



Using Evidence in Practice

Determining User Needs for an Academic Health Sciences Library Renovation

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Received: 08 Nov. 2010

Accepted: 16 Dec. 2010

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Setting

The Health Sciences Library (HSL) at the University of Calgary (U of C) opened in the late 1970's. The library serves the Faculties of Medicine, Nursing, Veterinary Medicine, and a Bachelor of Health Sciences program. In addition, HSL provides services to the Foothills Medical Centre, the largest acute care hospital in Calgary. Although some minor renovations had been done at HSL in the past, including new carpet and relocation of the administration offices, the library remained relatively unchanged for more than 30 years. HSL formerly occupied 2600 square metres on the second floor of the University of Calgary Health Sciences Centre. Reference and Circulation operated from two separate service desks, and there was a large area for

the display of periodicals, a few easy chairs, some study tables, and more than 100 carrels. There were only two small group rooms and three secure or lockable carrels. Despite taking up a substantial portion of the library, the stacks remained crowded. The University of Calgary Library system was moving to an online preferred collection model. As a result, print journals were being cancelled. A renovation and collection rationalization was needed.

Problem

In 2008, the Faculty of Medicine found it necessary to increase the enrolment of undergraduate medical students from 150 to 180. To meet accreditation standards, the Faculty had to add two 50-seat classrooms, six

small group rooms, and a 250-seat lecture theatre. The only possible expansion space was in the library. The U of C Provost and the Dean of Medicine reached an agreement in September 2008 for a total library renovation, giving the Faculty approximately 25% of the existing library square footage to create spaces for joint use. Complete renovation of the remaining Health Sciences Library space would better meet current student needs. Timelines were tight, as the Faculty required the two classrooms and six small group rooms available for instructional purposes in less than a year. Library staff had neither the time for a formal library needs consultation process, nor the creation of focus groups with faculty, students, and Foothills Medical Centre staff. However, staff needed to determine what users wanted to see in a new library space.

Evidence

A literature review revealed that library spaces need to be flexible, accessible, and attractive, with noisy and quiet areas carefully planned and distinct (Fitzgerald, 2004; Nelson, 2003). Natural light should be maximized and fluorescent bulbs replaced with full spectrum lights. Attractive and comfortable areas should be included (Fitzgerald, 2004; Twait, 2009). In addition, libraries can facilitate collaborative learning by planning for group study rooms as well as secure individual study rooms. Study tables must be wired (Marcus, Covert-Vail, & Mandel, 2007). The literature provided excellent advice, but HSL staff wished to determine if U of C users had any unique or different needs. They wanted to know how much and what type of seating was required, as well as identify issues and irritants with the current space to ensure that the same problems were not recreated upon renovation completion.

Two HSL librarians created a brief survey. They chose SurveyMonkey™ because it is electronic, cumulates results automatically, is fast and easy to use, and it was a product they were most familiar with. Although some provinces and institutions face

SurveyMonkey™-related constraints, this is not a problem at the University of Calgary. Staff expected a faster and wider distribution with an electronic tool than with a paper questionnaire. They wanted to keep the survey brief and focused. The survey included five open-ended questions, asking respondents about their preferences for the new library, their use of information resources, and their sources of information. Three additional demographic questions and two questions not specifically related to the library redesign completed the survey.

Staff posted the survey on the HSL web page, and emailed the survey link to faculty, student, and staff email lists. The survey was open from February 12 to 25, 2009. Within the first 24 hours, 136 participants completed the survey with an eventual total of 170 survey responses.

The majority (83.8%) of the responses were from students. Their preferences included carrels at the back of the library for quiet study, a desperate need for outlets to plug in their laptops, more technology, better furnishings, and a more comfortable and attractive library. Since 17% of those surveyed stated that they only browsed the collection, and students claimed they turned to Google rather than the library catalogue, staff confirmed the decision to move a significant portion of the collection to high density storage (Vaska, Chan, & Powelson, 2009).

Implementation

The survey was revealing, valuable, and resulted in changes to the renovation plans. New plans ensured an electrical outlet for every seat in the library. A self-check machine will be installed in the near future. Staff revised plans to eliminate most of the carrels and replace them with tables; however, more carrels were added in the back by the windows overlooking the atrium, replacing previous study tables. The new carrels are wired and have individual study lights. All study chairs are ergonomic and adjustable. There will be twenty comfortable chairs,

placed in groups of four around coffee tables, and eight rolling footstools. These changes ensured that specific needs were addressed and that library patrons would be happy with the end result.

Outcome

The Health Sciences Library renovation will not be complete until early 2011. Library users face a steady stream of construction traffic, several areas within the library that remain cordoned off, and temporary entrance doors which still need to be replaced. However, some of the new carrels and study tables are already in use, three of the six new group rooms are functional, as are the four secure carrels. Despite the construction, user response has been overwhelmingly positive. Carrels and small group rooms are heavily used, and faculty approach library staff both in and out of the library to compliment the changes.

Reflection

Although quickly designed and implemented, our survey demonstrates that evidence for decisions can be readily obtained and easily used. The survey results supported the findings from the literature; namely, that faculty, staff, and students desire attractive spaces with comfortable seating, windows, better lighting, and areas for both collaborative and quiet work. By enabling users to comment on their preferences, planners could incorporate their unique needs into the design. Although HSL staff would have preferred to conduct a rigorous and detailed survey, followed up by focus groups and individual consultations, important input was nonetheless gained within the time constraints. Obtaining evidence is not difficult, provided one is willing to be flexible and creative. Evidence ensures better, more appropriate decision making even when it cannot be gathered using a rigorous, structured protocol.

References

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