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Using Evidence in Practice

Silence in a Noisy World: Using Student Feedback to Enhance Library Silent Study Space

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Setting

Bellarmino University Library provides services and support to the University's roughly 3,200 FTE students (approximately half living on-campus). Undergraduates are about 2,500 of the student body with graduate programs contributing about 700 students. Bellarmine University is a private, Catholic university located in Louisville, KY. Over 80% of Bellarmine's undergraduate students attend full-time and are under 25 years of age. The library building is not home to only the

library; Other units located in the building include The Thomas Merton Center,

Information Technology, the Student Success Center, Disability Services, and the President's Office. The four-floor building is heavily used with a gate count of almost 300,000 (297,572) during the 2017-18 academic year. In 2014-15, the first floor was renovated to create the Lansing Learning Commons, which was intended to provide a student-centered collaborative learning space with technology support. At the same time, staff space on the second floor—the quiet study floor—was

reduced, doubling the individual seating, and old-style, individual study carrels from the first floor were repurposed on this quiet floor.

Problem

In 2017-18, the President's Office and boardroom, on the second floor, were slated to move out of the building, resulting in the availability of boardroom space to be reassigned for new functions. At the university, space is always in high demand. Given that the University had conducted a major renovation of the library specifically to

address student needs, it was now looking to address the space needs of a number of programs and projects, such as creating more classrooms, faculty development space, or the veterans affairs office among others. Not all proposed uses would be compatible with the quiet nature of the floor, and this was a major concern of the library. The library desired to convert the space into a modern quiet study space. The library had some anecdotal indications that the students would use more quiet space, but the library needed to be able to convey that this plan was the best use of the space.

Table 1
Reasons You Come to the Library

Options	Count	Percentage
To check out books	167	29%
To check out media	96	17%
To locate journal/newspaper articles	125	22%
To get help with research papers or other course assignments	197	34%
To read newspapers or current magazines	19	3%
To use items placed on reserve by your professor	111	19%
To use media equipment	37	6%
To study alone*	473	82%
To study with a group*	367	64%
To use the group study rooms*	367	64%
To use the second-floor quiet study area*	279	49%
To use a printer, photocopier	433	75%
To use the computers for academic purposes	359	63%
To use the computers for recreational/personal use	60	10%
To use a Mac computer	64	11%
To visit the "Ask Us" Desk for research assistance	82	14%
To visit the Technology Support Center	141	25%
To visit the Student Success Center for writing assistance	97	17%
To visit the Student Success Center for advising	139	24%
To visit the Student Success Center for tutoring	202	35%
To visit Disability Services	46	8%
To visit the Merton Center	55	10%
To meet friends	207	36%
To look for information in online databases	197	34%
I have class in the library	142	25%
To use the library as a "late night" study place	233	41%
To browse the popular fiction collection	23	4%
To browse the DVD collection	78	14%
To use the Smartboard	33	6%

Table 2
On Average, How Often Do You Use the Library in Person?

Options	Count	Percentage
Daily	103	17.98%
2 to 4 times a week	206	35.95%
Once a week	94	16.40%
2 to 3 times a month	74	12.91%
Once a month or less	76	13.26%
Never	20	3.49%

Evidence

To address the problem, the library needed to demonstrate that there was an ongoing student desire for quiet space. Anecdotal staff observations would not be sufficient; more compelling evidence of student demand would need to be identified or collected. The library reviewed the data from two sources that could convey student opinion on the question of quiet space. We used data collected through a library satisfaction survey and from the headcount data routinely collected by the library. The survey was concerned with three primary guiding questions:

- What is the perceived student satisfaction level of library services?
- In what ways is the library most used?
- What library services are most valuable for student stakeholders?

A total of 574 ($n = 574$) participants completed the survey. Participants were asked various questions related to their perceptions of the institution's library. Pertinent questions are included below however, to aid in clarity, tables have been created for responses to negate narrative representations of the results and hopefully increase clarity.

Students were asked to select reasons why they came to the library. Students could select more than one answer. Results are in Table 1.

For purposes of this study, four components (indicated by * in Table 1) stand above the rest: the number of people who want to study with a group, use group study rooms, study alone, and use the quiet study area. Table 2 illustrates how often participants use the library in person.

Students were also asked how often they complete or perform certain tasks during the school year. Responses are in Table 3.

Table 3
Library Related Tasks

Library Use	Never	Occasionally	Often	Very Often
Used the library as a place to study alone	14%	26%	26%	34%
Used the library as a place to study in a group	18%	40%	24%	18%

Table 4
Evaluate Importance of Library Areas

Library Areas	1 (Least Important)	2	3	4	5 (Most Important)	DK
Rank the importance of ... Group Study Rooms	4%	2%	6%	21%	60%	7%
Rank the importance of ... Quiet Study Rooms	4%	3%	9%	15%	62%	7%

Students were asked to evaluate various library areas in terms of their importance from 1 (least important) to 5 (most important). DK, or don't know, was also an option. Students were asked to rank the importance of several areas, and the most relevant are included in Table 4.

Researchers asked students to share their opinions regarding various aspects of library services on a scale of Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. In addition, Don't Know was also an option. The most relevant responses for this study are in Table 5.

Students were also asked to rate the library's renovation and creation of the Lansing Learning Commons and its value as a work space. In two questions, the students broke

down roughly into a two-thirds and one-third split. Most students clearly see the renovated collaborative space as valuable work space. However, a sizable minority of students, about one-third indicated that the space was too noisy or busy to work in effectively. On a scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, 223 (39.26%) said Agree, and 163 (28.70%) responded Strongly Agree. Also, 145 (25.53%) responded Don't Know. In addition, when asked if the Lansing Learning Commons is too noisy or busy for me to work effectively, 114 (20.04%) said Agree, and 81 (14.24%) responded Strongly Agree. Also, 142 (24.96%) responded Don't Know.

Finally, students were asked to provide their general rating of the library. Responses are included in Table 6.

Table 5
Opinion of Library Services

Services	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
I can find a quiet place to study in the library	2%	7%	47%	37%	7%
I can find areas to work in groups in the library	1%	8%	45%	37%	9%

Table 6
In General, How Would You Rate the Library?

Options	Count	Percentage
Excellent	187	33.45%
Very good	311	55.64%
Average	58	10.38
Below average	3	.54%
Poor	0	0%

Table 7
Suggested Improvements

Improve One Thing	2012	2018
Furnishings	.45%	6%
Hours	11%	6%
Quiet Study	8%	10%
Resources	19%	8%
Space	26%	35%
Technology (Computers)	7%	2%
Technology (Printers)	3%	2%
24 Hours Study Room (Larger Size)	2%	N/A

In addition to the numeric responses, the survey also provided students with the opportunity to provide feedback to open-ended questions. The survey asked, "If we could improve one thing about the library for you, what would it be?" We received 367 written responses. The results were categorized and tabulated to identify areas that could use attention. The top three improvement requests follow:

1. Space: 34.6%
2. Quiet Study: 9.54%
3. Resources: 7.9%

The overwhelming "one thing" students requested was more space in some way—more study rooms, more seating, more tables, or a bigger library. However, the desire for quiet study space is a demand for a significant number of our students.

A comparative analysis of responses in 2012 to 2018 showed an interesting connection. Table 7 below outlines survey differences regarding suggested improvements for the library. One chronological note, the responses from 2012 were collected prior to the renovation, and the responses from 2018 were collected after the renovation was completed. Also, all student responses are not listed below, only the most relevant for this study.

Post renovation and the significant increase in the number of individual study spaces on the quiet floor, student demand for quiet study space continued to increase. In addition, these survey responses were supported by the headcount data. While overall use of the library increased about 23% from pre-renovation (13-14) to post-renovation (16-17). The largest increase was for the quiet, second floor, which saw a 27% increase. Students were not just saying they wanted more quiet

space; when provided with more seating, they used it.

Implementation

As the University considered how to allocate the recently freed up Presidential space in the library, we were able to present data that demonstrated student desire for quiet space beyond the recently renovated learning commons collaborative space. Over 60% percent of the students rated the quiet study spaces as very important. About 1/3 of the respondents indicated that the learning commons area was too loud or busy to work effectively. This is a significant number of students who were looking for something other than collaborative work space. In looking at the trend of student responses, we were able to demonstrate that this was in fact an ongoing and increasing desire of the students. Finally, we were able to verify these user survey results with observed data in our headcounts. Students were using the library's quiet space more. As a result, the University moved Veteran's and International Student recruitment into other available spaces on the campus, but designated the large open spaces to be library quiet study space.

Outcome

The use of the new study spaces has been strong. The addition of the boardroom as a more relaxing quiet study space has also been well received. In the Fall of 2018, the boardroom study space was 23% of the use of the quiet floor. Unexpectedly, when the University was looking for a more centralized location for a meditation, prayer, or reflection space, the library's quiet floor was selected, and additional space was provided so as not to cut into student study space.

Reflection

Faced with a potential space vacancy that would attract many programs, it was important to be able to go to the University administration with evidence of the need for

quiet student space. The first step in this process was acknowledging that anecdotal staff observation was not going to be sufficient to maintain the quiet space in the library. University priorities had to be considered and empirical evidence was needed to make a compelling case that quiet study space would meet a significant student demand.

The student user survey is conducted regularly, so the next step was to review it for data that would support the library's contention that more quiet study space was an outcome desired by students. It was fortunate for us that a number of questions addressed the quiet space concern, and we were even more fortunate that the answers all consistently pointed in the same direction—a significant part of the student respondents wanted quiet library space and not just collaborative library space. Realizing that the historical trends also supported the library's point of view was a surprising discovery. Finally, having two complementary data sets, student responses on the survey and student actions from the headcounts collected, contributed to making a compelling case.

Taken together, the results reveal necessary truths about library functionality and physical space design. Libraries today are central features on campus (Head, 2016). In some ways the library has become a cultural icon. It must satisfy several dimensions of campus needs. The ability and necessity of the library to become a chameleon campus service are well known (Oliveira, 2018). As universities attempt to re-design the library to reach all student stakeholders uniquely, an emphasis on space to achieve individual learning mixed with collaborative design techniques is appropriate (Spencer & Watstein, 2017).

The results from this study should encourage library staff and university administrators to consider library design from two perspectives. While libraries continue to explore ways to develop open concept physical space design, individual study rooms and, more

importantly, quiet study spaces are still a desirable feature (Diller, 2015).

We would be remiss to sacrifice all features of the traditional library, including quiet study rooms or study spaces in order to develop more high-tech collaborative open-space design. Students still appreciate the opportunity and ability to study alone and to separate themselves from distraction. Library services would do well to remember what Goodnight and Jeitner reminded us of in 2017: “They [students] come to the library searching for spaces that are quiet, where they can settle down to read and study and write papers in silence, without distractions they find everywhere else in their lives” (p. 100). Collaborative space is necessary, but remember to offer students a place for silence in this noisy world.

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