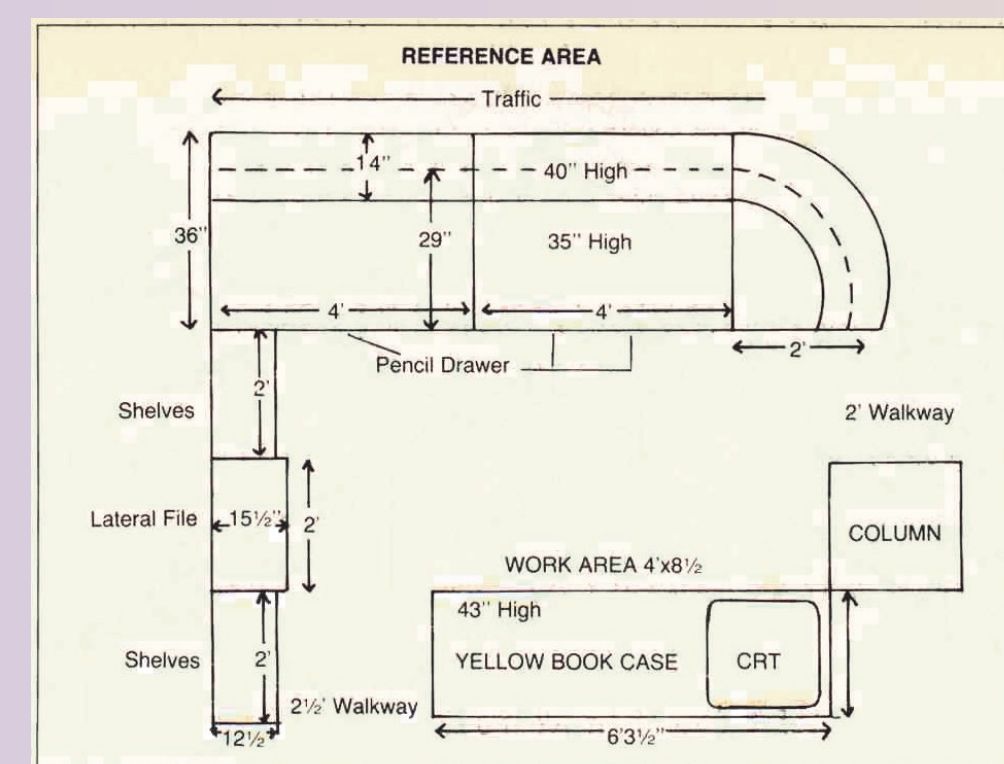


## Historically best design for circulation and reference desks in academic libraries

- Placement needs to be very visible “Generally, the reference desk should be visible from the entry area...and convenient to the staff area (Leighton, 239).”
- Design is very function based:
  - A counter for circulation service with consideration for returns, reserves, shelving carts, staff on duty (Leighton, 297-298)
  - A counter or desk for reference service with consideration for number of staff, seating for patrons (Leighton, 299)
- Factors in the choice between desk or counter should include
  - What has been done in the past
  - The philosophy of service that they library wants to convey
  - Volume of traffic (Leighton, 301)
- Above all, “[t]he desk needs to be inviting, uncluttered, easy to find, near ... offices, and not so monumental as to be intimidating (Leighton, 306).”

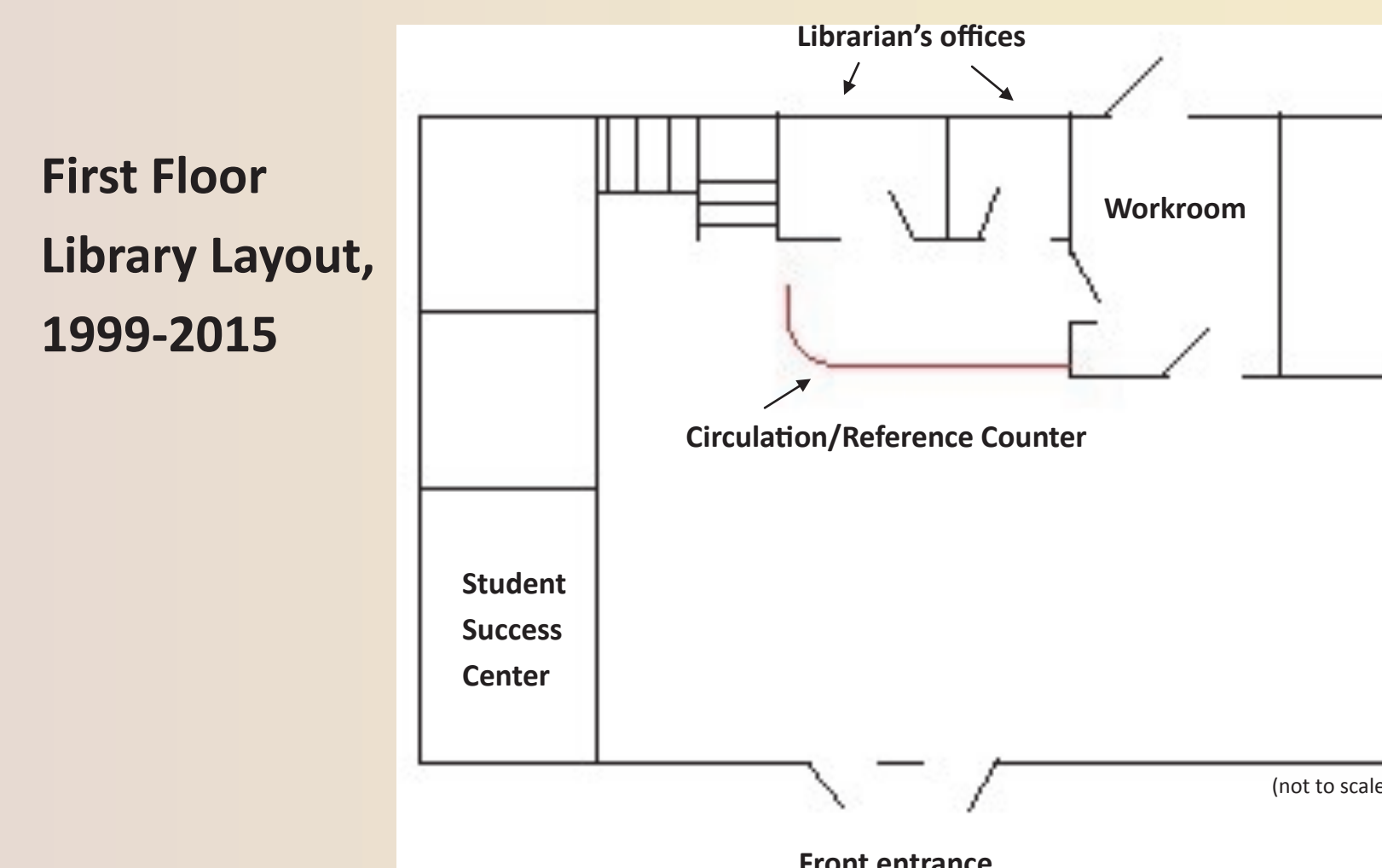
A suggested layout for a reference counter, c. 1983 (Crooks)



## Decision process to replace old counter

- The counter had seen heavy use, and was looking worn and shabby
- Like other libraries, we found that, “[t]he reference desk itself is a physical barrier to patrons (Deineh)” and to our own staff
- We wanted desks that would, “minimize psychological cost to users and thus encourage them to ask questions (Larason, 334).”
- We were looking for a setup that would encourage multiple returns to the service area (Deineh).
- We still needed something that was “an easily recognizable service point (Ahlers, 70)”, but easier to navigate for our staff
- After having a fixed counter, we wanted options that would give us “flexible use of space (Fletcher).”

# “Take down that wall!”: Making the Change from Circulation Counter to Mobile Service Desks



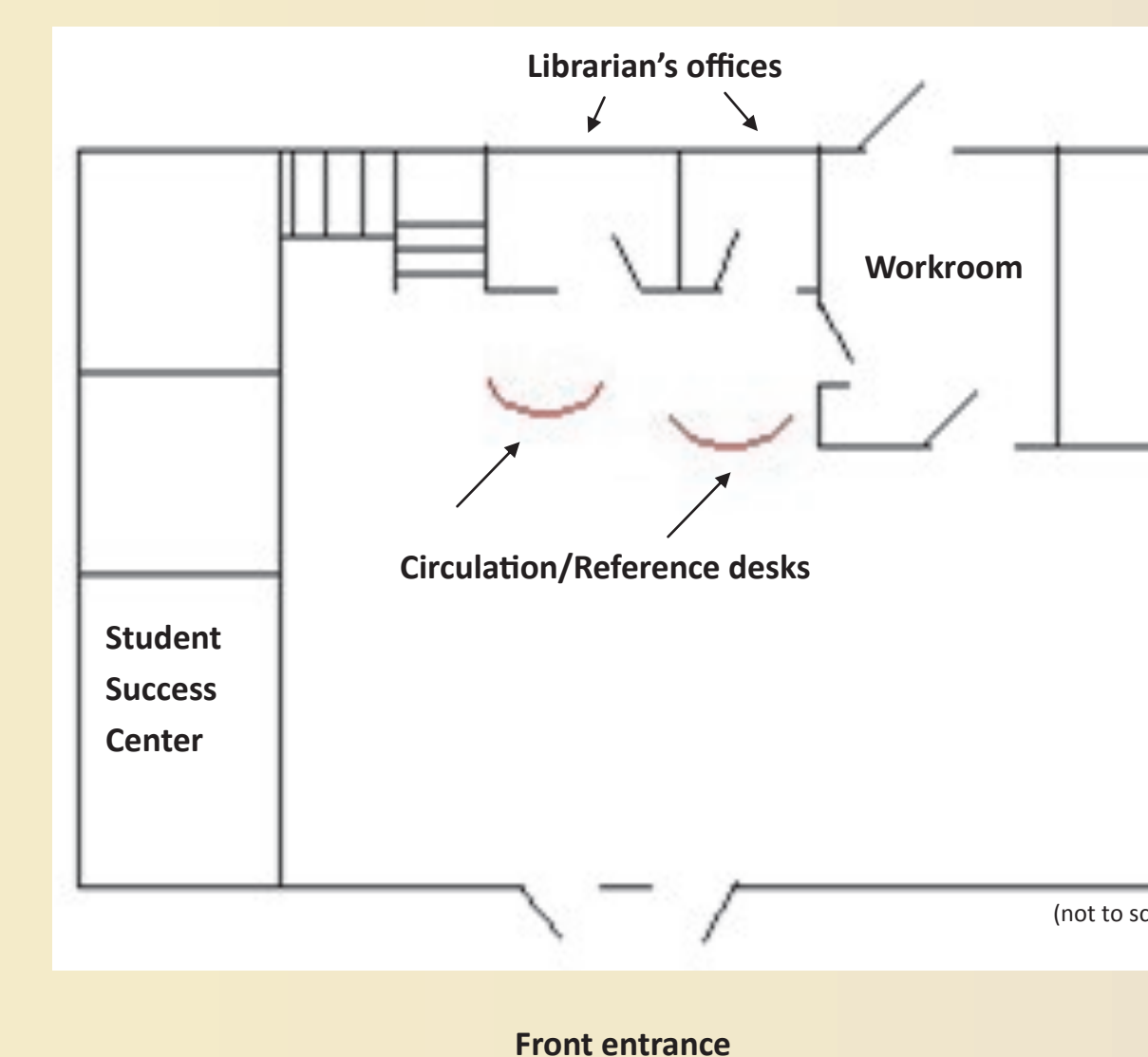
First Floor Library Layout, 1999-2015



Front desk, c.2010



Front Desk, Spring 2016



First Floor Library Layout, 2016-

## Preliminary reactions from our staff and patrons

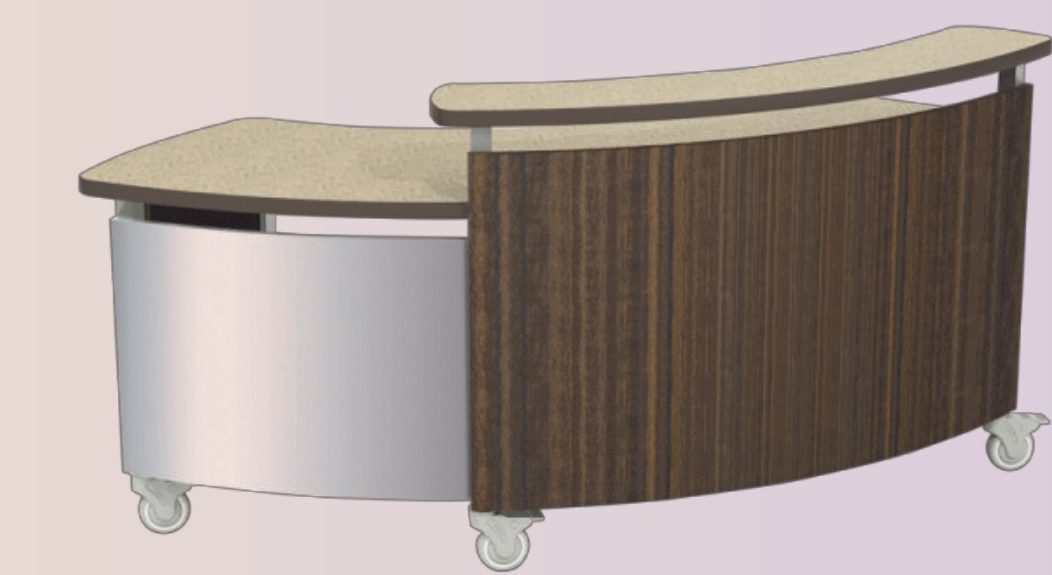
- Library looks modern, professional, up-to-date
- A needed change to be up to par with the rest of the university
- Circulation/reference is more inviting and comfortable
- Patrons don't seem as intimidated to ask for help
- Tours that come in can see we are organized and friendly
- It's less intimidating for patrons to approach the librarians in their offices without a counter blocking the path
- Student workers receive fewer questions that should be directed to the librarians
- Desks give a lot more leg room
- A lot more comfortable when working
- Feel more professional at a desk

- Like own desk, instead of sharing one counter
- Stapler and hole punch are harder to find
- Return basket, although labeled, is often overlooked

### References

- Ahlers, D. and Steiner, H. (2012). The approachable reference desk: How Norwich University Kreitzberg Library's desk got a new look. *College & Research Libraries News*, 73(2), 70-73.
- Crooks, Joyce M. (1983). Designing the “Perfect” Reference Desk. *Library Journal*, 108 (10), 970-972.
- Deineh, S., Middlemas, J., Morrison, P. (2011). A new service model for the reference desk: The student research center. *Library Philosophy and Practice* (e-journal). Paper 554
- Fletcher, J. (2011). *Breaking down the barriers: The no desk academic library*. Paper presented at The Effect of New Technologies on Library Design: Building the 21st Century Library IFLA Preconference, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.
- Larason, L. & Robinson, J. S. (1984). The reference desk: Service point or barrier? *RQ*, 23 (3), 332-338.
- Leighton, P. D. (2000). *Planning academic and research library buildings*. Chicago: American Library Association.

## What we finally chose:



MediaTechnologies Nomad Desk in Wild Cherry (pictured in English Oak at left) from DEMCO.

## Challenges to changing mid-year

- Retraining student workers/staff—new places for the return bin, shelving cart, emergency information and behind-the-counter shelves
- Where's the stapler? - the stapler, tape, pencils, hand sanitizer, and hole punch moved across the library
- Where do I return books? - return slot was clearly marked on the old counter; new desks use a smaller, labeled basket
- Plugging in the computers—old counter had built-in outlets that had to be relocated for the new mobile desks
- “Post no bills” - old counter was often used to post campus information; new area created near coffee and snack table for posting campus information.
- The invisible force field— many patrons still stop where the old counter used to be and want to be invited beyond this invisible barrier

## Improvements to service

- We found that the old counter, which, “establish[ed] a commanding presence, became a barrier in more ways than one (Ahlers, 70).”
- Students are bolder about knocking on the librarian's office doors
- It's easier for librarians to follow a student from their office or service desk to where the student is working
- The service desks and the librarian's offices are now more included in the traffic flow, “[and] provide stopping power for impulse transactions, and aid the patron in selecting and comparing service options (Larason, 335).”

## Ideas for future service desks

After two semesters, our students are mostly adapted to the new service desks. We've found that, “[w]hether a reference desk is an actual service point, a barrier, or an ambiguous barricade depends upon the library user's perception and interpretation of it (Larason, 332).” Most students still like some central point to go to for in-library service. Going forward, we would like to experiment with more centrally locating the service desk to utilize their mobility, especially during the lower-traffic summer semester.