Feature article

The library as congenial space: the Saint Mary's experience

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Abstract

The author, appointed University Librarian in 1999, saw that the library was not fulfilling its potential from the perspectives of congenial environment and student awareness. She used student marketing projects to examine perceptions of the Patrick Power Library, and develop ways of raising its profile within the university community. The tired-looking building, a product of the 1970s, undermined the quality of staff and services. She used the information gathered through the projects to enhance services as well as make the library a more welcoming and vibrant space to attract students, without a major infusion of funds. This article charts the development of the library over a two-year period.

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Saint Mary's University is located on one square city block in Halifax, Nova Scotia. It is a compact campus with one library building. Approximately 7,500 students take undergraduate and Master's degrees in a variety of disciplines. The university is primarily known for its business school, which also offers a doctoral program in management. Notable research activities are also undertaken in the arts and social sciences.

First impressions

When I first set foot in the Patrick Power Library in 1999, I was struck by how dark and uninviting the library was. A product of the 1970s, its austere foyer was dominated by dark brown brick walls, dark brown floor tiles, heavy wooden panelling, and low lighting. Past the foyer and into the reference room, I was pleased to enter an airy space with huge windows facing the trees, shrubs and lawns of the campus. However, the décor of the room itself echoed the same austerity of the foyer. The worn carpet, in what must have originally been fuchsia pink, formed a backdrop to functional, angular steel furnishings. The exterior wall, other than the windows, was the same dark brown brick. Worn fuchsia upholstered armchairs, the one nod to comfort, were all facing outwards to the campus grounds. These chairs were almost all full. It struck me that the students and faculty occupying them were turning their backs on the library, preferring to look elsewhere, even when using our materials.

The challenge

It was clear to me that we had to transform the library to make it a welcoming place. The irony was that I learned very quickly that the Patrick Power Library is known for its efficient, thorough and friendly service; however, I felt that these positives were undermined by the gloomy and tired demeanour of the building itself. It was also clear that money for renovations was very

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scarce. It seemed that the library tended to be overlooked in many quarters across the campus because few people really knew what good things went on inside its walls.

I set myself, as the newly appointed university librarian, the challenge of raising the profile of the library, and marketing it in any way that I could. I had my own ideas about what we needed to do to make the library a more welcoming, and thus more heavily used, space. A library survey of faculty had been done ten years before by the Senate Library Committee of the time. I convinced the current committee to undertake an update of the survey for comparison purposes. While the survey was primarily about collections and services, some faculty did take the opportunity to comment on space. The most common complaint was that, some years before, the periodical collection has been moved to the third floor, so it was no longer possible to browse through current periodical issues in the comparative comfort of the main floor reference room.

I consulted many faculty, staff and administration one-on-one for their concerns, but I had no systematic way of assessing student opinion. My approaches to the Student Association Executive were not successful, as the library did not appear to be high on their list of priorities. However, a new executive was elected earlier this year, and there have been encouraging signs that a more academically-minded student administration is now in place.

The audience

As often happens, a serendipitous opportunity arose to explore student views of the library. A marketing professor, Dr Harold Ogden, who offers a popular course in market research, approached the library to be the subject of a market research project. The students' assignment was to plan a project, test it, and then present it to the class.

Online services of the library

Two projects set out to examine how students felt our online services could be improved. In some cases, they echoed our own frustrations and planned improvements:

- the Novanet (consortium) catalogue should be Windows-based;
- all research databases should be Web-based and freely available;
- reserve readings should be online and full text;
- the library should be equipped with laptop ports;
- the library's Web pages should be improved and expanded;
- printing, downloading and e-mailing capabilities should be available from all databases.

In some cases, however, the students wanted services that were already available to them:

- online tutorials and self-help guides;
- access to the other services on the campus network;
- online renewals;
- self-initiated inter-library loan within the Novanet consortium;
- remote access to most databases;
- online inter-library loan request form;
- staff available at the workstations to help students and answer questions, so that the student does not have to approach the reference desk.

What this told us was that in some way we were not conveying to all students the range of services available online. Also, the students seemed unaware that the majority of our workstations allowed access to all the services of the network, not just the online catalogue. A separate group of workstations is devoted to databases which, for reasons of cost, are only licensed for use on dedicated machines.

What was also clear from the sample responses was that the students did not take into account the size of our university. They expected the same depth, breadth and sophistication of online services as they could find at major research libraries in multi-campus universities.

What was also evident, however, was that the students were aware that service enhancements cost money; the underlying message, though, was that as fee-paying consumers, they are entitled to that level of service.

This consumer attitude has become prevalent on every campus, as fees increase annually. Many of us in the profession have noted in recent years the more demanding and less patient and accepting nature of our student clientele.

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Do students use the library for their research, and if not, why not?

Two projects set out to examine where students prefer to do their research, and what changes would attract them to using the library more. Their sample found that a significant number of students (and, we suspected, the market researchers themselves) preferred to do their research in large bookstores, for the following reasons:

- atmosphere;
- up-to-date materials; and
- coffee shop facility.

The most surprising point to us was the question of up-to-date materials. From our own experience with large bookstores (and in Halifax, the students were obviously referring to Chapters), the non-fiction stock, and the availability of knowledgeable assistance, is very limited. It appeared that it was the atmosphere and the coffee shop which attracted the students most. Other students preferred to use the Internet, because "it can be used at any time day or night"[1]. This survey group seemed unaware that they could, in fact, access most of the library's databases at their convenience, too. Their responses showed an *either* (the library)/*or* (the Internet) mentality.

When asked what services would encourage students to use the library more, the majority of respondents in the sample group cited a coffee shop, and more resources. Other factors mentioned were updated materials; food and beverages allowed in the library; better climate control; atmosphere; lounge area; and better lighting. The final factor cited was promotion of the facilities. It was clear that the students themselves recognized that they were not fully aware of what was available to them. It was heartening to us that there were a significant number of positive comments about the library, too. The students considered the library clean; quiet; a good study atmosphere, with friendly and knowledgeable staff who are aware of the resources.

The student researchers told us that they discovered that "a lot of students are putting more emphasis on atmosphere and ease of access (i.e. Internet) than the more traditional library methods. This is due primarily to the perception that at a library, books are hard to find and resources complicated to use"[2]. It is interesting to note that the sample survey group contained a significant number of graduate students; we were surprised that they would share that view. It was also somewhat surprising that in terms of additional books, the undergraduate students seemed to be referring to textbooks. It is library policy not to purchase required textbooks. Given the cost of these items, it is perhaps understandable that students would like the library to buy them on their behalf. It is unlikely, however, that students would find these textbooks at the large bookstores that they told us they prefer to use rather than the library.

What we learned from the surveys

While the point of the projects was to identify the potential for market research and devise a potential instrument, it fell to us, as the client, to realize the survey beyond the test group. For lack of resources, we have chosen not to apply one of the surveys on a larger scale. My goal, however, was to determine from the students themselves what biases they had regarding the library.

We learned a lot from the students, not just about how they viewed the library, but also about the process itself. We learned that market surveys can work if you ask the right questions, and that one can only ask the right questions if one understands the product adequately. For example, when the students were researching why people did and did not use the library, they found good information. When they were asked to research why students did and did not use electronic databases, their projects were weaker. Most library surveys make the error of surveying only those who come to the library. With an increasingly remote client base (off-campus and part-time learners) surveys should investigate the needs of students who do not come to the library. The amount of library research expected of a student is another issue to be considered. While some faculty members insist on academic research, there are still programs where students can graduate without writing a research paper.

The best marketing is word-of-mouth; we know that students often consult peers rather than approach the reference desk. Yet if the reference staff are efficient, friendly, helpful and solutions-based, the students will generate positive word-of-mouth about the

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service. On the other hand, good marketing is soon negated if the student meets an unfriendly staff member.

If the student arrives on campus believing that all they need to know they can find on the Internet, the battle to market the library is a very tough one. Teaching them how to dig deep into the Web and evaluate their sources can be a difficult task.

Smaller institutions do not have the personnel to undertake the time-intensive task of showing students the range of appropriate tools on a one-to-one basis. Large class settings and workbook assignments can do little more than raise awareness a little. Libraries tend not to follow up on these sessions to see how much information has been retained.

Market surveys may tell you that you need products or services which you cannot afford, or which do not mesh with your overall objectives. A positive result of a campaign may lead to such volume of use that a cherished one-to-one service is no longer sustainable. Finally, a marketing campaign can create an expectation of immediate action when your ability to deliver may be only over the long term.

The theory

While I was considering how to make the library more attractive to students, the university administration was considering the larger issue of attracting and retaining students in an increasingly competitive environment. A little research into the topic found an article on student loyalty which I found relevant in the library context.

The Relationship Quality-based Student Loyalty (RQSL) model was developed by Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2001), as presented in their article in the *Journal of Service Research*. Their thesis was that "student loyalty is mainly determined by the dimensions of relationship quality". Their study found that as well as the expected quality of teaching, a student's emotional commitment to the university is essential to build student loyalty. The researchers found that quality of service is a major determinant of student loyalty, and that quality can be attributed not just to teaching but also to the university service infrastructure, such as library and computer labs. Thus, I extrapolated from their findings that if students find the library a congenial place to visit, and have a positive experience while there, they will gain a level of emotional attachment which will lead not only to their being frequent users, but also to their conveying a positive message about the library to their peers.

The library's response to the marketing projects

While it would have been easy to dismiss some of the student findings as impractical, uninformed, and even inaccurate, we took their submissions very seriously. We worked with a consultant to overhaul our Web site[3], and have added a substantial amount of informational material to it. Thanks to the establishment of the Canadian National Site Licence earlier this year, we are now able to provide accessibility to a large number of databases such as Web of Science from any computer, through the library's gateway. A system upgrade has now moved our consortium catalogue from telnet to Web interface, with the corresponding services such as inter-library loan and renewals now also available through the Web. A cued laser printing system has streamlined the printing process, and students can also choose to download or e-mail their database searches. The reference staff continue to provide assistance at the computers, as they always have. Laptop ports are not yet available in the library, although a complete refurbishment of the residences this year means that students now have free high-speed Internet connections in their rooms, from which the library Web site is accessible. The new commerce building is also fully equipped with laptop ports. Reserve readings are not yet online, but the continual addition of full text databases means that many readings are available through our commercial licences.

Discussions are also underway for a netLibrary licence to a collection of e-books in the area of management. It is expected that the licence will be in place in the Fall.

The Congenial Space Project

The two thrusts of marketing the library to students were to take the library to wherever they are, by continually improving

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accessibility to resources; and second, to make the library a welcoming and comfortable environment to visit. For some time, a number of people across the campus have had concerns that increasing class sizes and student demand, coupled with a growing deferred maintenance list, has eroded comfortable space. At the same time, the nature of teaching has changed to include a much greater emphasis on collaborative class projects. Collaborative projects require places in which to collaborate. Space and opportunity for casual, contemplative, congenial exchanges are limited. The challenge this concerned group set themselves was to take advantage of under-utilized spaces, dead-ends of corridors, and blank walls, and create environments that provide low-cost solutions to the very human need to congregate, converse, contemplate, or just sit.

The group called themselves the Congenial[4] Space Project. Notices were posted around campus inviting interested parties to an organizational meeting. An interesting mix of people attended: English professors; art gallery curators; student services staff; facilities and project managers; students; and three librarians, including myself. A round table discussion quickly showed a high level of consensus regarding what was wrong with the campus. It also proved an opportunity for us to voice our plans for the library, based on the information we had gathered. My goal was to market the library through this group as a congenial space, and thus raise its approval level on campus.

An action plan was developed, to

- Identify a contact group for consultation and support.
- Conduct an inventory of campus meeting places with photographs, hours of accessibility, restrictions on use.
- Conduct an inventory of unused space which might have potential as informal meeting places.
- Hold focus groups with students, and call for proposals for improving and expanding the use of these spaces.
- Hold a workshop in the art gallery, where selected proposals could be visually enhanced by designers for a student/staff audience.
- Display the resulting proposals and designs in the gallery for general input and feedback from the campus community.

The inventory has been completed, and the next meeting is scheduled for just before the Fall semester. Perhaps because we have already been proactive in this regard, and because the library is a space common to all students and staff, we have taken the primary focus in this project.

Work completed

Oscar Wilde said that the only thing worse than being talked about, is not being talked about. That aphorism has in a sense been my watchword, as I try to move the library higher in the general campus consciousness. I have made it an objective to have some item about the library in every issue of the campus newspaper. It is clearly working: I rarely go anywhere on campus these days without someone asking me about the changes in the library. As I said earlier, I have been in this position for two years now. When I think back to the gloomy and worn appearance of the library when I arrived, and look around today, I feel we have made considerable progress on very little money. What has made it much easier for me is the support of the librarians and staff, and the energy and resourcefulness of my administrative assistant, Brenda Bentley.

The reference room

My administrative assistant has a flair for improving appearance without a big budget. She found us suppliers who have re-upholstered furniture at a reasonable cost; built us laminate computer workstations and coffee tables to lend a fresh appearance to the reference room; and she has tackled discrete sections of the library to make improvements where we could not afford to renovate a whole area (see Plates 1 and 2). Another fortunate opportunity arose, when we approached the university's art gallery to loan us some artwork. They had in storage a collection of abstract acrylics by a local artist, Nellie Beveridge Gray. Nellie Gray had donated her work to the university some time before, but it had never been displayed as a set. One corner of the reference room, now brightened up with new laminate computer

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Plate 1 Reupholstered chairs and new artwork add a pleasant focus to the reading room

Plate 2 New monitors and workstations brighten the OPAC area

workstations, had two dark brown brick walls. At our request, gallery staff mounted the artwork in a grouping on those walls, and positive comments started almost immediately (see Plate 3). I had learned from the University of Calgary Library's experience when they opened their large Information Commons in 1999[5]. The extensive use of artwork throughout that space has elicited a huge response from students. The nature of the response has been that the artwork humanizes the space, and shows respect for the users, in contrast to a stark computer lab environment where

Plate 3 The paintings brighten the workstation area

computer monitors and keyboards are the dominant features.

The archives

The university commissioned a feasibility study for an archive some years ago, and as a result, a small archive was established in a cramped space within the library. There is, however, considerable interest in expanding the archives. Once again, opportunity presented itself. When the Freedom of Information/Protection of Privacy Act came into force in 2000, it was clear that the university had to develop a central records management program. In many cases in Canadian universities, the responsibility for records management rests within the same department as university archives. Since I was given the authority for administering the Act on campus, I proposed to the president that we expand the archives to include a records centre. As luck would have it, a small department was vacating the room next to the archives to move to a new building, and we were able to take over the space and renovate the whole area – on a very small budget (thanks to my administrative assistant's negotiating skills). We now have an archives area double the size, although as yet, no more staff. The timing is ideal, because planning is now well under way for a year-long celebration in 2002 of the university's bicentenary, and the archive is in the forefront in the planning process.

The conference room

Our conference room, a large and airy space looking out to the quadrangle, has great potential as a meeting and seminar space. Yet it has been little used for that purpose over the years, as food and drink were not allowed in

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the library. We have torn up the worn fuchsia carpet and replaced it with composition tile. We have replaced the seating. The biggest change has been a relaxing of the drink policy, so that if the room is booked for a meeting, the university's Food Services Department can now provide coffee. I expect that by the Fall, we shall find that the room will be in great demand.

Work in progress

The Folio Café

The most visible change at the moment is The Folio Café. The café is slowly appearing in a desolate and drafty space outside the library doors, which was formerly the location of some vending machines. I approached the company which holds the contract for all food services on campus about my idea for a café in this space. There was some initial reluctance, given that the recent contract with Coca-Cola had meant a proliferation of giant pop machines all over campus. The manager was willing to listen, however, and I pointed out that our long opening hours, seven days a week accessibility, and lack of other food services nearby, would guarantee a high volume of sales. I did, however, have to compromise on the type of food outlet. I wanted a customized coffee shop with a bistro feel to it. What was on offer, and not open to debate, was a Tim Horton's franchise. While Tim Horton's is extremely popular in Canada, I did not want a branded outlet; I wanted something more in keeping with a library and a university. Our library has a facsimile of the *Book of Kells* in its main foyer, and a small rare book collection. I had seen the movie Shakespeare in Love, and was amused by the images of Shakespeare toiling over a folio at his desk, coffee cup at hand. The manager and I both compromised a little: he got his new Tim Horton's outlet, while I got to call it The Folio Café. A mural on the shared library wall will depict Shakespeare at work, and the name of our new venture (Plate 4); while the official franchise name will still be clearly visible in the outside window.

While many long time library staff have concerns that we have relaxed our food and drink policy – and are going as far as having a café by the library, it is clear that this move is considered a big improvement in library

Plate 4 The Folio Café mural

service to the majority of our users. Some of my colleagues in other university libraries (John Teskey, at the University of New Brunswick, for example) have negotiated profit share arrangements with their cafes; that option is not, unfortunately, open to me at this stage, but I shall pursue it in the future.

General lighting

We have been successful in having the lighting upgraded both outside the library and in the main foyer. The arrival of the Folio Café has helped make the new lighting grids a reality. We hope for further lighting improvements in time for the university's bicentenary, when the foyer will house archival displays.

Work under consideration

There are some potential improvements which are more major and will need to be carefully evaluated and budgeted for if they are to occur at all:

Periodicals browsing area

I was struck by the comments from faculty that they missed the current periodicals browsing area, which had been located, some years ago, in the reference room, by the large picture windows. The need for space to add more computer terminals had necessitated a relocation of the bulk of these shelves. While most titles are now shelved upstairs with their backfiles, we keep two bays of "Top 78" titles for general browsing in the reference room. The armchairs near these bays are almost always full. The resemblance to the Chapters bookstore chain model is obvious. Just as Chapters usually has a Starbucks coffee shop in its quarters, our students in particular

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responded to the concept of a coffee shop/ easy chair/browsing area on the main floor of the library. Unfortunately, to expand this area to include all of our current periodicals is not feasible at the moment. I hope to liberate some space on the main floor as we replace hard copy government documents with online resources, but I plan to use this high visibility space for a writing centre.

The writing centre

The writing centre is itself an offshoot of my activities to market the library. Discussions held last year in University Senate led to the forming of a Senate Task Force to examine literacy issues across campus. As I had submitted a proposal for a writing centre within the library as part of my budget presentation, I was appointed to the task force. A cornerstone of our recommendations to Senate this Fall will be that top budget priority be given to the creation of a writing centre. I support this initiative for many reasons, whether the final version is housed within the library or in some other location. However, I particularly want to see it within our walls because it will then become part of the supportive, helpful, friendly and comfortable image I want the library to project to the students. In turn, that image will evoke an emotional commitment in them which, as the research I referred to earlier has shown, translates into student loyalty. Our library, as is the case with many others, has seen a reduction in foot traffic and reference statistics over recent years as the Internet and the World Wide Web has grown. On a very practical level, a writing centre, working closely with all teaching programs, cannot fail to attract many students to the library, and users translate into increased statistics; and statistics translate into performance indicators both within the university and beyond. Another opportunity to be directly involved with the teaching process is a further motivator.

Relocation of the library administration offices

It has troubled me since my arrival that the library administration offices are in what I call "prime real estate" on the main floor of the library. I would like to see them relocated to the second floor by the staff lounge, so that the ground floor can be completely committed to student space. With minimal renovations we could create group study areas as well as a small library instruction classroom.

The atrium

The north-west corner of the second floor of the library overhangs the front entrance, and thus creates a dark forecourt. Diagonally opposite is the free-standing science building. It was clear from the Congenial Space Project inventory that the university is in critical need of small group meeting space. I submitted a renovations proposal to connect the library, the adjacent arts building, and the science building by a large glass atrium. This atrium would provide light and airy meeting, talking, or just sitting and dreaming space, with comfortable seating and decorative planters to add to the aesthetics of the environment. It would also provide shelter for students and staff crossing between buildings in the winter. I knew that with a long list of deferred maintenance projects already on the books, this plan was not going to be funded. However, I think it is important to raise the idea as a talking point, and already I have heard it favourably mentioned in several contexts. Another bonus is that the president likes the concept, even though he is unable to authorize funding for it as yet. This is likely to be a project I shall pursue through the development arm of the university.

Further thoughts

One has to ask if, rather than overhauling a too small 1970s building piecemeal, it would be easier to start again with a brand new building of a size appropriate to the university in the twenty-first century. In theory, of course, it would be – but in practical terms, I can see that the chances of us receiving funding for a new building are extremely remote. There are several competing universities within the Halifax area; and even within Saint Mary's, a new library building is very low on the priority list. The best we could hope for is a generous bequest, targeted specifically to the library. The university is currently dealing with such a bequest for a new stadium, and is still faced with raising the remaining funds needed to build it. Thus, I shall continue to fine-tune the existing library

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as much as I can, to provide a congenial space for all who use it.

I stated earlier that the library building is a product of the 1970s, and as such, it has a long list of deferred maintenance projects waiting for funding. The student survey respondents had cited better climate control as a factor which would attract them back to the library. This is, unfortunately, one area where to date we have made little progress. Parts of the building are too hot, while others are too cold. Despite the efforts of the university's maintenance staff, these problems persist year round.

Dr Ogden, the marketing professor, recently approached the library again to be the subject of student marketing projects. This time, he wants the students to develop focus groups. It has been a year since we received the previous project reports, and many of the items under discussion at that time are now underway or have been completed. I am interested in revisiting the topics of the earlier projects, and testing them in a focus group environment. I hope that we shall learn that we are on the right track. Whatever the outcome, it is my plan that the library will continue to develop as a dynamic, responsive and vital organ of the university. Whether additional funding is available or not, I am convinced that much can be done to meet the needs of our clientele. Moreover, as we continue to be talked about in a positive light in university circles, perhaps the additional funding we would like will also be attracted to us.

Notes

1 Taken from the executive summary of one of the project reports.
2 Taken from the introduction to one of the project reports.
3 See http://www.stmarys.ca/administration/library
4 "Congenial" is defined in this context as "existing or associated together harmoniously; pleasant; agreeably suited to one's nature, tastes or outlook".
5 See http://www.ucalgary.ca/informationcommons/

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