

Sustaining an Assessment Mentality to Navigate Library Space Planning

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Abstract:

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Sustaining an Assessment Mentality to Navigate Library Space Planning

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Abstract

In 2008 the university libraries at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro conducted a series of assessment activities for the purpose of providing an outside space consultant the feedback needed to influence the programming and design of renovating space for an almost 60-year-old academic library. The resulting study produced by the consultant gave an excellent foundation for upgrading the existing facility for repurposing space and addressing contemporary user needs. Financial shortfalls and building restrictions thwarted the work from this design, but the assessment activity developed at the time provided a model for continuous assessment of space in smaller projects designed to plan changes to space when possible. This paper provides examples of those assessment activities and the outcomes produced as a result.

Introduction

The purposeful assessment of space with the goal of repurposing library space for changing users' needs began in 2008 with a series of assessment activities designed to learn what students, faculty, staff and the community needed in a new era of electronic resources and shared information environments. This data was produced to inform an outside consultant completing a multiphase plan of renovation for guiding future renovation activities. The result was an elaborate space study product meant to provide the library a blueprint of renovation to be executed in phases over the next five years. This project was documented in the LAC 2008 proceedings article by the same authors.

Unfortunately, execution did not happen due to the economic downturn along with infrastructure and code issues with the building. The libraries have been forced to downsize renovation projects into smaller events that include partners and other means of support for accomplishment. With each of these smaller endeavors, however, assessment activities were conducted in order to

provide evidence justifying the investment into the needed changes. This reinforced to libraries' staff and partners that assessment is always a critical component to any project.

Why is Assessment Important?

The changes to the libraries' space needs have been significant. In the 1990s stack space was expanded at the cost of reduction in seating. Gate counts declined as students only seemed to utilize the libraries when they needed materials or instruction on resources. But the Internet and electronic age changed how students obtained their resources, how they studied, and how they used the libraries. It was important to assess these changes to better serve the university community and its changing needs. Assessment needed to be purposeful and align with the university and libraries' missions with the gathering of evidence and demonstrating that the libraries were partners in learning. And as part of the organizational culture for libraries' staff, it was important for assessment activities to have a purpose with proven methods for data collection and strategies for reporting and implementing actions based on the results.

What Did We Learn from Assessment?

The original assessment referred to in 2008 produced significant insights into the changes taking place in the use of an academic library. The evidence gathered in 2008 used a variety of assessment methods in combination: surveys, focus groups, design feedback, interviews, and observation studies. We learned that students do value workspace over materials and that this workspace needed to be flexible for different types of use. The impact on the libraries' culture was dynamic as this began to change the libraries' views on content format, furniture attributes and support services. This knowledge produced a lot of "what ifs" that gave intent for future projects. For the record, the first phase of the project from this assessment was a repurposing of space to

expand Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA). Evidence from the study indicated the areas could not function as needed in the space they were occupying at the time.

This shift in space produced the need for the next project concerning space for researchers coming to SCUA. Previously, internal and external researchers were asked to work in a multipurpose reading room that was also exposed to public traffic. With space for the collections and staff now updated, work conditions were better and it was felt that the quality of research could be improved by enhancing the research area. Previous researchers were interviewed and surveyed to determine what space attributes impact the quality of their research. The results produced good evidence that a dedicated space was needed and an adjoining room to the reading room was remodeled to accommodate this activity.

In looking for partners to address improvements to our space use, we collaborated with a senior-level



It should be noted that these student presentations were presented to a broad audience of libraries' staff and interested patrons to share ideas and visions. They also maintained blogs which included their design ideas. Jackson Library was given attention and we did replace some furniture, but changes were limited due to budget restrictions. This student perspective was a great way to see space through their eyes and should be repeated in the future.

As these projects are being described in chronological order, please note that during this time the libraries conducted LibQUAL+® (2012).

interior architecture class. One of the professor's specialties was learning spaces, so it was a perfect fit! We made arrangements for his classes to review and assess the Harold Schiffmann Music Library and a portion of Jackson (main) Library. Students were put into teams to analyze and recommend changes to these spaces. The primary assessment tool was observing and interviewing other students and users of the space and of course, as students, they had their own perceptions. These were programming interviews to determine how visitors to these spaces could best use them and what changes would make them more efficient. It was learned that the Music Library was in desperate need of open, flexible, and comfortable space as well as inspiring color. The exercise prompted a furniture redesign to remove dated and heavy music carrels, which housed equipment no longer in demand and replaced it with table, chairs, and comfortable seating that encourage collaborative interaction. The walls were also painted non-traditional colors for an enhanced visual effect.

We previously conducted LibQUAL+ in 2008. Related to the Library as a Place category, we learned that although the trend is for group work and collaborative activity, there still exists a need for quiet space for individual reflection. We also learned that students expect a correlation between physical space and virtual space, in terms of the website primarily, so this information was shared for proposed changes and follow-up.

The next area of consideration for space improvement became the main library's lower level of basement, which housed approximately 9% percent of the print collection. As a massive

weeding project begins to make room for renovation possibilities, it was decided to assess the need for digital media support on campus to determine if there was a need and how we might repurpose the lower level to support it. Assessment was informal at first through conversation with instructors and teaching support departments. In 2010 we conducted a student survey to gain input on their media literacy needs.

We learned that having an open lab where students could access both the technology and the expertise for multimedia was a critical need on campus. Previously only media studies majors had access to these services. Partners for this project became the Media Studies Department and Undergraduate Studies who assisted with both advice and funding to get the space functional. The Commons opened in 2012 and is very successful. The Digital Media Commons is also a phased project so assessment has been ongoing in terms of tracking needs, features used, tools, and programs, so as to invest accordingly in the future.

During the assessment and consideration of building a Digital Media Commons, it was announced that the Campus Master Plan had

been updated to include a more current frame of reference based on financial considerations, enrollment growth, and community needs and trends. This plan became a significant piece of information for the libraries that, until this point, had been expecting an expansion or possible addition that had been included in previous master plans. Recognizing that a future building replacement or expansion was not to be had was disappointing but relevant to future space considerations. With this new information, the libraries must address and adapt its space needs, in the future, with existing building facilities.

With the new Campus Master Plan in mind, the most recent assessment project was conducted in 2014 to determine any changes to building use since the 2008 overall space study. With limited budgets the assessment focused on choices that were financially possible and lower ticketed items, such as wipe boards or specific products needed for tech lending. The assessment was conducted with surveys, observation studies, and focus groups and was designed to gather information on things that were affordable. It also served as a follow-up to the LibQUAL+ results regarding the physical/virtual and quiet space issues.

“How Students Use the Library”



This Wordle was produced from comments made in the survey asking, “How do you use the Library?” We were gratified to see answers that supported completed or ongoing projects.

This latest assessment project further informed or reinforced the challenges faced going forward for enhancement to furniture, equipment, and

tools/supplies needed by students, as well as the continued desire for designated quiet space and the enlarging of the Digital Media Commons. This data will be used in the next couple of years for strategic planning on making space improvements.

These projects are all summarized in this table:

Project	Assessment Methods Used	Summarized Findings
Overall Space Assessment	Survey, observation, focus groups, interviews, design feedback	Students value space over materials, need flexible furniture and multiple venues
Researcher's Space	Survey, interviews, review of statistics	Research activity has reached a point of need for dedicated space and support environment
Interior Architecture Students	Programming interviews, scenario designs based on contemporary design principles	Refresh of the Music Library with furniture updates, festive paint and space for comfort seating
LibQUAL+	Survey, follow-up focus groups	Need a merge between physical and virtual spaces, i.e., website and clarity between group and quiet study spaces
Digital Media Commons	Interviews, surveys, usage stats to determine areas needed for growth	Many curriculums had an expectation of media inclusion in student's work and an open facility was not available
Campus Master Plan Update	Redesign by architects to update campus growth needs with realistic expectations	Changed long term view of library's addition or expand to solidify need for continued renovation projects
Update to Building Use and Needs	Survey, observation, focus groups, usage stats	With continued budget declines, needed a focus on where to spend monies for greater need

Culture of Assessment

In a time of declining resources the libraries have found value in assessing needs and expectations before embarking on the use of monies and resources. Libraries' staff has come to expect assessment activity before decisions are made with regard to space or a financial investment into related uses. Evidence produced by assessment can justify many actions but ongoing assessment can demonstrate improvement and effectiveness within the organization as a whole. An assessment

LibGuide (<http://uncg.libguides.com/libassessment>) is maintained that includes the assessment plan for each year along with results, reports, and presentations on all assessment projects.

Cultural Assessment as defined by Lakos, 2002, Conference Proceedings on Performance Measurement, "*An organizational environment in which decisions are based on facts, research and analysis, where services are planned and*

*delivered in ways that maximize positive outcomes
and impacts for customers and stakeholders."*

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