
Library Snapshot Day, or The 5 W's—Who, What, When, Where, and Why are Students Using Academic Library Space: A Method for Library User Experience Assessment

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Abstract

During the fall 2015 academic term, members of the Florida International University Libraries came together to create a team of 18 researchers, composed of members from public and technical services, administration, and systems, to conduct a large-scale observational study founded on the premise of library sweeps presented by Mott Linn (2013). The project received Institutional Review Board approval in October 2015, after all researchers completed IRB training. The goal of the study was to better understand how students use the library facility, interact with its services, and use the collections. This collaboration resulted in the development and implementation of the first ever “Library Snapshot Day” at the Florida International University Green Library on November 3, 2015. Conducted as an experimental study to gain insight into actual versus perceived library use and satisfaction, the study collected qualitative and quantitative data during a three-hour period of peak library usage. The study employed an observational checklist adapted from the Linn (2013) research model, “pop-up” comment boards, and data extracts from the Integrated Library System, Google Analytics, and other automated systems. Designed to reveal factors such as seating availability and preferences, user behaviors, and issues related to building limitations and library policies, the checklist made note of 34 factors, across three major categories (where is this person, possessions, and activities). Observational teams were divided across the Green Library’s six public floors. Photographs and observational notes also served to supplement findings. A survey of library users, live tweets, and systems data also served to generate a “big picture” understanding of library use. Data analysis of the 4,100 user observations, 280 comments, and systems extracts have led to fresh and surprising insights into how students interact with spaces and services.

Introduction

During the fall of the 2015 academic year, members of the Florida International University (FIU) Libraries came together to consider new ways to gain insight into use of the FIU Green Library—its facilities, equipment, and collections—and to learn more about general perception of the building and services. A call for volunteers was placed by the then-assistant dean, and a team of 18 researchers was established. Together, these researchers explored the possibility of conducting an intensive, one-day observational study that combined tried-and-true practices presented in the library literature with methods associated with the field of user experience. The resulting study was designed with users in mind, and aimed to better understand user needs and satisfaction, while shedding light on actual versus perceived user behaviors.

The project received Institutional Review Board approval in October 2015, and all researchers completed IRB training before engaging in the study. The study relied on an observational checklist adapted from the Linn¹ research model, “pop-up” comment boards, and data extracts from the Integrated Library System, Google Analytics, and other automated systems to reveal factors such as seating availability and preference, user behavior, and issues related to building limitations and library policies. The checklist made note of 34 factors across three major categories (where is this person, possessions, and activities) and was used to record findings on the Green Library’s six public floors. Cell phone cameras were also used to record unusual and intriguing use of library spaces as a way to supplement written findings. Additional data was also collected through a survey of users (distributed electronically), a live-tweeting campaign (hosted by the libraries’ marketing representative), and systems data. By combining observational notes and direct user feedback, the team was able to develop a “big picture” understanding of library use. In total, the researchers collected 4,100 observations and

280 comments. Combined with complementary systems data, the findings provided a fresh, multi-faceted look at how students interact with spaces and services.

Background

The Florida International University (FIU) Libraries serve an urban, largely commuter-based population of more than 50,000 students across a variety of academic programs and fields, including undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral candidates. The university boasts two campuses and several satellite locations, though the Modesto Maidique Campus is generally regarded as the “main” campus by students and faculty alike. As such, the FIU Green Library serves as the primary learning resource for students in need of library services and study spaces. Students often describe the library as a safe space for individual and group study, while many also regard it as a “home away from home,” particularly those in need of a familiar, quiet place that is conducive to sustained concentration and hours of study. Nevertheless, the library’s 2015 distribution of the LibQUAL+ Lite survey revealed a real concern regarding noise, consumption of food, cleanliness, and general appearance of library facilities, as well as the need for upgraded electrical and seating options, findings that are corroborated by reports recorded by the library’s reference and circulation departments. As a result, the observational team sought to shed light on these issues by identifying areas of concern expressed by library users in an effort to gather quantifiable data and propose new solutions to existing issues.

Methodology

The idea for what would become “Library Snapshot Day @ FIU Libraries” was based on research presented by Mott Linn² in the paper “Seating Sweeps: An Innovative Research Method to Learn about How Our Patrons Use the Library.” The concept was then further refined through the application of user experience principles and a review of the literature on library space assessment to quantify library use and satisfaction (see recommended reading in Appendix B). In addition to the literature review, a small-scale study, conducted during the previous academic year by the user engagement librarian, served to inform the development of a workable model for data gathering, and aided in refining the categories for observation and review.

Seating sweeps served as the foundation for the Library Snapshot Day model. These are based on a series of scheduled observations, or “sweeps,” conducted at regular intervals over a period of time (say, three times a day every two hours, over a two-week period); the frequency and length of a sweep is determined by the aim of the study. A set of criteria is also identified and used to guide the study and serve as a checklist. These include questions such as: What are students doing? Where are they gathered? What are they carrying? And where are they sitting? For the purpose of the current study, the 34 factors were identified and arranged in a spreadsheet for data gathering and reporting (see Appendix A).

Unlike the average observational study, Library Snapshot Day was designed to provide a single, highly concentrated look at library use over the course of a three-hour period on an “average” library day (i.e., not close enough to midterms or finals to skew the data). Each member of the team received a copy of the checklist and was trained to identify data points for recording. Spaces for study were then selected, resulting in the creation of nine teams of two or four members each (based on the size of the area under observation). Two floors were excluded from the study: the eighth floor (the library’s administration area) and the fourth floor, which houses special collections and non-library offices. The first floor is a public, non-library space, and was also excluded from the study. This left a total of five floors to be divided among 18. Because the second floor is the most heavily trafficked area in the building, and has the highest concentration of seating areas in the building, two teams of two were assigned to two of the four zones on this floor, while two individual observers managed the remaining zones.

In collaboration with the library’s marketing representative, the study was announced and promoted on social media, and a simultaneous, live-tweeting event was hosted on Library Snapshot Day to encourage additional feedback and increase awareness of library user needs among university administrators and influencers.

Despite the university’s goal to serve each and every student, it is easy to overlook the role of place in student success. The constant struggle for seating, outlets, and elevators prompted one of our researchers to take action and reach out to the university president under the auspices of the

observational study. The president of the university hosts occasional Twitter chats to allow members of the community to voice concerns. He also has a quote posted on his office door (located in the library) that states, "Every student counts." Our researcher reminded him about the 8,000 students that visit the Green Library each day and asked, "What about them?" She also took the opportunity to report much-needed repairs, particularly to the building's ancient elevators and escalators. Ironically, on the day of the observational study, both escalators were out of service; soon after the Twitter exchange, they were repaired. Ultimately, the exchange revealed a need for greater advocacy on behalf of library patrons and the power of public forums to engage university administration.

In addition to the methods cited, feedback was also sought through the use of "pop-up" comment boards that were positioned near the elevators on each of the public floors, and collected via an electronic survey that was distributed online. Pictures were also recorded by members of the research team and saved to a shared drive; these were then combined and compared with recorded data to produce a "big picture" look at Library Snapshot Day. In total, the team recorded the aforementioned 4,100 observations and 280 comments (which were transcribed and coded electronically); in combination with systems data, the team was able to pinpoint the number of items checked out during the observation period, the number of devices on loan, and the number of library computers in use within the building.

Findings and Observations

Much of the data gathered during the study substantiated what we already knew about our users based on systems and circulation statistics. For example, the numbers confirmed that many students use electronic devices in the building, creating a greater need for upgraded electrical and Wi-Fi capabilities. However, the observations revealed additional insights that existing data could only hint at, particularly what students are doing in the building and how they are adapting spaces to their needs. Moreover, the study revealed resources that are not in use, at least not during the period observed. For instance, no students were observed using or browsing bound periodicals. However, because these items only circulate in-house, and browse data is not collected, the library has no

current method for gathering data on periodical use. As a result, the possibility of a new method for managing these volumes is under consideration.

During the three-hour observation period, several behaviors were consistent on all floors, including conversation and quiet areas. Based on the researchers' notes, it is clear that students value their space. Once claimed, there is little turnover in seating or space use. For the most part, individuals and groups remained in a single location for the duration of the observation. Based on comments made by students, it can be assumed that users feel the need to remain in a chosen location for a sustained period of time in order to hold on to that space. The fact that the Green Library cannot sustain the number of students present is more than evident when reviewing the data and comments posted on the "pop-up" boards.

The items that students bring into the building also make it evident that they are prepared to stay for an extended period of time. During the snapshot period, many of the students observed had drinks and snacks beside them, while others were seen eating full meals, despite policies discouraging these kinds of foods. Ideally, the solution is to provide more and better seating, so that students have less trouble finding suitable spaces; however, this is unlikely to happen with the current budget and university policies. During the preliminary planning stage, the research team focused on enforcing rules regarding food in the building, but the study revealed that such thinking needs to change and a different approach taken to resolve the issue. No doubt, this will require collaboration with units outside the library, such as the facilities department, to find the means to maintain a clean and inviting atmosphere that is accommodating to students.

Another interesting observation was made on the upper floors, this time involving the choice of seating among students. In some areas, seating is provided at large tables that can accommodate up to eight people. However, it was noted that, unless a group was working on a project or similar, individuals chose to use these tables in order to spread out and sit at a distance from other students. As a result, these tables only served two or three students at most. This indicates that space is being wasted and fewer students served by these tables, and that new options need to be explored to better serve students through furniture design and placement.

Finally, a researcher on the third floor observed a clear distinction between traditional and nontraditional students and their choice of seating. On the west side of the floor, the researcher observed a higher concentration of traditional students, while those using the east side of the floor were largely nontraditional student groups. The reason for this division is unclear, but may indicate the need for further study to learn more about the difference between traditional and nontraditional students' study habits.

Limitations

Limitations in our primary method for data collection make it difficult to make precise conclusions regarding the number of students in a particular zone at a particular time. Similarly, it is difficult to infer the actual percentage of students using a particular space while performing a specific task based on the data collected. For a better comparison, the data should be processed in percentages based on individual zones first and further extrapolated to reach more insightful conclusions. Moreover, given inconsistencies in reporting by members of the research team (such as when a round or observation was started or made), the numbers merely provide a general snapshot, rather than a detailed report on library use. For example, the researcher monitoring Zone 4 of the second floor reported nearly the same number of observations as the researcher in Zone 3; however, the number of rounds conducted in each zone was not included. Similar differences in reporting can be assumed for each zone.

Inconsistencies were also revealed regarding the team's understanding of the factors listed on the observational checklist. The accuracy of the observations is dependent on each observer's interpretation of the checklist and the observations reported. Additional training can greatly improve these issues, as well as a revised strategy for recording and reporting data.

Moreover, because the study was conducted during a single, three-hour period, the researchers can only provide a glimpse at what students were doing and where they were sitting during that period. A longer study is necessary to reveal patterns over time.

Further Insights

In addition to staff and library faculty, one of the researchers serving on the team was a current

MLIS student and member of the technical services department, as well as an FIU alum. The opportunity to participate in the observational study allowed this researcher to not only observe, assess, and synthesize data, but also develop new skills and become an integral part of an interdepartmental library research team. Participating in the study allowed the researcher to take lessons learned in the classroom one step further and put them into practice. As a student, the researcher was able to gain practical knowledge, and try her hand at the Institutional Review Board process. In addition, she learned how to serve as a co-investigator and conduct actual field research—both skills that are transferrable to the graduate thesis process and library profession.

The experience also exposed the researcher to professional development opportunities beyond those available to most students and library staff, including the opportunity to attend the ALA Annual Conference as a co-presenter. More importantly, the experience allowed her to feel like a true member of the institution and profession, both as a student and a minority.

Conclusion and Future of the Study

Observational studies are a low-key, easy-to-implement strategy for data on library user experience. However, by bringing together staff from various library departments, Library Snapshot Day not only provided insight on library users, it provided a sense of engagement for library staff and shed light on how they perceive their role within the library and the library experience.

The study was useful to the library as a whole as it provided fresh insight into space use and raised new questions for future studies. In addition, it provided additional information to augment a survey conducted during the spring 2016 semester by the Student Government Association, and which posed questions regarding students' library study habits and preferences. Armed with this information, we expect to create opportunities for future study and find ways to improve service. In the meantime, members of the team have taken the chance to share findings with other members of the library by participating in a post-ALA recap session, while those members of the committee participating in department chair committees and task forces frequently refer to the findings when relevant. Current projects include a new look at food policies

and the implementation of a new system for group study room reservations.

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Endnotes

1. Mott Linn, “Seating Sweeps: An Innovative Research Method to Learn about How Our

Patrons Use the Library,” in ACRL 2013 Proceedings, April 10–13, Indianapolis, IN (Chicago, IL: Association of College & Research Libraries, 2013), 511–517, http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2013/papers/Linn_Seating.pdf.

2. Ibid.

APPENDIX A

Observational Checklist

| Date/ Time: Floor/ Zone: | Round 1/ TIME | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Person: | | | | | | | | | | |
| Where is this person | | | | | | | | | | |
| In a carrel | | | | | | | | | | |
| In private/unobservable seat/space | | | | | | | | | | |
| In a lounge chair | | | | | | | | | | |
| At a public computer | | | | | | | | | | |
| At a table | | | | | | | | | | |
| Sitting on floor | | | | | | | | | | |
| Walking | | | | | | | | | | |
| In group study/media study | | | | | | | | | | |
| In a research carrel | | | | | | | | | | |
| At service point | | | | | | | | | | |
| Other (Ex: Honors, GIS classroom etc.) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Possessions: | | | | | | | | | | |
| Printed material | | | | | | | | | | |
| Writing material | | | | | | | | | | |
| Electronics stuff | | | | | | | | | | |
| (Laptops, iPad, etc.) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Food | | | | | | | | | | |
| Drink | | | | | | | | | | |
| Unusual photoworthy stuff (Ex: Backpacks, cords, skateboards in aisles etc.) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Activities: | | | | | | | | | | |
| Reading | | | | | | | | | | |
| Writing | | | | | | | | | | |
| Using laptop, iPad etc. | | | | | | | | | | |
| Using library computer | | | | | | | | | | |
| Using an outlet | | | | | | | | | | |
| Talking/listening | | | | | | | | | | |

2016 Library Assessment Conference

| Date/ Time: Floor/ Zone: | Round 1/ TIME | | | | | | | | | |
|--|---------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Using cellphone | | | | | | | | | | |
| Using whiteboards | | | | | | | | | | |
| Drinking something | | | | | | | | | | |
| Eating something | | | | | | | | | | |
| Sleeping | | | | | | | | | | |
| Searching for library materials | | | | | | | | | | |
| Searching for a seat | | | | | | | | | | |
| Using copier | | | | | | | | | | |
| Using BookEye scanner | | | | | | | | | | |
| Attending function (class, program etc.) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Other (Ex: Using digital signs etc.) | | | | | | | | | | |

APPENDIX B

Additional Reading

- Bedwell, Linda and Caitlin S. Banks. "Seeing Through the Eyes of Students: Participant Observation in an Academic Library." *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research* 8, no. 1 (June 19, 2013). doi:10.21083/partnership.v8i1.2502.
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- Paretta, Lawrence T. and Amy Catalono. "What Students Really Do in the Library: An Observational Study." *The Reference Librarian* 54, no. 2 (2013): 157–67. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02763877.2013.755033>.