Zoning the Library for Silent, Quiet, and Collaborative Study

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"Where is the quiet study space?"

"Can you ask that group to quiet down?"

"This is a library—why is it so noisy in here?"

"I can't even hear myself think."

These are comments frequently heard at our library service desks and I have overheard statements like these while visiting other libraries. When the University at Albany Libraries opened its doors to its three libraries for the Fall 2015, students found that the various spaces in each library zoned for different types of study space: collaborative, quiet, and silent. At each library's entrance, students encountered large signs serving as a key to the three zones with the zones' names and color codes, along with brief descriptions and examples of acceptable noise levels for the zones. Public services staff was equipped with brochures and library maps outlining the new zones and were prepared to help students find the ideal zone to meet their needs. After two semesters, these zones have proven effective in providing students with different types of space conducive to a variety of user needs. This article outlines the rationale for creating these zones, the approach taken to zone library spaces for noise and study needs, and the general concepts behind successfully implementing this facilities change.

Noisy and quiet library spaces

Prior to zoning the University Libraries, students on campus referred to the University (or main) Library as the noisy library, serving as a social hub on campus. Students referred to the Science Library as a quiet library. Students also considered the Dewey Graduate Library (located on the downtown campus) a quiet library. While the Science Library's regular users were happy to self-regulate the noise levels by shushing one another, students frequently asked staff members in the University Library to intervene in overly noisy areas and to assist users in finding quiet study space.

Some of the factors that caused these persistent problems in the University Library included a lack of designated quiet study space, a limited amount of group (collaborative) study space, furniture selections that did not match the library's intentions for noise levels, and inadequate electrical and data for today's library user. A large portion of the University Library's basement level houses the periodicals, microforms, and government documents collections. This space was also unofficially designated the quiet study space in the University Library. The area previously had a staffed service desk with employees who would enforce noise levels. The furniture in this space complicated maintaining the area for quiet study; it contained numerous large group tables conducive to groups gathering for collaborative projects, rather than individual study carrels.

The first floor group study area regularly filled up quickly since it had limited tables and space, supporting an increasing demand for collaborative workspace. Groups would seek out other areas in the library with accommodations that suited their needs. They would proceed to make noise and disturb other library users. The large tables in the periodicals area were a natural fit for these groups, and they regularly migrated into this area. This created a stressful situation for periodicals staff in that it was difficult for them to maintain quiet study in this area. Employees were ambivalent about trying to maintain a quiet environment for users who regularly used the periodicals area while trying to help users who very much needed a space where they could collaborate.

The Science Library, while traditionally the quiet library, also experienced a transition in space use and noise levels. The Science Library houses other university (non-library) offices, including the Center for International Education and Global Strategy, along with the Center's Intensive English Language Program (IELP). The university is increasing its focus on international student recruitment and enrollment, which, requires more support for international student services and increases demand for IELP's English classes. To meet this demand, additional IELP classrooms, also used as group study rooms when classes are not scheduled, were constructed in the Science Library basement, thus increasing traffic and noise in the library.

Establishing the zones

The University Libraries were short on collaborative space and quiet study space and it was clear that something needed to change. The Associate Director for Public Services decided to zone the libraries for collaborative, quiet, and silent space to address this issue. This project's goals were to provide users in each library with a variety of spaces to meet different needs and preferences by developing noise level zones conducive to different types of study, expand the collaborative space footprint in the University Library, designate collaborative space in the Science and Dewey libraries, and designate quiet and silent space in all three libraries. The University Libraries' student advisory board was asked to weigh in on this endeavor and the concept was met with plenty of enthusiasm.

The student advisory board provides a sounding board for ideas like this; by bouncing ideas off of these users library administration was able to determine if the zoning concepts were headed in the right direction and that they would be well-received by the greater user community. We were able to determine that our users wanted these changes in our spaces and would engage with these redefined spaces. Engaging groups of users in the early stages of library space planning also helps libraries avoid making costly mistakes

In preparation for zoning the spaces, the Libraries examined how patrons naturally used library spaces and how different spaces within each library flowed from one to the next. Staff members performed floor counts (tallying the number of people by activity in different spaces) to gather data on how library patrons used spaces as then configured. Existing floor maps for the University and Science libraries were used for taking the counts, and each floor map was divided into sections based on the floors' physical barriers (e.g., walls, furniture clusters, PC clusters).

Three activity categories—independent work, group work, and computer use—were selected for the floor counts to document how patrons were using the library facilities. Staff members walked through each floor at designated times during a two-week period to tally the number of patrons engaged in the three activity categories in each area. Tallies were recorded on printed copies floor maps and data were entered into Excel spreadsheets by library, floor, section and activity. Graphs were generated for activities and facility use by date and time to aid in visualizing and interpreting how library spaces were being used.

Department heads in the University Libraries' Public Services division defined the three types of spaces with behaviors and noise levels that would be considered appropriate and acceptable for each type of space. Collaborative zones were defined as spaces where people work in groups using normal speaking voices and could use headphones with their mobile devices and computers. Quiet zones were defined as spaces in which infrequent, quiet discussions are allowed, cell phone conversations are not permitted, and users should set their cell phones to vibrate. Silent zones were defined as spaces that are strictly silent with no conversations permitted, and all devices should be silenced and used with headphones.

With these definitions in mind, the department heads examined the floor count data, usage summaries, and the floor maps for the University and Science libraries. The group examined which library spaces patrons were using and the activities in which they were engaged, and discussed how to zone the buildings based on the users' activities and usage data. Once preliminary concepts for zoning the facilities were in place based on how patrons were using the buildings, the Public Services Department Heads also looked at how discrete spaces flowed from one to the next, as well as how sound could potentially bleed from one space to the next. It was decided that the silent zones should be spaces that are isolated from other areas and sounds, so that there would be no chance that noise from collaborative spaces and busy service desks would disrupt those in areas zoned for silent study. Quiet zones, on the other hand, did not have to be isolated and could be adjacent to collaborative spaces as long as significant noise did not bleed into these areas. While most spaces were zoned in a way that fit how the students were already using them, it was necessary to zone a small number of spaces based on each building's flow, rather than observed use, because it would have been difficult to maintain the desired noise levels in these areas. For example, an area in the Science Library was zoned as a quiet space, instead of a silent space, because the space was adjacent to a collaborative area and group study rooms; we could not guarantee that noise from the collaborative area and those in the adjacent spaces would not hear noise from group study rooms.

Furnishings: A key to effectively zoning spaces

Having the proper infrastructure in place is important to get patrons into these redefined spaces and to use the spaces as intended. Matching furniture to the spaces' intended uses was extremely important: large tables for groups in the collaborative spaces, and independent study carrels in the quiet and silent spaces. Prior to zoning the library, large tables were in areas supposedly used for quiet study in the University Library periodicals room. The space was transformed into a

collaborative zone since large numbers of tables were already in the space, and to help address the need for additional collaborative space in the University Library.

Significant electrical and data upgrades were performed throughout the University Library to address users' needs and to encourage patrons to use the second and third floors, which would be zoned as quiet and silent study spaces. The University Libraries installed 600 electrical outlets and 61 wireless access points to improve the outdated infrastructure.

Communicating about the zones

The University Libraries' Marketing Coordinating Committee worked with staff members throughout the Libraries to develop a marketing campaign, titled *Find Your Zone*, for the new noise zones. Each space in the three libraries is clearly labeled and color-coded collaborative (green), quiet (yellow), and silent (red). Large professionally made signs with a color-coded key to the various noise zones, including what is considered acceptable noise levels in each zone, were posted at each library's entrance. Trifold brochures with the key and definition for each zone were created and include floor maps with zone information labeled and color-coded for quick reference.

Staff members at the service desks handed out these brochures with each patron interaction, including patrons approaching a service desk inquiring about different types of study spaces. The information is also highlighted on the University Libraries' Web site, it is discussed in library tours for current and prospective students, and staff members promoted this information to patrons whenever an opportunity arose. Social media posts included the hashtag #UAlbanyLibsZones.

Success

Now our patrons largely self-regulate the noise zones; however, occasionally patrons approach a service desk, send an email, or use the chat reference service to ask a staff member to assist with maintaining noise levels appropriate to the designated space. The initiative has received positive feedback from patrons through email, in person, and in student advisory board meetings, with many patrons thanking us for implementing the new noise zones. This project has been determined a success based on data obtained from floor counts conducted after zoning was implemented. The data show steady and significant increases in use of spaces previously under-utilized.

The Libraries now provides users with a variety of study spaces conducive to their different noise level needs. While zoning was executed in response to patrons' concerns, careful planning—gathering user feedback, observing facility use, examining flow between spaces, matching furniture to noise levels, and providing adequate electrical and data throughout all library spaces—and heavy marketing were essential to this project's success.