



Work-in-Progress: "Ask Us Here" in the Shadow of Hunt Library

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Abstract

Engineering students are often unlikely to seek out assistance with library resources, especially when the engineering campus is physically distant from the library. An on-site reference program (“Ask Us Here”) was initiated by North Carolina State University engineering librarians to provide services and outreach in engineering student spaces on the university’s sci-tech focused Centennial Campus. With a flexible approach to location and a small physical footprint, librarians were able to respond to student reference needs, collect data in a lightweight and adaptable manner, engage with the College of Engineering community regarding the construction of the James B. Hunt Jr. Library on Centennial Campus, and develop service expectations for this new facility. This paper and the accompanying poster will discuss the program, as well as trends observed and improvements made in the five semesters preceding the opening of Hunt Library.

Introduction & Background

The James B. Hunt Jr. Library opened in January 2013. A two hundred thousand square-foot building (containing both library and non-library spaces) on a satellite campus that was previously served through a small branch library, the Hunt Library represents a dramatic shift in the level of library resources, spaces, and services available on the campus. Additionally, as a building designed to be (and aggressively promoted as) the iconic “heart” of the campus, the building is the subject of curiosity among students and faculty.¹

North Carolina State University’s engineering departments are currently split between the main campus area and a nearby satellite campus. Centennial Campus has a science and technology focus and is currently home to six engineering departments as well as NC State’s College of Textiles, several university centers, and a variety of corporate and governmental partners. The only library on the campus, prior to opening the Hunt Library, was the Burlington Textiles Library in the College of Textiles. The Textiles Library was home to the engineering librarian team, and was the main library service point for the campus.

With Hunt Library in the planning and construction stages, a remote reference program, named “Ask Us Here” (branded similarly to the Libraries’ “Ask Us” chat reference service and the “Ask Us” integrated service point in Hunt Library) was launched in Fall 2010. The program would provide reference services to engineering students and faculty, in their spaces and at point of need. The engineering students’ mix of technological savvy and confidence in their own problem-solving skills, coupled with their distance from the main campus and its central library, makes them more reluctant than other students to fully utilize library services, even if they make

use of library spaces.^{2,3} Ask Us Here was meant to address that reluctance, as well as act as a form of low-impact, passive outreach on the subject of the new library.

The concept of a providing library services in non-library spaces is not a new one.⁴ The Ask Us Here service was modeled on several established programs, notably “Ask Us HERE!” at Simon Fraser University⁵ and “Stump The Librarian” at Purdue.⁶

Materials & Methods

In its barest form, Ask Us Here consisted of librarians walking up to the engineering buildings, sitting down in the lobby and atrium spaces, and answering questions. Equipment consisted of a sign (18”x24”), a small tabletop tripod for the sign, a laptop or tablet able to access the building’s wi-fi network, and a bowl of candy and pens, the latter provided in bulk by an engineering database vendor. We chose to take a flexible approach to obtaining a table each session, waiting for a suitable table to become free in the often-crowded spaces rather than commandeering one. The sign was initially gray with the library logo, but was replaced with a more eye-catching red and white design (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: The original (left) and revised (right) Ask Us Here signs.

Sessions alternated between Engineering Building I (EB I, home of Chemical & Biomolecular Engineering and Materials Science & Engineering) and Engineering Building III, (EB III, home of Mechanical & Aerospace Engineering and Biomedical Engineering). Initially, two librarians attended each session, and each session was only held on Tuesday afternoons from noon to 2:00PM. Starting with the third semester of the project, the schedule was expanded to two days each week with one librarian per session (rotating through a staff of three librarians). EB I was visited on Tuesdays and EB III was visited on Thursdays. At the same time, the time was shifted to 11:00AM to 1:00PM, in order to align more closely with openings in the typical class schedule in those buildings.

To promote “Ask Us Here,” beyond the immediate signage, we posted notices on the electronic bulletin board screens in each building. We also mentioned Ask Us Here while talking with undergraduates in the course of instruction, as an alternative to traveling to either the main campus library or the nearby College of Textiles branch, and sent notices to several instruction-focused faculty members to pass along to their students.

Initially, librarians did a simple tally of the number of undergraduate, graduate, and faculty patrons interacted with over the course of the Ask Us Here session. Beginning with the third semester, however, a web form was created using Google Docs to gather data about each interaction observed during the session and feed that data into a Google Docs spreadsheet. After each interaction, the participating librarian would note their location, the type of patron (undergraduate, graduate, or faculty), the type of question (directional, introductory or general reference, specific or detailed reference, or relating to Hunt Library), the rough duration of the interaction (extremely quick or “fleeting”, less than five minutes, five to ten minutes, greater than ten minutes), and any comments about the interaction.

Results & Discussion

Over the course of the five semesters examined, the number of interactions and the type of patron were tracked. A total of 722 interactions were recorded. Figure 2 shows the raw number of interactions each semester, increasing approximately fourfold over the course of the five semesters. Further, it shows the number of interactions for each patron type each semester. Undergraduates showed the most consistent increase by semester, graduate students tended to interact more in the fall semesters than in the spring, and faculty tended to interact more in the spring semesters than in the fall.

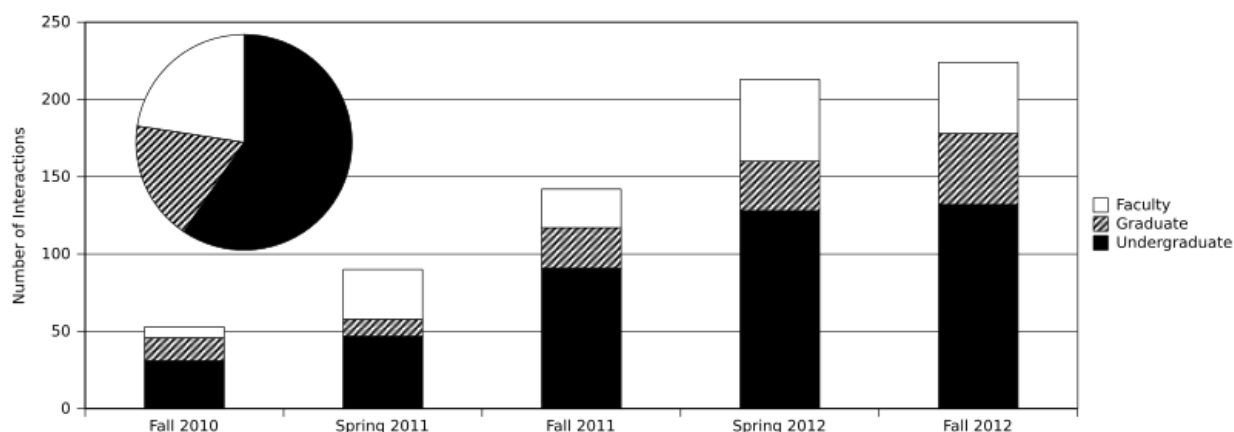


Figure 2: Number of interactions by patron type each semester. The inset pie-chart shows the overall five-semester breakdown by patron type. N = 722.

Starting with the third semester, several additional pieces of information were gathered for each interaction. Figures 3-4 show two of those pieces, question type and duration. The majority of interactions dealt with introductory or general questions. Also, the majority of interactions took very little time. Only 10% of interactions took more than five minutes, and only 2% took more than ten minutes. Questions relating to Hunt Library increased each semester prior to its opening, both in raw number of interactions and relative to the total number of interactions each semester (27%, 29%, and 32%). The number of interactions in each location was also tracked, and was roughly equal each semester.

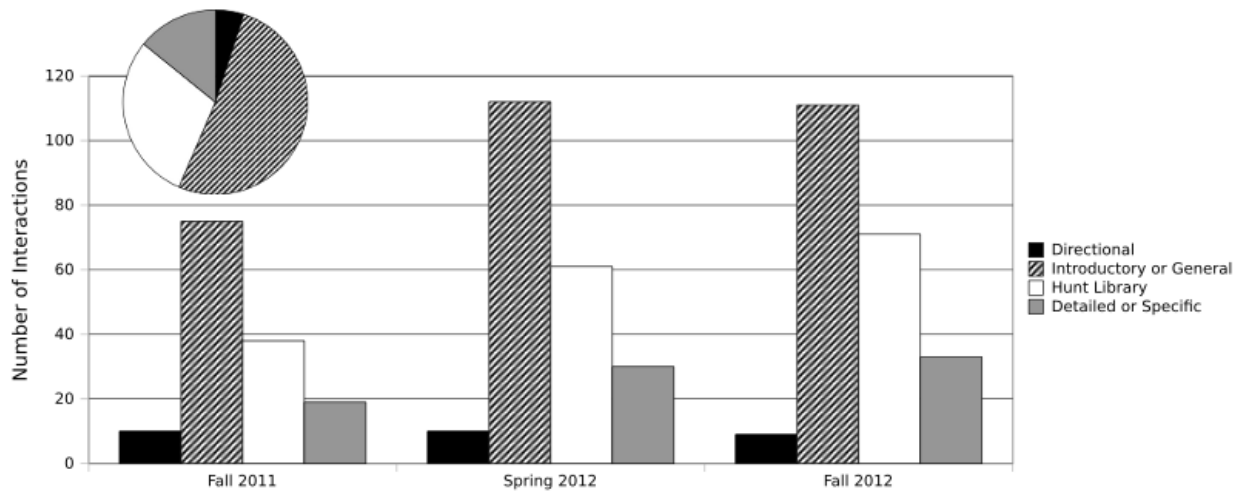


Figure 3: Number of interactions by semester for the four categories of questions. Inset pie chart shows the overall five-semester breakdown by question type. N = 579.

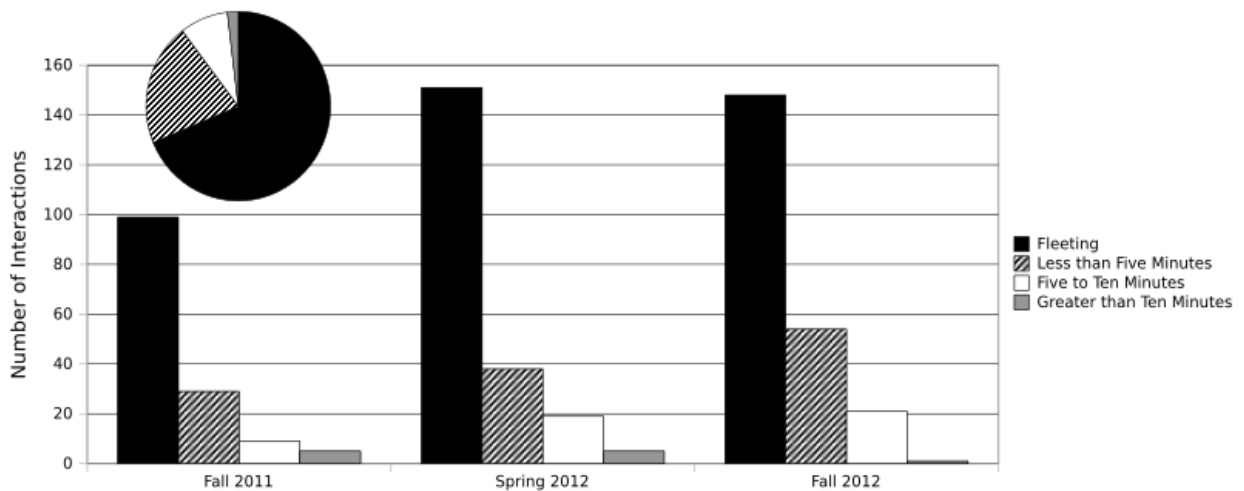


Figure 4: Number of interactions by semester for the four rough categories of interaction duration. Inset pie chart shows the overall five-semester breakdown by interaction duration. N = 579.

Using the data collected between Fall 2011 and Fall 2012, it was possible to examine the types of questions asked by and the lengths of interactions involving the three categories of patrons (see Figures 5 and 6). Undergraduates tended to ask introductory questions or inquire about the new library, and they were more often than not quick interactions between class periods. Common quick queries included “when does the new library open?” and “what’s this all about?” (in reference to the Ask Us Here sign).

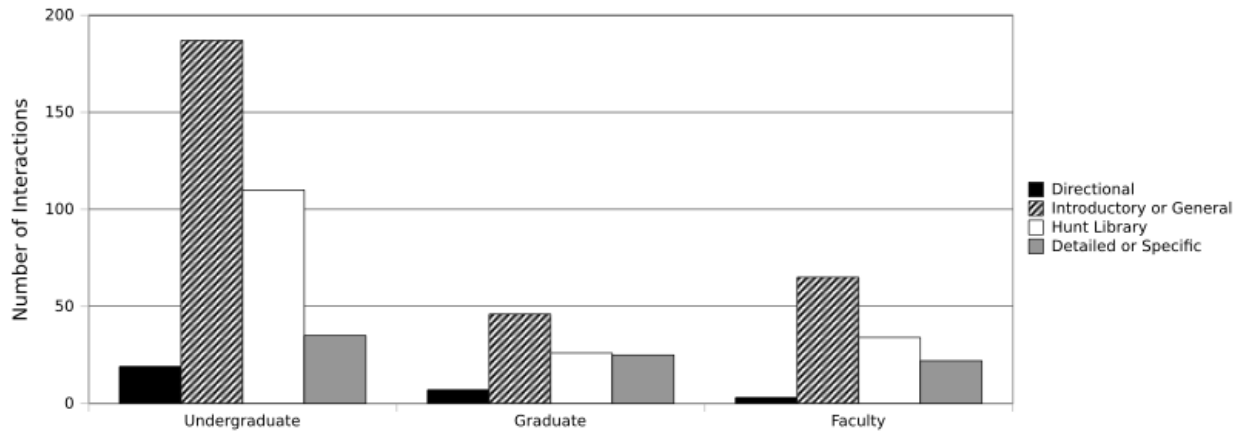


Figure 5: Number of interactions for question type by patron type. N = 579.

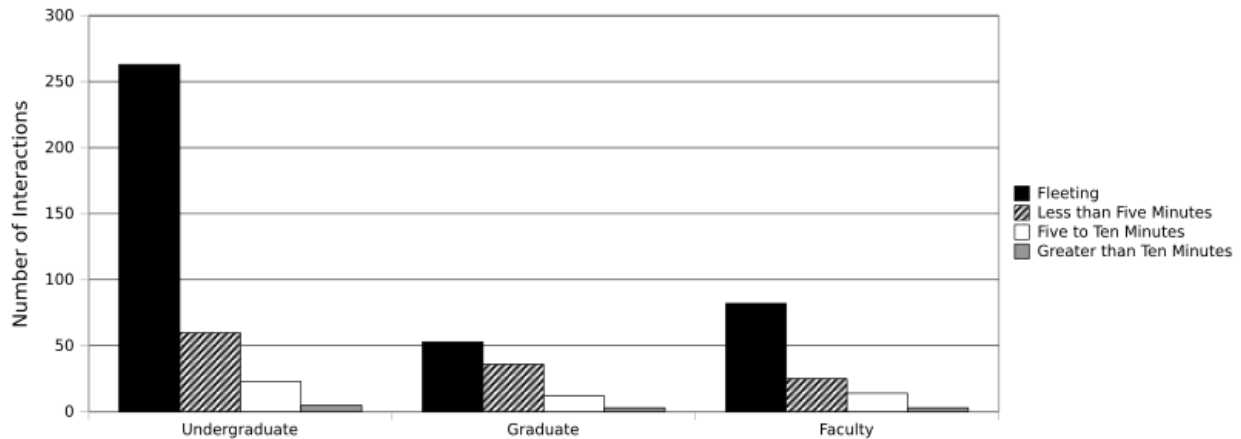


Figure 6: Number of interactions for rough interaction duration by patron type. N = 579.

It was also possible to examine the number of interactions over the course of each semester. Figure 7 shows the average number of interactions per session for each week of the semester. Averaged out over five semesters, there are clear peaks at the beginning of the semester, just before the mid-point of the semester, and at the end of the semester. The latter two peaks correlate with project deadlines and test schedules typical of engineering courses.

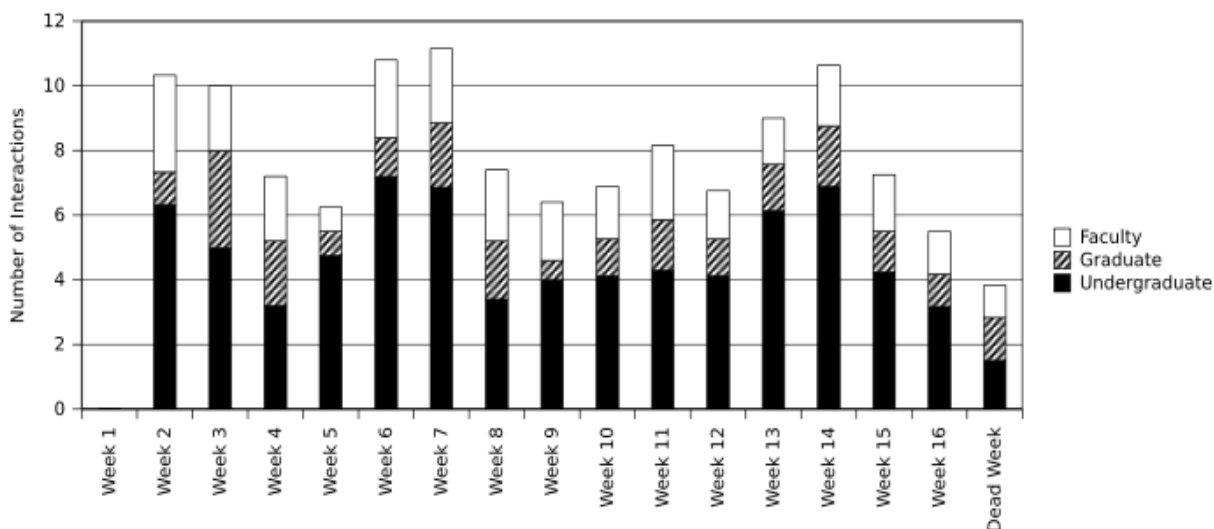


Figure 7: The average number of interactions per Ask Us Here session for each week of the semester. Also indicated are the average number of interactions per session per week for each patron type.

It should be noted that not every interaction in the above figures represents a separate individual. There were a number of “repeat customers” who stopped to talk with the Ask Us Here librarian on a regular basis, if occasionally only to chat and take a piece of candy. These regular interactions were useful in driving additional contacts, such as recruiting attendees for workshops or scheduling instruction sessions. The relationships built by these interactions also led to the patrons seeking out the librarians in non-Ask Us Here contexts for reference help.

The following is a list of sample questions received during Ask Us Here sessions, typical of the longer-duration interactions.

- A Biomedical Engineering undergraduate wanted to know how to find market research information relating to the footwear industry.
- A Materials Science & Engineering faculty member thanked the librarian for teaching an information literacy session and discussed ideas for the next semester’s instruction.
- A graduate student in Chemical & Biomolecular Engineering asked about the libraries’ support for citation management software.
- An undergraduate student in Mechanical & Aerospace Engineering needed help finding an article on steam turbines for a class assignment.
- An undergraduate student in Computer Science had an idea for an invention and wanted to know about the patent searching process.

Conclusion

Based on what we learned over five semesters, adjustments were periodically made to Ask Us Here. The time of the visits to the engineering buildings were adjusted forward an hour to better

fit student traffic patterns. Signage and promotion were improved, as well as the selection of pens (we now have both pens and highlighters). These adjustments correlate to increasing usage each semester, although it's also possible to attribute that increase to the students' and faculty's growing familiarity with the librarians and the service.

The current plan for Ask Us Here going forward is to expand the program to a third location, the College of Textiles. With the Textiles Library no longer extant, Ask Us Here will provide an additional form of in-person outreach to that college's community. That said, the opening of Hunt Library changes the dynamic of library service delivery on Centennial Campus. Hunt Library's effect on the continuing viability of the Ask Us Here service will need to be examined.

Works Cited

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