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New spaces for the space-strapped student

Building a 21st-century library

At Hunter College, we in the libraries were presented with a unique opportunity. The college administration has recently funded a multimillion dollar renovation to the aging main library. Originally designed to accommodate roughly 10,000 students, Hunter College Libraries currently serves close to 24,000.
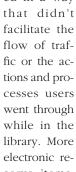
In the beginning, a presidential task force was convened and decided the renovations should be designed to bring the library "into the 21st century." Established as the first phase of a holistic renovation plan, the entire third floor was to be gutted and redesigned with users and public services in mind.

The task force outlined steps and renovations needed to transform Hunter College's main library into a modern space and service provider for all users: students, faculty, staff, and other Hunter College community members. While there were several targets identified by the task force, we saw three as the most relevant to the floor renovations:

• facilitating access to and use of materials,

• providing a comfortable and safe place for students and faculty to work and interact, and

• supporting individual group learning and study

The previous floor design contained two public service points: circulation and reference, with a third, print and technology reserves, being located on the floor below. All three desks were oriented in a way that didn't facilitate the flow of traffic or the actions and processes users went through while in the library. More electronic reserve items, increased demand for loaning laptops, and the start of iPad lending meant the textbook/print reserves staff

The Welcome Desk was designed to help patrons with simple, nonresearch-based questions like title lookups and directions.

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were being overwhelmed on the reserves desk.

The presidential task force still liked the idea of the circulation and reference desks being on the entry level to the library, but saw room for improvement. They suggested moving the print reserves to the circulation desk and making the old reserves desk the technology lending desk (laptops, tablets, headphones). The new circulation desk could then be staffed by students trained in both reserves and circulation.

The president's committee found that reference services were underused because they were hard to find. Often a librarian got a question that he or she was certain IT or the Writing Center could help with, but sending patrons to these other locations on campus wasn't working. To remedy this the committee took a cue from an Apple store's "genius bar" model. Now patrons can get help with any type of problem—from light to complex research questions to class registration issues. The new reference desk was moved to a more prominent location and redesigned to include not only a reference librarian, but both a representative of the Reading and Writing Center as well as a representative from campus Information Technology.

The initial design of the genius bar concept intended to streamline service to most efficiently allocate the resources (expert consultations) most efficiently. This revolved around the concept of four stations: the concierge station, the reference librarian station, the Reading and Writing Center tutor station, and the campus IT station. A patron would move to the first station, originally designed to be attended by a "research assistant" (student employee), engage in a brief interview with the assistant, and from there be directed to the appropriate station. The president's committee felt this would lead to smarter staffing plans and better outreach opportunities.

In addition, an entirely new service desk, the welcome desk, was created to accommodate expected need of the new space. This desk was designed to relieve the reference desk of the tedious informational/directional questions that seemed to make up a large chunk of the interactions, and overwhelmed librarians during busy times.

Along with the changes that were made to the service desks, there were substantial changes to user spaces. The reference/writing center/technology service desk was situated within a new research commons, a space designed to facilitate group collaboration and foster mixed modal methods of discovery and research. It was outfitted with dry-erase surfaces and desktop computers, all within close proximity to expert services. Former lab space was now turned into a hallway of bar seating with computers and a series of semi-private rooms designed for collaboration, equipped with lighted whiteboards, large screen iMacs, and cozy lounge-esque chairs.

Probably most striking, the renovations created an expansive reading room comprised of

Comfortable and movable furniture was important in the floor's redesign.

modern mixed furniture, including huge reading tables, lighted whiteboards, smaller low lying tables, couches, and numerous power outlets. The final space created in the renovation was what was being called the "Diner"—a space outside of the library with comfortable booths (like you'd find in a diner); dry-erase tabletops; Mac minis connected to large, wall-mounted monitors; as well as smaller tables and chairs.

This space is unique in that it allows students to use library resources while eating. As Hunter College Libraries were designed to be a food free space, it was important for the renovated space to allow students to eat at what has served as a central hub of activity on campus, while still protecting library materials and resources. In addition to these redesigned spaces there were technological updates to address

Space to spread out and work individually or with a group was an important need.

the final task force target, "access to and use of materials," which included touch screen lookup stations at the welcome desk, self checkout kiosks, more printers, and a supplies vending machine.

All of these enhancements were undertaken with the expectation of improving services for the user community at Hunter College, and drawn from the presidential task force's objectives to ensure that Hunter College Libraries became a 21st-century library that was able to meet the needs of the Hunter community of scholars. In addition, this was only the first phase of renovations implemented, so it became important to have some sense of the success (or failure) in reaching the stated objectives of the first stage of renovations.

How did we respond?

With this idea in mind, we decided to try an assessment plan that would be relatively all-encompassing with minimal impact on the lives of users. We also wanted a strong representative data sample. We decided to forgo surveys (both paper and digital) because of the typically low response rate and self-selecting populations. (However, we did intend to conduct a survey that addresses the working experiences of service providers in the renovated spaces.)

We decided direct observations would be the most effective way to gauge the usage of spaces and services. Considering that Hunter College is a large commuter school located in the heart of New York City, we felt it was important to record data from every hour that the library was open and providing some type of service. Because of the nature of the community, we posited that there could be a drastic difference in the profile of our users, and as a result, their respective responses to the renovations based upon the hours the used library.

To confront this issue we decided to have data collection occur every hour on the hour. In addition, we organized the observations to be done three times during the semester, for two weeks at a time. We decided these two week periods would be:

- the beginning of the semester, when students are coming in, new classes are starting, and people are trying to locate books and class-related materials. Also this is the first time users are seeing the new space;
- midterms, to discover the space needs during the busy middle of the semester and exams; and
- finals period, to look at the what services and spaces are most requested during the stressful finals period.

Since we wanted hourly samples, we asked the library student assistants to do the walkthroughs. This was useful because in addition to allowing us to gather the data we needed, the student staff members could better familiarize themselves with the new spaces.

Library Student Assistants (LSAs) were given iPads that were preloaded with a map of the floor with routes and observation points clearly illustrated. This map was paired with a Qualtrics survey, which asked the LSAs to make clear observations on specific metrics each time they made the circuit.

How did users respond to change? How did we respond to the change?

We learned that paying attention to your population sometimes outweighed the experience of the literature. Students in a super dense, hyper-urban, public, commuter campus had a completely different set of challenges, priorities, and needs than the wider college library community or even perceived peer libraries. We found that our users made the space their own, redefining the purposes for the technologies and furniture based on their need for solitary workspaces over communal space which dominated the campus. We found interactive technologies like whiteboards were ignored in favor of solitary input devices like work stations and reading tables.

We found that, as anticipated, the changes had a profound effect upon the user population. We were able to see that users took to the space immediately, but not necessarily as the project planners intended. For instance, the small collaboration spaces (with the cozy, lounge-esque chairs) turned into quiet spaces

for either individuals or the small group, studying together rather than collaborating. In several instances, users actually took the cozy chairs to another part of the floor. The research commons, now having librarian and IT help, has become more of a computer lab.

As a positive, the welcome desk did exactly what was needed, it took away the mundane directional questions, and combining the circulation and reserves desks created a much smoother process for checking things out, as well as easing staffing problems. Overall we'd like to say the users felt positive towards the changes, even if it was just because of new carpets, chairs, and lighting.

Anecdotally we get positive statements from students regarding the new space. While our data doesn't show the level of collaboration the task force was expecting, we are still working on service models that could boost those numbers, like being able to reserve the collaborative spaces or providing external monitors in other locations.

Conclusion

Working on this project led to several unexpected outcomes. We were initially presented with the question of how users liked our new space. However, over the course of the extensive experiment, we decided to estimate the impact of the new space on meeting our goals. While we saw some things go somewhat awry in our predictions for how users would make use of the new spaces, we did discover that the changes made did help Hunter College Libraries transform to a more contemporary and agile space. Our assessment program also encouraged library workers confront the space in ways that were atypical to our daily experience and provided a better understanding of how our services could be focused to the space we had now, and not the space we imagined it would be.

The Hunter College Libraries now have a second round of renovations starting, where they will actually be losing space. The understanding gained from these observations will allow us to better question what to do in this new situation. ✌