
Collaborative Libraries Assessment Across a Multi-Campus College

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Abstract

Montgomery College conducted ethnographic studies of four campus libraries on its three campuses to understand student work practices and to design improved library spaces and services. This paper describes the highly collaborative assessment approach to the in-depth ethnographic project on community college library use. For each campus, several assessment groups were established and facilitated through a process to complete the work: (1) library and college employees completed ethnographic studies; (2) anthropology students and honors students completed complementary ethnographic studies; and (3) stakeholder groups of college officials provided feedback on the project approach and on findings and implementation proposals from the library and anthropology studies. Training of student and staff researchers is described, as well as the methods by which non-specialists were enabled to gather and analyze data. Key findings and outcomes are presented. The organizational and personal impact of including a large number of participants as researchers, stakeholders, and respondents in the studies is explored. The project offers a replicable model for college-wide collaborations among administration, libraries, campus planning, and academic departments leading to customized breakthrough strategies for student-centered learning.

Introduction

From 2013 to 2016, Montgomery College (MC) conducted ethnographic studies of four campus libraries on its three campuses (Rockville in 2013/14, Takoma Park/Silver Spring in 2014/15, and Germantown in 2015/16) to understand student work practices and design improved library spaces and services. As the community college of Montgomery County, Maryland, Montgomery College is dedicated to the academic and vocational success of over 60,000 students. The libraries play a significant

role in the institutional mission, supporting the curriculum and ensuring that students have the information resources they need and the workspaces and conditions under which to use those resources. Basing this project on earlier work completed at the University of Maryland,¹ project leaders believed that a better understanding of student work practices and needs would increase the ability of the libraries to help students complete their academic work successfully.

Creating a Structure for Collaboration

The Montgomery College project, like the one at the University of Maryland from which it stemmed, comprised participatory design activities conducted by librarians and library staff (led by anthropologist Nancy Fried Foster) and complementary ethnographic studies conducted by classes of anthropology and honors students (led by anthropology professor Cynthia Pfanstiehl and her anthropology colleagues), as well as design work based on study findings by architecture students (led by architecture professor Shorieh Talaat). Moreover, the library director (Tanner Wray) recruited stakeholder groups on all three of the college's campuses to provide guidance to the project and to disseminate findings and bolster outcomes. Stakeholder groups included representatives from major administrative and operational units, as well as librarians and members of the academic staff.² Overall, the structure of the program created ties among a large number of individuals and departments throughout the college while providing innovative teaching and learning opportunities and producing data upon which to base improvements to libraries on all three campuses.

Indeed, all project partners were critical to the success of the enterprise. The library director, employees, and a project consultant provided

leadership and planning. An anthropological consultant conferred on the project, provided training in data-collection methods, data analysis, and interpretation for the library-based ethnographic study. Anthropology faculty designed and delivered new course material, enabling partnership with student-researchers to emerge out of classroom activities. Similarly, architecture faculty incorporated project-related activities into coursework, engaging their students, too, as project partners.

At the institutional level, Montgomery College's Central Facilities, seeing the potential of the project to support long term facilities planning, provided partnership in the form of funding as well as input via the stakeholder groups. The Montgomery College Foundation provided an initial grant to fund training for library employees. College administrators provided support through strategic plan initiative funding as well as participation in stakeholder groups. Many other members of the Montgomery College community participated in the stakeholder groups, both to achieve wide representation across student, faculty, staff, and administration and to include individuals who were particularly interested in the project and eager to contribute. The broad and complex set of partnerships created a framework for collaboration and was a major factor in the success of the project.

Success Factors and Replicability

Creating a framework for collaboration was a significant success factor for this project. Another was making a commitment to genuine participation, that is, to engaging people in information-gathering activities not as window dressing but because their contributions were considered to be essential to good planning and decision making.

Training for novice researchers was another success factor, both for library personnel and anthropology students. The expertise of anthropology and architecture faculty, as well as the consulting anthropologist, were essential to the project's success. We note that, as in such studies generally, the information gathering itself can be manageable for the trained novice whereas the development of questions and the analysis and interpretation of the resulting information is extremely challenging for anyone but a trained and experienced researcher. Moreover, the complexity of the collaboration meant

that strong project management was essential to the project's success.

Montgomery College modified the University of Maryland collaborative assessment model for use at a multi-campus community college. At the University of Maryland, the model was deployed on a single campus, to study a single library, using graduate students as research and design partners to complement the library-led research. At Montgomery College, the model was deployed across multiple campuses and four libraries, using community college freshmen and sophomores as research and design partners to complement library-led research. Another modification at Montgomery College was the expansion of stakeholder group membership beyond administrators to include faculty and other employees. If the success factors noted above are in place, the project offers a replicable collaborative assessment model for college-wide collaborations among administration, libraries, campus planning, academic departments, and students.

Ethnographic Studies Done by Library Teams

Montgomery College Libraries initiated, hosted, and coordinated the project and conducted ethnographic studies on four sites, engaging more than 1,000 members of the MC community in research activities and stakeholder groups.³ Importantly, the ethnographic studies had two significant characteristics. For one, the studies gathered extensive, actionable information upon which to base library improvements. The other, equally important, was to bring together people in widely varying roles from many different units across the college's three main campuses to conduct the studies, reflect on the findings, and envision change. It is this dual nature of the project's assessment methodology that we consider in this paper.

The participatory design approach used in this project is a particularly apt choice for such a project because it intentionally considers the whole community as equal stakeholders in a design process, albeit with different forms of expertise and complementary or even divergent interests.

Participatory or user-centered approaches have been used extensively in library technology and space design, especially since the 2005 publication of a study of faculty use of grey literature in connection

with the design of the institutional repository at the University of Rochester.⁴ That study demonstrated the value of understanding academic work practices before developing software requirements. The additional benefits of participatory design—the increased connection and engagement among librarians and academics—were described two years later with regard to a study of undergraduate work practices at the University of Rochester.⁵ Both benefits were explicitly sought in the Montgomery College project; that is, the assessment was designed to develop information and collaboration at the same time.

Project leaders recruited project teams successively on all three campuses to conduct research activities and help analyze and interpret results. Each team included librarians and library staff as well as representatives from other associated organizations: Grants and Sponsored Programs, a Writing, Reading and Language Center on one MC campus, and a Writing Center on another. The non-library team members increased the size of the team, and therefore how much research they could conduct, and provided helpful, semi-outsider perspectives.

As each year of the project began, the campus-specific team received training in the objectives of the project, the ethnographic approach, and the methods. The main methods were:

- Reply cards: short surveys printed on cards that were handed out in designated seating areas *within campus libraries*. The cards asked what students were doing, whether they were working alone or with others, why they chose their particular location, and a few other questions.
- Brief interviews: used *in non-library campus locations* to find out about students' most recent work sessions (where they were, why they chose that location, what they did, and several other questions, including questions about the last thing they read for a class).

Additionally, teams at two of the campuses conducted design workshops in which they had faculty members, librarians, and students draw pictures of an ideal library space and then asked them questions about what they imagined themselves and other people doing in the depicted spaces.

The project team analyzed and interpreted the data and learned, first of all, that there were some

differences but also marked similarities across the three campuses.⁶

In brief, the team discovered that the library provides a special place for students in which they can give their attention to their studies without distraction. For some students, there are few alternatives. Many students have work and family responsibilities that leave little time for studying, so they make careful use of their time on campus, grabbing even short stretches of study time when they can.

Students value the library as a study space for its atmosphere of quiet concentration and focus, appreciate the furnishings, access to outlets, and good Wi-Fi, as well as noise dampening and soothing décor. Students indicated that they seek spaces that allow them to feel welcome and secure.

Most of the students in both the library survey and the campus interviews were working alone. Many students sat with others but did not necessarily know them and did not work with them.

The wide range of programs offered by Montgomery College leads to a very wide range of reading material for students. Many students are in academic programs and read online articles, often on the recommendation of their professor or instructor. Some students read only the textbook. A few read charts and other job-related explanatory material or magazine articles and other popular reading material because these are the most important resources for their programs. Most students, even those who regularly study in the library, reported that they had last done some reading for a class at home rather than in a library or other campus space. Moreover, most of them did that reading on a screen rather than a tangible book or journal. Similarly, even students working within the library reported using online and onscreen materials rather than tangible materials.

The information gathered during the three years of the study enabled the project team to develop qualitative requirements for the improvement of spaces in Montgomery College's four libraries, some of them relating to basic infrastructure (more outlets) but many more related to designing spaces that enable students to work with standard technologies, get help when needed, use the many resources the libraries provides at no cost, feel

inspired, and focus on the work at hand rather than their many other cares.

Ethnographic Studies Done by Anthropology Students

Anthropology professors and students developed and conducted complementary ethnographic studies of the four Montgomery College Libraries. The college's four full-time anthropology faculty established the following research questions for the project:

1. How do students and faculty typically use the Montgomery College Libraries?
2. What are the needs and expectations of students and faculty when using the library?
3. Are there aspects of library services and programs that might work better if improved or modified?
4. How do students and faculty feel about working in and enjoying the library space?
5. Are there aspects of the library space (visual, spatial, auditory) that could be improved to better facilitate concentration, comfort, and aesthetic appreciation for library users?

Two methods were deployed: structured interviews and in-library observations; overall they engaged hundreds of members of the MC community.⁷ The interview and observation forms, associated classroom assignments, and the methods for analysis and modeling were developed by the college's full time anthropology faculty. Cross-campus implementation also required the involvement of three part-time faculty members and an honors faculty member. Across all three campuses, this study involved 260 students from twelve ANTH 201: Introduction to Sociocultural Anthropology classes. Student researchers participated in the data collection and analysis for this project. In addition, the project involved eleven ANTH 201 students from the Montgomery Scholars Program, four students from the ANTH 201 Honors Module, and fifteen students from the Renaissance Scholars Program.

A questionnaire with eighteen questions for structured interviews was developed by anthropology faculty and students and tied closely to the research questions. Student researchers conducted scheduled, structured interviews at various non-library locations throughout the campuses. Two researchers were present at each interview: one student took the role of interviewer, asking the questions and prompting the interviewee

for additional information; the second researcher recorded the responses of the interviewee on the questionnaire form. No voice or video recording was done.

- Structured Student Interviews. Each researcher selected one or two students outside their anthropology class to interview.
- Structured Cross-Section Interviews. These interviews provided data on smaller sample groups that represent a cross-section of the campus communities. Sample groups included general full-time and part-time faculty, students who have accommodations with Disability Support Services (DSS), students in the American English Language Program, evening students, students who are military veterans, nursing students, nursing faculty, and arts faculty. Cross-section groups that were selected varied by campus. However, faculty members and students who have accommodations with Disability Support Services were interviewed at all campuses. The perspectives from the cross-section sample groups proved to be an important element of the anthropology study.
- Observations. Librarians designated specific areas within each library to be observed. Areas were defined by their location and function, and the services, equipment and resources available. Student researchers made observations throughout a typical week during morning, afternoon, and evening sessions. In one observation approach, student researchers observed library users for a 30-minute period, recording activities and use of space by those users in a specific library area using codes. In a second observation approach, student researchers observed one of the designated library areas for a 30-minute period and recorded and counted the entrances and exits of library users. They also described the activities that occurred within the area.

The findings of the anthropology students' studies indicate that each library facility is quite different and has its own set of very specific needs, but there were common recommendations across the three campuses.⁸ One common recommendation is to improve access to technology, with an emphasis on increasing the number of library-provided computers and electrical outlets. The library could also explore students' understanding of reserve materials and their limited utilization of tutorials, course pages, and other online resources. Similarly, the library could find ways to reach out to students who do

not already ask for assistance from staff. Study findings also suggested a range of improvements to the facilities themselves. These include updating furniture, adding comfortable seating, making the library more colorful, and adding artwork; providing different types of workspaces in the library with varying sizes and shapes of tables and different layouts; finding ways to reduce congestion in the most heavily used areas; and improving lighting, especially in areas that are noticeably dim.

Students in the anthropology classes realized a number of benefits from conducting the ethnographic studies. The 290 students examined library spaces, services and programs that are essential to student academic success. The findings show that in addition to providing academic support, a campus library has other significant functions at a community college. It may serve as a calm, inspirational place where students and faculty alike can relax between classes, peruse materials for their own personal interest, or catch up with friends or colleagues.

Conclusion: Implementations and Benefits

The design of libraries is constrained in many ways: by brick-and-mortar construction, existing systems, and financial limitations that lead to piecemeal improvements and retrofitting. But library design can be responsive to the needs of the community, by providing evidence of current and emerging work practices and needs, which in turn supports a longer-term view of the future library and creates a path toward achieving that future. Given the constraints, we argue that the collaborative assessment approach deployed at Montgomery College provides not only added but necessary benefits. That is, given the structural, systemic, and financial obstacles, the odds of the library successfully implementing broad changes are good only if there are established, cooperative relationships among stakeholders. It is not enough to collect some facts. It is necessary to build collaboration all along the way.

To build effective collaboration, a project must provide meaningful work. The anthropology faculty were charged with developing a framework for a groundbreaking study. The opportunity to contribute to a collaborative, college-wide project, uncommon for community college faculty, was another welcome benefit. As project researchers, students learned the methods of their field and applied concepts

acquired in the classroom to real-world situations. Students were eager and proud to be included as part of the research and design teams. The collaborative approach employed in this study empowered students to use the library as their laboratory to interview, observe, recommend, and design change in their own campus library. Several of the students went on to give presentations at a regional honors conference.

Participants from the Montgomery College Libraries enjoyed more direct interaction with students and faculty and heard their thoughts and preferences about library spaces. Employees gained research and data presentation skills, and presented and published their work at community college and library conferences. The structure of the collaborative assessment approach fostered more meaningful relationships among library employees, faculty members, and administrators across the college.

Stakeholders commented that the opportunity to examine data produced by the students, coupled with the opportunity to share reactions with others in cross-disciplinary stakeholder groups, was very valuable. The wide range of stakeholder representatives from various departments and divisions contributed to an environment of mutual interest, understanding, and respect among areas that do not normally have an opportunity to participate collaboratively on a student-focused project. Stakeholders also observed that, through this project, the MC Libraries made substantial contributions to college planning processes and voiced support for the libraries to continue and expand these student-centered contributions. The management of this complex collaborative assessment project increased respect and prestige for the library and increased its understanding of its role in student success and completion.

The project ultimately resulted in a stronger college-level understanding of student needs and the role the MC Libraries fill in supporting student success. The MC Libraries have established themselves in a new role at Montgomery College—both as research leaders and partners, and as a social science and design lab for student learning and original research. The collaborative assessment approach led to customized breakthrough strategies for student-centered learning. The college-wide qualitative assessment partnerships between administration, staff, faculty and students are informing the design of

learning spaces and services at the college, including the reprogramming of several library spaces.

I believe this project has afforded the opportunity not only to improve the campus library but has also created a window into the culture surrounding the library. This helps perpetuate student engagement and eliminates steps in the trial and error process. I think the continuation of this project will set a precedent for many other schools.

—Montgomery College Student

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Endnotes

1. Patricia A. Steele, David Cronrath, Sandra Parsons Vicchio, and Nancy Fried Foster, *The Living Library: An Intellectual Ecosystem* (Chicago, IL: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015).
2. Each year, a stakeholder group was convened for the campus under study to provide feedback on the project approach and on findings and implementation proposals from the library and anthropology ethnographic studies. Each group had an average of over 20 members, with a total of 65 stakeholder slots across all three campuses filled by 54 different individuals. Stakeholders included vice presidents, department chairs, full- and part-time faculty, and student services, security, and assessment personnel.
3. Research and stakeholder activities conducted by library teams over the three years of the project included 911 students, 56 faculty members, 42 library employees, 19 administrators, and 41 other Montgomery College employees.
4. Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons, “Understanding Faculty to Improve Content Recruitment for Institutional Repositories,” *D-Lib Magazine* 11, no. 1 (January 2005), DOI:10.1045/january2005-foster.
5. Helen Anderson and Ann Marshall, “What an Experience: Library Staff Participation in Ethnographic Research,” in *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester*, eds. Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons (Chicago, IL: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2007), 55–62.
6. The library findings are detailed in the three yearly reports and summarized in a capstone report. Montgomery College Libraries, “Montgomery College Libraries Ethnography Study,” 2016, cited September 23, 2016, <http://libguides.montgomerycollege.edu/ethnographic>.
7. Research activities conducted by anthropology students over the three years of the project included 290 student researchers, 306 student interviewees, 8 faculty members teaching and facilitating the project, and 23 faculty interviewees.
8. The anthropology findings are detailed in the four reports and summarized in a capstone report. Montgomery College Libraries, “Montgomery College Libraries Ethnography Study,” 2016, cited September 23, 2016, <http://libguides.montgomerycollege.edu/ethnographic>.