Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Combining Surveys with Seating Sweeps and Observational Data Yields Insights into Physical Space Usage in an Academic Library

Dominguez, G. (2016). Beyond gate counts: Seating studies and observations to assess library space usage. New Library World, 117(5/6), 321-328. https://doi.org/10.1108/NLW-08-2015-0058

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Evidence Summary

Combining Surveys with Seating Sweeps and Observational Data Yields Insights into Physical Space Usage in an Academic Library

A Review of:
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Abstract

Objective – To propose a new method to assess library space usage and the physical library user experience utilizing multiple data collection techniques.

Design – Seating usage studies, surveys, and observation.

Setting – Large university in the southern United States.

Subjects – Students who physically use the library spaces.

Methods – The researcher performed seating sweeps three times a day for one week at time, using a counter to get an accurate headcount of each area of the library. The number of users was recorded on paper and then transferred to Excel. A survey for library patrons was created using Typeform and distributed through both email and in-person. In addition, the researcher created a photo diary to document how students were using the space, particularly creative and flexible uses of the library space. These photos were collected to be shared with library administration. The researcher conducted the study twice, once at each main campus library.

Main Results – The initial seating sweeps at one location showed an average of 57 to 85 users engaging in active study, and 57% of users engaged in individual study vs. group study. The sweeping study at the second campus location found that floors designated as quiet floors were the most overcrowded. The researcher found that overall, the actual library use surpassed expected library use. The survey results indicated patron concerns about the lack of available seating, noise policies, uncomfortable furniture, and technology issues such as power outlets and Wi-Fi connectivity.

Conclusion – The researcher found that utilizing surveys in addition to observational data provided a more complete picture of the user experience. Photographs also provided depth and texture to the observational data. Based on the findings the librarians and administration plan to upgrade furniture and technology options, as well as make changes to the noise policy.

Commentary

How do patrons use the physical library space and how can that experience be improved? These are essential questions for many librarians, particularly at a time when the physical function of the library is in flux. To find answers, librarians in a variety of settings have developed methods to count and observe how and when patrons use the library space, most notably through the use of seating sweeps, headcounts, and observational methods (Linn, 2013; Jaskowiak et al., 2019; Olsen, 2019). This study builds on that literature by proposing a combination of sweeping and observational methods with user surveys. This approach allows librarians to incorporate more direct user feedback into the decision-making process when choosing how to improve the library space and its features.

This study had a 75% validity rating based on Glynn's critical appraisal tool for library and information science (2006). The methodology is well described, particularly the emphasis on the adaptions that the researcher made along the way. The author provides a brief but effective review of the literature that helps contextualize a useful synthesis of how to prepare for and implement a library user space study. The study itself was limited by its small scale, as noted by the author. Providing the full survey instrument and more detailed quantitative and qualitative data would have been helpful for researchers looking to build on this paper and would have provided a more complete picture of the data collected.

The author's experiences provide a persuasive case study for the importance of combining multiple data collection methods to acquire a more complex and thorough picture of the user experience. In addition to the user surveys, the photo diaries focused on creative space usage and provided insights into not just how the patrons use the space, but how they adapt when the space does not meet their needs. More complete data allows librarians to make decisions about library upgrades that will truly meet the users' needs. Librarians with an interest in performing physical usage studies at their own institutions would find much practical and theoretical value from this paper.

This paper also opens up several areas for potential future research. For example, the author suggests that the combination face-to-face surveys and physical sweeps could provide an opportunity to increase librarian visibility among patrons. The author also brings up using user experience (UX) as a lens through which to look at physical library spaces, a concept that could use more robust exploration. Although primarily used to discuss digital library usage, the methods and tools of UX have intriguing implications when applied to the physical patron experience.

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