Eric is a sophomore who works part-time at the help desk. He has been invited to join a team of IT staff, learning commons staff, faculty, and students considering changes to help desk services. The first order of business is to agree on a vision for a successful help desk. A lively discussion ensues about values, strategic plans, and everyone's best and worst service-related experiences. Currently the help desk is housed in six office cubes in the IT department, where it fields about 35 phone calls per hour during peak hours, with wait times that can exceed 10 minutes. The team hopes to make the user experience less stressful when the help desk moves to the new learning commons. Plans for next week's meeting include defining character personas based on typical users of the help desk service. Eric will bring a summary of the types of calls he receives, demographics of customer types who use the service, and typical scenarios for call and problem resolution.

During the next meeting, the team documents the experiences of their personas as they walk through current and anticipated help-desk scenarios. From this documentation the team will create a service blueprint that describes the direction the new service should take, a direction they will test and refine by prototyping it.

Eric joins the pilot for the new IT help service in the learning commons. The focal point of the new commons is a central, ring-shaped information desk that offers library reference, resource check-out, and IT help. The IT help desk is also “distributed” throughout the commons in a series of kiosk-style bar tables where consultants work with students and faculty more informally. At Eric’s station, new procedures for triage determine precedence for call-in, walk-up, and e-mail requests, and a virtual dashboard lets everyone know where they are in the support queue. Eric sees people gathering for a workshop, one of several designed to provide preemptive technical support. A student approaches Eric and says, “I can’t send my blog post from my regular blog service to the site for my history course. I’m not sure what the problem is.” Eric motions the student to a chair and together the two troubleshoot the problem. Once the issue is resolved, Eric types in his comments for the team review, quoting the student’s remarks: “It’s great talking to a human being about this. It’s so much easier than explaining it over the phone.”
The University of Derby’s redesign of its student enrollment procedure is a widely recognized service design project impacting a university service. Because the university’s processes and toolset have been carefully documented and made available online by JISC, their experiences offer a particularly useful starting point for those looking to reconfigure business processes in higher education. McMaster University in Canada used a service design approach in its reconfiguration of the H.G. Thode Library of Science & Engineering. The multipurpose space integrates IT help, reference, and circulation desks, thus minimizing the time users spend to check out documents and devices, get research support, or find help troubleshooting problems on their laptops in one central location. Self-check-out machines and ample printing stations also reduce wait times.

**4 Why is it significant?**

Service design provides an effective mechanism for institutions that need to juggle resource constraints with a desire to make services and spaces more useful and desirable. It offers tools to evaluate, create, and improve services and to justify their value. A new learning commons or student hub, designed with careful thought to the user perspective, can yield a system more responsive to different learning styles. Service design can also contribute to cost savings and to sustainability in a culture moving from product ownership to service use. In this regard, when an academic service is designed properly, campus users don’t need to own an actual product, they just need access to the service it provides—an approach that is increasingly common in an era where people have become accustomed to sharing resources online. That is, students with access to a textbook through rental or borrowing may not need to own it, and the ability to check out a laptop may obviate the need to purchase one. Finally, an approach that considers the user perspective can result in services and spaces that offer a community experience, promoting greater student and faculty engagement.

**5 What are the downsides?**

As in other industries, services in higher education are often designed from the perspective of the provider rather than that of the user. **Because service design advocates a user perspective, it may herald a culture change that can precipitate frustration and resistance.** To employ service design, faculty, staff, and students may need to learn new skills, such as prototyping and iterative design methods. Then, too, a focus on the end user can unearth information some stakeholders may not want to hear—that current processes are not satisfying needs, that there is a need to standardize, or that the place where the most money is currently being spent is the least effective. Because of these factors, a process like service design might reveal flaws within a current service or space, and an organization that undertakes the process will likely be expected to follow through with appropriate actions to remedy flaws or weaknesses that are identified.

**6 Where is it going?**

For years higher education has been experiencing a broad push toward accountability and assessment of the services they provide to students, faculty, and staff. **Service design provides a creative approach to this pressure for accountability.** which may be why it is seeing wider adoption, particularly in customer-facing areas such as libraries, learning commons, IT help desks, and administrative arenas. Colleges and universities are likely to develop more student-service hubs, where students can go to register for classes, speak to a financial aid counselor, pay bills, meet with advisors, and generally conduct the administrative and financial business they have with the institution. Such hubs will function most effectively where tools and processes are in place to measure, evaluate, and test that the services meet user requirements. The focus of these analyses will probably change over time as well, from measuring simple usage to measuring satisfaction and impact. Similarly, virtual spaces may benefit from the service design approach that sees online admissions, registration, financial aid, or courseware as a total system that ought to be evaluated from the user’s perspective rather than that of the provider.

**7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?**

Service design offers higher education an integrated approach to planning, evaluating, and operating learning spaces and those services offered by the institution in support of academics. Initial design that evaluates points where people interact with other people or with technology, furnishings, or layouts can result in a lively, well-used physical or online space. Spaces and services that emerge from user-centered and participatory designs are easier to use and less expensive to maintain. They are also less likely to require expensive retrofits, despite a commitment to ongoing iterative and proactive research dedicated to uncovering user needs and responding to them promptly. These spaces and services should generate better student engagement through programming and events, greater ease in scholarly collaboration, and a more satisfied consumer base. This focus on students and faculty as users of campus services can generate creative approaches to designing these services and build a culture of continuous improvement of the infrastructure that supports education.