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## How We Did It: A User Experience Seating Survey Success Story

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### ABSTRACT

Academic libraries are changing – the emphasis is no longer focusing solely on collecting print material, because the way we find information has changed radically in the last two decades. As a User Experience (UX) Librarian, my focus is to assess and improve the services that our patrons come in contact with. The State University of New York at Oneonta's Milne Library will undergo a renovation in 2017 and prior to the architectural plans being completed, we wondered what will the alterations would mean for our users? Our UX group took the initiative to study the spaces and seating choices students use when in the library, to determine what would be most beneficial for them in the renovated building.

During the fall semester of 2015, coinciding with the weeks when the library was most active, our group undertook a two week study of the seating choices the students had at their disposal in the hopes that we could understand what motivated them to work in certain areas, as well as improve what we offer them in a renovated building. The study required a great amount of time and dedication from library faculty, staff and student workers, but in the end we gathered an enormous amount of data that directed our decisions toward the final renovation in ways that we hope will make the library a more welcoming and engaging place for all our patrons.

I have often been asked, “Are libraries relevant anymore, especially with so much information online these days?” As a librarian, my knee-jerk reaction is, “Of course.” But what we librarians must remember is that to keep ourselves, as well as our buildings, vital and relevant, we need to always be aware that the library is a constantly growing organism. If we do not allow for continual growth and change, it will stagnate, and at some point the answer to the above question might be a simple “No.” We do not wish our libraries to become mausoleums for books, rather we want to see them flourish and shift into the 21<sup>st</sup> century where they are vibrant and exciting hubs of scholarly and social activity.

I am a User Experience (UX) librarian, which often comes with a myriad of definitions. Aaron Schmidt states, “UX is about arranging the elements of a product or service to optimize how people will interact with it” (*Library Journal*, 2010) and I find it an appropriate definition for what our work entails. UX is not a new phenomenon. Early developments can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, inspired by increasing production efficiency and output, leading to the development of technological advancements. It has been used for many

years, in diverse fields, to increase productivity and satisfaction among manufacturers and their customers.

However, adopting UX in the library world is a relatively new trend and one that I believe is necessary to keep our libraries relevant and flexible enough to adjust to the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century library patrons. As a UX librarian, my job is to flip the glasses that I usually see the library through—I am no longer looking at our space or service points as a librarian, but rather as a patron, in order to determine if what we are providing for them truly is what they want and need to be successful. Some of the early work we focused on at our institution was the website, which is often the initial way new users find us. In the years before the Internet explosion, patrons understood what the term *catalog* meant. Today our students use a different language when they are looking for sources, such as “how do I find a *book* or an *article*?” Thus, it seems only logical that we shouldn't force them to use the “librarian” language we often have on our websites, but rather alter our wording to make their searching seamless—a “Find Books” link is much easier for modern patrons to locate our resources than the traditional “Classic Catalog” tab we often use.

In 2017, the Milne Library at the State University of New York, Oneonta, will undergo a multi-million dollar renovation. Our library is five stories with a collection of approximately 350,000 print books, with additional collections of magazines, newspapers, and journals in print, microform, and electronic formats. We also house United States government documents, New York State documents, maps, a children's and elementary education collection, multimedia material, special collections, and the College Archives. The Technology Center, Bibliographic Services, and Networking occupy the basement floor of the library, with the remaining four stories used to house the various collections, provide work areas for staff and librarians, as well as public areas for patrons' use. Additionally, we have a café that occupies one corner of the first floor and we have condensed our own work areas to allow for several departments on campus to use as they do not have office space as of this writing.

With the renovation, we will be bringing three additional services to the building: the Center for Academic Development and Enrichment, Student Disability Services, and the Faculty Excellence Center. While we are excited to have these services housed within our building, we are unable to increase the square footage of the library; thus, it became obvious that we needed to assess what services and service points our patrons value the most in order to provide relevant data to the architects and consultants to assist them in designing the plans for the new building. In the fall of 2015, the UX group developed a study to observe the spaces students utilized the most, when they utilize these areas and what could be improved for them with the renovation in mind.

We selected two separate weeks in which to complete the surveys: the week before Thanksgiving break (which coincides with mid-terms) and the week of final exams in December, as these are the times when the library is most heavily used. We chose the four floors of the library that students use for studying—the sub-basement and the first, second, and third floors. We omitted the basement level, which houses the Technology Center, as well as other non-library units (with the exception of Bibliographic Services). Creating floor maps, with all seating options represented, the UX librarians, evening and weekend staff walked the floors on a 3-hour rotation, from 9 am to midnight on the days the library was open until 1 am. On the weekends, we modified the survey times to accommodate

for when the library was open, which was fewer hours than during the weekdays. We noted on the floor maps where the students were sitting, the type of furniture in use, and the number of students in each space (i.e., group tables/rooms versus Individual carrels). Additionally, we took advantage during our mapping to take time to speak with the students, thus gaining valuable input from them about what they found advantageous or lacking with the furniture and seating availability and location.

When the 2 trial weeks were complete, we analyzed the data collected. We created Excel tables and graphs to help visualize what the information was telling us. Additionally, we worked with the visualization software, *Tableau Public*, as another option to display the results. We have a similar study from the University of British Columbia Library to thank for helping in our discovery and use of this software.

So, what did we learn? Most of the data did not surprise the UX librarians. Students who needed quiet spaces to study spent their time on the third floor (already designated as the quiet floor) in individual wooden carrels or in study rooms. Those who were doing group work sought out the larger tables on the second floor or in the sub-basement. And the first floor, where Circulation and Reference services are located, as well as the café, tended to be more social areas where soft-seating was preferred for more casual group discussions or places to meet with friends or faculty members. However, when we shared our data with the consultants and architects, we were flooded with gratitude, as this was exactly the type of information they desired in order to ensure that the remodeled library fit the needs of those who use it as an avenue to succeed during their college experience—the students. The students told us what was *useful*, *usable*, and *desirable* for them (the three tenants of good UX) and the renovations plans were altered to make sure we could accommodate as many aspects of their wishes as possible.

Perhaps the most important result of the survey was the students became aware of our desire to listen to and take into account their hopes of what the renovated library will be. Of course, we may not be able to provide everything they wish for due to cost and space restrictions. But what proved most vital to us, as UX librarians, was the connections we made with them. By making the students aware that this was *their* library and their opinions were not only of interest to us, but highly valuable and would be taken into account

as the consultants and architects worked through the numerous revisions of the plans for the renovation, it gave the students a feeling of investment in what the future held. As a bonus, they learned who *we* were, and by asking what mattered to them—giving them a voice in the process—made it an empowering experience for everyone.

Since the completion of the seating survey, our students seek out the UX librarians, to give us additional feedback and input of ways we can improve service points, as well as additional aspects of how the library works for them, not only after the renovation but also currently. We are excited to see that the equation is being flipped—instead of the librarians determining what they believe is “best” for students, we are now listening to what the students need for their own success

during their time at SUNY Oneonta. We hope that in giving them this opportunity, we not only bring more students into the library, but also set them up for a love of life-long learning and libraries, once they leave our campus.

I am truly grateful for all who participated in making this a success. This project could not have been accomplished without the invaluable work and dedication of: Lyndsie Robinson (UX librarian); Heather Beach (UX librarian); Charles O’Bryan (Director of Libraries); Andrea Gerberg (Assistant Director); Robin English (Evening Supervisor), Jodi Oakes (Library Support Assistant); and Adam Wood (Instructional Support Assistant).

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