On Being in Libraries

Why are they coming? A new colleague asked me earnestly. She was wondering why students are coming to visit our university library in the digital age. If we understood the answer to this question, could we prepare more wisely for the future of the IT and library professions? Indeed, there is reason to be curious. At the University of Miami Libraries, for instance, the number of people entering our largest library, Otto G. Richter Library, has risen approximately 20 percent since 2015. During peak periods, such as final exams, the number of students entering often exceeds seating capacity. Our students advise incoming peers that the best place to study is the library, and they are acting on these recommendations by visiting in person and staying for many hours at a time. But the students who visit our library are not entirely satisfied with what they are finding. When asked what needs to be improved, students request more seats, more power outlets, and longer hours. These requests might be understood not just literally but also philosophically: students seem to want a library that is more capacious, connected, and open.

In higher education and libraries, openness—as a value—is actively promoted. In practice, this value is commonly interpreted as access itself: freedom from censorship, paywalls, and discrimination. Could it also be interpreted as intellectual spaciousness, as awareness itself? Learning within a 21st-century college or university necessarily involves limiting the scope of learning—selecting majors and minors—and submitting oneself to ongoing critique and assessment. Libraries have the ability to offer students the opposite: limitless possibilities for exploration and freedom from judgment. At our best, 21st-century libraries might be functioning as “third places”— informal learning spaces that bring people together and build community—and also as restorative places, where “one can engage in thinking, wondering, figuring out things, and feeling congruent with where one wants to be.” For students, who are often uncertain about what to study or become, the opportunity to be in a state of not-yet-knowing or openness within the library could literally be a relief. Designing spaces and services that allow for open-ended dialogue, creative expression, and contemplative inquiry may support students seeking greater spaciousness of mind and being.

Designing for Conversation

Since 2015, I’ve been leading an effort at the University of Miami Libraries to develop a Learning Commons—a hub for academic services—in Richter Library. Located on the entry level, the space chosen for the Learning Commons was previously filled with compulsive shelving housing periodicals that were already digitized or no longer needed. The opportunity to reimagine this space has allowed us to begin fulfilling one of the students’ requests: provide more open space for people to study. We are also achieving administrators' aspirations of raising the visibility of academic services on campus and modeling the essence of the intellectual experience—learning in relationship with others. For librarians, the initiative has offered a chance to work collaboratively with campus partners to reimagine how the library might serve the next generation of students.

Because of the complexity of the project—involving more than eight different academic services reporting to four separate deans—we decided on an inclusive planning approach managed by a third party. We hired brightspot strategy, whose team guided us through user research and participatory design exercises. The opinions and ideas gathered from our student, faculty, and service-provider community resulted in actionable findings. We learned that the majority of students were coming to the library at least once a week to study, meet with peers, use computers or other technologies, and access materials. Students were curious to find out more about academic services available in the library, and they expressed interest in gaining more opportunities for improving communication and creativity skills. These findings, among others, informed the development of a service model and space strategy that we have piloted over the last two years and are now beginning to implement in phased renovations. In March 2018, we opened the first phase of the Learning Commons.

The service model we designed aims to promote learning by doing. Students are invited to choose services that match desired activities, such as writing, researching, analyzing, communicating, or creating. The focus is on process, and the library is where students can stay in “flow,” not getting stuck but, rather, progressing through challenges by consulting with peers and experts and making use of tools and resources. The Learning Commons features a consultation zone, consisting of modular stations ideal for two to four individuals to learn together. Unlike the traditional reference desk oriented to transactional experiences, this space encourages sustained dialogue and seeks to destigmatize the act of seeking help. A welcoming service point provides a place to check in for appointments with consultants, who provide assistance with research, writing, modern languages, math, statistics, data analysis, GIS,
digital humanities, and more. The launch of the consultation zone is also well-timed to support the University of Miami's new accreditation-related Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), which aims "to enhance student learning through dialogue and discussion-based learning in undergraduate courses."^{7}

**Designing for Creativity**

To enter the Learning Commons, students move through an exhibit gallery, where they can discover rare and unique materials from Special Collections and University Archives—objects to inspire curiosity and stimulate conversation. Over the next several years, exhibits will feature curricular projects emerging out of CREATE, a program funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to promote faculty and student engagement with collections. Creativity is also supported in a digital media studio situated at the center of the Learning Commons; here, students use emerging tools and technologies, such as 3D printing and virtual reality, to make and develop projects. We're also piloting programs to entice students to practice research and creativity skills outside of the formal curriculum. A Library Research Scholars Program gives undergraduate students an opportunity to propose their own projects and work with librarians over the course of an academic year. Examples of projects include writing an original dramatic play informed by primary sources in Special Collections, conducting oral history interviews with LGBTQ alumni, and co-curating an exhibit on university history. Each of the projects involves a combination of inquiry, consultation, and experimentation. Now, thanks to an endowment from Adobe Systems, we are expanding the program to include Adobe Scholars. These students participate actively in the foundational program while receiving specialized training from emerging technology librarians and staff. They develop multimedia projects of their own design and, in turn, serve as "creative consultants" to help their peers learn about Adobe Creative Cloud and other creativity software and tools.

**Designing for Contemplation**

In partnership with Scott Rogers, director of the Mindfulness in Law Program at the University of Miami Law School, we’ve also begun offering guided meditation programs in Richter Library. Why? Researchers are discovering that mindfulness—the act of paying attention “on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally”—can reduce physical and psychological symptoms, produce positive changes in biological markers, and increase neuroplasticity. The library’s guided meditation programs complement formal courses, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), offered elsewhere on campus. Students are taught to observe their breath, witness their thoughts, and practice non-doing. With the knowledge that anxiety and depression are on the rise among our student population, we’re hopeful that offering such programs in the library will make a positive difference in student well-being.\(^8\)

Now that the Learning Commons has been open for a few months, we’ve been able to take a step back and reflect on what we’ve learned. Besides requests for yet more seats, students and consultants working in the space are asking for noise reduction. After years of striving to increase libraries’ embrace of active learning, I am humbly recognizing our students’ profound need for quiet space and also the role of contemplative inquiry in fostering dialogue, creativity, and research. I am appreciating our “quiet floor” and individual carrels in the stacks, where students work in companionable silence, and I am consulting with architects, interior designers, and audiovisual technicians to develop sound-abatement solutions.

So, back to the question posed by my new colleague: why are the students really coming? Are they gravitating to the library because it embodies opportunities for human connection and creative expression? Are they coming because the library helps them cultivate inner quiet and coherence? Are they coming because no one is judging or grading them and they can work peacefully, if they choose? Or, are they experiencing in the library a spiritual sense of belonging to a larger community and centuries-long scholarly conversation?\(^9\) While we seek answers, I’m offering gratitude for their presence.

**Notes**


5. In Susan Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), flow is defined as "the state of consciousness in which a person is totally engaged in and experiencing deep enjoyment of a particular task." (p. 133).


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