

Sweeping Statistics: Space, Noise, & Seating Preferences in an Academic Library



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Introduction

The concept of “library as place” in assessment literature has confirmed that there is an ongoing migration from print to digital collections. Often, this is soon followed by renovations to newfound open space in order to transform libraries to an “academic center” or “community building” on campuses.

The University of South Dakota (USD) Libraries faced the library building transformation puzzle when creating space for an academic commons area encompassing much of the first floor of a three-story library building. The library was then faced with challenges regarding student perceptions toward library use or nonuse due to increased noise levels and lack of sufficient study space. The USD library conducted a LibQUAL+® survey in the spring of 2012, shortly after the renovation project that made way for academic offices for student advising, engagement, math testing, tutoring, writing, and presentation services. Materials that were housed on the first floor moved to the 2nd and 3rd floors creating less study space initially. The following year, thousands of print volumes were deaccessioned or moved to offsite storage to increase study space. The overall perceptions due to these various changes were that the library had become a noisy place, where it was difficult to find a place to study.

Purpose

Comments were collected through an open text box at the end of a LibQUAL+® survey conducted in the Spring of 2012 and from the library “Comments” box located at the Circulation Desk. Comments identified as having a negative connotation toward the new “academic commons” renovation, lack of study space, and noise levels, were used as a basis for further study. The study aimed to determine how the library could improve student satisfaction with study space while addressing noise level concerns.

Sample

Selected 2012 LibQUAL+® Survey Comments

“The only negative aspect... in regards to the library is the noise level on the different floors. Sometimes it is difficult to study in that environment.”

“I’ve generally been disappointed by the amount of noise -- especially on floors 2 and 3.”

“The physical library space is lacking. It does not seem to invite study and learning, but socialization.”

“The only real downfall comes with a lack of space especially around certain times of the school year.”

“...more places to work quietly with others is needed.”

“It would be nice if [the] 3rd floor were no talking like the signs say.... have an employee walk through every 1/2 hour or so and remind people.”

Methods

Library student employees were assigned to perform seating sweeps as a job duty 3-5 times each day at varied times. The assigned employee walked each area of the 2nd and 3rd floors of the library using a clipboard, pencil, and map of the library. (See Fig. 1). The library map was also used as a tally sheet to record the number of individuals utilizing each space. (See Fig. 2). Hash marks were used to indicate the number of patrons seated at tables, upholstered furniture, library owned computers, or individual study carrels. (See Fig. 3 for furniture types). While students performed these Sweeps, they also served as “hall monitors” to ensure the quiet (2nd floor) and silent (3rd floor) zones were respected.

Figure 1: Seating Sweep Map & Tally Sheet

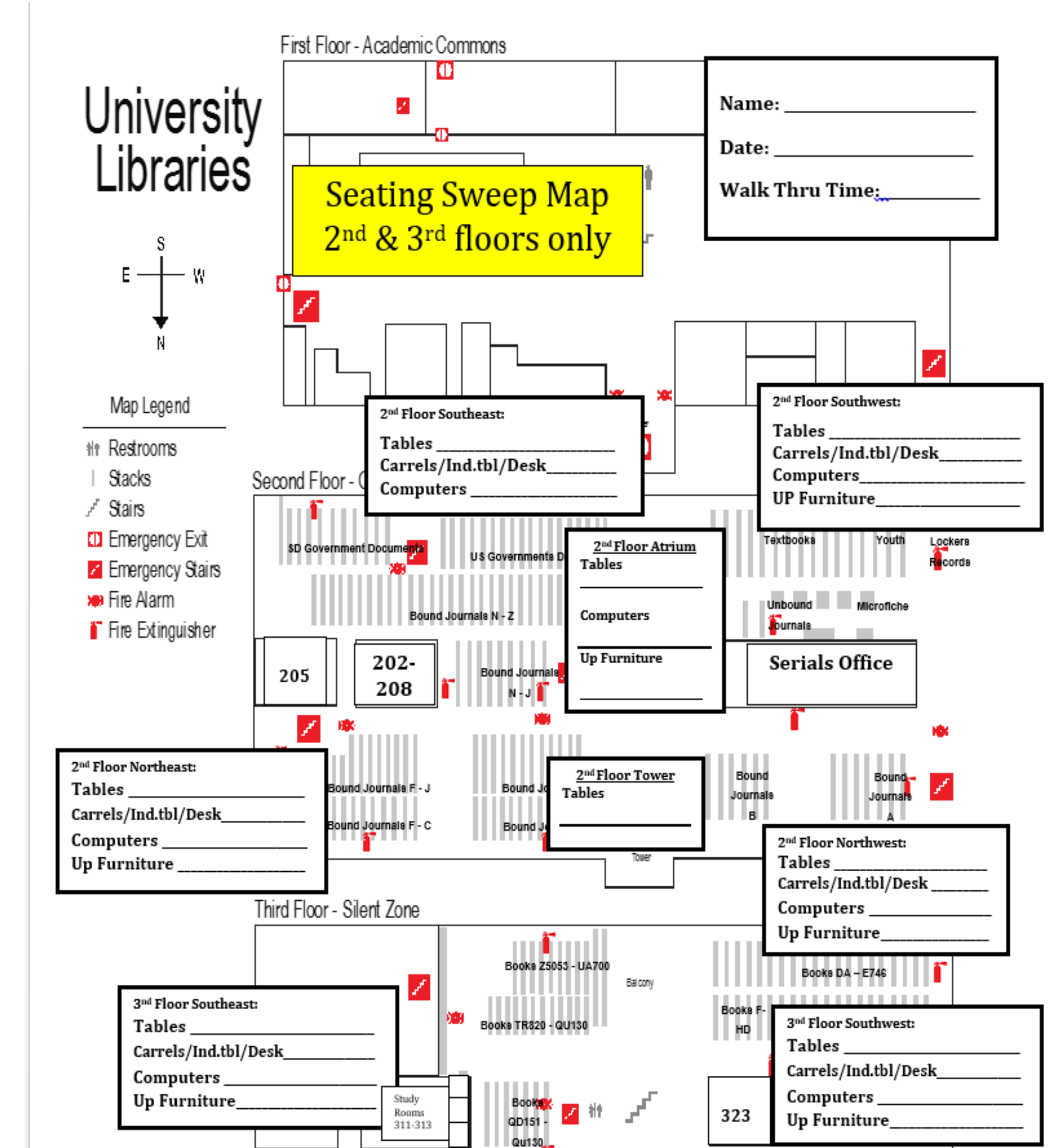


Figure 2: Tally Method

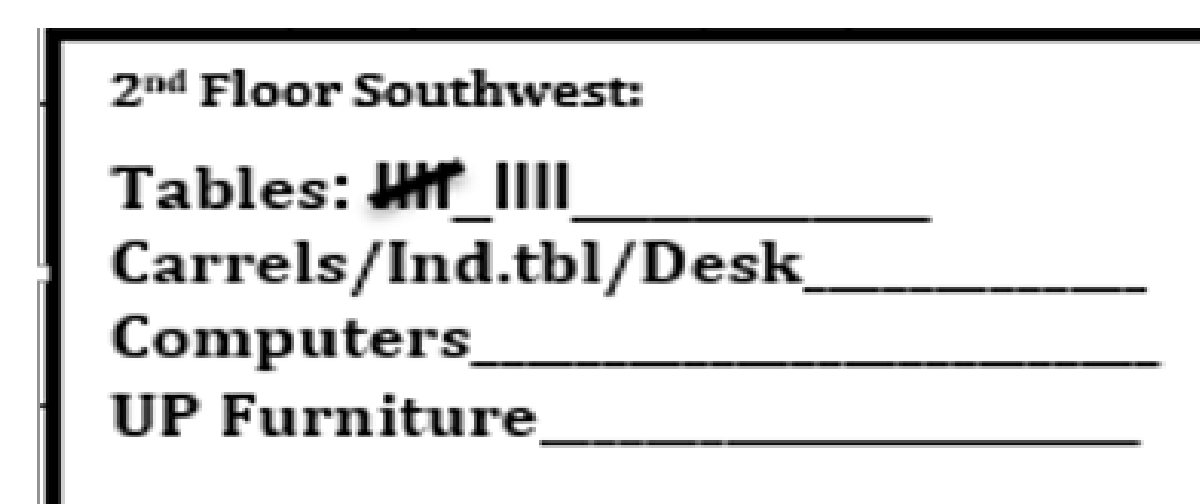
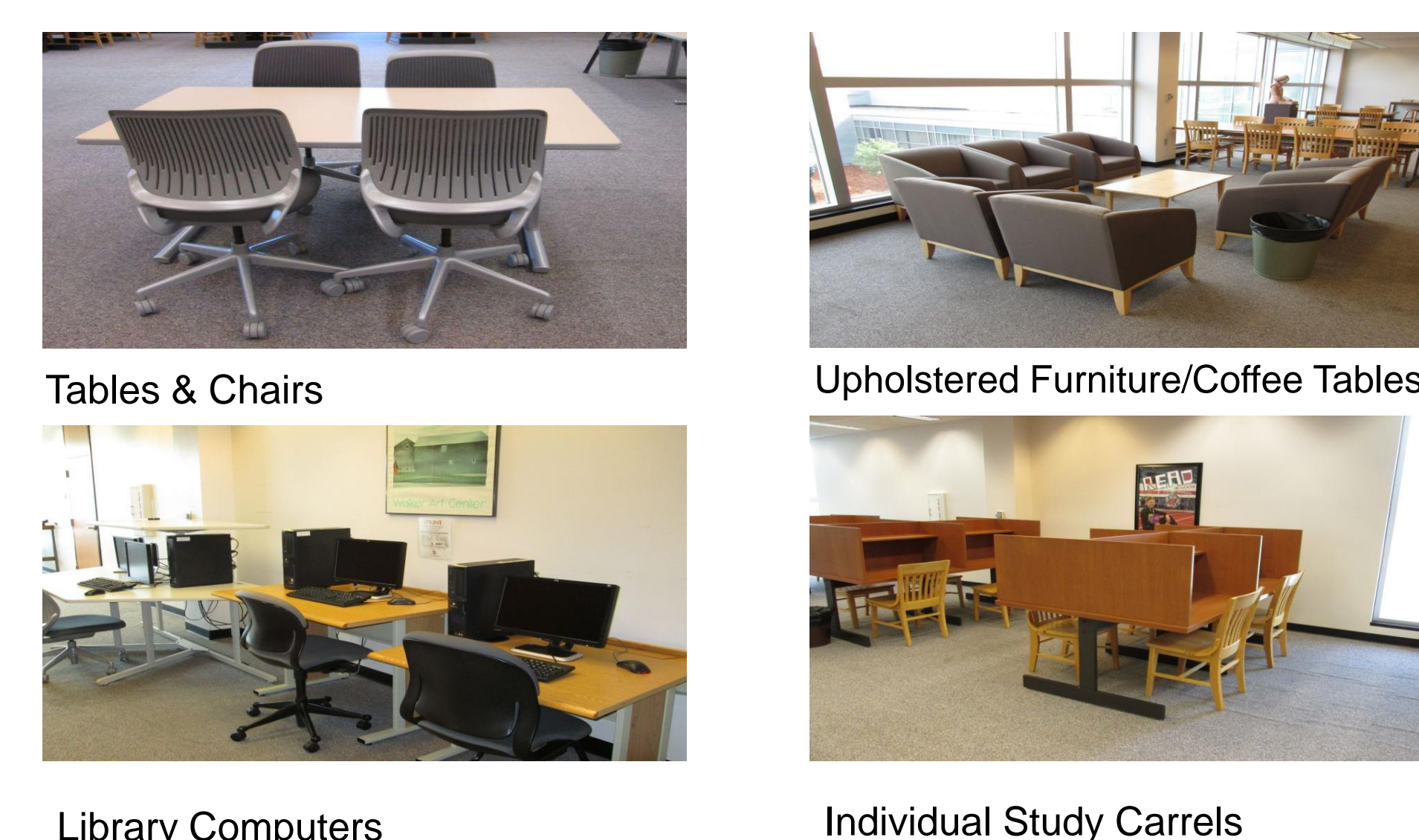


Figure 3: Furniture Types



Results

Fall 2012 & Spring 2013 Furniture Utilization

I.D. Weeks Library 2nd & 3rd Floors Furniture Utilization by Type				
Type of Seating	Furniture Ownership	% Ownership Rate	Where students are Sitting (n)	Usage Rate
Tables/chairs	359	45%	4298	62%
Carrels/desks	258	38%	1624	24%
Computers	22	3%	367	5%
Upholstered Furniture	101	14%	595	9%

Findings

- Tables were over-utilized. Many larger tables were in use by just one student, as they prefer to spread out study materials & multiple electronic devices. This created the perception of individual study space being difficult to find.
- Study carrels & individual desks were underutilized.
- Upholstered furniture configurations were underutilized. Some contributing factors were:
 - Age/staining/not attractive.
 - Not conducive to laptop use/not ergonomic or comfortable for long periods of time.
 - Upholstered chairs positioned in groupings with coffee tables contributed toward a conversational vibe which is frowned upon especially on the silent floor.
 - Heavy/difficult to move if not enough chairs for a group.

Actions

- Purchased additional (smaller) tables and chairs with wheels. Two-three small tables could replace one large table.
- Swapped study carrels for tables between the 2nd & 3rd floors (carrels to 3rd - silent floor, tables to 2nd - quiet floor).

Fall 2013 & Spring 2014 Furniture Utilization

I.D. Weeks Library 2nd & 3rd Floors Furniture Utilization by Type				
Type of Seating	Furniture Ownership	% Ownership Rate	Where students are Sitting (n)	Usage Rate
Tables/chairs	359	48%	4776	55%
Carrels/desks	282	35%	2738	32%
Computers	22	3%	379	4%
Upholstered Furniture	100	14%	764	9%

Findings

- Table usage & ownership become more balanced.
- Upholstered furniture continues to be underutilized.
- Library owned computers are in high demand on 2nd & 3rd floors. Patrons may be looking for a quieter place to work, rather than 1st floor computer labs.
- Individual study carrel usage also become more balanced.
 - Hypothesized that students were able to find quiet space for individual study due to less conversational noise on the 3rd floor.
 - The University student center was reopened with additional seating (and restaurant choices) resulting in more noise, driving students to the library for a quiet study option. Gate counts & seating sweeps showed an increase in library usage over spring 2013.

Results Cont'd

Additional Actions

- Phase out upholstered furniture and coffee tables and replace with comfortable furniture with attached writing tops, for easier laptop/tablet use.
- Purchase additional 4-6 person tables, and chairs with wheels. Phase out large 12-16 person tables.
- Chairs with wheels are ideal for creating more flexible use space and are more likely to be returned to their original location than heavy, wooden chairs after a group meeting.
- Consider moving some computers from the 1st floor academic commons to 2nd & 3rd floors as they continue to show a high demand.

Discussion

Seating sweeps thus far have served to identify more appropriate furniture configurations and helped to control the noise levels. Fewer complaints about noise have been received. Some additional perks of this study have helped to truly identify usage of the “library as place.” When the additional academic offices were opened, gate counts were not a reliable source for library usage statistics. Obtaining numbers of students studying/utilizing the library at any given time during the day or night helps show that the library remains a destination for study and research. Since this study was observational, a survey or focus group may now be appropriate in order to delve deeper into students’ reasons for choosing to sit where they do or why they choose to utilize a library computer rather than their own laptop. Social learning will continue to see an uptick, and the appropriate gathering spaces in a library to perform collaborative work will remain relevant and necessary. A future LibQUAL+® survey will be conducted and comments regarding space and noise will be compared to the 2012 survey to evaluate any changes in attitudes toward finding quiet study space. Seating sweeps will continue to be performed and data collected to determine any new or evolving seating trends and/or noise concerns.

References

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