More than two decades ago, the Boston College (BC) Law Library moved into a new building. The new space featured additional study areas for students, more space for a growing collection, and a large atrium with cascading natural lighting. Unfortunately, the Law Library’s Information Desk was not included in this list of excellent features. During construction of the new building, the library staff were, for the most part, not consulted about the design or configuration of the Information Desk. On the few occasions they were, their ideas regarding the design of the desk were not taken into account. With a small workspace, large sections that blocked staff from patron view, a bulky and unapproachable exterior wall, and no quick way to get in or out from behind the desk, the Information Desk was not conducive to patron interaction from its inception.
A Need for Change
Remodeling the Information Desk had been a long-awaited and much needed project. After many years of considering the need for a new desk that provided better, more-approachable, and more-agile service, the University gave its approval, along with generous funding. In February 2017, the full law library staff began work with Peter Bracciotti, senior designer in Capital Planning and Engineering at Boston College, to create a new Information Desk. The following sections detail the process and strategies that led to the success behind the new and supremely functional Information Desk.

The Design Process
The Information Desk at the Boston College Law Library is unique in that it is shared by two service departments: Access and Organization (A&O), and Education and Reference (E&R). A&O provides all circulation needs, while E&R provides reference assistance to the law library’s patrons. The departments’ service points are located at the respective ends of the Information Desk, and whereas an A&O staff member is always present at the Information Desk when the law library is open for circulation assistance, E&R staff members often conduct reference services from their offices. A&O staff members call their E&R counterparts when patrons require or inquire about reference assistance.

To ensure the needs of both departments were met, the design process included input from all staff, A&O, E&R, and those in the technology department. Departments first met individually to discuss what functionality and design they would like to see featured in the new desk and then later met as a full staff group to bring these ideas together. Once the law library staff had a better idea of what their ideal Information Desk would look like, these ideas were brought to BC architects. BC’s Peter Bracciotti listened to staff comments regarding the appearance of an ideal Information Desk. He then created blueprints and brought them back to staff for revisions. After a series of revisions and a lengthy back-and-forth, a final plan was created, communicated to the staff, and then executed in a timely fashion.

From Vision to Reality
Demolition of the old Information Desk started on December 21, 2017, and construction of the new desk began in early January 2018. As the law library remained open for much of the demolition and construction period, many considerations were necessary to set up a temporary Information Desk, which was ultimately placed in the library’s reference area. Upon completion of the new Information Desk, staff quickly inhabited their new home. Within two hours, the move to the new desk was complete, with minimal interruption to patron services. While the process ran smoothly and quickly, there were a few notable moments.

Project Highlights
During the individual department meetings with Bracciotti, staff were able to present a more unified position as they shared their ideas. These smaller department meetings, in turn, made the full staff meetings far more productive, as more minute and department service-specific decisions had already been addressed and were now simply shared and refined with the entire group.

The main considerations from the A&O service department included:

- Taking stock of all circulation services offered and determining how to arrange and provide them in both the temporary transition space and at the new Information Desk with minimal disruption and adjustment, particularly with course reserve and permanent reserve items
- Creating an open design where staff could readily move from behind the desk to help patrons, as well as easily ask patrons to come behind the desk to look at the computer monitor
Creating two comfortable workstations with options for staff to either sit or stand

Ensuring immediate visibility of the entrance from either workstation, as previously only one workstation had a view of the entrance

Adding seating for student workers to complete filings and other tasks

Removing the book drop, where books were often occasionally forgotten and consequently went overdue

The main considerations from the E&R service department included:

Assessing the current use of the reference side of the Information Desk

Determining the configuration of space, including where to put ready reference materials in the new desk

Having a space where students could easily move around the desk to see the computer monitor for resource demonstrations

Including a countertop power source for easy access to patrons

Making the space more inviting for staff to regularly sit at the desk and be seen as approachable and available

**Reflections: Lessons Learned**

With the project having been completed more than a year ago, there has been time to reflect on the process as a whole. The design process was essential to the success of this undertaking. It led to the creation of an Information Desk that is both functional for all users and a recognizable and attractive cornerstone of the law library. To achieve this goal, it was imperative to hear the voices and value the opinions of each and every library staff member.

Although unanticipated problems are a part of any large-scale project, most can be addressed and resolved. Inevitably, when there are so many strong-minded contributors—22 to be exact—troubleshooting and compromise will be elements of the process. For example, one of the workstations on the circulation side was uncomfortable to sit at due to molding around the opening of the workspace. Without having used the space, issues such as these were hard to anticipate. We kept a list of items that needed to be readdressed and worked with our administrative offices and the architects to make sure they were completed. Further, there were a number of other issues that the law library staff never reached a consensus on, such as the aesthetics of the desk. In those cases, the majority opinion moved things forward. These issues were long forgotten by the time the new desk was unveiled.

Finally, and perhaps the most important consideration, is that of patron experience. Based on feedback received and our own assessment of patrons’ interactions, the new Information Desk has led to notable improvements in the provision of efficient service to patrons. An open design with pass-throughs in the desk allows for patrons to be invited behind the desk for help as well as for staff to gracefully exit the desk to help

**BEFORE:** Built in 1996, Boston College Law Library’s prior Information Desk included a bulky exterior wall, making interactions with patrons challenging.

**AFTER:** Boston College Law Library’s renovated Information Desk, completed in January 2018.
Management + Business Acumen

Located in the Social Law Library’s reading room, the half-circle Reference Desk features an eye-catching marble countertop and ample room to assist patrons.

A Welcoming Desk at Social Law

The Social Law Library has served the Massachusetts bench and bar for more than two hundred years, relocating as new court-houses were built in downtown Boston. In December 2004, the library moved from the high-rise “New” Suffolk County Court-house, where it had been for more than 60 years, to the renovated and renamed John Adams Courthouse, along with the Supreme Judicial Court and the Appeals Court.

The move presented many opportunities to improve services to our public agency and private law firm members. Increased space gave better access to the print collections and an up-to-date infrastructure made electronic databases and Wi-Fi more available. New staff offices would make more efficient workflow possible.

At the previous location staff space was very tight. The reference librarians had small open offices close to each other, but there was no central reference desk, and major dictionaries, directories, and other reference books were dispersed among several nonadjacent bookcases. Therefore, staff were hopeful when meeting with the planners from the State Division of Capital Management, which oversaw the building renovation project, and the architects of the Boston firm CBT. The architects in particular were enthusiastic about designing an attractive and inviting structure that would ease the work of providing legal reference.

With staff input, CBT designed a marble-topped half-circle (or horseshoe) desk with ample shelving behind it that blends well with the rest of the fourth-floor reading room. Though librarians do not often sit at the desk, they do meet members with research inquiries there every day. At present, the desk has two telephones where staff can pick up calls when away from their offices. It also features staff-written research guides for particular areas of law, an electric stapler, and a scanner from which members can email or save library materials on flash drives. The desk has also served as a bar when the library has hosted festive occasions, including the American Association of Law Libraries State, Court, and County Special Interest Section (now the Government Law Libraries Special Interest Section) reception during the 2012 AALL Annual Meeting.

— Brian Harkins