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

Shelie Vacek
University of South Dakota

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.

Results
Fall 2012 & Spring 2013 Furniture Utilization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Seating</th>
<th>Furniture Ownership</th>
<th>% Ownership Rate</th>
<th>Where students are sitting</th>
<th>Usage Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tables/chairs</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>4298</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrels/desk(s)</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>1014</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upholstered Furniture</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.
- 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).
- Swapped study carrels for tables between the 2nd & 3rd floors (carrels to 3rd - silent floor, tables to 2nd - quiet floor).

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

Contact
Shelie Vacek
University Libraries, University of South Dakota
414 E. Clark Street
Vermillion, SD 57069
shelie.vacek@usd.edu