



ARTICLE

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Supporting Student Wellness and Success through the LSU Libraries Relaxation Room

ABSTRACT

As students are increasingly overwhelmed with stress and anxiety, especially during exam weeks, it is important for libraries to demonstrate their impact on student wellness and success. While libraries have traditionally been focused on the educational aspects of student growth, it is important that as students' mental-health needs grow, the range of libraries' services grow as well. One way Louisiana State University (LSU) Library is meeting this need is through the creation of a Relaxation Room during exam weeks. The room helps the library engage students during exam weeks, alleviate library anxiety, and encourage the idea of library as a place for community. By focusing on students' needs, the library positions itself as a community center on campus and a leader in helping to develop well-rounded students.

KEYWORDS

academic libraries, library outreach, student engagement, library programming, community

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The Relaxation Room at the Louisiana State University (LSU) Library is a former conference room set up with tables, chairs, and activities to allow students to take a break from studying for exams. It is a low-cost way to engage students during exam weeks by providing a variety of stress-relief activities and materials, and to reinforce the idea of a library as place. The Relaxation Room (RR) was created in spring 2016 when the newly formed Programming Committee noticed the high number of students in the library during exam weeks. The committee saw an opportunity to show support for students through the creation of a Relaxation Room.

The Programming Committee envisioned the Relaxation Room as a student-only space—repurposed from a staff meeting room—with puzzles, games, coloring sheets, and origami materials to help students decompress during finals. While this space is fun, it was designed to meet students' needs. It challenges the idea that academic libraries are boring and monolithic by encouraging students to socialize and hang out. The Relaxation Room supports LSU's mission "to achieve the highest levels of intellectual and personal development" (Louisiana State University 2020) by providing a space where students can decompress as well as grow interpersonal relationships. Having a space where students can relax, connect with other students, and retreat from the stress of academia is integral to the intellectual and interpersonal growth of our students. The room helps students engage with each other and the outside world and helps them develop stress-coping techniques that the students can

call on throughout their lives. The Relaxation Room reinforces the idea that the library is the heart of campus by holistically serving students.

Literature Review

LSU Library's Relaxation Room is a de-stressing service for students that many libraries have adopted in some form: Michigan State University has a "Stress-Free Zone" with classical music and puzzles; Dalton State College hosts a "Stress-Free Week" during finals featuring a coloring station and games; University at Albany, SUNY hosts a "Stressbusters" event that provides games and toys (Flynn 2017; Whitley and Burger 2019; Newton 2011). There is also the "Living Room" at the University of Tennessee, with its comfortable furniture, games, and snacks; "Micro-Breaks" at Memorial University of Newfoundland, which provide toys, stress balls, playdough and more; and the "Finals Resting Place," with comfortable furniture and a relaxing environment at the University of Louisville Kornhauser Health Sciences Library (Walker, Sandelli, and Smith 2018; Rose, Godfrey, and Rose 2015; Smigielski and Nixon 2004). These programs share a similar theme: they provide a student-specific space for relaxation and a reprieve from studying. Some of the programs differ in the details, but the overall concept is to boost student success and build community within the library setting. LeMire et al. (2018) mention finals week programming and other stress-relievers as a common activity among many libraries (LeMire, Graves, Farrell et al. 2018). These programs can be an important part of student success and are a great way to build community through student engagement.

The RR encourages students to see the library as a place not only to study and learn but also to engage socially and actively. Libraries are natural "third places." As Ray Oldenburg lays out in his 1999 book, *The Great Good Place*, the first place is home, the second place is work, but the third place provides social engagement and capital. In third places, people are free to come and go as they like. Third places are accessible and inclusive to everyone; conversation flows and, while open to anyone, there are regular visitors. We designed the RR with all of these characteristics in mind. The room is accessible and open to everyone, there are no barriers to access, and students can use the room however they need to. Montgomery and Miller (2011) argue that libraries need to become these third places in order to build community and to demonstrate "how academic libraries are advancing the mission of the academy by evolving into a place for active learning where students create their community" (235). Communities are important for students because it is through community that they find belonging and a sense of purpose. The RR takes traditional library space and utilizes it in a non-traditional way to meet student needs.

As noted, through programs like the RR, LSU libraries are not only supporting the university's mission but also promoting student success by providing opportunities for students to make connections with each other. In her 2020 article, Barbara Eshbach notes, "by providing opportunities for students to make connections with others on campus and participate in activities that foster effective learning practices, spark curiosity, and engage them both academically and socially, the academic library can have a positive impact on student learning and personal development" (1). A recent study by Croxton and Moore (2020) suggests that social activities done outside of the classroom play an important part in student success (413). The RR provides opportunities for students to socialize with friends or make new acquaintances through the use of board games, puzzles, aromatherapy jars, or even by sharing colored pencils. Often, one or two students will start a puzzle and another group will come in to finish it. The students have common concerns to bond

over: exam weeks and stress. It is vital that students have these opportunities to come together; this is how students find belonging and purpose. Students who have a community where they feel welcome and at ease to participate are more likely to succeed (Croston and Moore 2020 414). Jong-Ae Kim (2016) recommends academic libraries host spaces where students can study as well as take a break from their studies: “Academic libraries serve as places to socialize, relax, and communicate as well as places for information seeking and learning. They serve as valued public spaces on campus that enrich users’ academic and social experiences” (509). Through library engagement, students see that the library is inclusive and has something for everyone (Whitley and Burger 2019, 1). The library is evolving to meet not just the academic needs of students but their social needs as well—all while building community.

The RR is beneficial for students’ mental health and contributes to their overall wellness. “Students frequent the library in greater numbers at the end of the semester and during exams, a time when they are likely experiencing the highest levels of stress and anxiety, making it an ideal location for wellness support (Rose, Godfrey, Rose 2015, 4). Exam weeks put library faculty and staff in a prime position to assist students with their mental wellness. As the American College Health Association’s fall 2019 assessment shows, 29.3 percent of students surveyed said their anxiety impeded their academic performance; 23 percent cited depression and 40.2 percent cited stress as negatively affecting their academic performance. In addition, 50.3 percent of students said they experienced loneliness and 76.5 percent reported experiencing moderate to high amounts of stress (2019). Students use the Relaxation Room and report feeling better afterward. It is natural for libraries to see a student’s need and fulfill it, even if the need is not a traditional, library-based need. Librarians do not stop being librarians at the end of a reference question. If a student needs access to a resource, librarians help students find that resource, be it a journal article or the Student Health Center’s phone number. “By asserting their place in this form of caregiving, academic libraries can contribute to the lifelong health, wellbeing, and successes of their students (Ramsey and Aagard 2018,333).

The Relaxation Room and other exam week programming help students overcome their library anxiety. Libraries can be scary and intimidating; even approaching a desk to ask questions can put many students on edge. Mellon’s 2015 study found that “75 to 85 percent of students. . . described their initial response to the library in terms of fear or anxiety” (278). However, the same study discovered that just by interacting with a librarian, that anxiety was reduced (2015, 280). The RR brings students into a positive space designed specifically for them. It shows the students that librarians and staff care about the their well-being. It is an act of kindness and shows warmth toward students, which helps build trust. “Any program that brings students into the library space demonstrates the value of the library as a supportive place. Students interacting with librarians during library programs and events can help build positive relationships that could lead to individualized research consultations. Together, all of these promote academic rapport and student engagement” (Eshbach 2020, 4). A student may use the RR without ever reaching out for help; just providing the space to students shows them that libraries are here to help them.

The Relaxation Room is great for students, but it also helps bring the library to the forefront of the discussion about services that are essential; it helps showcase the multitude of resources libraries have. “Leveraging space, collections, and campus expertise and priorities can all help illustrate libraries’ value to institutions” (Kelly 2020, 340). An RR or other programing like it can be implemented as simply or as grandly as library missions and budgets allow.

It is vital that we continue to explore, question, and get curious about ways to expand our libraries' resources to connect and engage with students. "It is too easy to retreat into more traditional forms of librarianship in the face of tight budgets and reduced staffing. Instead, just as academic administrations are questioning many of the "sacred cows" of twentieth-century college life, we should also continue to investigate and question the role of the library as a place in our users' lives (Montgomery and Miller 2011, 237).

The LSU Library is open twenty-four hours a day, five days a week during exam weeks. The committee saw this as an ideal opportunity for outreach to students and to challenge the old-school notion that a library is meant only for studying. For the duration of exam weeks, we converted a staff-only meeting space into the Relaxation Room. This space is easily accessible (if a bit hidden) on the second floor near the Access Services Desk. Since the room is not normally used by students, it was not a highly sought-after study space. Using this second-floor meeting space also allowed the committee time to set up and take down the RR without disturbing other library meetings and activities. The room was stocked with coloring sheets and colored pencils, origami instructions and colorful paper for folding, bubble wrap donated by our Interlibrary Loan Department, and puzzles and board games donated by library faculty and staff. The room was also stocked with LSU Library-themed postcards that students could fill out and send to their family and friends. We decorated the door and room using materials bought at Dollar Tree to catch students' attention and make the room feel inviting. The final cost for stocking the room—including pencils, postcards, and decorations—came to one hundred dollars, with the pencils and decorations accounting for thirty dollars of that total.



Figure 1: Relaxation Room door decorated for Spring 2017. Photo by Randa Lopez Morgan.

Publicizing and Running the Relaxation Room

The Programming Committee advertised the room within the library using flyers posted around the building as well as directional arrows leading from the ground floor to the RR. The Committee created a blog post on the library's website and posted information and photos on the library's social media accounts to promote the event.

The committee decided that while they did not want to have someone staffing the room the entire time, it would be a good idea to have a staff member present throughout the day to check on the room, clean it up or reset the games and puzzles if needed, and to take a head count of the students for assessment purposes. The committee members volunteered for two-hours shifts during which they would peer into the room periodically. The members also used this time to write down how many students were in the room at the time and to pull any completed surveys (discussed below).

Assessing the Relaxation Room for Spring Midterms 2016

Aside from counting the number students using the room throughout the day, the committee developed a short survey that students could fill out for a chance to win a small gift card to a local coffee shop. The gift card was donated by a staff member. The survey asked if the students enjoyed the room (yes/no), what they liked best (open-ended), and what they would like to see in the future (open-ended). (See Appendix for the survey.) We felt this survey was the easiest way to determine whether students liked the room, what aspects they specifically liked, and what they wanted to see in the room if we were to continue to host it. As this was our first semester hosting the Relaxation Room and the committee was learning on the fly, the survey was an expedient way to take a convenient sampling and get a general overview of the room's favorability. While the committee decided against running a focus group—because of time and budget constraints—several student workers were asked their opinions of the room during the planning process; all indicated they thought the RR would be well received.

There were some limitations in the assessment measures. When committee members checked the room, there was no way of knowing whether the students present had been counted already. Additionally, if a committee member couldn't check the room during his/her shift, the counts for that day were incomplete. Finally, the committee members' working hours prevented them from taking head counts during the night. The last count was taken at 5:00 p.m. each weekday, which meant the committee missed about fifteen hours of usage counts. They assumed high usage of the room at night judging by the amount of time it took to tidy the room in the mornings, but this assumption couldn't be measured.

Results of the Assessment

The Relaxation Room's assessment results during spring midterms 2016 were incredibly positive and encouraging. The committee counted roughly a hundred students during midterms and received thirty-one completed surveys (see table 1). Twenty-nine respondents enjoyed the room, while one did not. The students indicated they liked the origami and bubble wrap the best, and they wanted snacks and drinks in the room going forward. The responses to our survey echoed similar comments found in the literature. Survey respondents at the University at Albany, SUNY give positive feedback for their "StressBusters" event (Newton 2011, 172.) One hundred percent of respondents to the University of Louisville Kornhauser Health Science Library survey said they "thought the Finals Resting Place worthwhile and. . .should be repeated" (Smigielski and Nixon 2004). And comments left by students at Memorial University Libraries in Newfoundland asked for more coffee and snacks (Rose, Godfrey, and Rose 2015). The committee took the lessons learned from the spring implementation of the Relaxation Room and were able to apply them in future iterations.

How the Room Has Evolved

Since 2016, the Relaxation Room has been a standard part of exam-week activities at LSU Library. However, the design of the room and our assessment methods have evolved. The committee gathered a lot of feedback from students indicating they wished the room could remain open longer. The current schedule has the room open during LSU's concentrated-study period, from the Wednesday before finals to the Friday of finals. The room stays open during the

weekend with limited monitoring by Access Services staff, graduate students, or student workers.

Number of surveys collected	31
Did you enjoy your time in the Relaxation Room?	Yes: 29 No: 1 No response: 1
What did you like best?	Origami: 7 Popping bubble wrap: 7 No response: 5 Coloring: 4 Games: 4 Postcards: 4 Everything: 3 Puzzles: 2 The silence/relaxed environment: 2
What would you like to see in the future?	Snacks/drinks: 7 No response: 5 This room every day: 4 Connect Four: 2 Inspirational board: 2 More bubble wrap: 2 Puppies: 2 Bean Bag Chairs: 1
	Contests: 1 Less intricate coloring pages: 1 More advertising: 1 More origami: 1 Music: 1 People: 1 Something to make us stand up: 1 Video Games: 1

Table 1: Survey responses collected for spring midterms 2016 Relaxation Room

Committee members continue to conduct room checks, but they are no longer taking a count of students in the room. In fall 2017, the committee purchased an inexpensive door counter—similar to those used in many retail stores—and positioned it so that students entering the room activated it. This approach comes with its own flaws (for example, one student entering and exiting throughout the night can cause high numbers to be recorded), but the committee believes it provides a more accurate count of usage than did the previous approach.

The survey went through many iterations throughout the semesters, including asking how the students found out about the room (usually through a friend), how they were using the room (most frequently “to relax” with “studying and relaxing” coming in second), and whether they had visited the room previously (most often “no,” although we do have our fair share of



Figure 2: Students using the Relaxation Room during finals week in fall 2017. Photo by Randa Lopez Morgan.

repeat users). We also provided space for open comments, which usually ranged from requests for food and places to nap, to enthusiastic feedback such as “This is awesome!” and “Just discovered this place. Seriously, SO AMAZING. Y’all are amazing. I wish nothing

but the best for all who arranged this magical place.” The survey also collected information about the students’ majors, which mostly fell into the humanities and social sciences, as well as engineering. The committee decided to discontinue the survey in fall 2018 feeling that it had served its purpose. It was replaced with a large whiteboard on which students could write their comments instead. One of the downsides to this approach concerned the temporary nature of notes on a whiteboard: some comments could not be documented by the committee before eager students erased them to use the board for studying. Committee members attempt to address this problem by taking photos of the board throughout the week.

The committee has added a sensory table with calm-down bottles, aromatherapy with scented oil, kinetic sand, stress balls, word puzzles, and “fun” furniture like inflatable chairs and bean bags. The committee has had to replace games and puzzles over time, either by purchasing them or through staff donations. One student-led change was the addition of music through a Spotify playlist featuring piano music or spa music that runs continuously throughout the week. The space has also been a great place to try out weird or fun new ideas for helping students relax. The committee has tried cardboard Jenga, fishing for positive fish (a game in which students fish for positive and encouraging words written on the backs of paper fish using makeshift fishing poles), coloring seashells, and posting positive quotes around the room. Not all of the ideas have been winners, but students have had fun and have appreciated all of the attempts at changing the room.

Factors that differentiate the LSU Library Relaxation Room from other universities’ relaxation spaces include the access to the space itself and the wide variety of materials and activities in the room. The room has no barriers to access; it doesn’t require swiping in or showing identification. The room isn’t constantly monitored, so students can feel more at home. While committee members do stop by to straighten the room, the students feel free to let down their guard. There is a wide array of resources in the room that appeals to a variety of tastes and preferences. In selecting materials for the room, the committee attempted to incorporate each of the five senses: kinetic sand and rice for touch, sensory bottles filled with glitter and beads for sight, essential

oil aromatherapy for smell, music for hearing, and a Keurig coffee machine contributing for taste. The students use the room in different ways; many use it for relaxing, but they also use it for studying and collaborating with other students. They use it to play and to release pent-up energy; they use the room to de-stress in whatever way benefits them.

Lessons Learned

The committee has learned several important lessons over the course of their experience running the Relaxation Room.

1. Every semester is different.

The things students liked one semester may not appeal to them the following semester. During some semesters the music is a big hit, while in others the students will turn the music down or off. This means it's important to try new approaches, to experiment with new ideas. Get weird with it and don't be afraid to fail. If an idea doesn't work as planned, figure out what went wrong and try a new variation. Try approaches meant for different age groups. When people are tired and stressed, it is often the simple ideas that bring the most relief. The most important thing is to provide a space that is homey and comfortable; students will begin to see the library as not just a place for studying but a place where they can hang out and relax.

2. Students handles stress in their own way, and it is not always positive.

Not everyone reacts positively when they're stressed; sometimes items get destroyed (usually stress balls) or go missing. While these twenty-somethings are adults, stress, lack of sleep, and improper fuel can lead to poor decision-making. It is easy to get frustrated and want to shut the room down when students behave negatively, but the committee tries not to let one bad apple spoil the bunch. For every student who treats the room disrespectfully, there are twenty students who help clean the room up or leave encouraging comments.

3. There is no right way to do a Relaxation Room.

A relaxation room can be implemented in variety of ways to fit the space and budget of any library. Don't have an available room? A cart with coloring sheets and pencils also works. The committee has had success using a corner of the lobby to create a relaxation space, putting out puzzles, board games, or other small items for students to enjoy during non-exam times. During LSU's Welcome Week, the committee set out a mini version of the Relaxation Room in the lobby for students to use in-between classes. Don't have a budget for puzzles and games? Ask your library faculty or staff if they have some they would like to donate. Many of our RR games and puzzles were donated by people cleaning out their closets. The committee has even received puzzle donations from graduating students. Through the committees' partnership with the Access Services department, the library has been able to circulate the RR's board games during non-exam weeks. Students can check out a game for a limited amount of time and play wherever they want. It's a way to help bring students together and encourage collaboration and problem solving even when the Relaxation Room is not set up.

4. Get student feedback along the way.

Ask students what they want to see or what helps them to relax. This can be done via a survey or through conversation during room checks. Asking students for their opinions allows them to have a voice in the decision-making process and helps them to see that this space is for them. Not every idea they

suggest is feasible (such as nap spaces and a constant supply of snacks), but get into the habit of saying, “Great idea! How can we implement that?”

The committee has learned that students are truly appreciative of small gestures of comradery. Many of the comments from the survey were not suggestions but simple thank-yous. It feels great to be able to do something for students that has all the benefits mentioned above, and to show that the libraries care about the students and their well-being.

COVID-19 and the Future of the Relaxation Room

In spring 2020, the LSU campus was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic much like other institutions across the world. It led to the closure of the LSU Library building and forced staff and faculty to work from home. Due to the ever-changing nature of this virus, as of this writing, there are no plans to host the Relaxation Room in fall of 2020. The LSU Libraries’ foremost priority is maintaining the health and safety of LSU students, faculty, and staff. The Relaxation Room will return when it is safe for everyone to return to normal campus life. In light of what we’ve learned through the pandemic, important changes will be made, including more regular cleanings of the Relaxation Room and sanitizing the circulating board games more frequently during the semester. As we’ve done in previous semesters when influenza was spreading on campus, we will remove the more hands-on items, such as the sand and rice tubs, and wipe down surfaces with Lysol. The committee does not wish to limit the number of students who can access the Relaxation Room at one time, yet it is a precaution we will need to consider. We may also need to relocate the Relaxation Room to a space that allows for better social distancing. These conversations are ongoing. Encouraging students to have routine good health practices, especially during times of high stress, will be a focus moving forward. Through the pandemic experience, the committee has learned that the library can also be a place to help cultivate not just mental health but physical health as well.

Conclusion

Students’ exam-week stress will always be an issue in academia. As the place where most students study during high-stress times, libraries are in a prime position to not only help students access resources that can help them in times of stress but also to provide outlets for that stress. Doing this benefits the library as well as the students. It brings positive attention to the library and challenges the outdated idea of what a library is and what it can do. As our public libraries are turning into community centers, academic libraries can become the community centers for their campuses. The addition of a Relaxation Room in an academic library can be a great way to not only engage students who are already in the library but also to help students overcome their library anxiety, to support student wellness, and to present the library as a third place. Libraries have always helped to support students educationally, but as the needs of students have grown, it is incumbent on libraries to grow as well.

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Appendix

Spring Midterms 2016 Survey

Did you enjoy your time in the Relaxation Room?

Yes

No

What did you like best?

What would you like to see in the future?

If you would like to be included in a drawing for a chance to win a small prize, please fill out your name and email.

Name: _____

Email: _____