Space Preference at James White Library: What Students Really Want

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ABSTRACT

Although there is abundant information available remotely, higher education students and teachers still seek the campus library to meet many of their teaching, research, and learning needs. The usefulness of the spaces provided is directly dependent on the match between these spaces and the learning and teaching styles students and teachers engage in today. Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify what types of spaces students really want in order to accomplish better their academic requirements and learning needs. The data was collected through traditional and ethnographic techniques, such interviews, *in loco* observation, focus groups, and design charrettes. Information from students reading, studying, or using their laptops and computers in other places in the university was also gathered with the main objective of identifying the reasons they prefer or choose to be there instead of in the library. This methodology was followed by an actual field survey to identify participants' space priorities. The main results indicated that students at Andrews University, independent of gender and program level, prefer individual study spaces over group study and social areas.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries have always been involved in and affected by opportunities, challenges, and changes in higher education. Developments in pedagogy and a shift in millennials' learning styles — from centric to collaborative, emphasizing, more than ever, group and social learning — learning processes that occurs in interpersonal contexts, as developed by Bandura (1963, 1977) have affected how librarians develop and structure library services and information literacy programs in an attempt to better meet faculty's and student's academic needs today.

Libraries are becoming actual learning centers. Albeit collection development, information storage, access, and distribution systems are all necessary to perform its role within the academic community, very little will be accomplished if the library doesn't support the learning activities set forth by faculty and academic programs. Thus, learning impacts rather than traditional library services should be the focus of library space planning, defended Seaman (2006), one decade ago.

As the information seeking habits of students and faculty have changed, libraries are providing more space for patrons and less for stacks, becoming true learning centers (Haapanen, Kultamaa, Ovaska, & Salmi, 2015; Schmidt & Kaufman, 2007) — transforming the information commons into learning commons to provide an adequate environment that stimulates collaborative social learning, encourages creativity, and supports knowledge creation.

Recently, Bilandzic and Foth (2013) challenged academic libraries to reshape their spatial planning to meet the changing needs of academia and actually become facilitators of education and learning.

In order for libraries to truly become learning centers, library spaces should be designed to foster and meet the learning needs of students. Van Note Chism (2006) stated that librarians "can facilitate deeper and richer learning when we design spaces with learning in mind" (p. 1).

Coupled with this change in study habits observed within the undergraduate community, and emphasis in learning, many librarians today adhere to the idea (or even, sometimes impression) that students seek social spaces at the library where they can meet friends, work together, chat, or simply relax from their grueling day-to-day studies (Chan & Spodick, 2014; May & Swabey, 2015).

When librarians take on the challenge of renovating or building a new library, they will need to decide which types of spaces they will design and prioritize. The Millersville University Library's renewal planning process was guided by the answers given to questions such as:

"What are libraries about in the 21st century? How do we create spaces that will help our community to learn and grow? How do we design spaces that foster conversations, collaborative inquiry, and the development of critical information literacy skills?" (Parrish & Szczyrbak, 2013, p. 233).

Knowledge of the "primary purposes for which patrons use the library" and "what is the initial destination of patrons as they enter the building" as proposed by Lux, Snyder, & Boff (2016, p. 110), will also base the decisions regarding the types of spaces to be offered. Identifying "what features would users like to have in an ideal library space" to support decisions on space design, as proposed by Pierard & Lee (2011, p. 193) is also highly commendable.

When faced with this incumbency, universities in the US — University of Iowa (Thomas, Van Horne, Jacobson, & Anson, 2015), Finland — Tampere University of Technology (Tavaniemi, Poutanen, & Lahdemaki, 2015), Great Britain — Loughborough University, (Cunningham & Walton, 2016), and Australia — Australian National University (McNamara, 2012) grounded the renovation plans on actual students' feedback from interviews, observation, focus groups, and surveys which were conducted and applied to identify their library space needs, preferences and use.

In order to satisfy the growing need and demand for spaces more conducive to learning, researchers are emphasizing and libraries are creating an array of spaces for different purposes. Spaces such as: *non-traditional facilities* like cafés and classrooms (Harrop & Turpin, 2013; Stewart, 2011); *informal spontaneous spaces* (Thomas et al., 2015); *social learning spaces* (Bryant, Matthews, & Walton, 2009; Carpenter, 2011; Chan & Spodick, 2014; May & Swabey, 2015); *group study areas*, (Dallis, 2016; Holder & Lange, 2014; Kinsley et al., 2015; Montgomery, 2014); *communal*, (Bedwell & Banks, 2013); *flexible* (Chan & Wong, 2013; Dallis, 2016); *collaborative* (Booth, Schofield, & Tiffen, 2012; Cunningham & Walton, 2016; Dallis, 2016; Fox & Doshi, 2013; Gayton, 2008; Henry, 2015; Holder & Lange, 2014; Parrish & Szczyrbak, 2013; Turner, Welch, & Reynolds, 2013); *computer stations* (Bailin, 2011; Kinsley, 2015; May & Swabey, 2015; Norton, Butson, Tennant, & Botero, 2013; Pierard & Lee, 2011) *individual study* (Paretta & Catalno, 2013; Lux et al. (2016), as well as areas where *solitude and quietness* prevail (Beard & Bawden, 2012; Cha & Kim, 2015; Lawrence & Weber, 2012; Massis, 2012; Scarletto, Burhanna, & Richardson, 2013; Tavaniemi et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2015).

It is an arduous task to design the actual spaces that will meet and satisfy students' expectations when interests are so diversified, even more so considering that:

(1) Pierard and Lee (2011) declare that they were "struck by how important quiet and individual spaces were to the users" (p. 201) when the staff at New Mexico University learned, through a variety of ethnographic methods, what students considered to be ideal library space. They conclude that "Our team had expected that we would see a stronger desire for small or large group space, as well as social space. Yet, large group spaces, social spaces, and coffee shop received lower rankings than individual spaces" (p.201).

(2) Millennials studying in the D. H. Hill Library at North Carolina State University "stressed the need of quiet space for academic work", albeit their "appreciation of the social spaces in the library" (Yoo-Lee, Lee, & Velez, 2013, p. 498). However, 35% of the respondents to the survey regarding their favorite spaces, said they would use both quiet spaces and social spaces almost equally;

(3) Thaler et al. (2014) highlight that over 50% of the students at seven different libraries at its most social points are engaged in individual, focused work;

(4) Holder and Lange (2014) were surprised to find out that 30% of the students surveyed at McGill University intended to use the newly built Furniture Lab intended for group study for quiet study.

(5) Students were observed using the group spaces to study quietly 47% of the time at the University of Iowa's Learning Commons (Thomas et al., 2015). The facility was being used to study quietly by the majority of students, representing the most frequent reported activity.

(6) Tavaniemi et al. (2015) report that "the library's staff have noticed and received feedback from customers studying alone that they would like peace and quiet in the areas of the library's learning spaces intended for social study" (p. 319). According to the authors, "Users will readily ask others to talk more quietly in these spaces or even to leave the library" (p. 319). This fact leads the authors to conclude that the implementation of social learning spaces in the library did not fully meet the users' needs. No wonder these observations are made in a Section entitled "Peaceful Study Areas are Important" (p. 319).

(7) Harrop and Turpin (2013) set out to explore learners' information learning space behaviors, attitudes, and preferences to find out what makes a successful informal learning space. Quite unexpectedly, they found that that the "majority of learners demonstrated clear self-awareness, expressing a preference for spaces where they were not being disturbed; nor were they disturbing others" although "not all students choosing to work individually wish to be in a quiet environment" (p. 69).

(8) Jamieson's (2013) study at the University of Melbourne, Australia, shows that in spite of the virtual library and emphasis on social spaces, students came to the library seeking a contemplative space to study, and observes that:

Many current trends in higher education, such as problem-based learning, emphasize the need for space for group work. However, we did not get a lot of evidence for this. … It seemed that the users clearly worked more alone than in a group … The results of the monitoring and the survey show that the library is actively used as a study place, more for individual than for social, collaborative purposes. (pp. 184, 185).

(9) Even though Doan and McGee (2013) recognize that today's pedagogy and learning style focus more on collaboration and teamwork, the results of the survey they conducted at the Management and Economics Library at Perdue University, clearly points out that students still require individual quiet space for study.

(10) A study to assess the use of informal learning spaces at the Loughborough University was reported by Cunningham and Walton (2016) and indicated interestingly enough, that 52% of the population surveyed chose to study in the Library because of the quiet environment it provides.

(11) May and Swabey (2015) found that academic pursuits of students remain the most common activities in libraries of five different academic institutions in Canada, "despite perceptions of the modern library as a social space" (p. 771). Students from these institutions regard the libraries as scholarly destinations, that their main purpose for visiting them is to engage in scholarly work, and that they value them for its quietness.

(12) The aim of the study conducted by Cha and Kim (2015) at the Eindhoven University of Technology's library was to identify which of the 18 attributes selected influenced most students' spatial choice. The conclusions clearly indicate that quietness is still highly valued by students and that individual study spaces (communal or isolated) are still being heavily used in academic libraries today.

As demonstrated, the literature is robust as it presents not only a large gamut of preferences but also, at times, conflicting interests. Maybe this is the reason why, during this decade, Beard and Dale (2010), Wu and Lanclos (2011), McNamara (2012), Thomas et al. (2015), Seal (2015), and Kinsley et al. (2015), to mention a few, adhere to the provision of a balance between formal and informal study, and between group and individual and quiet study areas in academic libraries.

Identifying how students use the university library and what types of spaces best suit their needs and preferences to provide them with a gratifying academic experience has been a challenge for librarians since the electronic medium has found its way into libraries and grown deep roots into just about every aspect of librarianship. As librarians become increasingly more conscious of the importance of aligning the role of the library and its service mix to the university's teaching