
After the Ribbon Cutting: Creating and Executing an Efficient Assessment Plan for a Large-Scale Learning Space Project

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Introduction

In the fall of 2015, the University of Texas Libraries opened a new Learning Commons on the entry level of the Perry-Castañeda Library (PCL), the main library on campus. This project served to repurpose 20,000 square feet of what had been technical services staff space. While the Learning Commons includes some office space for liaison and instruction librarians, the majority is non-staff space. The spaces include the University Writing Center, five active learning classrooms with flexible furniture, flat panels and strong wireless, and a 44-seat Media Lab. Because the building is open 24/5, we designed the spaces so that they could be used the entire time the building was open. The University Writing Center is open as study space outside of regular consultation hours, and all of the classrooms are available as study space at any time we are not teaching. While we knew we would be working with the University Writing Center to do a longer term assessment about how the Learning Commons services impact student learning, we wanted to take some immediate steps to determine how well the Learning Commons was functioning for our students and our staff working in it so that we could quickly make needed changes to ensure its effectiveness going forward. In addition, because it was a high profile project for the campus, we wanted our assessment to help us tell the story of the Learning Commons in its first semester. This paper outlines the approaches we took, what we did with our results to close the loop, and practical implications and ideas for conducting similar assessments. We believe it represents an assessment model that could be adopted at other libraries opening new services and spaces.

Literature Review

Library literature includes examples of multiple methods assessments conducted on Learning Commons services and resources,¹ examples of large-scale surveys used to assess large-scale projects,² and examples of space assessments such as kindness audits.³ Our approach was to take elements of each and combine them into one large, quickly

implemented, actionable plan that would allow us to make fast changes while also generating compelling data to share with our stakeholders.

Designing the Plan

During the design phase of the Learning Commons project, the Steering Committee (which included a library facilities director and several public services managers) developed a list of questions that they wanted to be able to answer by the end of the first semester with the new space. This list was shared with the learning and assessment librarian, who drafted a mixed-methods plan designed to answer each question. We wanted to find answers such as whether students and faculty were using the space in ways that we anticipated through the needs assessments we implemented prior to building the Learning Commons, what aspects of the space were working well, and what we could improve upon. The plan included metrics such as gate counts and event attendance, surveys to learn about user perceptions, usability exercises, and staff focus groups. The goal in choosing methods was to provide actionable data to answer important questions. Keeping this goal in mind helped us weed out methods that could provide interesting data, but did not address a current question. For example, we decided not to have student staff perform hourly counts of users because door counts provided the level of detail we needed to determine use. Once methods were agreed upon by the planning team, the learning and assessment librarian and the head of teaching and learning services (who manages the Learning Commons) wrote a schedule of methods, and set to work on implementing them throughout the semester.

Media Lab

The media lab was designed to support students working on audio, video, 3D/animation, and graphic design projects and is staffed by student interns specially trained in the hardware and software. It is also designed to serve as a teaching space. We took a three-pronged approach to assessment in this

space. To begin with, we conducted a user survey designed to learn what users were doing in the media lab and how they felt about the space and its policies. The survey was implemented through a pop-up link on the lab machines that appeared five minutes after login, and received 166 responses in a four-week period. We also monitored usage statistics for the software installed in the lab. At the end of the semester, we conducted a focus group with the student interns.

Our assessment results gave us some quickly actionable items, such as adjusting the temperature in the lab since users found it too hot and adding some signs to make it clearer that it was a media lab and when it was booked for teaching versus open for general use. Usage statistics indicated that the software and hardware were being used and represented a good investment of IT funds. We were pleased and surprised to learn that in addition to class projects, people were using the media lab heavily for personal projects, a service to the campus we were not expecting. We also discovered it was a draw for computer science students doing coding and added XCode to the machines to support this use. Users found the student interns extremely helpful but at the same time they were not asking very many questions. As a result, we rethought how we used our student interns. We gave them some graphics and video projects that supported other areas of the libraries, such as development and communications, which they could work on during the time they were staffing the media lab. We also dedicated some of their work hours to completing those projects on a staff Mac workstation outside of the media lab. Another assessment finding indicated that while the media lab was very busy, people found it mainly by seeing it when they came into PCL. Potential users who did not regularly visit PCL would not know about it. We are working on more widely promoting it around campus and involving our interns in that effort.

Learning Labs

The Learning Labs, the active learning classrooms, are primarily used by libraries and University Writing Center staff for workshops, course-integrated instruction, and events, with reservations mediated by libraries staff. They represent a new kind of classroom on campus designed to facilitate pedagogical experimentation. All the furniture is moveable, there are flat panels or screens around the room, technology is in place to facilitate group work

around a screen, and there is no fixed instructor station. Our assessment plan included tracking use of the space, tracking requested use of the space that fell outside of our initial policy, and conducting a focus group with people from the libraries and writing center who taught in the learning labs.

The learning labs were heavily used, with 229 reservations for classes, workshops, and events over the course of the fall semester. By tracking requests that were rejected, we learned that faculty were very interested in booking the learning labs for their own instruction and this gave us an opportunity to partner with them to foster pedagogical change on campus. As a result of our assessment, we added a service where faculty could book a learning lab up to twice a semester with sponsorship of a librarian to either take advantage of the technology or engage with the collections. We were guided by the 229 reservations to cap bookings at two per semester. That number also helped us come to the conclusion that we could not host semester-long classes in the learning labs in the fall. Since then, we have analyzed spring numbers and will host up to two semester-long classes during spring semesters.

Focus groups with staff who taught in the learning labs showed that people were very energized by the new spaces and inspired to change their pedagogical approaches. We learned that instructors often needed more support to use the learning labs and to troubleshoot technology than we had available and we were able to use that feedback to successfully advocate for a staff member dedicated to supporting the learning labs.

Space for Open Study

Opening up as much student space as possible was one of the most essential goals of the Learning Commons project. While much of the renovated space was used for our new classrooms, we felt strongly that design and policy should allow for students to use the space to study and collaborate when it is not reserved for classes. Since it would be easier in many ways to lock classrooms when not in use, it was important to assess whether students were making use of classroom and writing center space during off-hours.

We considered using observations as a direct method of seeing what was going on but since peak open study time occurs at PCL during the evening, it would have been inconvenient for staff to conduct

observations at these times. Instead we relied on more indirect methods. We installed a door counter in one of the classrooms to give us an estimate of general traffic patterns in the space. Beyond numbers, we wanted to know how students were using the space. To begin answering this question, we designed a series of posters to be hung in each classroom that asked students to provide feedback by answering multiple choice and short answer questions using provided dot stickers and pens. This method was adapted from one developed by Larry Lev and Garry Stephenson of Oregon State University as an alternative to interviews and questionnaires for gathering data in farmers' markets.⁴ We liked the idea because it showed students that we are invested in what they are doing and want to make improvements, and invited them into conversation with us.

The posters showed us that, as we expected, the space was being used primarily by undergraduates. Students using the space reported that they were more likely to come to the Learning Commons to work with a group than to study or work individually. Each classroom is equipped with mounted flat screens that students can connect to wirelessly to display screens from their personal devices, but students reported using whiteboards about three times as often as flat screens. These findings showed us that, while students were largely finding the new spaces and using them in ways that we expected, there was room for further promotion and instruction in the use of the new technologies made available.

Sharing space with students, particularly overnight, means that staff who work and teach in the space must be flexible and understanding. Providing evidence of the value that students get out of the space when it is open for study helps soften the blow of the occasional mess and rearranged furniture.

Wayfinding and Space Usability

It was important for us to make sure that students could find their way around the Learning Commons, felt comfortable, and understood the different intended uses of the new spaces and technology. We borrowed an idea that reportedly originated in Michael Stephens' HyperlibMOOC class and has been used by various libraries since, and planned a "kindness audit" to be performed by student employees as soon as the space opened.

For this exercise, we recruited student workers from across the organization and directed them to walk through the space taking pictures of what they liked, did not like, found confusing, and anything else that stood out to them. They then shared their pictures and observations with us in an online folder. This exercise revealed that students liked the general design of the space and all of the technology within it. They disliked areas that they saw as ambiguous in availability or intended use, and liked signs that clearly explain specified purposes of different Learning Commons areas. They also found navigation to be difficult, mentioning that the lettering labeling the Learning Labs was easy to overlook, especially when doors were open. These findings helped us make the case for adding additional signage and changing the classroom labels.

Informal staff observations revealed that after additional signage was added, fewer students asked staff at the library's main service desk where Learning Labs were located and students found instruction sessions more easily.

Practical Implications

Before we even received funding to build our Learning Commons, we knew that in-depth assessment would be part of its design and implementation. Once funding did come through, plans moved very quickly. While the architects were drawing up the plans, the Learning Commons Steering Committee came up with a list of questions that we wanted answered in the first semester, and devised a series of assessment methods that we hoped would answer them. Through this project, we learned the following lessons:

- 1. Involve stakeholders in assessment planning.** Asking our stakeholders what they would consider a successful first semester of the Learning Commons helped us prioritize the kinds of assessment we launched immediately upon opening the space.
- 2. Plan in advance to incorporate assessment into workflow.** While we worked as a group to prioritize which questions we wanted to answer immediately, one person was primarily responsible for implementing the resulting plan. Since assessment methods were chosen well in advance of the space being built, we knew about how much time to set aside to make sure assessments were carried out and analyzed in a timely manner.

3. **Employ mixed methods.** We found that some of our stakeholders are taken by examples and quotes, and others focus on charts and numbers. By using a mixture of methods to tell our story, we were able to provide a variety of evidence that showed our success and helped us make decisions.
4. **Show users that you are ready to act on feedback.** One of the main advantages of beginning assessment immediately is that we were able to make quick changes. This showed users that we valued their feedback and were committed to maintaining dynamic spaces and services. We build trust by following through on assessment.
5. **Use findings to grow and change policies.** During the initial semester, only librarians and writing center staff were permitted to reserve and teach in Learning Commons classrooms. Since demand for classroom space outpaced availability before the Learning Commons opened, we were not sure whether the new spaces could accommodate use by others on campus without negatively impacting our core programs. Immediately, instructors from all across the campus began asking if they could use the space. Usage tracked in our initial plan helped us decide to roll out a tailored program for limited numbers of non-library staff to teach in our space, highlighting our use of data to make decisions that allowed us to share resources when possible.
6. **Assign assessment tasks at a granular level.** Since the learning and assessment librarian was part of the unit in which the Learning Commons was housed, she worked closely with staff members responsible for managing and using each part of the space. This working relationship with constant communication allowed them to negotiate on the spot when there were questions about who was responsible for various pieces of the plan (such as getting permission to buy incentives for survey prizes or running reports on usage statistics), but in the future, we will assign responsibility for each task within an assessment plan. It is important to know who will provide data for each portion of the plan, when and in what format it will be provided, and who is responsible for using the data to make changes.

Detailing an opening-semester assessment plan ahead of time made assessment possible even when construction ran behind schedule and the semester became hectic. By focusing on data that would provide answers to important questions and that would allow for quick improvements, we streamlined our plan into a manageable workflow. Assessment plans are now written as part of every large-scale project in our library, and the information we collect allows us to craft a compelling story about what our new spaces enable our users to accomplish. Now that the Learning Commons is open and running, we are working with campus partners to do a study on the impact of collocated student support services on student success and retention. The positive feedback we got through assessing the opening semester gave us the confidence and practical experience to take our assessment efforts even further.

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References

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