Stephen Bell has argued that the reference desk is only a symbol of the service we provide to students. It has become over the years a symbol that millennial students don’t relate to and don’t recognize. According to the American Library Association, between 1994 and 2008, academic libraries experienced a 50% decline in reference transactions. The University of Northern Colorado Libraries experienced this decline and responded by changing the model of the service – first by removing the reference desk and later by changing our department name from Reference to Library Research Services.

We still offer reference services in a variety of ways – physically and by telephone through an on-call model; virtually through email, chat, and SMS; and in person with office hours in buildings across campus. I will say that while we have experienced these declines, it seems clear that the type of research help students need is also changing – indicated by more rich and in-depth consultations, rather than fact-finding missions.

Two things are clear: students still need help with library research, and, as librarians, we need to promote ourselves. This is, of course, not news. We’ve all sat through meetings discussing methods and measures to make sure campus communities are aware of our existence and our services. And while these discussions generally include the question of where it will be best to put our time and efforts, a review library literature indicates that we rarely look towards data to help us make these decisions.

In an effort towards data-driven decision making, in the fall and spring of the 2015-2016 academic year, members of the UNC Libraries Reference Department sent a survey to individuals contacting a librarian for in-depth research assistance. The goal of this survey was to determine how these students heard of our services; with this knowledge, the department can better target populations for promotion of services. Institutional Review Board approval was received in fall of 2015.

To be concise: we conducted a market research survey using a convenience sample of students. Fifty-six usable student responses were gathered. Although the number of respondents was small, the survey appeared to reach a good cross-section of UNC students. Of the respondents
20% were distance students, 83% were full time students, 20% were nontraditional students, 13% were transfer students, and 22% were first generation college students.

We also collected responses from every level of student from undergraduate to doctoral. It is clear that responses from graduate students are over-represented in our data as compared to UNC enrollment numbers. Likewise, upperclassman are overrepresented in comparison to underclassman. What this survey does not tell us is why: we do not know if this is an indication that we need to spend more time marketing to adjunct professors and general education courses or if this is simply an indication that juniors and seniors are more engaged in research for their coursework.

Of the respondents, 54 had been in contact with a person that recommended the research services at the Libraries. One of the two who did not indicate another person recommended the library services stated, “I just knew it from prior education experiences how amazing librarians are!” Fifty-two percent of responses indicated that multiple individuals recommend library research services. For example, some respondents indicated that a professor, an academic advisor, both recommended contact with a librarian, as well as having had a librarian speak at one of their classes.

The data on the screen clearly indicates that we are reaching students through the classes we visit and that teaching faculty on campus are aware of our services; it also demonstrates that we need to reach out and promote ourselves to support services and co-curricular programs on campus.

Thirty-nine percent of responses indicated that students learned about library research services from multiple venues. For example, “a librarian’s name and contact information was listed in my syllabus”, “a librarian’s name and contact information was listed in Blackboard”, and the “library website” were all responses chosen by a single student.

While I don’t have time to share all the results of the survey today, the last question on the survey asked students if they had any advice for librarians in letting students know about library research services. While some responses were more helpful, many student suggestions centered on things we cannot change ourselves (such as making sure professors talk about librarians and library services in their classes), but this does indicate that we may need to do a better job of liaising with our faculty.