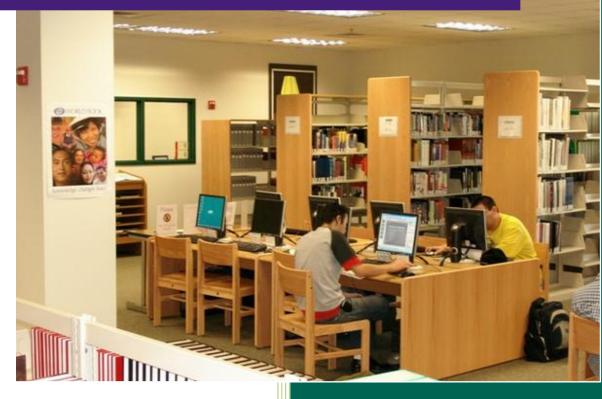# Spring 2010

Learning Commons Services Assessment: Student Views

A Report by South Texas College's office of Research & Analytical Services

South Texas College

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Inquiries regarding this study should be directed to any of the following individuals:

Brenda Cole, Ph.D., Director of Research & Analytical Services
bcole@southtexascollege.edu
(956) 872-5584

Mónica Jean Alaniz, Qualitative Researcher
mjalaniz@southtexascollege.edu
(956) 872-5569

Fernando Chapa, Institutional Research Analyst
fchapa@southtexascollege.edu
(956) 872-5585

Inquiries regarding South Texas College's Library Services should be directed to:

Cody A. Gregg, Director of Instructional Technologies
cgregg@southtexascollege.edu
(956) 872-2528

Background:

Individuals' means of seeking out and gathering information is something that is constantly evolving and changing. As stated by Cowgill, Beam, and Wess (2001):

> In academic Libraries nationwide, electronic resources have become an important and prominent part of library collections because of the rapid development of the Internet and the World Wide Web. The fundamental structure and organization of university libraries' services have been impacted by patron demands for accessibility to such resources. (p. 432)

Beagle (2006) expands on this idea in his text *The Information Commons Handbook* in which he shows how information needs, and the way in which these needs are met, have evolved, creating the necessity for Information Commons.

The demand is no different at South Texas College [STC]. As stated on the Library Services' website, "Library Services supports the educational mission of South Texas College by providing access to information resources and instruction seeking skills to people of Hidalgo and Starr counties" (STC, 2009).

Purpose of Study:

As part of Library Services' effort to continue its support of STC's education mission and transition into an Information Commons model, opinions of college stakeholders, namely students, faculty, and staff, are being studied to assess library services and ways in which the library can improve its services. Information gathered as part of this study can be used to modify

current services so they better reflect the needs of the population being served. Additionally, information gathered during the course of this study can be used to provide guidance regarding new services that could be developed as part of the effort to move to an Information Commons model.

This is part one of a three part report on this study. This particular portion of the report concentrates on students' opinions, attitudes, and usage of library services. Part two will focus on faculty and staff, while part three of the study will involve quantitative inquiry.

Research Questions:

The purpose of this study is to ask several questions in regard to STC library services. Chiefly, it seeks to ask: What are stakeholder opinions towards the library and the services that they offer? It will also examine ways in which stakeholders use library services and their opinions as to how library services can improve. Part one of this report involves qualitative inquiry of students in regards to these questions. The information gathered for this study will be used by library services staff to develop ways to improve STC libraries and the services that it offers.

(Please see Appendix A for a list of focus group questions asked of students.)

Methodology:

Part one of this report involved eight focus groups that were conducted across STC's five campuses. While all focus groups conducted were with STC students, one group was unique in that it utilized student workers that worked at the Pecan campus (STC's largest campus). Focus group sessions were transcribed and entered into NVivo8, qualitative research software, to help facilitate coding. Additionally, observations were conducted at each of the five campuses'

libraries to support the information that students provided during the course of the focus groups. For the purposes of this study, descriptive coding was employed. This type of coding pulls out the topics that were most prevalent throughout the data.

Findings:

Analysis of focus group data allowed us to pull out several main themes that were brought up by student participants. The main areas of discussion revolved around the following issues: resources, atmosphere, and operations.

Resources

One of the main topics that students were questioned on during the course of focus groups was the type of resources that the library provides. It was apparent through student discussion as well as observation that students took full advantage of the resources offered by Library Services.

Computers and Related Equipment

Across all campuses, students agreed that the availability of computers and related equipment such as printer and software were a vital part of their library experience. When asked what services they valued most, the computers were the top response. The availability of computers is a vital part of students' ability to gather information.

Students said they use the computers to print out documents, check emails, work on research papers, study, and look up information. As with many services that are in high demand, students felt that there was a lack of available computers for academic use. As one student stated: "What I think, what I have noticed, is that there is not enough computers… every time I come it's full." Students from the Pecan and Mid-Valley campuses pointed out how morning hours are usually

the hardest time to find an available computer. And, while wireless internet was seen by students as a mean of alleviating the unavailability of computers, students across all the campuses also pointed out that the speed of their wireless connections were too slow.

The computers reserved for group work were also greatly appreciated by students. Students at Pecan liked this set up and wish that there were more: "But they do need more of those because there are a lot of groups that go specially during the finals or like mid-terms and there is a lot of groups, like one class alone can have six or eight groups." Additionally, students at the Technology Campus expressed an interest in having computers for group work set up on their campus. It should be noted that the Nursing and Allied Health [NAH] campus students found computer accommodations to be adequate to meet their academic needs.

While many students expressed that the availability of free printing services was an essential part of their library experience, they also noted that the printing system was set up in a manner that caused confusion and frustrations stemming from delays in being able to print things in a timely manner. The focus group made up of student workers who are employed by Library Services claimed that sometimes students went up to the circulation desk to ask how much they would charge for print outs. Still others were unsure if there were limits on printing. A common source of frustration brought up by many students was not being able to print out a class assignment needed in a hurry either due to lack of available computers or printer being occupied or out of service. "I think that is like the biggest [frustration] when there is not enough computers or that the printers don't work and you are like ok where do I go I really need that fast."

In addition to the lack of available computers that were available for student use and printing problems, students at the Technology Campus expressed problems specific to their campus library. They mentioned that a lack of electrical outlets did not even allow for the use of personal laptops within library space. They also felt that the wireless connection at their campus was slow in comparison to other campuses and that a lack of software necessary to their academic studies made it difficult to fully utilize the library. Students here felt that their classes demanded them to stay abreast of new technology and the library was not able to keep up with the equipment (software) they needed with the new Microsoft operating system (7) being cited as a main example. Students here also felt that the library staff should be knowledgeable in and up to date on such software in order to provide guidance for students in need of help.

Textbooks

Students felt that the availability of textbooks on reserve was also one of the benefits that led to their increased library usage. Many felt that the ability to check out textbooks on reserve rather than having to carry all the textbooks necessary to complete their academic work made it easier to complete homework assignments and study for exams. However students also expressed frustrations at the limited time for check out of these books (two hours) and also not being able to leave the building with such books. Many students also mentioned having to wait for the textbook while it was checked out to another student as a common occurrence and source of frustration. Overall students expressed a desire to see more textbooks put on reserve for their use and extending the time allotted for check out.

<u>Medical Models (specific to NAH)</u>

Students at NAH stated that they would really benefit from more "hands on aids." They made specific mention of being able to check out from the library various medical 3-D models of things such as a skeleton, muscles, the brain, bones or various part of the human body. They also felt that visual aids such as videos or large poster boards of such things would also be helpful. Students stated that models that are currently available on the NAH campus are worn-out and are only located in classrooms; thus making them hard to access. Students also felt that it would help them if they the library offered such models and allowed them to check out to take to a study room and use to study in groups. Students also stated that having other equipment such as projectors available to use in the study rooms would also greatly enhance their learning environment.

<u>Tutors</u>

Students at MVC, NAH, and Pecan mentioned that they would like to see and would benefit from having tutors available at the library. Although students are aware the tutors are located other places, such as the Center for Learning Excellence labs, they felt that having tutors at the library would be more convenient because they would have all the resource the library has to offer in close proximity. Students suggested that the library schedule tutors for selected subjects on certain days of the week, for example they could have a Math tutor on Monday and an English tutor on Tuesday and so on. One other student said that she would like to be able to schedule one-on-one tutoring services at the library because, "it is very noisy over there [CLE]…and if you are going to schedule someone you want that one-on-one time."

<u>Space</u>

There was a consensus across all campuses that space at the various campus libraries needs to be increased. Students expressed a need for more study rooms as well as open-common areas with mobile furniture that allows for group work. The lack of space across the libraries has contributed to what students perceive as problems in the atmosphere of the library.

Atmosphere

Students felt that the directions that the library has taken towards an information commons in terms of social/open areas in addition to quiet areas and the addition of more comfortable learning spaces including mobile furniture such as chairs and couches has made them want to use the library more often. They felt that this environment was more welcoming to students. Many of the study participants felt that the move towards a more "coffee shop" type atmosphere was a positive one and felt that the actual availability of coffee, snacks and other food services would be a very welcome addition.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of space that was previously mentioned, many of these social/open areas are adjacent to quiet areas, making it difficult for students seeking a more silent atmosphere to find the type of study environment that they are seeking out. This was especially true on the Nursing Allied Health [NAH] and Starr campuses. Observation of the Starr Campus showed how students whose studying was disturbed by other students doing group work in close proximity. This occurred despite the fact that the students conducting group work and the students studying on their own were in different areas of the library.

It should also be noted that students at the Technology Campus felt that their campus' library was not as welcoming as the other STC libraries.

"Well if you have it more spacious…you don't feel like you are in a classroom the whole time…and you are just like ok I have to study I have to, but if you are more spacious you more comfortable. I don't know about anybody else here, but I like, if I am studying I want to make sure that I am comfortable. I can't be sitting on a hard chair."

It almost seems as if the Technology Campus is lagging behind the other campuses when it comes towards moving in the direction of an information commons. Observations showed that there are fewer couches and comfortable chairs when compared to libraries in other campuses such as Pecan and MVC.

Operation

Staff

Overall students across all campuses were satisfied with the services they received from library staff. Students largely felt that library staff were friendly and in most cases knowledgeable and helpful. In a few cases however some students felt that the staff could benefit from more training in order to enable them to better serve students. It is interesting to note too that student workers also mentioned providing better training and orientation activities to students in order to get them more knowledgeable about services the library offers. Increasing the number of library staff was also an issue that came up in both MVC and the library staff groups. The group of student workers also felt that most students generally do not have all the information about the library they should have and that most times students do not ask for help when they should, and as one student worker pointed out, "they won't do it because they probably get embarrassed." Another common complaint from students was that the library staff does not consistently enforce library

rules. In reference to enforcing rules in the quiet zones one student pointed out, "if they are going to put all those signs up in the upstairs, I mean what is the point of having like fifty…what is the point of having them if you are just going to not say anything when people are being loud." Another rule that students claimed to like to see more heavily enforced was the time allotted for students to check out textbooks. Students have mentioned that their classmates have repeatedly checked out the same book after they are done making it difficult for other students to use it.

Library Hours

The library's hours of operation was also an issue brought of frequently throughout all the focus groups. Students felt that the library should be open later and also on weekends. One student stated, "because we work during the week and we go to school, so we practically have just Sunday [to do homework] and its only open for like five hours." Students felt that the library should be open later on weekdays and have more hours open on Sundays. This was particularly a strong issue for NAH. Students at NAH expressed frustration that their library closes early on Fridays and is not open on Saturdays. Since such students typically study in large groups, it is hard for them to find a place to meet when the library is closed.

Recommendations

Computers and Related Equipment

Providing more computers for student use, including computers dedicated to group work, should be considered. The problem of not having enough computers available for students might also be alleviated with an increase in bandwidth which would allow students to feel more comfortable using their personal computers/laptops.

It is also apparent that a better printing system needs to be instated at the libraries. Options may include, a computer that is strictly for printing purposes, prominently posting printing rules (i.e. no cost to students), better maintenance of existing printers, and informing students of an alternative when printers are down.

Textbooks

Students found the presence of textbooks on reserve to be an important part of their library usage. The continual changing of textbooks for different classes as well as the publication of new editions would make maintenance of a larger, up-to-date selection difficult. It is our recommendation that Library Services work in conjunction with instructors and various academic departments at STC to make these textbooks available to students.

Space

With increased enrollment at STC, space is an issue in all areas of college operations. Students would value and appreciate having more space dedicated to Library Services. The addition of more space would also help with many of the atmospheric issues that students seemed to experience such as quiet areas being too close to open areas.

Atmosphere

Students displayed a true appreciation for the more relaxed atmosphere that has been instituted in many of the libraries. They believe that the addition of food and beverage services would make it a "coffee shop" type atmosphere that they would find even more appealing. Library Services should consider whether such an option would be cost effective.

Tutors

Students across three campuses (Technology Center, MVC, and Pecan) expressed interest in having tutoring services available to them. Library services may consider working with the CLE to coordinate having tutors available on selected days and times throughout the week, or available for private one-to-one appointments with students.

Technology Campus

There were several issues that need to be addressed in regards to the Technology Campus. Students at this campus felt that their library lags behind the others in having a more open, inviting atmosphere. They felt that this stoic atmosphere contrasted greatly with the more relaxed areas that could be found at the other campuses. Additionally, many felt that there needed to be more electrical outlets for laptop usage, updated software on campus computers, and staff trained in the software that was available to them.

NAH Campus

Since students at NAH were more frustrated than other campuses with the limited space issue, this should take priority in deciding what changes to make at this campus. Students feel their library is too small to facilitate group and individual study – both of which students stated are crucial to their success in this field. The creation of more study rooms and extended library hours would alleviate such issues and should be considered. NAH students also were unique in requesting three dimensional type models of various parts of the human body. The feasibility of having such models available for students to check out should also be explored.

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