

Libraries Study Spaces Research

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SUMMARY

The goal of this project is to understand how UW Libraries can improve communication to students about the use of spaces and behavioral expectations. We worked to locate pain points of the student experiences on locating study spaces, particularly spaces in which they are comfortable taking Zoom calls/attending remote classes. This was a focus of our study because of an increase in questions regarding the use of library spaces for this purpose.

We used the following questions to guide our research:

1. What are the processes students use to locate the spaces they need? (e.g., I wander through, ask at desk, start at HUB, ask my friends)
2. How does UW Libraries best communicate about spaces / expectations (hours, mask wearing, eating)?
3. What are the pain points in their experience of finding spaces? (e.g. is the signage helpful?)

We found that students rely most heavily on their physical surroundings in order to gauge what is an appropriate use of the space. For example, rather than noticing the signs, looking online, or asking a staff member, students preferred to *listen* to the noise level and find an appropriate place — whether that be for quiet studying or attending a participation-required Zoom meeting. We found that the UW Libraries' communication methods on 1) study locations, 2) policy updates, 3) appropriate use of space are difficult to track down for students. Rather, they preferred to analyze their physical surroundings for the information, relying on social cues above provided information.

METHODS

We completed the research in 2 stages.

Survey

The first step was to send out a survey to gather initial data and information on individuals who we may want to interview. The survey asked the following questions:

- How often do you study on campus?
- Have you ever had difficulty finding a space on campus?
 - Please describe any challenges you've had finding study spaces on campus.
- Which of these spaces have you studied in? Please select all that apply.
- In what cases have you ever used a study spot on campus?
- What methods do you usually use to find a spot to study on campus? Check all that apply.

- Where do you go to check for information about Library spaces (for example, noise level, food and drink policy, etc.)? Check all that apply.
- Are you interested in potentially being contacted for a 30 minute interview of your experiences finding spaces on campus?

These questions aim to investigate student needs in a broad, overarching form. Surveys were circulated with the help of departmental liaisons. Ultimately, we received 336 responses.

Interviews

From the survey results, we selected individuals for interviews. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. They were broken down into three categories: Frequent use (study 3+ times a week), common use (1 time a week), and uncommon use (a few times a month). We attempted to get equivalent participants from each category.
 - a. For infrequent users, we are interested in where they would instinctively look for information regarding their needs — this will help us understand where to Libraries meets their needs (or doesn't)
 - b. For frequent/power users, we are interested in how to increase engagement with the physical space/website, so we are selecting individuals which note their methods consist of "Friends/Word of mouth" or "Wandering around campus until they find a spot." This will allow the Library to understand where to meet current users at their needs.
2. We selected individuals that mention some of the key themes that arise from the survey and relate to our main questions (finding information about spaces, common pain points, communication methods, and noise levels). We avoided individuals that highlight crowded spaces as a pain point — while this is a common complaint, it is not within the scope of our research. Same holds true for individuals whose biggest pain point is the limited Library hours.

Interviews were completed in two forms: in-person wayfinding or remote interviews. They both consisted of warm-up questions which gauged general use. For wayfinding, the first task was to find a place to attend a Zoom class after it quickly changed to online only — this replicates the user's need to find a quick spot that is comfortable for talking and course participation. For the remote interview, the first task in the remote interview was to find a space for a team of 6 to complete group work. The second task was the same for both methods. It was to find a quiet, individual study space.

We completed 9 interviews overall — 5 wayfinding and 4 remote.

FINDINGS + RECOMMENDATIONS

Improve Physical Signage

Create a map of study areas and place it in highly visible places such as the entrance.

Incorporate maps into physical signage and include information on study spaces, noise levels, and amenities. Some ways to visualize the map include: showing study spaces by *different activities* such as an area where you can participate in classes without getting interrupted or disturb others, color coding by *noise level*, and 1-5 *noise level* scale.

Wayfinding Interviews:

- 5/5 participants indicated that they find physical signage helpful for communication, and 4/5 participants specifically suggested that having a map of the study spaces would help them navigate around the library.
 - Many of them also said that they would expect the map to be located by the entrance.
- Multiple participants noted that a challenge was they did not know where to go to find a good study space, especially since they are not familiar with the area.
 - For example, they were unsure what each floor has, where a good place for virtual meetings would be (where it's not too quiet but not too loud), or where there would be available seats.
- Study space factors that participants considered are:
 - *Noise level – most important.*
 - Different noise levels include: acceptable to talk/not too loud but not too quiet so that they won't be distracting to others & very quiet so they do not have any distractions while studying.
 - *Privacy/Separate space for quiet study sessions – very important*
 - *Table/Desk availability – very important*
 - Power outlet
 - Lighting (natural light, light for individual desk)
 - Room layout (areas with lots of bookshelves are intimidating or feels enclosed, large area to work in, vibe, aesthetic)
 - Computers

Continue using physical signage for policy communication.

We found that physical signages are very important and are a very effective way to communicate about things like study spaces and food policies. Furthermore, the top method of searching for a study spot was wandering around, so the high usage of the physical signage makes sense.

Wayfinding & Remote Interviews:

- Multiple participants cited signage as the best form of communication—whether it be about noise level, help with navigating to a study space such as a directory, or policies—and suggested placing important signage by the entrance, stairwells, elevators, and around the libraries.

Survey:

- Physical signage was the top method at 59.3% (194/327 responses) to check for information about library spaces.
- Wandering around was the top method of finding a study spot on campus at 84.2% (282/335 responses).

Increase visibility of current noise level signage.

Despite the importance of physical signage, only one of the wayfinding participants noticed the noise level poster while they were walking to search for a study spot. Some ways to make noise level signage more visible include attention to their location, size, content length, contrast, and colors. For example, place signage near high traffic areas; use bold and crisp fonts; use white space, minimal words, and/or graphics; utilize high-contrast color combinations to make signage noticeably different from its surroundings.

Wayfinding Interviews:

- 3/5 participants did not notice the noise level posters, and one participant saw the noise level poster only after sitting down. However, 3/5 saw the large “silent area” sign in front of the Suzzallo Reading Room and found it helpful.
- Noise level was the most important factor of deciding whether the study space was appropriate or not.

Update Online Space Reservation Experience

Improve the online booking experience.

The current website is an information rich environment that overwhelms new users. Many students expressed confusion when navigating the website since they could not easily identify physical space information such as noise levels, physical space appearance outside of the picture available, etc. Through including more information such as hours available, defining “inside out” language (ex: study carrels), this could lessen the confusion students might experience when navigating the website. Aesthetic improvement for pages is also recommended to clearly identify the “reserve now” selection for students. For example, the words could be underlined or be a button to make clear to students where to perform the booking. Additionally, routine update of reservation links between the Scout app and UW Libraries is recommended to lessen the amount of inconsistent links between the apps.

Wayfinding interviews:

- Multiple interviewees expressed confusion with the reservation booking process, sharing “And I feel like it's difficult or more difficult online. Just kind of navigating through the different checkpoints to get there.”
- One mentioned aesthetic improvement so links appear more clearly, stating, “See, I do think that I prefer instead of links to things, I prefer buttons, like visual buttons. So I find this pretty easy to read and that definitely draws my eye to it, but it's not super clear that these are links in the first place.”
- One interviewee suggested including the “next available hours” in the Scout app during the booking process

Add maps and more visuals of the space on the website so that students can plan out which study space to go to in advance.

Visualizations are very helpful, and pictures are a great way to show the space because users can see more details such as lighting, seating/desk arrangement, and layout of the space. Providing maps will also be helpful for planning ahead and navigation. It is also worth considering adding videos that portray the actual feel/atmosphere/noise level of the study space because those are hard to gauge by just looking at images and maps.

Wayfinding & Remote Interviews:

- Multiple participants said that pictures on the website/Scout were very helpful, and that a map on the website would be helpful as well to view study spaces in advance.
- However, several participants expressed that a challenge of the website is it is difficult to gauge the actual noise level and feel of the study space.

Stagger booking times to save a small amount of rooms for day-of booking.

Many students expressed that it is difficult to book a room because they are always booked and have to book a room days or even weeks in advance. Allocating rooms for different booking times could help with this issue.

Survey:

- 22 students cited “study rooms always booked up” as a challenge they experienced in finding a study space

Utilize Engaging Activities to Promote Study Spaces

Provide study spaces recommendation to students through different channels with emphasis on the “words of mouth” style of recommendation.

Interview participants expressed a preference of discovering study spaces through learning from others or wandering around. Increasing their knowledge of all available spaces could help with the crowding issue in popular study spaces such as Odegaard, so increasing our presence across social media and/or having in-person tours that highlight a diversity of

spaces would give users more information from the get go that does not rely on them wandering around. These tours could be throughout the year and during Dawg Daze. Similarly, having the liaisons write about study spaces specific to their departments would help lift the weight from the main libraries. Good timing for an email of this sort would be lining it up with acceptance of a new cohort in the major/department or at the beginning of the quarter.

Wayfinding & Remote Interviews:

- Two interviewees mentioned finding information on social media such as receiving recommendations from an Instagram account like Smirk_UW.
- Multiple interviewees stated they prefer emails for library communication.
- One interviewee mentioned long term usage of the Reading Room as a study space because it was mentioned during a walking tour as a quiet study space.
- Several interviewees expressed valuing word of mouth recommendation. One interviewee shared that they prefer “word of mouth” since they “feel like I can learn more from people.”

Survey:

- The second most popular method of finding a study spot on campus was by friends/word of mouth at 54.9% (184/335 responses).

Additional Recommendations

Rearrange study spaces layout to reflect its expected noise level.

For example, place a large table with many chairs around it or provide a whiteboard to indicate that it is a collaborative area where people can talk. Collaborative spaces tend to have a relaxed, informal atmosphere while quiet study spaces have a studious, focused environment. Some factors that affect the atmosphere include furniture (casual lounge seating, individual booth/table, etc.), lighting (natural light, individual lamp, etc.), and privacy (open floor, semi-enclosed, etc.).

Wayfinding Interviews:

- 5/5 participants determined if the noise level is appropriate by reading the room. For example, whether there are people talking or not.
- 5/5 participants thought that it was more acceptable to talk on the first floor or Starbucks than the upper floors because they hear other people talking, see people sitting in groups, and/or it's close to the entrance so it's louder. All of the participants went upstairs to look for a quiet study space.
- 5/5 participants looked for a more private or separate space when searching for a quiet study spot so that there are no distractions.
- One participant noted that the room is not reflective of the noise level poster. For example, even if it's “chatter,” the people in the room are not talking and are just on the computer by themselves.

Remote Interviews:

- “Odegaard is good for chats because the overall environment is more casual, and Suzzallo is a great setup for studying because it is very official/studious.”

Survey:

- Wandering around was the top method of finding a study spot on campus at 84.2% (282/335 responses).
- Many people find it awkward sitting next to a random person at a table.

Explain *why* hours are limited for library visitors.

Providing a brief explanation on the Hours pages to inform library visitors about the reasoning behind hour changes may make things less frustrating for them.

Survey:

- The second most common challenge that survey respondents cited was limited hours.