



Why Users Come to the Library: A Case Study of Library and Non-Library Units



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ABSTRACT

This case study explores use patterns of an academic library following the addition of several non-library units. Of specific interest were the initial destinations of patrons, the number of destinations visited, and the primary purpose for coming to the library. We observed all destinations of patrons as they entered the building and administered an exit survey to gain additional insight into patrons' use of the library, including all first floor destinations visited and their primary purpose for visiting the library. We used selected statistics to further explore library use. Findings indicate that non-library units are a popular destination for library patrons but do not eclipse the overall use of library units; that the majority of patrons only visit one destination per trip to the library; and that the primary purposes for which patrons come to the library are studying and the use of library materials.

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INTRODUCTION

Libraries are increasingly being asked to provide space to other campus entities. This has necessitated that libraries “envision ways to open up space for these constituencies while still providing the spaces needed for more traditional library services” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015). In this study, we explored use patterns of an academic library following the addition of several non-library units through observing patron behaviors, seeking their perceptions through survey responses, and examining select library statistics. Over the past five years, our library has added several new units to the building as our campus has undergone several significant capital improvement projects. These projects have displaced dozens of offices, creating a domino effect of relocated services, classrooms, departments, etc., and resulting in every square inch of campus being examined for efficient and varied use of space. This has resulted in intensive scrutiny of campus buildings to determine efficient and varied use of space. In addition, the library has also been working toward being known as the campus academic hub—a place where students can go to get all the support they need to be academically successful. In part, the library has been seeking partners to expand our image as the academic hub, but

campus administrators have also been looking to the library to help solve space issues.

The first floor of our library is the largest with approximately 90,000 sq ft, followed by the second floor with approximately 15,000 sq ft. Floors three through eight consist of slightly less than 10,000 sq ft per floor. As a consequence of such a large footprint, the first floor of the library has been the focus of interest and change in regard to the addition of campus spaces and services. In 2011, the library contracted with campus dining services to add a café to the first floor. That same year, we also collaborated with the Division of Enrollment Management to establish a Learning Commons in the library, uniting several academic support units formerly spread out across campus. Though the definition of a learning commons differs from institution to institution, on our campus it primarily means peer-to-peer tutoring. More specifically, the Learning Commons offers writing consultations, conducts math and statistics tutoring in a dedicated computer lab, and offers content tutoring in a variety of disciplines including chemistry, biology, sociology, and more. In addition to the Learning Commons, the library inherited a student technology help center from our central Information Technology Services (ITS) unit in 2013. We rebranded this operation as the Student Technology Assistance Center (STAC) and located it in a former classroom space.

The café, Learning Commons, and STAC joined previously existing spaces and services in our building that do not necessarily have library-related functions, including classroom space (room 125) for semester-long classes and an additional ITS help desk staffed by an ITS student employee. Altogether, these spaces and services now occupy roughly a quarter of the first floor, with the possibility of additional

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units to come. For the purpose of this study, we are making a distinction between these recently added units and library units. Library units, as we define them, are services, functions and spaces commonly associated with academic libraries such as reference and circulation desks, print collections (government documents, newspapers, periodicals, books, etc.), computers, copiers/scanners, and study spaces. Non-library units, in this case, include campus services and spaces moved into the building such as the Learning Commons, the STAC, the café, the ITS help desk, and the classroom used for semester-long courses. It is also important to understand that at our institution, all of these non-library units operate independently of each other and of the library even though they now reside in the library facility. Library services also function independently of these non-library services as well. Despite cross-unit collaboration, each unit has designated square footage as well as its own service desk, where appropriate.

The purpose of this study is twofold. As we move more services into the library, we want to gather baseline data to determine if the reasons users come to the library facility change over time. We plan to replicate this study periodically. The other reason we conducted this research was to simply have a better understanding of which services, collections and spaces are being utilized on our heavily trafficked first floor. Our first floor provides the primary entrance and exit to the building and is the only floor in which we house a combination of library and non-library related services and functions.

Our primary research questions were:

- 1.) What is the initial destination of patrons as they enter the building?
- 2.) Do library users come to the library for more than one reason?
- 3.) What are the primary purposes for which patrons use the Library?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A variety of researchers have examined the ways in which students use the library space and interact with the library as a place, and written about the importance of the library as a physical space in the life and culture of the university (Brunsdales, 2000; Buschman & Leckie, 2007; Frade & Washburn, 2006). These articles tend to fall into one or more categories based on the purpose and design of the study, which we have categorized as being about the observation of the space, informational interviews with students, and information gathering based on a redesign of the library space. There are also a number of articles that deal primarily with navigation or movement in the library and other spaces (Bitgood, 2006; Hahn, 2011; Li & Klippel, 2012; Mandel, 2010), but we have excluded discussion of this topic as our study concerned the primary purpose and initial destination of our library visitors, and not the manner in which they navigated the space to arrive at their destination. Although much research has been done on the use of the various spaces within the library, we have not been able to identify observational studies of the initial destination of library visitors.

A common theme in the library space literature is the use of a research study in order to guide the process of a redesign of the library's facilities. These studies use one or more methods to obtain information about the students' use of the space, and then apply the information gathered to customizing the space in ways that will be most beneficial to the habits and needs of the students they serve (Hobbs & Klare, 2010; Montgomery, 2011; Webb, Schaller, & Hunley, 2008). Many studies follow the ethnographic research methods outlined by Foster and Gibbons (2007), either through application of their methodology from an existing study or in consultation with Foster and Gibbons themselves (Hobbs & Klare, 2010). In a similar vein, Fox and Doshi (2013) observed and surveyed students after a redesign in order to assess the effect of the changes that were made to the space, hoping to confirm that it did indeed make a positive impact.

Other studies have centered on an observation of student use of the library space without the framework of an imminent or recently completed redesign, but still with an eye toward understanding the

ways in which students utilize the various spaces within the library (Applegate, 2009; Bedwell & Banks, 2013; Bryant, Matthews, & Walton, 2009; Dotson & Garris, 2008; May & Swabey, 2015; Pareta & Catalano, 2013; Suarez, 2007). These observations were carried out in various ways, including seat counts at different times of the day and notes on the variety of study and/or social behaviors the students exhibited. The studies were geared toward helping the library staff understand the ways in which specific library spaces were being used, and whether this aligned with expected or intended use.

Although unobtrusive observation of students and spaces in the library is one of the more common techniques for acquiring information about the use of the library's facilities, other studies have combined the observations with some sort of interview or direct feedback from students (Faletar Tanackovic, Lacović, & Gašo, 2014; Foster & Gibbons, 2007; Fox & Doshi, 2013; Hobbs & Klare, 2010; May & Swabey, 2015; Shoham & Roitberg, 2005; Webb et al., 2008), added observation data to statistics gathered from various service points (Scarletto, Burhanna, & Richardson, 2013), or skipped the observations altogether and instead relied on student feedback alone (Bailin, 2011; Yoo-Lee, Lee, & Velez, 2013). Van Beynen, Pettijohn, and Carrel (2010) combined a number of methods in order to paint a full picture of the student space use, examining gate and service desk counts, observation, focus groups, and pedestrian travel choices in order to maximize the efficiency of the design of the library and the placement of service points. After analyzing their results, they concluded that "future library design needs to strategize the high demand services and resources along the natural pathways" that students take in order to design an efficient space that conforms to the needs of students (p. 412).

The literature on non-library units in academic libraries has highlighted potential benefits of bringing non-library units into library buildings. One suggested positive outcome is the potential for increased collaboration. In the introduction to their edited volume of case studies of convergence and collaboration among library and non-library and external services, Hernon and Powell (2008) wrote that "in effect, convergence creates new opportunities for the library, increases the number of campus players working within the library, and is a logical extension of library services" (p. 9). Schafer and Moore (2008) also reported collaboration between campus services within the university library as a positive outcome, stating "we are seen as the glue that reaches out, pulls people in, and supports them to create something new together for the benefit of students" (p. 124).

Another proposed advantage is the potential for increased use of library buildings, although this has also raised concerns. According to Sennyey, Ross, and Mills (2009), external organizations and services might increase gate counts, but it should not be assumed that this will lead to an equivalent increase in the use of library services and materials. They emphasized the importance of coordination between non-library and library services, lest the library risk becoming "nothing more than an office or classroom building whose management might best be left to a campus facilities manager" (p. 253). Similarly, Lippincott (2004) advocated for collaborative facilities as genuine partnerships that create value and better serve users, and stressed the importance of shared goals, planning, the valuing of expertise, and pooled resources between units.

Shill and Tonner (2004) hypothesized that library buildings housing non-library units would see increased usage by attracting non-library users. However, they did not find "a significant relationship between the proportion of building space allocated for library functions and postproject usage levels" (p. 133). They found no types of non-library units that led to statistically significant increases in library usage, and concluded that

there is no evidence that the presence of particular nonlibrary facilities has significant impact on library exit counts. There may be good reasons for including various nonlibrary facilities in a project, but there is no indication from this study that their presence has a

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