

**Title: Following the Paths of Library Users in Redesigning Library Spaces****Authors Names:** Derek Halling, Christine Foster, Esther Carrigan**Affiliation:** Medical Sciences Library and Evans Library, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas USA 77843-4462**First Author E-Mail Address:** dhalling@medlib.tamu.edu**Acknowledgements:** Michael Maciel, Data Analyst for the Texas A&M University Libraries, is to be recognized for his contribution to the LibQUAL+® survey portion of this paper. His experience with the compilation and interpretation of the data results save tremendous energies and provide added clarity to the process.**Introduction**

The Medical Sciences Library (MSL) at Texas A&M University, like many of its colleague libraries, is faced with the constant pressure of meeting the needs and wants of the onsite patron. The library gate count continues to rise, and demands for flexible study areas, quiet study space, lighting, power, seating, and computer access have risen as a result. The MSL has therefore begun redesigning and renovating library spaces to meet this increase in traffic and resource demand. As electronic resources replace print collections, the collection-centric model of libraries is being replaced by the user-centered, user-experience model. The MSL is charged with meeting the specific patron requirements, while maintaining fiscal responsibility in an economically stressed climate. To achieve this goal, the MSL has been expanding its sources for user feedback and input into making these space renovation decisions.

**Objective**

The objective of this project was first to harvest regular user feedback as well as to develop a broad based complement of mechanisms for input concerning the redesign of library spaces, and then to analyze, prioritize, and then act upon this feedback in creating the future of MSL library space.

**Methods**

The methods used to accomplish accurate insight for best matching the actions of the library with the educational requirements of the modern user involve two logical steps. Those steps consist of data collection and data analysis.

*Data Collection*

There are a great number of different methods that involve capturing patron input. Each of these methods can generally be grouped into two categories. These categories are created based on whether the data collected is user-driven or library-initiated. At the MSL, examples of the user-driven tools include a suggestion box, website links for patron comments, and an email address

specifically created for patron interaction. The library-initiated methods consist of a library census (which occurs every five years), a LibQUAL+® survey (which generally occurs every two years), and some customized data capture as particular information is needed. This includes such things as a white board where patrons can respond to a question, text voting, or ballot voting on a particular set of options. There are many advantages and disadvantages for each of these when compared to each other. The user-driven input has the benefit of having potentially immediate response time and it is generally addressing a specific concern that the patron has right now. Some of the detriments of user-driven input are that it is subject to being misinterpreted by the library and that many times due to natural language differences in communication, the input can be more difficult to interpret and analyze consistently. The library-initiated input will generally have the luxury of being more patterned, thus creating longitudinal trends over time. Since many library-initiated tools provide limited answer selections, there is an increased potential for patrons to give feedback that reflects the thoughts and views of their peers, thus lending a greater priority to the topic. However, the extended lengths of some feedback methods (such as surveys) often risk incompleteness and the possibility of questions being misinterpreted by the patron. Additionally, there is a potential for patron frustration in the event that the answer options available do not accurately reflect a problem or concern that the patron wishes to rate. Many times an area is left for freely given comments in hopes of addressing this issue.

### *Data Analysis*

Once the data has been collected via the mentioned vehicles, it must be reconstructed in a way that has visible meaning for decision making. One of the flagship tools of the MSL that illustrates this example is the results of the LibQUAL+® survey. This web-based survey captures the minimal, optimal, and perceived status of the library as it is viewed by the patrons in the areas of Affect of Service, Information Control, and Library as a Place (1). This paper will focus on the summarized results of the Library as a Place section and the user input gathered via other means that also fall under this category. Preceding the 2010 LibQUAL+® survey, the MSL saw an increasing trend in patrons that had higher expectations and strong concerns in the areas of library spaces that inspire learning and quiet spaces for study. Library conditions that were specifically mentioned for inspired learning included more areas for collaboration, more access to power sources, better lighting, increased access to computers, and improved seating. The only comments that really expanded on the emphasis of more spaces for quiet study suggested an increase in the number of study rooms, and the removal of undergraduates (which is not an option). At this point, the MSL has collected the data to be used for decision making and it has a means of organizing the data in a manner that has a sensible construct which clarifies what the patrons deem important. This leads to the ultimate question of “Now knowing what patrons want, what method can the MSL use to prioritize it and provide it in a timely manner while keeping within all budget constraints?”

### **Outcomes**

Comments from the LibQUAL+® surveys made clear the importance of the library as a place to undergraduate, graduate and professional students. In an effort to harness the positives of both

the user-driven and the library-initiated methods of data collection, an Onsite Services Librarian position has the assigned duties of acting as a liaison to every patron that walks in the library doors. The position has the primary mission of re-designing the MSL, in terms of the physical aspects and even in regards to collection needs; to provide for the patron needs at the time they need it. To assist this position, and to build consensus around the emotional issue of space, an MSL Space Group was convened to help with the coordination of space redesign efforts through scenario planning using the identified driving forces of money, space, and client expectations. The group included faculty and staff from all library departments so that an increased diversity of thought and observation could be harnessed before making decisions. The mission of this group was:

- Define a continuum of values for key driving forces including money, space, and user expectations
- Discuss the table of possible combinations for these values
- Identify/discuss preferred scenario(s), most likely scenario, worst case scenario
- Brainstorm implications for these in terms of space directions to be considered
- Translate those implications into actual space changes that can be undertaken

By analyzing captured information through the observations, surveys, suggestions boxes, and client trends, a realistic list of needs could be prioritized. Out of 27 possible scenarios created for the future of the MSL, the one closest to the current situation and most likely to occur was implemented which allowed for many user-requested changes to happen as well as a few trial ideas. Finally, as one of the key elements in the decision making process, the Onsite Services Librarian created an MSL student advisory council. The 12 person council consists of student leaders from each of the primary colleges that are served by the MSL (College of Veterinary Medicine, Texas A&M Health Science Center, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences), and also incorporates a diversity of undergraduate, graduate, and professional students. The biggest benefit of this council is that with both regular and (when necessary) irregular scheduled contact, it allows for direct input by those who have first-hand experience of the role the library plays in the routine of the student. This input is easily gathered both in reference to a present situation and in many ways more importantly, before an expense is incurred to make a future physical change. The three of these influences working in conjunction acts something like the following. The MSL space group outlines the chosen scenario. The Onsite Services Librarian corresponds with the patrons with both user-driven and library-initiated methods. For the larger initiatives, the Onsite Services Librarian meets with the Library Student Advisory Council to clarify intended activities as well as open channels of communication and opportunities for customization before expense is incurred. This method of targeted feedback led to specific changes in library spaces, and the following are just a few of the successful redesign efforts:

### *Collaborative Areas*

The MSL has observed that the modern student is confronted with an increased expectation of working in groups. As a result, the need for areas of collaborative study is on the rise. To address this demand, the MSL has attacked the issue from different angles. First, office spaces and larger areas were recreated into group study rooms which are always in short supply (2). Secondly, since a significant decrease in the usage of current print journals had been observed, the journals and shelving units on which they were housed were relocated to a less prominent

area, and replaced with numerous lengthy tables which were quickly appropriated by study groups. The decision to put tables in this area was greatly influenced by an open whiteboard positioned in the area where patrons were encouraged to write in and vote on what they would actually want to be put into this area. Finally, a forty machine computer lab that was found to be infrequently used was refitted to allow the machines and monitors to be below the desktop, thus allowing the “computer” desks to be used simply as table tops. These desks also came with casters allowing the tables to be rearranged into different formations as necessary (3).

#### *Increased Power Access*

Amazingly, this concern is one of the hardest for the MSL to address due to the way in which the building is constructed. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is one of the most expensive needs to address. Through building observations, a more effective way of arranging and relocating the public computers was discovered which made use of columns that had previously been considered a hindrance. Moving the computers to this new location allowed for study tables to be moved next to open power outlets on several columns as well as an entire wall of the library. In the short term, several of the more lengthy tables were equipped with power strips that could be shared by multiple users. The data used to make these decisions was collected as a direct result of LibQUAL+® survey comments. Future plans involve actually retrofitting the tables themselves to be powered.

#### *Improved Computer Access*

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the public computers were relocated so as to make power sources more efficient. As an added benefit, the move of these computers also improved their access by the patrons. The move resulted in the computers being closer to the single-service point client services desk for added user assistance. It became much easier to see where open seating could be found. Finally, due to the previous location being next to large unshielded windows, it was observed that a significant glare issue made many of the computers undesirable. The move to the new location resolved that problem as well. The improved access to power also resulted in an increased demand for the publicly available laptops for checkout. The higher usage of public laptops brought relief to the lack of acceptable computer access as well. The heavy focus on making an improvement in this area came from a large number of requests in both the suggestion box as well as LibQUAL+® comments.

#### *Improved Lighting*

In addition to having the entire public area refitted with a newer greener light source, this issue has somewhat been addressed by the tables that have been moved toward the windows where the computers had been located; however, that is only good for a portion of the tables, and for those tables only during daylight hours. That being the case, the Onsite Services Librarian working in conjunction with the Library Student Advisory Council has presented an option that will put LED lighting on 23 group study tables by the end of this summer.

#### *Improved Seating*

Recently, the Client Services Desk staff was approached by students distressed by the fact that they could not find anywhere to sit in the library. Upon further investigation, it was discovered that there were numerous available seating options, but they were not the options desired by the

students. To address this issue, after running a ballot where students were allowed to vote on a selection of three different chairs, fifty new fully adjustable student selected chairs were purchased to increase and/or improve the options that were otherwise available. As a second phase of this project, following many 2010 LibQUAL+® comments requesting more of these chairs, an additional fifty chairs are to be purchased this summer.

### *Quiet Study Spaces*

As one of the primary concerns of the library patrons following the past LibQUAL+® surveys, the topic of quiet study spaces has a tremendous priority placed upon it. With the increased emphasis on collaborative study areas, the aspect of quiet study spaces can seem almost in direct conflict. Fortunately, the MSL is a two-story building allowing for some separation between the collaborative first floor, and what has historically been considered a quiet second floor. Unfortunately, there is a large atrium connecting both floors where sound easily travels causing consistent verbal and written complaints about the noise. The MSL space group came to the conclusion that the only way to truly meet the need for quiet while allowing for the continuance of group study on the first floor was to make an improved physical barrier between the two. With the Library Student Advisory Council in agreement, a decision was made to build glass walls that would provide a noise barrier between the two areas. The manner in which the walls were constructed also allowed for a small lounge area that would permit students to leave the quiet zone and take care of any phone calls or verbal discussions that might disturb the study of their peers.

Now the MSL has collected the input via both user-driven and library-initiated methods. The data has been plugged into the most applicable scenario created by the MSL Space Group based on the current library climate. The Onsite Services Librarian discussed the situation and came to group consensus with the Library Student Advisory Council on what steps to take to address the concerns, and those steps have been taken. How have the changes been accepted? In the most current LibQUAL+® survey, based on the 249 local comments received, 83 (33%) addressed some aspect of the library as a place. Overall, the main priorities remained spaces that inspire learning and quiet spaces for study; however, the only concern that was expressed was a getaway for study, learning or research. This suggests that the MSL has done well in addressing the main priorities which previously were concerns, but that there is still work to do. As education styles and methods change, the needs of library users will change with them. It will be a critical goal of the MSL to walk in the shoes of library patrons and take the steps necessary to keep the library on the right path.

## References

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