

If You Rebuild It, Will They Still Come?
Evidence-Based Library Space Planning, Post-COVID

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Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of college students' utilization of an academic library building space for individual and group study and related activities after the impact of COVID-19. In the 2018-19 academic year, elements of ethnographic research were employed by librarians at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas to learn more about the use of the William Allen White Library building in terms of its physical space and to obtain quantitative and qualitative evidence for future library building projects. The COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 negatively affected the numbers of patrons using the physical library building for several years, and it has only been in the 2023-24 academic year that the WAW Library has seen a gate count increase in patrons entering and exiting the building. In addition, the Kansas Board of Regents adopted in June 2021 a policy framework for its universities, including Emporia State University, to report annually on campus building space utilization efficiencies. As a result, the initial 2018-19 study was replicated in 2023-24 by librarians in order to identify possible changes in the last five years in students' library space preferences for research, recreation, and other aspects of academic life.

Keywords: COVID-19; academic library assessment; ethnography, student perceptions; library space utilization; mixed-methods

Introduction

Emporia State University (ESU) in Emporia, KS is a state-funded academic institution under the Kansas Board of Regents. The latest available data as of this writing from the ESU *Fall 2023 Data Book* lists a total of 4,658 full-time and part-time enrolled students.¹ In terms of residential status, ESU's student population reflects certain trends of other colleges and universities since the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and after the library's initial physical building space study from 2018-19. The number of students classified as "on-campus" declined by 46 percent, while students classified as "off-campus" increased by 61 percent.² At the same time, the number of full-time students declined by 26 percent and the number of undergraduate students declined by 32 percent.³

Table 1. *Comparisons of total student enrollments, Fall 2018 and Fall 2023*

Enrollment	Fall 2018	Fall 2023	Percent Change
On-Campus	4432	2458	-46%
Off-Campus	1364	2200	61%
Full-Time	3736	2771	-26%
Part-Time	2060	1887	-8%
Undergraduate students	3569	2412	-32%
Graduate students	2227	2246	0.9%

It is essential to understand these enrollment patterns and in particular declines when considering student use of a physical campus library building. In the 2018-19 academic year, elements of ethnographic research were employed by two librarians at ESU, Cynthia Kane and Megan Mahoney, to learn more about the use of the William Allen White Library building in

terms of its physical space and to obtain quantitative and qualitative evidence for future library building projects. These findings were summarized in an article written by Kane and Mahoney for the April-December 2020 issue of *New Review of Academic Librarianship*. Major themes of this initial project were a strong preference of students for a formal space to reinforce individual focus upon their own research and reinforcing existing designated floors for quiet study and for collaborative group work.⁴

In an ironic twist, Kane and Mahoney were notified of their article's final journal acceptance during the first part of March 2020, the same time that ESU pivoted to online-only instruction and remote work for the rest of the Spring 2020 semester due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Plans to continue studying the use of the physical library building were subsequently placed on hold for the next few academic years as students slowly returned to in-person course instruction and the library settled into a new normal of public services.

Anecdotal evidence and casual observations in the Spring 2023 semester revealed that students were indeed using the library building once more, although perhaps not as much as before the pandemic. A factor under consideration was a significant drop in overall student enrollment between Fall 2022 and Fall 2023, from 5,324 to 4,658 students (a decline of 13 percent).⁵ Due to the decline of enrollment and the shift towards students considered "off-campus," it was time to revisit this project and learn more about current students' familiarity with and utilization of a physical campus library building post-COVID-19. Kane and Mosakowski led this second study and were assisted in the latter part of the project by Appleby, at that time a graduate assistant in the library and a graduate student in the School of Library and Information Management. The study was granted Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval on September 29, 2023. In particular, we were curious about students attending ESU in person after

the Covid-19 pandemic. Would they, like their predecessors, also perceive a library building as a desired formal space for research - or were their preferences now for their own living spaces or virtual environments?

Literature Review

Ethnography “is a collection of qualitative methods that focus on the close observation of societal practices and interactions” that “deeply [examine] the context in which activities occur”.⁶ Ethnography uses qualitative methods that are deeply rooted in anthropology and sociological research, typically involving a lengthy period of observations, interviews, and cognitive mapping.⁷ Ethnographers rely on their interpretive abilities to “produce data that would be difficult or even impossible to retrieve via more commonly used methods such as quantitative surveys”.⁸ By producing rich descriptions for comparison, ethnography helps researchers build a deeper understanding of participant’s behaviors in a specific social situation. Ethnographic methods are commonly employed in health care and educational settings “to help inform and guide decisions to help improve services, change design, or create new buildings”.⁹ Academic libraries use ethnographic research to better understand student behaviors, space organization, and utilization of library resources.¹⁰

Ethnographic research in academic libraries has been called “ethnographish” by two professional anthropologists, Donna Lancros and Andrew Asher, who work full-time in academic libraries.¹¹ Ethnography typically requires the researcher to gather data over a long period of time to build a deep understanding, and their goals are open-ended to allow for multiple interpretations. In contrast, when libraries undertake ethnographic research, it is usually to gather evidence to support the effectiveness of the library or make decisions on the configuration of the library space or deployment of library resources. Concerned with real-world

applications of their research, academic libraries focus on more narrow contexts, such as demonstrating the effectiveness of libraries on campus, and generating ideas for redesigning the library space that is more student-centered.¹² Due to time and staffing constraints, libraries often mix ethnographic research with quantitative methods, like surveys (e.g. LibQUAL, Project Outcome, or SAILS), gate counts, and usage statistics of library resources (e.g. library resources, technology, study room reservations).¹³ The Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries (ERIAL) Project led by Asher and Miller created a handbook for libraries conducting ethnographic research and designed many of the common methods for collecting data.¹⁴

The use of ethnographic research by an academic library first gained attention with the publication of *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester* in 2007.¹⁵ At the University of Rochester, librarians relied on unobstructed observations, photo surveys, library mapping, interviews, flip charts, and design workshops to better understand student experiences and interaction with the library.¹⁶ In addition, the librarians at University of Rochester used charrette-style design workshops to encourage students to creatively reimagine the library space. Students were invited to walk around and become familiar with the library space, then they were given a plan of the library with furniture cutouts to scale, markers, and sticky notes to design their “perfect library”.¹⁷ On the initial flip charts and design workshops, the ideal space for students were comfy areas for groups that included fireplaces, sofas, bean bags, as well as computers, outlets, Wi-Fi, windows, and access to food. But in sharp contrast to these responses, the charrette designs revealed students mostly wanted quiet, individual spaces.¹⁸

Feedback gained through ethnographic methods has been used to assess the library configurations and recent updates to the library space. Several ethnographic studies were

launched in the context of gathering student feedback for a library renovation. At Sheffield Hallam University, researchers collected data over a 16-month period to evaluate their library spaces, including a months-long effort to conduct observation sweeps of all their study sweeps, conducting 240 interviews, including asking students to draw a map of the library and take a photo of their favorite study places.¹⁹ Similarly, the James White Library at Andrews University in Michigan used a combination of observations, interviews, focus groups, and design charrettes over a semester to identify the types of study spaces students preferred and generate ideas for improvements.²⁰ The Oklahoma State University (OSU) Library community created whiteboard discussions with open-ended questions. The questions ranged from being library-focused (e.g. “Why did you come into the library today?”) to student life (e.g. “What is the most challenging thing about college?” and “What is your most memorable college experience?”).²¹ The University of Tennessee Library gathered 2,000 responses using white boards, which provided the impetus for renovating its learning commons.²²

Very little has been done to compare methodologies and findings from different studies, but a common theme that emerges is a desire for quiet, individual study spaces and the need to work in groups. Students value silence over specialized spaces for group study.²³ Although students sometimes express a desire for group study spaces, ethnographic data reveal that students seek out individual study spaces to concentrate.²⁴ Sometimes, students complained that group study spaces would be occupied by individuals.²⁵ One explanation is that students seeking quiet, individual study prefer furniture intended for group seating, such as lounge chairs and couches, over tables and desk chairs.²⁶ When students complain about the library space they usually focus on obstacles to studying, such as the lack of a 24/7 space, confusing layouts and wayfinding, and poor lighting.²⁷

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted college campuses, and many libraries closed or restricted services for health and safety reasons. There is evidence that some changes are becoming permanent, including negatively impacted usage of the library spaces. During the pandemic, Penn State University Libraries investigated how “the needs and behaviors of library users [changed] as a result of limited access to library facilities and resources”.²⁸ Investigating in the fall semester of 2020, they found that students visited the library less due to the transition to virtual learning and the practice of social distancing diminished opportunities for group activities “since only one occupant was allowed per table”.²⁹ Yet, aside from Penn State, the most recent ethnographic space studies were produced just prior to the pandemic, including William Allen White Library at Emporia State University,³⁰ Michener Library at the University of Northern Colorado,³¹ and University of Tennessee.³² This provides an opportunity for a comparative approach in all academic libraries to better understand how students' perception and use of the library has changed since 2020. According to Lanclos and Asher, a “comparative approach can reveal patterns of common practice as well as unique situations,” underscoring that “comparative work. . . is crucial to building understanding”.³³ This study is an attempt to conduct such a comparison to better understand how students' understanding, and use of the library has shifted since 2019.

Background

The William Allen White Library building on the ESU campus was constructed in 1951 with an addition of four floors to the north of the original building in 1969-1971.³⁴ In 2013, the former library lobby was converted into a 24/7 Learning Commons. The 1st floor also became a 24/7 space in the fall of 2022 as a direct result of student feedback from the first library space

study, in which students commented upon crowding in the Learning Commons during midterms and finals weeks.³⁵

Research Methods

For the 2023-24 study, we replicated as closely as possible the mixed-methods research approach from the original project:

1. An online survey of undergraduate and graduate students.
2. Focus groups and individual interviews.
3. Feedback from whiteboards placed throughout the library.
4. Unobtrusive observations conducted by library staff.

Survey

The online survey utilized the Baseline module of ESU's Anthology system (formerly CampusLabs). A similar online survey of students, also in Baseline, was employed in Fall 2018. Baseline enabled us to use and adapt the same questions from the first study, helping in a longitudinal approach and analysis of open-ended responses. The online survey was made available to all ESU undergraduate and graduate students through a general URL for access. We were able to work with a number of faculty members to offer extra credit for completing the survey, accomplished by an optional question at the end for students to add their name and ESU email address if they were receiving extra credit. There were 324 respondents to the survey. Of those, the most responses by class level were from juniors (94 responses) and the majority (289) were full-time students. Interestingly, 230 of the responses were from self-identified off-campus students. Without further definitions, these students may have been outside Emporia and taking completely online courses or just residing in Emporia or surrounding areas.

Focus Groups and Interviews

In Spring 2019, Kane and Mahoney coordinated one focus group of six students and 14 individual interviews of undergraduate and graduate students and used a set of questions to ask those students about their general use and perceptions of the physical library building space. The same questions were utilized in Fall 2023 and Spring 2024 for three focus groups and one individual interview. In both projects, graduate students facilitated the groups and interviews to avoid introducing bias from a librarian as an authority figure. Participants in Spring 2024 were awarded a \$100.00 scholarship as an incentive. All participants, in line with ESU's IRB guidelines, signed a consent form prior to the meetings acknowledging that their responses would be recorded via Zoom only for transcription and analysis purposes.

The Spring 2019 focus group was face-to-face. The Fall 2023 group and one of the Spring 2024 groups were face to face, consisting of three students and five students respectively. The other Spring 2024 group, also five students, was conducted through Zoom. The face-to-face focus group was interviewed first about their use and perceptions about the library building spaces. They were then provided with floor plans of the four floors along with plastic boards built with Legos reflecting the current placements of furniture on those floors. The group compared the floor plans and Lego boards and went to each floor to help visualize the physical furniture orientation. Following these comparisons, the group rearranged the Legos on the boards to reflect their suggested changes in furniture placement. Finally, the group was interviewed following the activity to learn more about their decisions.

Whiteboard Discussions

In Spring 2024, large whiteboards with dry erase markers were placed on each level. Once a week, library staff wrote a question that solicited feedback about the library, to which

students responded by writing on the whiteboard. A total of five questions were posed to students with each question being lifted from the same exercise conducted in Spring 2019 to draw comparison between the response from five years ago and now. The questions asked students about the noise level, lighting, and furniture, as well as why they chose to work or meet in that study space and what would improve the space. The researchers took a picture of each whiteboard before wiping it and writing the next question. In total, 142 responses were recorded. The responses were transcribed and sorted into multiple categories, such as positive, negative, academic, social, library services/resources, and common themes that emerged in the feedback.

Unobtrusive Observations

Similar to 2018, library staff conducted unobtrusive observation sweeps of the library spaces during week prior to and the week of midterm exams, and during the week prior to and the week of final exams in the spring of 2024. During observation sweeps, staff recorded instances of library user's activities and utilization of library space and resources in two ways. First, staff conducted a visual count of activities conducted in the library. Second, staff were given a plan for each library space, including the locations for furniture and study spaces. As staff marked where they observed library users on the layout, this helped researchers to visualize how library users utilize the space. A key difference from 2018 is that researchers conducted more sweeps in 2024 due to the Learning Commons and the 1st floor being available to students 24 hours a day. While in 2018 observation sweeps were conducted at 12:00 p.m., 3:00 p.m., 6:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m., in 2014 researchers also observed at 9:00 a.m. and 11:59 p.m.

The results from the observations were analyzed by two methods. Initially, researchers studied the patterns of library users' activity that had been mapped out by library staff on the library space layouts. Next, observational data on the library users' activities were entered into a

spreadsheet, where the researchers created several tables. Activities in the library were examined through multiple factors, including days of the week, time of day, and library location. Finally, the data from the 2024 unobtrusive observations were compared to the results from 2018 to specifically identify changes in students' preferences and use of the library.

Results

Survey responses

Questions on the 2018 and 2023 surveys focused upon the usage per week and familiarity of students with the four floors of the library building, including the Learning Commons and Special Collections and Archives, which is on the 1st floor. Not surprisingly, in both surveys the floors with the highest percentages of never being used were the 3rd and 4th floors. The 3rd floor houses a children's fiction and non-fiction collection and is designated as a Silent zone for individual study, and our later unobtrusive observations reinforced this survey result. The 4th floor is a Quiet Zone for individual and small group study, and it is also the home of the ESU Honors College. The previous library building study revealed that some students believe the 4th floor is only for Honors College students and several open-ended responses on the most recent survey noted the same misperception.

The 2023 survey results revealed that the most heavily used library spaces by students were the 1st floor and the Learning Commons, a slight change from the 2018 survey in which the most heavily used space was the Learning Commons. Both areas currently feature 24/7 access, and individual and group study rooms are available on the 1st floor. Students used the Learning Commons for computer and printer access and the 1st floor primarily for individual study. The 24/7 spaces along with study areas were popular with students, judging from the following comments:

- “The 24/7 spaces are great and I think it’s awesome that only someone with a school ID can get in.”
- “I appreciate the 24/7 availability study areas. I feel safe knowing there is a space I can go to even late at night that is secure.”
- “I mostly use the study space that is open 24/7 because I like to do my homework late at night.”
- “Designated areas in the library for "quiet" zones and active zones are great. The private rooms downstairs are awesome. Resources I don't use are very useful to others.”

With the 1st floor designated for 24/7 access, there was a significant increase in the general use of this floor between 2018 and 2023. Only 65 students frequented the 1st floor one or more times per week in 2018. In contrast, 116 students utilized it one or more times per week in 2023 for an overall 79% increase from the 2018 number.

Focus groups and individual interviews

In terms of the focus groups and individual interview, the discovery from the first study that students felt “calming, motivated, welcomed” when entering the library building had not changed even post-COVID.³⁶ Answers overall from the 2024 focus groups included:

- “It’s inviting, the [Learning] Commons are a nice, open space. I like it.”
- “I like the vibe of the library, it’s open and welcoming.”
- “I like coming to the commons. Because there's like the big windows and greenery outside. I think the rest of the library is a little plain or dark.”

The face-to-face focus group in the Lego board activity expressed a desire to move or add comfortable seating closer to the windows in the Learning Commons and the 2nd floor. In

addition, the group stated repeatedly a need for standing desks throughout the four floors for students to use with laptops or other devices. Other group observations included a lack of network printers on the 3rd and 4th floors and an overall concern about the 3rd floor's limitations in terms of rearranging furniture. The 3rd floor, currently the home of the Children's Literature Collection and a "silent" zone with no talking or phone use, is being renovated to accommodate the university's Learning Technologies office. As a result, the purpose of the 3rd floor as a student study space will need to be revisited in future semesters.

Whiteboard responses

Whiteboards were placed on each of the five floors of the library in Spring 2024, inviting students to answer questions about why they chose to use the space, as well as their opinions on the furniture, lighting, and noise level of the floor. Students generally talked about their preferences (73%), made positive feedback (58%), or negative feedback (26%). The features of the library most commented on included noise (28%), library services and resources (21%), furniture (19%), and temperature (15%). To a lesser extent, students also focused on lighting (8%) and on the availability of whiteboards (11%) and study rooms (7%). When students answered why they chose the library space, more students answered for academic reasons such as to study, rather than for socializing.

Table 2. *Whiteboard responses by categories, Spring 2024*

Category	Total	Percent
Total Responses	142	100%
Positive	58	40.85%
Negative	26	18.31%
Social	2	1.41%
Academic	16	11.27%
Library Services/Resources	31	21.83%
Habits and Preferences	73	51.41%
Joke/Sarcastic/Whimsical	15	10.56%
Drawings/Pictures	8	5.63%
Technology	1	0.70%
Furniture	27	19.01%
Temperature	21	14.79%
Lighting	11	7.75%
Noise	41	28.87%
Study Rooms	7	4.93%
Whiteboard/Pens/Cloth	15	10.56%

Relating to individual floors, several comments expressed a desire to expand 24/7 access to the 4th floor, largely driven by the Quiet Zone designation as well as the floor’s design and furniture. 24/7 accessibility was cited for the 1st floor as well, which was converted into a 24/7 space in 2022. Students also appreciated the diverse layout of the 1st floor including the private study rooms, pods, and beanbag chairs but commonly noted dissatisfaction with the warm temperature.

The Learning Commons’ Collaborative Zone and the 3rd floor’s Silent Zone noise designations were specific draws for students selecting those respective spaces. Constructive feedback was also offered relating to the Learning Commons’ furniture. Across all areas, whiteboard responses were generally informal but specific in evaluating the individual space, including:

- “Love 24/7 but temperatures are always off like it’s too hot.”
- “Love the bean bags – more please!”
- “Study rooms are boiling!”

- “I like the little bit of noise and it’s a stress-free study environment.”
- “The sofas are uncomfortable; nobody uses them.”
- “Quiet.”

Results from unobtrusive observations

Unobtrusive observations were conducted by library staff from February 27th, 2024, through March 8, 2024, and again from April 22, 2024 through May 5, 2024. Compared to pre-COVID levels, the average number of library users per observation dropped in all spaces except on the 3rd floor, which remained consistent at 1, as indicated by Table 3.

Table 3. *Average and total patrons observed by location, 2018 and 2024*

Space	Average		Total	
	<u>2018</u>	<u>2024</u>	<u>2018</u>	<u>2024</u>
Learning Commons	15	5	1,059	626
1st Floor	21	8	1,477	991
2nd Floor	30	5	2,052	471
3rd Floor	1	1	101	48
4th Floor	12	5	840	409
All Locations	16	5	5,529	2,545

In 2024, 9:00 a.m. and 11:59 p.m. unobtrusive observations were added to the study, yet the total number of patrons observed was 54% less than pre-COVID levels, representing a larger decline than the 46% decrease in on-campus students. In both timeframes, however, more patrons were observed utilizing the library at 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. compared to other times as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4. *Average and total patrons observed by activity type, 2018 and 2024*

Time	Average		Total	
	<u>2018</u>	<u>2024</u>	<u>2018</u>	<u>2024</u>
9:00 a.m.	-	2	-	131
12:00 p.m.	10	4	1,123	379
3:00 p.m.	8	6	254	534
6:00 p.m.	19	7	1,879	685
9:00 p.m.	23	7	2,273	654
11:59 p.m.	-	4	-	162
All Times	16	5	5,529	2,545

A surprising result of the 2024 study was a notable increase in patrons using the library space for reading, meeting, and writing, illustrated in Table 5. This indicates the possibility of a more intentional or active utilization of library space among fewer users in the post-COVID environment.

Table 5. *Average and total patrons observed by activity type, 2018 and 2024*

Activity Type	Percent Observed		Total Observed	
	<u>2018</u>	<u>2024</u>	<u>2018</u>	<u>2024</u>
Computing	63%	71%	3,477	1,813
Reading	4%	18%	243	451
Meeting	6%	16%	312	402
Socializing	12%	14%	637	359
Writing	2%	14%	104	349
Phone Call	6%	11%	311	284
Drinking	5%	4%	304	113
Eating	1%	4%	81	97
Other	3%	2%	170	44
Sleeping	0%	1%	19	38
Gaming	0%	1%	9	17

Additionally, a lower percentage of patrons were observed using laptop and desktop computers in the 2024 observation, while the percentage of cell phone and tablet use increased. This would align with anecdotal evidence of fewer students utilizing university-owned desktop computers in the Learning Commons and 2nd floor, as well as the continued adoption of personal mobile-based technology.

Table 6. *Percentage of patrons observed utilizing technology, 2018 and 2024*

Technology Type	Percent of Patron Usage	
	<u>2018</u>	<u>2024</u>
Desktops	11%	6%
Laptops	65%	55%
Cell Phones	8%	15%
Tablets	0%	3%

Discussion

Observation sweeps and gate counts confirm a significant decrease in the utilization of the library space in 2024 than in 2018, largely due to the decline in student enrollment and on-campus student population. Notably, students who utilize the library space in 2024 tend to be more focused on academic activities, including studying, reading, and writing, rather than engaging in social activities. Qualitative feedback shows that student's feelings toward the library are consistent from 2018 to 2024. Repeatedly, students mentioned that the library was welcoming and inviting, while also praising its study spaces and 24/7 availability. The most commonly cited reasons for students not to use the library space are either they live too far away (off campus or live at a distance from Emporia) or that they prefer to study at their place of residence. The preference to study in one's private residence may be a change in general preference to study spaces as a result of isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is also possible that students who work or commute to campus might find it more of an inconvenience to drive to the library than to stay at their residence to study.

It is also interesting to compare student responses from the survey, focus groups, whiteboard responses, and unobtrusive observations in terms of preferred library areas for study and research. The 4th floor of the library was mentioned in the survey and focus groups as a desirable place because of its comfortable furniture, relatively isolated location, and expanse of

windows for natural light. In addition, several whiteboard notations repeatedly asked for the 4th floor to become another 24/7 space similar to the 1st floor and Learning Commons. However, the unobtrusive observations did not necessarily support popular opinion. It was rare in Spring 2024 to find more than two to three students on the 4th floor at various times, while the Learning Commons, 1st floor, and 2nd floor remained more populated overall. This finding highlights the need to balance quantitative and qualitative evidence when considering physical space utilization.

A theme that emerged from the first study from the survey, focus group, and individual interviews was the confusing layout of the library building. A “Welcome” banner was installed on one wall of the Learning Commons in Spring 2023 along with a slogan, “Hornet Learning Hub” on the soffit above the entrance to the 2nd floor. In addition, posters that clearly define the various quiet and collaborative zones of the floors were redesigned and hung throughout the building. However, comments from the second study’s survey and focus group indicate that wayfinding is still a problem in terms of locating physical books and even navigating from floor to floor. One focus group participant noted:

This sounds stupid, but until two weeks ago, I didn't even know we had books. Because they're not visible. They're hidden in stacks and I didn't know where to go to the stacks. I've never heard of them before. I've only been here, this is my second year, but I didn't know we actually have like a library - traditionally speaking - of books [sic].

This feedback points to a continuing signage need, especially with the planned creation of sensory-friendly spaces that will need to be clearly identified.

One comment from the Fall 2023 survey had a direct impact upon a planned remodel of the library building.

I would like to see more spaces that include neurodivergent-friendly areas, which can be little safe havens away from the noise and busyness. As an undergraduate student, I enjoyed finding a spot that was all mine and was free from the chaos of class, roommates, and everything else. For the most part, this lasted in the library until midterms, finals, or any other significant papers came up, and the rest of the university descended on the library. I then felt like my safe space was being invaded, and I no longer had an area free of people, which was essential to me with ADHD and social anxiety.

This comment was used to help support a successfully funded grant proposal in Spring 2024 from the American Library Association - Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC): Accessible Small and Rural Communities. The grant will be used to create sensory-friendly spaces in the library.

Conclusion

While decrease in enrollment and on-campus student population unconsciously paints a dim picture for the future of academic libraries, the results of the study demonstrate that the library remains a desirable place for students to complete their studies. However, the data does not explain why fewer students are choosing to visit the physical library building apart from enrollment and “off-campus” status. In part, this is due to the limitation of the “ethnographish” methods used in this study. Understanding why students use the library remains incomplete since the researchers do not have a complete picture of students’ daily routine on campus. In other

words, the student's life outside the library is a proverbial black box, not truly understood by librarians who mainly interact with students in the library.

To comprehend why students choose to visit the library, future research should investigate students' daily lives overall on a physical campus. Indeed, many ethnographic studies conducted by academic libraries involved methods to observe students on campus, including making a map of their day and taking photos of their favorite places to study or relax. Researchers also need to engage students in other study spaces to see how the library is perceived and used in comparison with other learning commons and third spaces on campus. There are plenty of creative methods for engaging and soliciting students' opinions, such as a floating reference desk in a cafeteria or public spaces or asking students to act out common scenarios in the library.

Notes

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