Welcome! I’m excited to be here.
This is a project that I worked on during my time as the Arts & Architecture Librarian at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte (UNCC).
I’m talking about the different methods I have used to solicit student feedback about the spaces and services in a branch library. I will not talk much about the results of the work, or next steps, given time constraints and that I no longer work there.

These sorts of evaluation towards assessment activities allow us to connect with users to provide meaningful services and spaces that promote use and demonstrate our relevance and value by giving users ownership and a voice in how we work with them. If we aren’t consulting the people who need our libraries, we could miss out on some really great opportunities to connect with and support our communities.
I started working on this project because I was working in this great branch library, the Charles Hight Architecture Library, located in the School of Architecture (SOA) at UNCC. The space is really great in some ways – lots of natural light, recently re-carpeted, so close to students, and really important to the faculty of SOA. But it was lacking in others in some ways that became very obvious after being there a short time – the furniture was SO heavy, we couldn’t move some of it at all, and others of it only with difficulty, there was no good space for instruction, the circ desk took up a ridiculous amount of space and was really unwelcoming. So, I started making a list of things I wanted – flexible furniture to support instruction, SOA colloquia, and other events, a retractable screen and projector, reconfiguration of circ.

But as I was thinking about the grand dream I had for this space, I was also remembering, my professors’ voices saying “Librarians assume they are proxies for users and can make decisions on their behalf – this is a problem.” And started thinking, I have these things I want, but what do students want and need? And, also, I’m thinking about space for people who are working on becoming space experts – shouldn’t I be considering their expertise?
SLAG
The first thing I did was form a student advisory group. Two graduate students agreed to fulfill this role, I wanted 3-4, but I took what I could get. Since I do not have a way to directly contact students, I simply put signs up around the library. The added benefit to this was that I was only reaching students who were already using the library space.

Positives:
The students really had great ideas about the space, both from their training and from their own experiences in the library. I had no idea that the quiet study area was unusable certain times of day due to sunlight and glare.
They also gave me some things to think about. One of the students said “I really want study carrels.” My first thought was “those terrible ugly clunky things?” But then I thought okay...what do those provide? How can we accomplish that type of thing in our limited space? So we started looking at different ways to partition off space. The also helped with planning, scheduling, and survey implementation.
They were able to recruit other students to participate, which was really helpful. They were able to suggest courses to align with the library needs – such as a shading course that could be used to address sunlight issues in the quiet study area. It gave them ownership over their space.

Difficulties
Trouble keeping the group going over the summer.
While they were very helpful to me, I don’t think they were getting very much out of the group. I think it might be better if there was a way to build this into a meaningful project for them. I think it would be better if there was either some sort of stipend, or if the relationship was formalized someway with the school and library to give the students experience somehow meaningful to their education.
I brought up the idea of having an event for students to come and give feedback about the library. So, SLAG helped me figure out a good time (we chose a Wednesday that was right after studio classes that all students are required to take, let out – this was so much easier to figure out with their help!)

I got some money for pizza, and bought soda, cookies, and chips myself and threw an event.

During it I set up voting stations. Working with the manager of the library, we figured out some questions we wanted to ask, put them on large post-its. We then put out little post-its so that students could put their opinions down, and it was kind of fun to have them so visual.

Something that has come out from this: we planned on experimenting this semester with having the library open until midnight during finals week.
The flip charts were first set up during the student event. I had them up so that students saw them prior to sitting down to draw their floor plans. My hope was that if I asked them some questions they would start thinking about the space, and that would result in more useful floor plans. I didn’t have a control group, so I don’t really know if it helped, but in this charette-type activity, it was important to prime the participants in some way. Since students could come and go from the event as they needed, I wasn’t guaranteed to be able to talk to each of them about the process before they got started. I did these flipcharts as a way to have the first contact, and do that priming without having to make sure I got to each student individually.

They really are an easy way to get feedback from students.

I kept these up throughout the rest of the semester, asking different questions occasionally. There are still a lot more questions that could be asked.
This was the main focus of the event. And it was really fun. I spread out markers, colored pencils, and pens with blank library floor plans. Students then sat down with their pizza and soda and drew. I then had them tape the plans to the wall in the space for others to see. These materials were left out for a week or so after the event to allow students to participate who couldn’t make it to the event. Overall we got 52 plans from the event. Some of them were jokey (we got one with a dance floor and stack scooters for getting books), but most of them had some serious/useful component. The students had a lot of great ideas.

I want to show you some examples...
Lots of great ideas!
Some were really detailed, like this one. They provided solutions to things like hours. They added services like coffee – not feasible in this space, but a good outreach opportunity for finals. They added tools, different types of study spaces, and didn’t forget about circulation.
Napping was actually a pretty consistent theme. Roughly 10% of the plans had napping areas. When we think about this more broadly and combine napping with ideas about relaxing and comfortable space, we end up with well over half of the plans mentioning this quality of space. If you remember from the plan I drew up – I was so focused on flexibility, I didn’t even think about comfort or places to relax.
Putting up artwork or student work in the library came up in a number. Of the 52 floor plans, 6 of them (or 10%) mention art work. I particularly like this one – the student switched from drawing a plan to drawing an elevation in order to emphasize their point.

While I had space in my ideal plan for exhibitions, I hadn’t really thought about if that is truly something users would want or if it is just something I like. It is nice to see that this is something that is important to these students.
Unexpected side effect?
Chance to connect with students and let them know about the library and our services. This particular student was drawing “Portal” and I said “What is the portal for?” He said, “well, sometimes I want a book from the other library, and I don’t want to walk all the way there.” So then, I was able to tell him about how we have a “request item” link in the catalog and that books can be delivered to the architecture branch library from the main library. So! That’s great!
Really is about connecting with users and showing our support of their needs in order to reinforce and communicate our value.
Then we coded them. I went through and pulled out things I was noticing and made them into two lists – Atmosphere (represented with letters – for things like quiet, open, comfortable) and Physical Space (represented with numbers – for things like tables, computers, circulation), making sure to include an “other/unknown” category so that the coders could interpret as they saw fit when needed. 3 people looked at each plan and no one was given more than 20 plans (we were lucky to have enough student workers in the architecture library), and I compiled the codes.

You can see an example here.

One potential problem: the varying level of attentiveness on the part of the coders. This might be mitigated with more thorough training.

The coding showed a fairly equal split between group/loud study and private/quiet study. Service point changes (4) was the most frequently used code – either adding services (such as providing a space for photographing models) or relocating current ones. Lots of new multimedia tools were added - 3D printing, tvs, robotics.
I’m not really going to talk about the survey – since I think most of us know what they are, as well as the value and potential problems. This was a useful exercise and gave me the names of students who were willing to talk about the library with me (this was an optional field they could fill out), as well as additional information that couldn’t be portrayed in a floorplan – such as when they use the library, if they bring a laptop, and what types of spaces they are missing in the SOA.

Just as we saw with the floorplans – the school was lacking places to be comfortable and relax. I really needed to consider this rather than concentrating on flexibility.
The other thing we did during the fall term was to track student use of the space. We talked about a couple different methods such as using Suma. However, in the end we went with LibAnalytics. The students were already (supposed to be) using it to track non-circulation transaction at the circ desk, and one benefit of suma is that it is mobile, but our space was small enough that we didn’t need a mobile as an option.

Benefits:
Only log into one system.
Also allowed us to change what we were tracking in terms of questions…time etc.

Some troubles we have run into:
Students not understanding military time.
Remembering to do it at 30 minutes after the hour.

What we have here is a way to understand our user behavior, as well as something that gives us a better measure than the other options to use when we re-evaluate after any changes are made.

What we saw was that what they wanted wasn’t totally contradictory to what I wanted, although the shift from my flexible to their comfortable is really important. Additionally, the spaces they imagined were so much richer than what I had come up with.
What we ended up seeing was that the information obtained from the different evaluation methods, in general lined up with each other. However, because each method allowed us to ask different questions, and reach different users, it was still beneficial to use a variety of methods. And especially having that event really showed the students that we are listening to them and trying to have them own their space and help us figure out how to be of value to them.
Some of the resources I used.
THE END!

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