

Building a Positive Learning Environment

Noise Down, Student Satisfaction Up

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Traditionally, the word “library” conjures thoughts of books, study and silence.

The role of the library has changed over time and in response to the growing needs of educational institutions and library users. More and more, ‘traditional’ libraries that have focused on collections are transforming into ‘academic learning centres’ with a broader focus — people. And so while libraries remain spaces for quiet concentrated study, they are also active spaces driving teaching, learning and research.

Herein lays the challenge — a challenge that many libraries that have undergone this transformation are experiencing.

The University of Toronto Mississauga Library is working toward a resolution. The Library re-opened in the Hazel McCallion Academic Learning Centre in 2006 as one of this new ‘breed’ of libraries focused on people over collections space, with an emphasis on engaging students, Library staff and librarians, faculty and other campus units in its teaching and learning mission. Promoting the University of Toronto Mississauga Library as an active

learning space requires balancing an array of needs — for instance, finding a balance between an open, welcoming environment with collaborative learning spaces and a noisy, disruptive environment that undermines silent study. In catering to different learning styles, the Library must also find effective ways to address the concomitant behavioural and noise issues.

“The Library is the information hub and gathering place on the University of Toronto Mississauga campus for collaborative and individual learning,” says Chief Librarian Mary Ann Mavrinnac. The Library works closely with students to co-create an environment conducive to academic research, reflection, discovery and learning. During peak periods, visits routinely exceed 9,000 per day — a significant number given the total University of Toronto Mississauga student population of 10,500. Minimizing the noise and behavioural issues that result from the Library’s popularity has required making physical alterations to the Library space as well as implementing service-oriented and programmatic strategies.

The design of the Hazel McCallion Academic Learning Centre supports various learning styles. In 2008, the

Library physically organized into 'learning zones': "Quiet Collaborative Zones" where students can work together on academic projects, "Silent Zones" for deep thinking and reflection, and "Conversation-Friendly" and "Cell-Phone Friendly" Zones in busier areas of the Library. These Learning Zones complement different academic activities, so students can select the zone that best matches the work they need to do.

Research on the learning styles of millennial students has informed the Library's design and the implementation of Learning Zones, as has research on learning in the presence of others. "More and more, students prefer to work collaboratively on many tasks, and new pedagogical methods are increasingly using active and group learning techniques," says Mavrincac. For instance, even with little or no interaction, students perform better when reviewing work they already know well in the presence of other students. For complex tasks requiring problem-solving or other high level thinking, most students seek quiet, individual study carrels.

In implementing the Learning Zones, the Library revised signage to align with and communicate expectations in each zone; installed opaque glass "fins" to reduce sound and divide zones; added acoustical panels to break up large collaborative zones and increase sound absorption; and installed cellphone booths to contain conversations.

The Learning Zones have helped manage noise levels in the Library, as comments from service satisfaction surveys and other feedback mechanisms illustrate:

- "I appreciate the new study noise zones. I think this has helped tremendously with the previous noise problems."
- "The environment is very conducive to learning. I'd rather spend nights at the library studying than at home, and I live 7 minutes away."
- "I just want to start off by saying 'thank you' for the positive, impeccable changes made this year [2008] to make our learning experience as well as environment a better one."

Overall, students' negative comments about noise levels dropped by 26 per cent and positive comments about the Library's efforts to address noise issues increased from about 3 per cent to 30 per cent from 2007 to 2008 when the

Learning Zones and related strategies were implemented.

These related strategies include service-oriented and programmatic initiatives to foster a positive learning environment. One example of this, the University of Toronto Mississauga Library's "Adopt a Floor" campaign, reflects an all-staff commitment to being active and present on all levels of the Hazel McCallion Academic Learning Centre. Staff walk about their assigned level daily to assist students, monitor noise, educate students about Learning Zones and promote other elements related to the Library Code of Conduct. In managing student behavior, Library staff have moved away from rules and sanctions to using positive language that articulates expectations and encourages cooperation. The campaign has significantly increased staff visibility and, according to student feedback, successfully reduced noise.

The University of Toronto Mississauga Library has also developed strategies for communicating with students. Over the last year, the Library established the Undergraduate Student 'Friends of the Library' Advisory Board, a forum (in its planning stages) for students to provide input and feedback about library spaces, services, resources and programming; created flyers that promote the Library as a space for research and learning — a reminder to students that the Library is an academic space, not a social space; and worked with campus partners to appropriately position their respective spaces — some as academic and/or collaborative and others as social spots. In this way, students understand their choices in terms of campus spaces and the benefits and behaviours that accompany each.

Combined, these measures have helped the University of Toronto Mississauga Library fulfill the vision for its new home, the Hazel McCallion Academic Learning Centre — to emphasize "people space" and, in doing so, enhance student learning, support University of Toronto's academic mission, advance the Library's role as a teaching and learning centre, and contribute to academic librarianship. To this end, the University of Toronto Mississauga Library is breaking new ground in terms of its multi-faceted approach, team focus, use of research on learning in the presence of others to inform strategies and, most importantly, its impact on students.