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Results of a Study of the Uses of the Coates Library, Trinity University, San Antonio, TX

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Results of a Study of the Uses of the Coates Library, Trinity University, San Antonio, TX

Summary Version, April, 2014

by Jeremy Donald and Alexandra Gallin-Parisi

Overview

This summary report presents highlights of a study of reader spaces in the Coates Library at Trinity University. In February 2014, a brief study of the uses of the reader spaces of the Coates Library was performed, based on methods detailed in Chapter 9, “Designing Academic Libraries with the People Who Work in Them,” by Nancy Fried Foster, in Studying Students: A Second Look, 2013 ACRL. This study also built on findings from a fall 2013 ethnographic study of library users investigating student study habits, behaviors, and terminology. We sought to record the locations, activities, motives, and preferences of seated users throughout the building during a typical week of student activity. The results indicate that ample work surfaces, electrical outlets, and on-demand social contact are important to student library activities. Respondents to our surveys indicated that the library was an important “third space” on campus (being neither dorm nor classroom) which allowed them an environment free from the distractions of their living space, but which also provided them with the opportunity for social contact with other students engaged likewise in the general activity of “studying.”

Summary of Findings

The top words included in students’ self-reported activities were “reading,” “writing,” “studying,” “class,” “exam”/“test,” and “notes,” and several of the activities described were not only academic-specific but library- and research-specific. Student were using the spaces not only to read assigned materials, take notes and do problem sets but also to research and write.

Students tended to use surfaces intensively, with paper notes (72% of all students observed), print readings (30% of students observed were using a print textbook), laptops (57% of observed users--sometimes in combination with library desktop computers), calculators, smartphones, and planners before them. Nearly all students had smart phones in use (mostly for playing music and texting), while very few had tablets on display or in use.

Small and large tables appear to be in highest demand (demand as both expressed in surveys and observed in usage of library spaces). More outlets for these spaces were requested often.

Soft seating is used less intensively over all than any other furniture type with the exception of carrels, which are so plentiful as to have a low capacity index while still having high numbers of users. Some areas of soft seating, such as second floor periodicals and fourth floor clusters of couches, received very sparse use, particularly at night, when the library was busiest.

Having the opportunity for on-demand social contact, “studying along” with a friend or roommate, needing to feel peer pressure to be productive by being around other studyers, or doing group work were reported as responses to “Why Are You Here?” by 31% of survey respondents.

Being free from distraction, away from others, and able to focus were reported as responses to “Why Are You Here?” by 31% of survey respondents.

Methods

Observations

During the week of February 9-13, two librarians recorded the locations of students in the library by recording observations of student locations during two times, 2 p.m. and 10 p.m., Sunday through Thursday. Each observer simply marked the floor plan as precisely as possible with the location of each individual student. Simultaneously, each observer used a prepared observation sheet to note the type of seating the student occupied, the nature of the student’s activity, the kinds of materials and technology present (e.g., textbooks, paper notes, devices), and whether they appeared to be collaborating with one or more other students.

Surveys

During the two initial days of the study, students were also handed a one-page survey which asked respondents to record whether they are a student, faculty member, or other, and, if a student, to record their year of graduation and, if a student or faculty member, their major or department. 155 responses were collected. Respondents were also asked to email a photo of their “library work layout, including the electronics, notebooks, pens, highlighters, furniture, anything!”

Observations

Observations of library users were conducted Sunday, February 9, through Thursday, February 13, at 2 p.m. and 10 p.m., though a 10 p.m. was not conducted on the 13th. Observations

focused on the following:

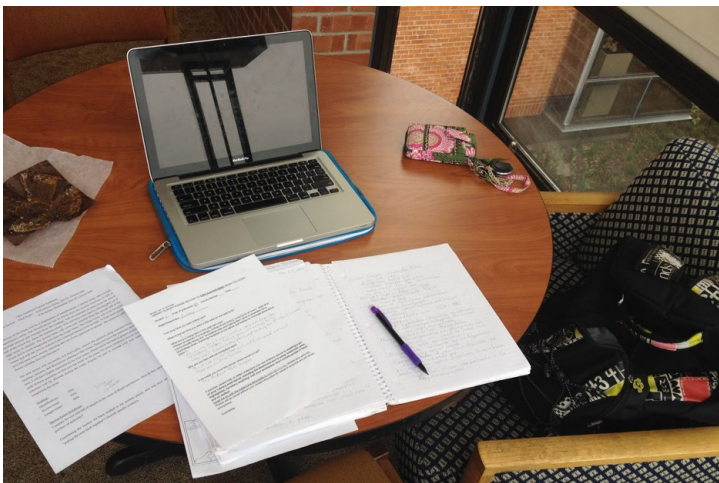
- Location
 - Floor
 - Seating Type
- Uses & Behaviors
 - Laptops
 - Library books
 - Textbooks
 - Paper notes (hand-written)
- Day and Time
 - Day
 - Time

Results

Uses & Behaviors

Use by Floor

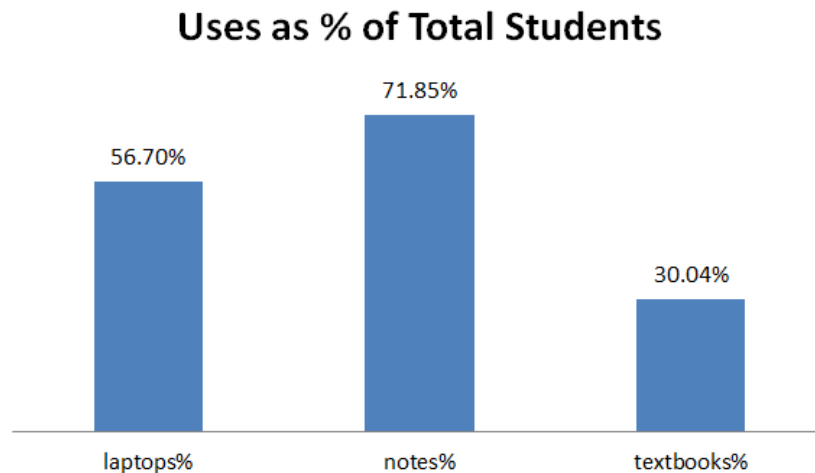
The third and fourth floors were the most heavily used, with the third floor, with 48% of users, being used by nearly as many students as the other floors combined. The fourth floor was the second most popular, with 33% of users. The second floor had 14% of users, and the first floor 5% of users. Computer workspaces are the most popular, though the most in-demand spaces are small tables--also high in popularity. While large tables saw the fewest students, they were third-highest in demand, given their limited numbers. Carrels saw the third-highest number of users, but greatly outnumber their users. Soft seating saw moderate low numbers but reasonable intensity of use, primarily on the library's main floor.



We asked survey respondents to submit a photo of their workspace. ([View all 33 photos](#))

Technology & Print Use

While nearly every user had a smartphone on hand, and almost no users had tablet devices, a majority of users had laptops, paper notes, and textbooks in use. Nearly 72% of users had hand written paper notes in use, most frequently in combination with a laptop computer, sometimes with a physical textbook as well. Also surprising was the prevalence of users at library computer workstations who were using a personal laptop, in addition to or instead of the library computer.



Some additional numbers:

37% of computer workspace users also have personal laptops in use.

Coincidence of uses among observed users (707 total observed users):

25% (177)	Laptop & notes
12% (85)	Laptop, textbook & notes
11% (76)	Laptop only
9% (66)	Library PC & notes
9% (63)	Textbook & notes
7% (48)	Library PC only
6% (42)	Library PC, laptop & notes
5% (38)	Notes only
5% (36)	Library PC, textbook & notes

4% (30)	None of the above
2% (16)	Lib. PC, laptop, textbook & notes
1.5% (11)	Laptop & textbook
0.8% (6)	Textbook only

Use of Reader Spaces by Day & Time

Usage by day of the week and time of day may be the least helpful information in making decisions about library space designs, since it speaks less to space factors than to factors in users' schedules. Not surprisingly, combined use for the 3rd and 4th floors is highest on Sunday and Monday, with lowest use on Tuesday and an uptick on Wednesday.

By Floor Plan

Seeing where students sit on each floor over the course of a week, and how their choice of seats changes from day to night reveals some interesting patterns:

- Note the shift away from the window seats for the 10 p.m. observations.
- Note the relative scarcity of students in the soft seating, particularly on the 2nd & 4th floors.

Images of library floor plans marked to show the locations of seated users at each of the observation times can be viewed at <http://lib.trinity.edu/lib2/space1.php>

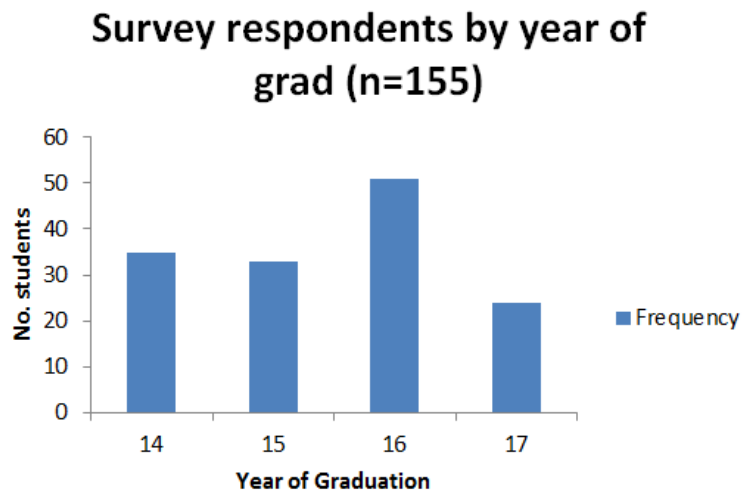
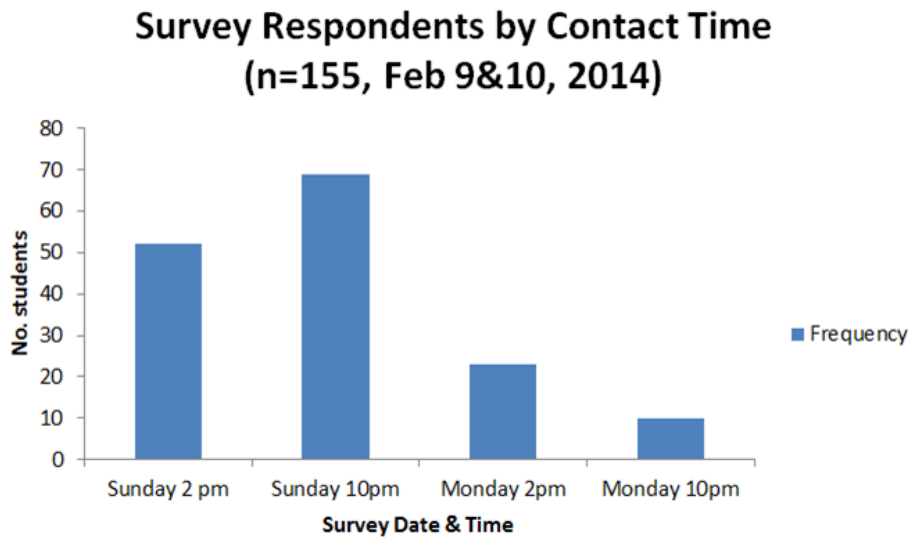
Survey Results

Surveys were conducted on Sunday and Monday, at both 2 p.m. and 10 p.m. each day. Blank response sheets were handed to all students on the 3rd and 4th floors and student were asked to submit their completed surveys at the Circulation Desk upon their departures from the Library. 155 students returned completed surveys.

The survey consisted of the following questions:

- How long have you been sitting here?
- When is the last time you were in this seat (or one right by it)?
- What are you doing in this seat right now?
- Why are you here and not someplace else?
- If we made you move this minute, where would you go?

- Comments



All years of graduation were roughly even, with the exception of sophomores, who were almost twice as plentiful in the library as other years.

Business majors were the most populous self-reported group in the library, followed by STEM and social science majors.

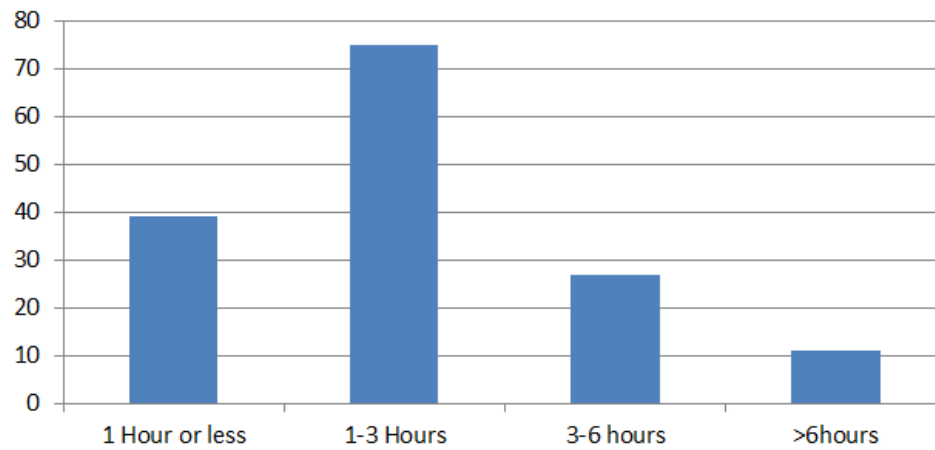
Library Visits: Duration & Frequency

49% of respondents indicated that they had been in their current location 1-3 hours.

26% of respondents indicated that they had been in their current location less than 1 hour.

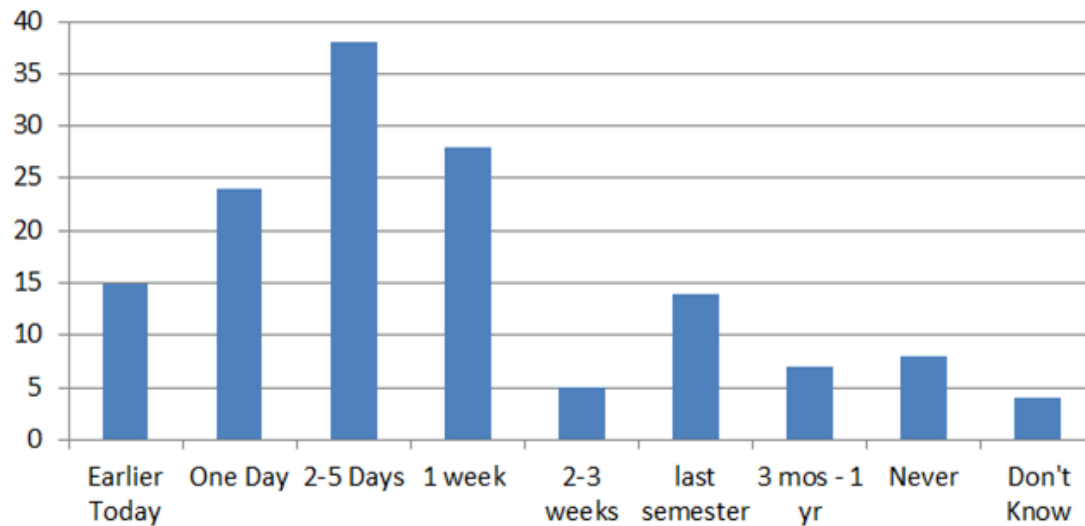
25% of respondents indicated that they have been in their current location longer than 3 hours.

How Long Have You Been Sitting Here?

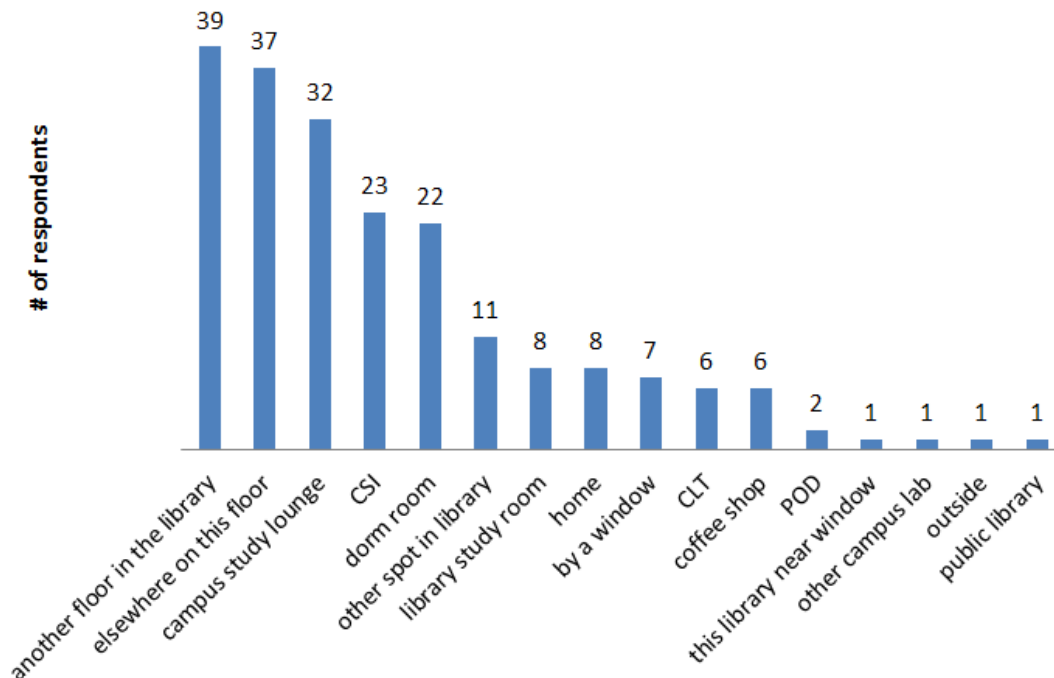


73% of respondents indicated that they were last in their current location within 1 week.

Days Since You Were Last In This Spot?



Where Would You Go If We Made You Move This Minute?



46% of respondents indicated they would move to another library location if asked to move immediately.

30% of respondents indicated they would move to another campus study area, such as a dorm study lounge, the Center for Science and Innovation, the Center for Learning and Technology, or a campus computer lab.

15% said they would go to their dorm room or home.

Comments:

As direct feedback from library users, the comments offered by a number of survey respondents are presented below, preceded by a brief categorical summary.

40 respondents out of the 155 who returned questionnaires provided comments.

8 people said “I love this library!” or something similar.

6 asked for extended/weekend hours

5 asked for more & more convenient outlets

2 asked for more small tables (on 4th floor and in the window corners)

2 asked that the temperature in the building not be so cold

2 asked for computer hardware/software additions (large monitors to plug your laptop into and MiniTab on all machines)

2 asked for furniture additions (more chairs with armrests and cloth bottoms)

1 asked for more study rooms

Notable & Surprising Findings:

72% of all students observed were using paper notes (usually a spiral bound notebook), either to review notes taken in class or to write notes while reading a course-assigned reading--usually a pdf that they were reading online. Print textbooks were also notably abundant (30% of students had them).

Following the popularity of paper notes and textbooks, most users of carrels, tables, and computer workstations were using the available surfaces intensively, spreading their materials (predominantly laptops, notebooks, textbooks, and phones, and often including calculators and beverages).

Small tables are in high demand, specifically 30 in. tables seating 1-4 people, as opposed to low coffee-style tables found many of the 4th floor corner window seats. Access to power outlets at all seating locations is also in high demand.

Following O'Connor's idea of "study along" behavior, many students sought a particular library location because it allowed them both focus *and* a social element. Some cited the presence of other studying students as a motivating factor in their own concentration/productivity; others rewarded themselves from bouts of study with social breaks. A number of students said they chose the library because they did *not* want to feel "alone" or "isolated" as they studied. 23/155 respondents mentioned the word "friend" or "friends" positively in the context of studying in the presence of others. 6/10 respondents who mentioned the word "people" did so positively in the context of motivation, mood, and productivity.

Soft seating is used less intensively over all than any other furniture type with the exception of carrels, which are so plentiful as to have a low capacity index while still having high numbers of users. Some areas of soft seating, such as second floor periodicals and fourth floor clusters of couches, received very sparse use, particularly at night, when the library was busiest.

The Coates Library is one of several popular campus study spaces, including CSI and the Murchison and Prassell Hall study lounges. In a departure from trends noted by O'Connor and by Hiller, many students commented that they chose not to attempt to study in their rooms, as that was the location most fraught with distractions.

Recent Developments

In response to the popular demand for more desk-height surface areas (particularly small tables), quiet study spots, and access to electrical outlets, the 2nd-floor current periodicals area was redesigned. This space had been configured as a soft-seating area comprised of low, cushioned, dated chairs, arranged in facing groups and accompanied by low tables placed to the sides and fronts of them. Lighting was provided by recessed cans in the ceiling, and was often described as inadequate. The furniture area was bordered on two sides by stacks holding unbound recent journal issues. The above study revealed little use of the soft seating, and it had already been decided to relocate the current unbound journals to the library's third floor in order to facilitate faculty browsing.



The space was emptied of furniture and shelving and equipped with a combination of 6' rectangular tables (10) and small round tables (8). Each table was equipped with lamps that contained electrical outlets and data connections, and new chairs were provided. While a quantitative study of the space is planned for later in the spring of 2015, time-lapse photography shot during the fall semester shows that the space is very popular with students, seeing moderate use in the weekday mornings, increased use in the afternoons, and heavy use during evenings Sunday-Thursday.

Credits and Acknowledgements

Thanks to our faculty, staff, and especially our students for their feedback and participation in the observations and surveys that led to this report. Special thanks to our library administrators and professional colleagues for their support of this effort.

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