Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

The Library as a Preferred Place for Studying: Observation of Students' Use of Physical Spaces

A Review of:
Applegate, R. (2009). The library is for studying: Student preferences for study space. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *35*(4), 341-346.

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Abstract

Objective – To determine students' utilization of physical spaces in the library, excluding computer labs or stacks.

Design – Observational research, unobtrusive method.

Setting – Areas of space in the University Library, as well as within adjoining areas at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, such as carrels, tables, soft chairs, and study rooms.

Subjects – Students using the library's space.

Methods – The researcher chose to collect data via observation of individuals and groups in a particular space in the library, noting the gender of the individuals using the space and whether or not they were using laptops. Areas of space examined were carrels, group study rooms, chairs and sofas, tables and chairs in the Academic Commons, and benches and chairs within corridors. The unit of analysis used was equal to an individual seat. The research excluded stack space as well as any space with fixed computer stations. The time periods chosen to study the spaces were selected based on the author's previous research. Due to higher daytime usage than evening, data was collected at two time periods during the day: 12-1 p.m. and 3-4 p.m., Monday through Friday. The researcher recorded the time of the semester as well, choosing weeks 14-17 in Fall 2007 and weeks 10-17 in Spring 2008. Space diagrams for

collecting data were created, and each area had different collection times. All data was entered into a database in which each area was recorded with the number and type of users. Each area had a different capacity as to how many individuals it could hold. If the percentage of capacity was higher than 50%, the usage was considered to be notable.

Main Results – The researchers observed a few patterns from their data collection. Gender analysis provided information regarding the use of laptops; men were more likely to use them than women. While men were a smaller part of the overall university demographic while this research took place, they utilized the library spaces most.

As expected, library usage increased as the end of each semester neared, suggesting that the spaces are used mainly for study purposes. The author also chose to collect data regarding library usage by semester, which is questionable because the student population declined from fall to spring and a Campus Center opened, providing another study space.

The most attractive spaces in the library were study rooms, and for the most part, groups, as opposed to individual students, utilized these rooms. The chair and sofa areas of the library were the next most popular areas, but the study carrels were also popular, especially toward the end of a semester.

Conclusion – According to the researcher, the data collected points to the library as a preferred place for studying, as opposed to other activities. By observing the use of areas such as study carrels, soft chairs, and group study rooms, one can derive data that will allow for future space planning, as well as gain an understanding of how a current space is being used.

Commentary

The data collected for this study is important in that it provides evidence of how certain spaces within the library are used, and this data could be useful at the beginning of designing a new space. If charged with space-planning for a university library, it would be beneficial to know, for example, that study carrels and group study rooms are utilized most frequently.

The researcher chose to evaluate several aspects of the use of space in the library, but did not develop any clear research goal or question other than whether library space is used for studying. Gender, or rather "sex", the preferred term in academia, was one aspect the researcher chose to consider. However, while it is interesting to consider sex when planning spaces, it is also presumptuous to assume that female students would want open spaces instead of closed spaces for safety issues. A separate study surveying students and analyzing preferences by sex would likely be more beneficial than making broad generalizations. Again, it would be interesting to survey these students and get more in-depth information on why men choose to utilize the study space more frequently than women.

The author also makes an assumption that the spaces are being used only for studying purposes. She does not consider that students with laptops often use softer spaces to watch online media, participate in social networking activities, browse the Internet, and email friends. Since no evidence was gathered concerning these activities, it is hard to say that the spaces are used only for studying. The researcher also did not make it clear how she came to the conclusion that the library is the preferred space for studying, as she did not directly observe other areas on campus, specifically the Campus Center. Also, in order to get a clear view of the spaces studied, it would be beneficial to include floor plans or images of the library space instead of simply a textual description.

Applegate wrote "Build it and what? Measuring the implementation and outcomes of an information commons" in 2007. Her paper examined the expectations, pros and

cons, and issues that confront libraries in designing an information commons. The study evaluated for this particular summary does not pose a clear research question as did her previous paper. A follow-up on utilization of library space since the redesign and development of the Academic Commons would be more effective and provide more evidence as to the importance of space planning.

References

Applegate, R. (2007) Build it and what? Measuring the implementation and outcomes of an information commons. In *Sailing into the Future: Charting Our Destiny. Proceedings of the Thirteenth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, March 29-April 1, 2007, Baltimore, Maryland* (pp. 167-173). Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.