Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Students and Libraries May Benefit from Late Night Hours

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Abstract

Objective – To assess late night library usage, including a demographic profile of students benefitting from late night hours, with an analysis of the services and resources they used, and whether the use of late hours is connected to student success.

Design – A mixed-methods approach including quantitative demographic information alongside qualitative user feedback collected using a web-based survey.

Setting – A large, public research university library in the United States of America using late night operating hours (11 P.M. to 7:30 A.M.) to create 24-hour library availability 5 days per week.

Subjects – Undergraduate and graduate students.

Methods – Using the university's building monitoring database (BMD), researchers collected data on which students were using the library building when late night hours were in effect for fall and spring semesters. Along with the date and time of entry, the BMD collected the university ID number of the students and their email address. Using student ID numbers, information from the BMD was cross-referenced with anonymized demographic information from the university's institutional planning office, enabling comparisons across a range of other data, including students' discipline, GPA, and other information.

Researchers emailed students the web-based survey, directly targeting users who had made use of the library's late night operating hours. Survey questions investigated when students used the library, explored student aims when in the library, and asked students to rank the tasks they were trying to accomplish while in the library. In addition, researchers sought student feedback on what services and resources they used during late hours, asking students to identify services and resources they would have liked to use but which were not offered during late night hours, and inquiring about students' sense of safety and security when using the library late at night.

Main Results – In total, researchers report that 5,822 students, representing approximately 21% of the campus population, visited the library during the late hours, for 22,383 visits. Researchers report that 57% of late night users took advantage of the extended hours on more than one occasion, with 39% returning three or more times. Sundays were the most popular day, while Thursdays were least popular. Researchers also tracked entry times, with the most popular entry times occurring between 11 P.M. to 2 A.M., accounting for 80% of all late night visits. While survey respondents were drawn entirely from the late night users, 63% preferred using the library late at night versus standard daytime operating hours.

The overall survey response rate was less than 5%. Survey respondents (n=243) reported participating in a variety of activities while visiting during late night library hours, with quiet study (87%), working on projects or papers (72%), and group study (42%) as the most frequently reported activities. Respondents also ranked the top three activities they hoped to accomplish while in the library: quiet study (50%) and work on projects and papers (34%) remained top activities, though group study (20%) fell to fourth place, slightly behind the third-ranked activity of printing or copying documents (22%).

Respondents reported their use of services during late night hours, indicating use of the university's wireless Internet access, library

printers, computers, and online databases and electronic resources. The only staff service point available to students during overnight hours, circulation services, was used by 16% of respondents. Regarding student responses about what services were not offered that they would have liked to have available, the researchers reveal that "[f]ood and drink were overwhelmingly the most frequently requested services" (p. 374), followed by a desire for more comfortable furniture and spaces. Some respondents also requested that late night hours be extended to seven days a week. Overall, 96% of those submitting user feedback reported a sense of security, an important consideration for late night hours.

Regarding the sample, researchers found that the population of late night library users closely reflected the overall university population. An independent samples *t*-test comparing the differences between the average GPA of late night users to the average GPA of the overall university population was statistically insignificant. For undergraduates only, there exists a small difference between the retention rate of students using late night hours (84.6%) versus overall university retention rate (80.2%). A Pearson's chi-squared test revealed a statistically significant association between late night library use and retention rates for both undergraduate and graduate populations when compared to the retention rates of non-late night users across the same student groups.

Conclusion – This study reveals that undergraduate students in particular make use of late night hours for studying or other academic activities, and positions the late night model as a successful customer service offering at Kent State University. Although researchers do conclusively connect the availability of late night hours to student retention and academic success, their study points to the need for further research exploring this question.

Commentary

The study anticipates trends recently discovered elsewhere, and contributes to the broader conversation of library operating

hours. For example, Sanders and Hodges' (2014) related study found that 22% of the on-campus student population visited the library between 11 P.M. and 8 A.M. (p. 314). Meanwhile, Sowell and Nutefall (2014) report that 90% of student survey respondents (n=825) agreed that the availability of late hours had a positive impact on their academic success (p. 108). While further study is needed to determine the connections, if any, between student success and retention and library operating hours, it is hard to deny the positive perceptions that students have regarding late night hours.

With a minimal staffing model and only one service point available, this research does not provide evidence regarding how academic libraries should staff late night operations. However, the qualitative evidence from this study provides valuable information on the types of services, resources, and technologies required by students who take advantage of late night hours. Libraries looking to offer 24-hour access should be prepared to have basic university technology resources, such as wireless Internet access and printing. The researchers note the minimal demand for technical support for these services, perhaps suggesting that late night users do not expect the same level of service as during the day. It is unsurprising that late night users require options for food and drink, and desire comfortable spaces when working late at night, and this study reminds us that libraries should account for this need if drawing on this study as evidence for their own operating hours decisions. Finally, the inclusion of the survey instrument as an appendix would strengthen this article's presentation of survey results. Without knowing the questions posed and other details of the instrument, it is difficult to judge the validity of the data, including the reliability and replicability of the study.

The large quantitative sample size, comprehensive quantitative data collection, and comparisons to overall institutional data all help contribute to the validity of this research (Glynn, 2006). Regarding how data are reported, n-values are only given for some of the responses, while others are only reported as percentages, making direct statistical comparisons a challenge. This shortcoming is compounded by the fact that the authors report different n-values for the quantitative dataset throughout the manuscript. This data, objectively collected by the building monitoring system, should remain constant. If there are corrected n-values for reporting different results, the reasons for these corrections should be described in detail for the benefit of the reader. The combination of minimal statistical analysis and unexplained shifts in n-value reporting do call into question the validity of specific results being reported. This is particularly worth noting when it comes to an important research question informing this study, about the attempt to connect late night hours to academic success and student retention, which ultimately receives limited attention.

As university libraries look for additional ways to assess their student impact under tight budget constraints, and as students demand greater flexibility, operating hours will continually come under examination. Even with the limitations of this study, libraries considering the adoption of late night hours should find this research to be useful evidence that extended hours can have positive customer service benefits, and that such hours address students' need for study space at times most convenient for them.

References

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