

# **Studying the Florida State University Community**

## **A FSU Libraries Endeavor to Understand & Engage our Users**

### **Summer 2008-2010**

#### **Study Background:**

Beginning in 2008, Florida State University Libraries engaged in a series of conversations with students about their study habits and research practices. "Undergraduate Conversations" initiated a series of qualitative and ethnographic studies of how FSU students and faculty study, research, and live. The methodology is a rich mix of qualitative studies.

The first seminal study specifically focused on our undergraduate users and collected data from 328 students, faculty, and stakeholders commenting on student study and research behaviors or expressing preferences for types of Strozier services and spaces. In addition, we photographed more than 400 students showing their patterns of library use, and then collected over 800 ballots for "Chair 'Cision '08" - a student "election" on user preferences for furniture. In total, this study represented input from more than 1,300 students, staff and faculty.

Throughout 2009, FSU Libraries' continue to investigate the impact of users' utilization and use of space through bed-checks, surveys, and furniture demos that drove selection and decision-making for learning commons furniture and layout. A request from Student Government Association (SGA) to expand campus tutoring paralleled deeper exploration by library faculty of findings related to late night study group behaviors of undergraduates. A subsequent analysis of high-fail/ high enrollment courses led to pilot a night-time tutoring program funded by SGA and an expansion of existing campus partnerships in the library to offer day time and evening tutoring.

The investment in organizational resources to conduct these ongoing user studies is reflective of an organizational shift to evidence-based decision-making: a commitment to integrate user findings in all strategic decision-making. Continuing into 2010, the Libraries created a dedicated Assessment Department, that is conducting two major user studies, one on FSU's entire STEM population and a second study focused specifically upon graduate students across disciplines.

## Selected Findings from Undergraduate Conversations:

**Here's what students said were three essentials to their study environment:** Overwhelmingly, the three most important characteristics in selecting a location to study are furniture, atmosphere and varying levels of noise and visual distractions.

- **Furniture Needs:** The most ubiquitous word when describing what students wanted in a study chair was “comfy.” They carry lots of “stuff” (books, notebooks, cell phones, MP3 players, food) and want plenty of space to spread out to work. Tightly compacted side-by-side computer stations (computer farm-style) do not fit their work-style.

**Here's what we are doing about it:** Furniture that provides mobility and comfort is being selected for the 1<sup>st</sup> floor commons renovation. Comfortable chairs that are already a part of the libraries furniture are being kept in place over the remaining wooden chairs. Tables that provide lots of space for spreading out are being purchased for the 1<sup>st</sup> floor Commons Renovation. Less desktop computers and more laptops for checkout will enable them to have more table space.

- **Atmospheric Needs:** Students want to eat and drink while they study. Students want natural light to study by. The students want to be able to “own” their study space by rearranging furniture, selecting the acceptable level of noise, creating or removing visual barriers, adjusting temperature levels, moving freely from relaxation to study to fun, and having access to “just-in-time” services.

**Here's what we are doing about it:** A full-service café on the first floor is being built. Staff offices that had premier window spaces were given up to allow for more natural light in the coming café space. Library shelving was removed from the 1<sup>st</sup> floor which allows more natural light from the windows to emanate onto the floor. Glass wall partitions are being installed in the study rooms in order to allow natural light to infiltrate from the windows from the study rooms onto the main floor.

- **Noise Level Control Needs:** FSU students cited the library as a favorite location to study; noise in the dorms was an important factor in preferring a library. Some want some background noise while they study (music, people talking around them, etc.). Some students want complete quiet and want the library staff to enforce it. The students made distinctions between the desirability of visual and auditory distractions – it's not as simple as wanting “quiet space.”

**Here's what we are doing about it:** We designate quiet study zones in the library, and provide headphones for checkout if students want to listen to music. Moveable whiteboards and visibility screens will provide visible barriers against visual distractions. Designated talk zones will still be provided with more enforcement for keeping quiet zones quiet on other floors. The 1<sup>st</sup> floor will provide a space for those students who like background noise while studying while being away from the distractions of their apartment or their home.

- **Here's what students said about their connectivity and campus computer access needs:** Cell phones (not email) are the ubiquitous communication tool for undergraduates, and more often for text messaging than using the telephone. As a communication tool, Facebook followed as a popular second. While most students have laptops, many do not bring them to campus during the day because of weight or restrictions on class use. They want access to computers and Microsoft Office Products while on campus. They want ubiquitous printing.

**Here's what we are doing about it:** We have added the ability to text message our IM reference service and added a component to our online catalog to allow records to be emailed or texted to patrons. We are adding additional electrical outlets for cell phones (as well as computers) in the new Commons. A strong wireless connection is also very important. More wireless capacity was added as well as wireless printing. We have ordered more laptops for students to check out. All computers on the floor had Microsoft Office products installed on them.

- **Student Study Times:** Students have complex daily schedules, packed with classes, work, club activities, study groups and social activities. FSU students say they are 8 times more likely to study between 8pm and midnight than between 8 am and noon, and almost 5 times more likely to study between midnight and 4 am than between 8 am and noon. We commonly heard remarks about weekly study groups that begin at 11 pm. Students also clearly communicated an expectation for robust services throughout the day and night.

**Here's what we are doing about it:** We expanded our library hours to 24/5 with virtual reference available 24/7. This means that they will have information assistance from anywhere, at all hours. During that time night time gate counts steadily increased each semester peaking at mid-term and finals times. FSU Undergrads were the biggest user group for the late night hours. According to floor counts over a period of 10 months, peak times for evening hours after 10pm continued to be high with gradual decline between 3 and 4 am in the morning. In addition, library partners, such as the Reading and Writing Center, now extend their service hours beyond traditional office hours.

- **Students' Need for Social & Study Infusions:** Students are adept multi-taskers. They don't separate time for work and socializing but instead easily mingle the two. The likelihood of running into friends, ability to talk and "being seen" are important. This finding encourages us to intermingle social and study spaces on one floor, rather than separating them. Students see those co-existing in a study space with "quiet" areas.

**Here's what we are doing about it:** The current renovation of the floor includes both study spaces on the floor and a full-service cafe with food and drink available at all hours. A variety of booth seating is planned and TVs and video games will be available for convenient study breaks. Lots of open space for students to be seen are being created with the first floor renovation; including a circular pathway framing the first floor space so people can get quick, clear sight lines of the floor.

- **Students' Group Study Needs:** The prevalence of group assignments is shown in the high demand for group study spaces. There are dozens of varieties of study groups and these nuances drive distinct support needs. Two examples illustrate the differences in needs. Sometimes a study group came together simply to provide peer motivation for individualized quiet study. They may need to talk occasionally but they really need minimal distractions around them. In other instances, small study groups came together to talk without disturbing others with a whiteboard or other surface to visually map out their work.

**Here's what we are doing about it:** There were no study rooms on that floor prior to the renovation. Our current renovation of the first floor is adding group study rooms. We will have approximately twelve rooms added of various dimensions. Check-out of projectors for presentation practice will be provided. Whiteboard and chalkboard paint will cover wall space within the study rooms. Study rooms will be equipped with electrical outlets, we will have over 80 laptops for check-out, and all rooms will have glass walls for visibility.

- **Students with Disabilities Needs:** Some desire quiet spaces where they can have few distractions, be alone and have privacy. However, they also want places where they are allowed to talk and group study spaces. Other frequently mentioned needs are Jaws and Microsoft Office software. Students with disabilities requested less crowded spaces and more open study spaces. They specifically mentioned the need to lessen congestion in the front lobby due to lines at the coffee stand that were in the center of the entrance by the doors. Students with disabilities mentioned the importance of having late night buses operate even later than they do now.

**Here's what we are doing about it:** The new 1<sup>st</sup> floor Commons in the main library has an Assistive Technology Lab so that students can be away from the many distractions of the main floor if they want to. However, universality in the design and furniture of the larger space will make it easier for them to be a part of the open space that some of them desire. The main library café will not be located near the entrance, but will be off to the side of the building so as to ease congestion. Efforts are currently being made to provide funding from student government for the late night buses operating at even later hours.

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