less than or comparable to borrowing from another library (Lugg, 2011, p. 12). Both ILL and DDA fill in gaps in a collection. While ILL has traditionally focused on print resource sharing, DDA is most often utilized to provide on-demand access to online content (e-books and streaming video). Several librarians have proposed that DDA replace ILL whenever possible as it provides more content, immediately and seamlessly at a lower cost; a win-win for both libraries and users (Levine-Clark, 2011, p. 26-7; Way & Garrison, 2011, p.150).

Figure 5 shows the percentage of use that USC’s ILL service and DDA program have had in the last five years. DDA use has been steadily increasing, while ILL requests have begun to decrease.

Figure 5: Percentage of Use for USC's "On Demand" Services: ILL & DDA



We are not arguing that there is a direct correlation between the introduction of DDA and the decrease in ILL; there may well be other factors in play that we have not considered for this paper. For instance, Penn State librarians recently conducted a study, which found that ILL requests have gone down by 22 percent since the launch of their discovery system (Musser & Coopey, 2015). Both DDA and discovery systems provide users with more intuitive ways to immediately access content without librarians or ILL staff acting as mediators. There is more research to be done on the impact of discovery systems on ILL and reference services.

Regardless of a correlation, we see positive news in the decreasing number of ILL requests. Our users are gaining access to content more expediently either through our current subscriptions or through our DDA pool of titles. There will always be a need, even if reduced, for more esoteric and rare material that we do not own or that is not currently available online. Lower numbers do not mean the end of ILL, rather they mark the evolution of ILL towards developing new services and partnerships. As Musser & Coopey (2015) state, "With less time being spent on processing requests for locally owned or licensed material, ILL staff have more time to enhance and expand services to meet the needs of our changing user base" (p. 15). ILL's new services might include extending document delivery to more user groups, offering paging services and office delivery of print books, partnering with other library departments to troubleshoot access to e-content, and more.

Conclusion

Self-service reference and DDA both offer preemptive and proactive solutions that anticipate and solve problems before they become frustrations. We should not be

waiting for students or vendors to address our known pain points (StackMap was developed by Stanford students). We need to do everything we can to mitigate the problems we know our users struggle with and reconfigure our priorities to better meet theirs. Self-service reference and DDA utilize online systems to connect users quickly and intuitively to information, resources and assistance. These new systems require new collaboration across library departments and service points. This in turn requires that we adjust our attitudes and definitions of traditional roles and responsibilities within libraries.

Since the usage of some services are going up while others are going down, it is important to see the suite of services that libraries provide in a larger, more inclusive and interrelated context. Folk (2015) argues, “As we move forward and imagine what public services models should look like in the future, more nuanced data is crucial for making evidence-based transformations. While annual tallies of non-directional reference transactions can help us gauge the extent of informal teaching and learning opportunities, this data is not good enough” (p. 21). The quality of the service being provided and how that service connects to our core values should be paramount. Fister warns, “measures of value that become unanchored from philosophical values can be destructive” (2012). As Nicholson (2015) states, “We should consider how our efforts contribute to making higher education a transformative experience” for users and not just focusing on measuring and counting as evidence of our value (p. 334).

Folk proposes that we track and count different types of data, ones that capture “meaningful teaching and learning opportunities through reference services in order to have valuable discussions about the future of reference services and the value they add to the learning experience” (Folk, 2015, p. 21). Connecting everything we do to student learning is the future of measuring library value, not on decontextualized usage alone (Oakleaf, 2010, p. 20). Yet, it is still important to look at fluctuations in library service usage, if only to gauge changes in user expectations and needs so we are able adapt and evolve to meet those needs. If we are open to the feedback that usage numbers (both increasing and decreasing) offer, we can learn to be more nimble, proactively self-destructive in providing our ever evolving and diverse users with the services and resources they need to learn, use, and create new knowledge.

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