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Sounding Off About Noise

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ABSTRACT. Noise in a community college library can be part of the nature of the environment. It can also become a huge distraction for those who see the library as their sanctuary for quiet study and review of resources. This article describes the steps that should be taken by library staff in order to be pro-active about noise and the library environment, in order to fulfill the mission of the library for the campus community. The overall goal is for staff to control acceptable levels of noise and related student behavior.

KEYWORDS. Noise, library space, socializing, cell phones, study techniques, behavior, policies, library staff

Upon entering a community college library, one might expect to hear, nothing. You should at most be able to hear the sound of students studying which could be a few murmurs, some pages turning, a chair scraping and a hint of muffled background or outside noise depending upon what side of the library you are in. You might definitely feel that this is a place to study, get some information, and maybe speak with an instructor or student partner about assignments.

Sound good to you? Sure it does if the alternative to that is; loud talking, the crunch of food wrappers and the slurping of drinks, books being tossed around recklessly, chairs bumping and noise that is more in the foreground than background. If your library has been a victim of disrespect over noise and behavior-related issues then maybe some of these ideas can help.

Is There a Noise Problem?

Community college libraries run the gamut in terms of size, number of service points, traffic patterns, and use by patrons with physical presence. Students coming into a community college for the first time, especially those just out of high school might not have the behavioral disciplines to show proper respect in a learning environment.

So the first question becomes: is there a noise problem? Follow that question with:

- Do students complaint that it is too noisy to study?
- Are library activities interrupted due to outbreaks of noise and/or physical confrontation?
- Does the library have a reputation for addressing behavioral issues, especially those relating to noise?
- Does the mission of the library reflect policies and procedures related to noise control?
- Did this grow into a problem unnoticed until too late?

And of course on a personal level, you can ask yourself, "Is it too loud for me to think clearly?"

If any of these questions point you in the direction of change, take this advice.

A community college library that is intended to support the learning opportunities offered by the college should also garner the respect of its patrons and support a learning environment that creates equal opportunity to all for obtaining information resources and being able to apply those resources thoughtfully.

The library staff must decide,

- "What is the proper expectation of noise in our library?"
- "Where do you draw the line on behavior issues?"
- "How do we support our decision?"

Keeping in mind that learning environments have moved to group study assignments, libraries create information commons type of work areas encouraging interactive participation of patrons and technology tends to creates its own noise. The first step really is to decide, what noise is appropriate and what is not.

Cultural Aspects of the Library to Consider

To determine whether or not you have a problem, an initial investment of time for thinking it through is well worth the effort. This is important not only to answer the question but also to reinforce your decision at the time of implementation.

Public libraries and to a degree larger university libraries have adopted some different cultural aspects of their operations with a variety of motivations. For example, with the growth of the "super" bookstore, many patrons default to this type of environment for the comfort of the amenities, such as coffee and plush furniture. Motivations to adopt these concepts include the need to build traffic, satisfy active user demands, or try to appear more modern. This type of

approach might also be appropriate in libraries with enough space to accommodate both group environments and provide quiet space.

At a community college level, this option might not be available so effort should be made to determine the most appropriate use of library space as it relates to other options on campus. In other words, what is the expectation of the patron base, be it student, faculty or staff. Another similar consideration would be behavior expectations of the institution and in particular those related to accreditation standards.

An example of this would be the accreditation principles for SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools). Principle 3.8.1 discusses appropriate facilities for library and learning resources. Noise and behavior problems could affect the appearance or perception of this standard.

Regarding the other expectations, find out if faculty members are making assignments that refer students into the library to do group projects. In fact an analysis of faculty use at the library might be helpful as well. If you determine that faculty doesn't use your library, this could be a sign that there is a problem.

What about students' expectations? We are in an age when technology is at our fingertips, literally. Most students have cell phones, music players of some sort, and a variety of other technological noise makers. Their expectation could be that their use is universal; but like laws that limit smoking, there should be limits.

And finally with regard to you total campus situation, the relationship of the library with other departments, buildings, and service areas around campus can make a big difference. This can be especially true if the library is in a high traffic area, or if buildings are open and shelter options are limited in bad weather. Partnerships with student services related staff is important so that the proper message is sent to students. Certain types of activities should be allowed in certain campus locations but not others. The library staff members need to know what the options are when correcting behavior issues. For example, with groups, those who just want to socialize in bad weather need to know that this belongs in the student lounge, not the library.

Analysis of Noise Issues

If you determine that you have a problem and that the library has lost its reputation for a quiet place to study or for addressing certain behaviors that are detrimental to the learning environment the next step is to get specific. This means analyzing the exact causes of the problem before creating your plan to correct the issues. The list below could be possible causes:

- Socializing – As mentioned earlier, the library could have simply become students' idea of where to hang out without real purpose, other than to visit with friends. Figure out where to draw the line on socializing.
- Cell Phones – Usage of cell phones has grown into a problem with the percentage of people who acquire cell phones growing every year. Part of the problem here is that in our culture we do not have cell phone etiquette, but allow the ringing of a cell phone to direct our immediate actions. Part of analyzing this problem is deciding whether or not a cell phone conversation is more or less distracting than a normal two-person discussion and being able to defend your stand.
- Group Study – Not all group study activities will be directed by faculty. Recognize the circumstances and if it is a concern, provide options. Not all options would have to be in the library proper, but if you are seeking a solution to this particular issue, be creative and don't forget your partners.
- Free Time – This issue is related to socializing but somewhat different. Some students are in situations that give them free time between classes without personal options for use of their time, such as transportation. If these students are not willing to use this time wisely and quietly in the library, library staff should be able to direct these folks elsewhere. Think of your partnerships within the student services community to help generate those options.
- Mechanical – Computers are quieter than typewriters but can still be part of the problem if allowed to sing, beep or provide some other burst of sound with the innocent stoke of a few keys. Other machinery (copiers, fax machines), technology related equipment (scanners, printers) and building amenities (automatic doors, elevators, HVAC systems) could also be a cause of unwanted noise. Be aware of these and build them into your plan as either expected or anticipated background noise or as possible reasons to make some physical space changes.
- Staff and Faculty Noises – Always start your journey from home. If staff help create a noise problem by loud talking or any other means of disruption make sure everyone is on the same page of setting an example. By the same token, faculty who come into the library and are out of sync with the standards being established need to be counseled first so that they can support and reinforce behavior expectations with students.
- External Noises – If you are in situation where the noise is coming from the outside this might be more difficult to address because it does not fall within the library's jurisdiction. Once again a partnership is needed with school administration officials in order to make changes. Sometimes these issues happen unexpectedly if something else changes on campus to alter traffic flow or access to some other area. Be aware of these possibilities.

There certainly could be additional or different causes to your particular noise issue. Spending the time and effort to determine exactly what the problem is will be beneficial in determining the answer.

Other Factors to Consider

If you have come this far, you might have an idea that you have a problem or one is growing. Maybe you even have some ideas for possible causes. There are a couple of other things to consider before planning your strategy to improve your situation.

Early studies into library noise recognized the growing concern that technology, educational techniques, and social attributes were becoming noisier as it related to the traditional library environment. These studies mostly viewed problems and results in the form of decibel levels. Recommendations from these studies centered on altering physical space and furniture for the most effective use of sound preventing barriers. The other primary recommendation from previous research is in the use of instruction, modeling behaviors, and providing feedback to “offenders”.

An expectation for behaviors is something to consider from several different points of view. First of all, the library's expectation of certain behaviors doesn't match behaviors expected elsewhere in society. You might hear this a lot under people's breath that, they don't have to be quiet here or there. Knowing or recognizing this doesn't necessarily change anything other than your approach to solving the problem. This will be especially true if you are in a confrontational environment and part of your solution will be to “teach” what library standards are.

This issue actually leads to another question to consider. Whose rights are you satisfying by deciding to foster a quiet environment vs. a more open, louder, active environment for group activity or with special amenities? This applies to the mission of the library: As a place, is it meant to be available for quiet study and/or concentration, or should it be available to all regardless of their behavioral nature? And, do others have the right to intrude upon the quiet needed by those studying? As users' needs change, so does their expectation of the library as a place. With the design of curriculums changing, what become the options for setting the library's rules and standards?

One more factor to consider is the affect that other elements, other than noise, have on the noise issue. At the top of the list is food and drink. By restricting food and drink, you are also restricting the associated behaviors of socializing while eating and drinking. Other behaviors or restrictions to consider would be use of cell phones, sleeping, children, and limits to group size.

And the Answer Is

Once you have identified a problem or once you even suspect that you have a need to address a rising level of noise, and you've thought through all of the factors involved along with what partners and physical attributes associated with the library need to be considered, it is time to develop a plan of action.

Based on your physical layout, recommendations could include changing traffic patterns, rearranging furniture, dividing space into quiet protected vs. group activity space and communicating to your patrons other options available on campus.

Traffic Patterns

Patron traffic patterns should be logical and focused away from areas of the library that should be quiet. Sounds like common sense, but many libraries were built when noise issues were not a problem, and enrollment size was not large enough to contribute to noise pollution. Don't try to keep a high traffic area quiet, you will lose the argument and feel defeated on your other noise reduction goals. Related to the amount of traffic is the timing of the traffic. Recognize the between-class shift and plan accordingly. Also be prepared to respond to weather-related changes, in terms of shelter, for example, or any other environmental activity that might drive people and thus noise into the library.

Furniture and Fixtures

Reducing clusters of furniture has proven to be one of the most effective methods of deterring group socialization. With limited staff, furniture placement can be helpful in directing traffic to specific locations. The type of seating or furniture can make a difference also. Carrels and tables should be used in areas meant to be quieter. Plush furniture signals relaxation which can lead to sleeping and a more casual atmosphere for socializing. Place plush furniture accordingly or remove if necessary.

The use of cubicle type of walls is also helpful in dividing open spaces into quieter study areas or the opposite, to create space needed for groups to study, without disturbing others. Cube walls in a library are sometimes overlooked because they were not part of the original design.

Policies

If you don't already have them, to be in control of your noise situation will require creating, following and being prepared to enforce policies and procedures for handling noise causing problems. Once agreed upon by library staff and management, they need support by campus administration as well as campus partners who will be call upon as needed.

Then these policies need to be communicated both internally to campus staff and faculty and externally to students, community users, and other patrons. A consistent message must be sent for this to have credibility. However, library staff must be coached to allow for the use of judgment as needed.

Signs

You've created your physical layout, you've established your policies and procedures, and you've even started communicating to your user group and campus population. People respond to what they see in front of them. Support your efforts with a sign program.

Signs are an important part of any successful service-related business, such as retail, but often get overlooked in libraries. In a library environment signs are also instructional tools to direct users to resources, equipment, physical spaces or locations and to make announcements. A good sign program can send a sharp and clear message that will also aid in enforcing good behaviors and in turn can reduce noise.

To develop a good sign program, invest in the effort; meaning, use a scientific approach to place signs in particular locations with particular messages that are clear and understandable. Place signs at appropriate locations to match the need. Signs won't always tell the whole story if it's complicated. Lengthy messages should refer the user to staff for full explanations. Also invest in making a sign look professional. A handwritten sign says you didn't care enough to do it right!

Conduct a usability study with a sample group of students to ensure that the messages are clear and easy to understand. Train and coach staff to use signs as a tool for communicating and explaining standards and policies. Signs do **NOT** replace staff enforcement of standards and policies.

Signage can come in many different formats. Overhead category sign, signs posted at circulation desks, reference desks, or on doors, which provide basic direction and instruction. Some signs aren't signs at all but could be part of your program. An example is attached to this article. These signs are really bookmarks and are used to inform patrons of a violation in a non-confrontational, easy-to-understand format.

And Speaking of Staff

Library school does not teach noise control. Library staff members will have different levels of tolerance for noise based on age and experience. Noise control issues also detract from other duties and become the least favorite part of the job. But it is important to realize that without staff involvement any actions taken to reduce a noise problem will fail. Moving furniture or creating

walls, developing a sign program or changing a traffic pattern, are all useless if staff is not actively supporting and enforcing policies and procedures.

The following tips could help library staff deal with these issues;

- Develop a comfort level for addressing noise offenders either through role play or self assessment.
- Conduct training on proper techniques such as, having staff members identify themselves as staff and using the authority of the campus as support, knowing what to say and not to say, learning how to be positive firm and friendly and being consistent and confident.
- Support each other in approaching possible problems with back-up plans and strategies for dealing with problem patrons.
- Take ownership of the situation including being able to describe and direct problems to security or administrators when they are called to intervene.

Safety Issues

If you've read this far then you must have some problem to address. Keep in mind the safety issue associated with noise-related problems. Rampant, disrespectful behavior can be a breeding ground for more serious offenses. Create partnerships and understanding with those on your campus responsible for the enforcement of laws and all campus policies. Do not hesitate to report potential problems or worry about the false alarm issue. Better safe than sorry.

Develop a plan or strategy for action when a patron or user crosses the line. This means if someone becomes confrontational know what actions should come next. The plan will give you the confidence to move in the right direction as oppose to backing down.

Overall Recommendations

If noise has become an issue at your library, identify the causes and the need for putting parameters around noise control. This includes evaluating your space, along with the needs exhibited by the teaching environment, to establish policies that satisfy your users in relationship to other facilities on campus.

Review physical aspects involved and adjust accordingly, i.e., furniture arrangements or groupings, study rooms or quiet areas, walls and traffic flow.

Inform your students and other user populations of standards and rules through signage, verbal instruction and campus marketing. Invest in doing this in a professional clear manner so as to set a tone of credibility.

Develop a plan of action with the staff which includes practice to develop a comfort level for dealing with issues, safety concerns, and how to have back-up and partnerships to support the process and recognition of the benefits that taking a stand will bring.

Partner with administrative officials in supporting the enforcement of rules and carrying out the consequences of disruptive behavior in the library. It will also add credibility to the library as an organization that sets standards.

Seek ways to positively reinforce good behaviors with your users and recognize those who appreciate the efforts made on their behalf. This also will add to the library's reputation within the user community.

While all of this sounds like a lot of work, the satisfaction of having control in your library, serving users that are there for the right purpose, and being able to hear yourself think can make it all worth while.

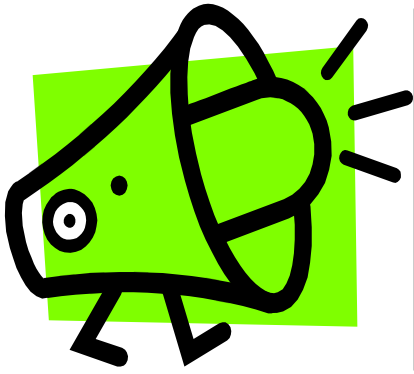
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No Talking

Please refrain from talking while in the library. Keep your voice at a minimum so that you are not disturbing other people trying to use the library.



No Cell Phones

Please keep your cell phones off or on vibrate and keep conversations with them for outside the library. Cell phones can disturb other people in the library.



No food or drinks

Food and Drinks are prohibited in the library, please do not bring these into the library, can cause damage to computer and books and attract bugs.