Understanding Students Use of Technology and Space in Milner Library: An Investigation of Study Habits and Library Use

An Ethnographic Study

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It is my first day of classes as a freshman at Illinois State University. I am walking around trying to familiarize myself with the campus layout, and decide to walk into Milner Library to take a look around. Walking around, I see that they have study rooms but no one is using them. I notice a “no food and drink” sign on the wall but see four people eating and drinking at the tables while they study.

I am a little confused because I’m not sure how to locate the books I need for class. I decide to sit down at one of the computers and explore Milner Library’s website to see what is available. After about an hour of investigating the catalog I find I have access to several online journals and e-books; I also find I can get call numbers and talk to a librarian using text and instant messaging. After doing my own investigation, I decide to talk to a librarian and ask for a tour of the library. She checks an iPod out to me and explains how it will give me a virtual tour explaining where everything is located. After I am done at the library, I decide to look around to see what else Illinois State’s campus has to offer. Close by, I find a coffee shop in the Bone Student Center called the Cage II and see that students are also using this space to socialize and study, along with other places on and off campus.

As a senior now, it is easy to see the draw of coffee houses and café-style restaurants as study places, but as classes become increasingly more difficult more study time is required and the library serves as a quiet and productive atmosphere for me. This is primarily because of the library’s many readily available resources and presence of the library staff. Cafes may still have their appeal but overall, they are not designated places for studying where quietness is an expected courtesy. Overall, I concluded that the Milner library has a more conducive atmosphere for intense study and research.
Summary of the Content

In this ethnography, we examine how ISU students use Milner Library and its services. First, we explore how students use Milner’s spaces as seen through our observations and what library-related needs students vocalize in surveys and interviews. We also consider how other spaces around campus are used for study and why students sometimes choose to use these areas instead of the Library. Second, we look at what technology is available at Milner and how that technology has changed the traditional role of the university library.

This project stems from our understanding that Milner Library and academic libraries in general are changing as the result of the expansion of information in recent decades attributed to advancement in digital technologies. We would like to discover different ways the library can better adjust to accommodate today’s university students’ needs.

We intend to find that advancements in technology that make it possible to access the library from the internet play a major role in how students use Milner today. The internet is used many ways. It is an access to information for every-day things, such as the correct spelling of a word, or today’s news. The internet is also tool for research that is used to find sources for a paper by searching online journals and articles. Additionally, the internet is used as a tool for studying, like doing a Google search for a term on a study guide, or checking Blackboard for documents. Obviously, the internet, which has only been around a couple decades, has opened up countless opportunities for students as well as educators, and has changed the way research is done and the way students study. Because the internet is accessible nearly everywhere on or around campus, the domain in which studying or research can take place has expanded from only the library to just about anywhere.
We further expect to be confronted with the fact that students have specific preferences when it comes to the environment in which they study. These preferences may include the desire for food and drink during study sessions, preferences for quiet isolated spaces, or preference for a space that welcomes chatting for a more interactive learning environment.

The Changing Role of Academic Libraries Today: Some Ethnographic Studies

Today’s college students have, for the most part, grown up with computers and digital technology. Because of this, they are familiar with obtaining information in a way no generations have before them. Technology changes the way we communicate, gives us more opportunities to multitask and changes the way we see and use physical spaces.

Some of students’ study and research needs are met by computers and the internet, but others are not. In a student interview, ‘Jane’, an Illinois State University alumni, reported that she prefers using physical copies of materials over digital because, “having the hard copy gives me the opportunity to highlight important sections of the text and take notes on them,” Physical modification isn’t the only reason though, library staff also reported that many students lack the skills to search and find credible sources. ‘Lyra’, a librarian at Heartland Community College, who has been working in public and academic libraries since 1993, stated the she felt many students lack competence searching for, “the ever elusive credible source,” and states that our ‘viral culture’, the feeling that everyone can be an expert, is a contributing factor to this problem. Solving this issue, she believes, is as easy as being open to talking with a librarian before and during
research in order to sharpen searching skills and gain valuable knowledge about available databases and other materials.

The ways in which students’ use of the library and research needs have changed has been studied by ethnographers; perhaps the most well-known of these studies was at University of Rochester (Foster et al 2007). Nancy Foster points out that the Millennials (the generation that grew up with the growth of technology) prefer to learn, “anywhere they may be, in social settings as well as academic, using digital technology in ways that suit them individually,” (p. 68). This means that learning often does not take place primarily in classrooms or study spaces; according to Lomas and Oblinger “Anywhere students congregate is a venue for academic work, a coffee shop is just as likely as a dorm room or lounge,” (Foster p. 68). She goes on to explain that the Millennials value information and communication accessibility, but they also need spaces that are free from the constant activity that ubiquitous technologies provide. Thus, she states that “this may be the first generation that comes to the library to escape from communication,” (p. 69). This tells us that communication has become so prominent in our lives that it can become a distraction when trying to concentrate on academic related activities.

Foster and Gibbons examined how students make papers happen. The anthropologists thought it would be beneficial to observe a student go through each step of the writing process from the initial research to the final submission in order to get a clear picture of how it is done. First, they talked with instructors to get idea about the content and expectations that were necessary to get positive feedback on the paper. Next, they recorded the student’s use of facilities and library space and the last step was to follow students through their process of researching the web and other mediums for information. They then compiled their data and used it to broaden the scope of their understanding of students’ writing methods.
The first important conclusion they came to was that there is no “composite or average student,” (p. 79) but a diverse student body that has differing needs and desires. This led them to believe a library’s job is not merely to comply with each individual need but take all needs and suggestions into account in order to make all encompassing decisions that best serve the student body and the academic institution as a whole. They concluded that a “user-centered” design for a library may sometimes be at odds with the institutions educational needs and therefore may need to be reformed at times to fit within a university’s ideal. In our observation of Milner library we saw that there is a petition at the circulation desk to build a coffee bar in the library. While this petition reflects student’s desire for the library to meet this need it is up to the library to decide if that is a need they feel they are required to spend their resources on. The result of this argument, as reinforced by Foster, is that things which can only be done in the library must have priority over things that are found in a variety of non academic places.

The same year, Joanna Bryant (2007) evaluated the use of space at Loughborough University’s library. She did so by using ethnographic methods to see how specific spaces are used, and addressed the role of the library in the modern world.

"Many predicted the decline of the academic library, as digital communication methods allowed access to information via the Internet... instead, there is actually higher demand for library buildings, as places where members of the academic community can access information in a variety of formats, and make use of a range of learning environments” (2007: p. 8).

She argues that modern day libraries are most beneficial when there is a flexible learning space available for student use.
A Brief History of Milner Library: The Endless Need for Renovation

Milner Library was not always located where it stands today. Prior to the library’s expansion, this place of knowledge resided in what is now known as Williams Hall. The need for the library to expand was brought on by the rapid growth in enrollment of Illinois State University. Between the late 1950’s and the late 1960’s, enrollment vastly increased from 3,200 students to 13,000 with a prediction that this number would triple in the next decade. With these ever growing numbers, the need for an expanded library was a top priority. The plans to construct the new Milner Library were announced in 1968 and it was to be built on the north side of Illinois State’s campus.

The new Milner Library would be part of a “Super Block” construction that would include a student center, residence halls, as well as parking for 7,000 cars (Boyd, 2001: p. 1). The budget of $116.2 million was requested in September of 1968 (p. 2). However, this budget, which included the other “Super Block” structures, was cut drastically by the board of higher education and the only building that remained was the library.

In May of 1969, the cost of the building was cut down to $8 million but construction was delayed because of the most tumultuous year in Illinois State’s history which included the Vietnam War, race riots and labor disputes (p. 2). With a reduced budget of $7.2 million and a new construction firm, features such as skylights, enclosed study areas and light fixtures had to be eliminated to accommodate the new cost. After a final firm change in 1975, the new Milner Library was built and opened its doors in 1976.
The design of the building is reflective of a European/International tradition, incorporating large windows, open air stairs, a voluminous feel, and an emphasis of vertical and horizontal lines, externally. When Milner first opened, it was capable of holding 800,000 volumes. Additionally, it had 2,733 chairs, 2,063 carrels, 117 tables, and 12 conference rooms (p. 3). There was a great emphasis placed on regularity in the design of the library, explaining why all the floors look basically the same. From the beginning, the new structure was plagued with construction flaws. In 1981 the State of Illinois filed a lawsuit against the appointed construction firm over the leaking roof and the debate over whose responsibility it is to pay for it continues today. In 2000, a renovation of the 2nd floor was completed and plans for the offsite storage facility were underway.

Milner underwent drastic changes after the approach of the technological revolution. In the late 80’s and early 90’s, the transition from electric typewriters to computers was beginning. “Starting in 1989, patrons went to a computer screen when they wanted to look up a book, rather than thumbing though bibliography cards in a drawer.” (Wyman 1999). In a staff interview, Lyra reported that when she first started working, “The technology available for use was limited to a card catalog, a couple CDROM catalogs and only one computer with a dial up internet connection for public use.” In the mid-1980’s, a large area of Milner’s second floor was set aside as a computer work area. “By 1997 there were 6,200 computer (really, microcomputer) workstations on campus, including those in faculty offices as well as microcomputer laboratories for student use in Milner Library, Williams Hall, and in Stevenson Hall” (Wyman 1999). In many ways, Illinois State was becoming a new campus.

As an academic library, Milner, similar to other libraries historically, started out as a quiet place for independent study; but people today are using it as a social learning space. We have
discussed how Milner has changed with the times historically, and now we will investigate how Milner might need to change for the modern day technological revolution. This is an important question to ask in order to fully understand its role in student’s lives today. In an e-mail received from the head of access services, we found that there was an 83% increase of laptop checkouts, a 5% increase of students requesting books through academic interlibrary loan and a 73% increase of students requesting materials through public interlibrary loan. These substantial increases prove that the library is becoming more digitalized. Given the upcoming renovations, we hope our study can make a contribution to discussions of what the new facility should look like and the services it should offer students.

Methods

Our research of Milner Library and its surrounding spaces to determine where students included a number of methods: observations, interviews, and surveys. From simple observations to large scale surveying and more personal interviews, we have extracted a large amount of data about Illinois State University students. Collectively, we gave 9 interviews, did 11 observations and handed out 2 surveys.

As Illinois State students ourselves, observing a population of college students presented few problems, since we belong to this peer group. Removing ourselves from this peer group in order to analyze results, we began looking at Milner as researchers. We placed ourselves in some of the popular study spots on campus to see how students were using the space. Many of our observations took place on 5 floors of Milner Library where we observed the behaviors of students from a distance while they were going about their daily routines. In addition to making
observations at Milner Library, we looked at some of the popular places that serve food and beverage that are close to campus, such as coffee shops and eateries in the student center.

On top of doing observations, we also handed out surveys on different floors in Milner Library to see what students were working on the library and why they chose to come to the library as opposed to other places on or near campus. Not only did we survey students at Milner Library, but we also conducted interviews with some of the library staff to get a different perspective of what goes on at Milner Library.

**Our Data: Multi-Purpose Milner**

What is the best way to find out what the academic library is like today? As ethnographers, we observed many important points of interest. First, Milner is a multi-purpose space; students use this area in many ways, and differently at varying times of day. Second, Milner provides students with more services than they know how to use and library staff intervention is often necessary. Third, there seems to be a demand for changes that suit the wants and needs for a more productive learning environment, especially pertaining to beverage and food consumption. We all made personal observations of the library to research these important points.

**Who is Using Milner?**

On a Sunday afternoon, an observation took place with the goal of identifying who was coming in and out of the doors, and to also answer questions such as: ‘What do most patrons bring with them?’ ‘Do they come alone or in pairs?’ And, ‘How diverse are library users?’
During the 30 minutes spent observing only 4 individuals brought books out of the library. While this does not account for individuals who store their books in a backpack, it’s still a surprisingly low figure when compared to the 50 plus patrons walking out the doors. This tells us it is probable that most students are relying much more on materials found online and the internet and less on physical books.

It was also noted that the groups that enter together usually meet up outside the library or inside the door. Since they are not coming from the same destination, this could mean these individuals are in a loose knit network brought together only by an assignment related to a class. This is reinforced by the fact that the groups were going separate ways when they left the library. Counting a single group as one unit and an individual as one, the patrons coming in as groups outweighed the number coming in as individuals. In an interview with “Katie,” a reference librarian, it was learned that the staff is aware of a need for enclosed spaces for students to do collective projects in.

In terms of diversity, patrons who were perceived to be students between the ages of 18-25, ‘traditional’ students, were the norm. Comparatively, there was a very small minority of young children with their parents and elderly who came through the doors. This information was representative of the fact Milner is an ‘academic’ library and does not draw the community around it like it does the students. Speaking to the staff, we learned that community members can get a library card, but with a more limited amount of access. The library does not market themselves to the community like it does to the students and that is the primary reason for the limited number of community users.
**What Are Students Really Doing?**

Milner Library serves as a multi-purpose location for students to research, study, relax, use computers, print documents, as well as other common tasks. As students, we are aware of the main activities that take place within Milner Library, but our prior knowledge does not necessarily cover all bases. In order to better understand what students are doing at Milner Library and why they choose to go to Milner, we conducted several observations and passed out surveys on two occasions.

Among the varying tasks that take place in Milner Library, many students use the library for doing group work. One Tuesday evening, there were three separate groups doing work at the computers on floor 4. There is no designated area for computer group work, which might be a type of space Milner should provide for its students.

Students have also been observed using the large tables for group work. This reality of student homework life creates a conflicting environment between the people who need a quiet place to get their computer work done, and those who are collaborating and talking about their work.

For this reason, we believe it would be extremely beneficial to Milner Library to have at least one floor designated as a learning commons. In this area, students would be free to collaborate with one another on their homework, utilize technology, have a meal or a snack, or enjoy a cup of coffee. This would be an area that accommodated the needs college students have when it comes to studying, because today it is not just about tables, silence, and books.

On September 6, 2009, an observation was conducted on the 5th floor of Milner Library at 10:44am. The majority of students in the main entrance area were using Milner’s computers. In this location, the computers and printing station are what draws the majority of students there. A
few students were making use of the private study rooms and the partitioned cubicle desks, but most coming in and out found a spot at one of the computers available. This observation then answered the question of what these students were really doing at Milner. In general, along with group work, individual computer access is an important offering within Milner Library.

Research is another big reason students use Milner. We observed a Senior Art student, ‘Madison’, beginning research for an art history paper. Madison entered the library and sat at the first open computer, not far from the doors. She opened up her notebook to a prepared list of terms to search. Madison then opened up Milner’s home page and began a search for books. She soon got frustrated because she is not a very good speller and any word she misspelled returned no results for her search. As a result, Madison opened up a Google page to get the correct spellings, and continued to search for her books.

Madison was also kind enough to let us interview her about Milner Library. She claims that she doesn’t go to the library much: when she needs books, quick internet access, or when she needs to print. One specific complaint she had about Milner is that their books are too old and, therefore, irrelevant to her purposes. She is an art student, and when her professors ask her to research new artists, Milner isn’t very helpful. “You have to go on the internet for everything, which is a bitch because sometimes we’re not allowed to have internet sources, so you have to use a book, and Milner’s books aren’t recent enough.” When Madison was asked about the general layout of Milner Library, she explained that it is “crowded, not enough windows” and just feels old. “I don’t really like the feeling. It needs more plants… I always sit by the plant on the 5th floor.”
All in all, she believes that some of Milner’s strengths are that there are a lot of computers, and it is a large library. She pointed out, though, at finals, the library seems to be too small, and that she avoids it because she knows how packed it gets.

From our observations, we discovered students often come into the library in groups, either to work on something together or simply to sit together as they work individually. Comfortable seating areas are often used for reading and relaxing, and partitioned desks are used by individuals in order to privately work on homework.

*As the Day Changes, So Does Milner*

The reasons people go to Milner Library change throughout the course of day. The number of students using Milner is greatly dependent on whether or not classes are actively in session. Many students come to Milner before classes in order to finish last minute preparations for exams or lectures. Towards the end of the day, students have less of an obligation to hurry to class, making long-term visits more common. As the day turns to night, general library use becomes more centered on studying, research, and homework rather than hurried preparations for class.

On November 4th, 2009, 86 questionnaires were completed by students in Milner Library on floors 2 through 6, between 8:00am and 9:00am, and between 11:30 am and 12:00 pm. The morning questionnaires were passed out beginning on the 2nd floor and ending on the 6th floor. The noon questionnaires were passed out beginning on the 6th floor and ending on the 2nd floor. The questionnaire consisted of a brief demographic section followed by questions inquiring about participants’ purposes for visiting Milner and what they were doing there. The most popular reason (43 instances) why participants chose to use Milner as opposed to any other location on or near campus was for a quiet environment. The next popular reason was less distractions (21 instances)
and convenience in either close proximity to class or residence (16 instances). A few interesting occurrences worth noting were student’s confessions of browsing Facebook instead of studying; some student’s also admitted being at the library to merely kill time, and other’s reported they chose a location within Milner that was close to a bathroom. This brings up an unwritten rule within Milner regarding trust between students in leaving belongings unattended and not showing concern of theft. The library staff has recently tried to combat this idea student’s have about leaving their things by posting signs around study spaces telling students that ‘Milner is not responsible for lost or stolen items’.

Many students declined to answer questionnaires passed out in the 8:00am-9:00am time frame because they were under time constraints or were studying for exams in early classes. Most rejections occurred on the main floor of Milner primarily because this floor serves the function of a “quick stop” area where students quickly complete their work and hurry out. The computers to the left of the main entrance also serve the quick stop purpose as well. Since Milner opens up floors 3 through 6 at 8:00am, it was predicted that fewer students would be on the upper floors, but surprisingly, there were many more students on the 6th floor than on floors 3 through 5.

Of the questionnaires passed out in the 11:30am-12:00pm time, fewer students declined. At this mid-day hour, it seems students are planning a longer-term stay than in the morning. This makes sense since the majority of students have classes during the day, and it’s likely that fewer students have classes as the afternoon progresses. In conclusion, the time of day plays a major role in student’s use of the library.

*Are Students Satisfied With the Space?*
An interview was conducted with “Dean,” an ISU graduate with a degree in Geology and Geography. Dean attended ISU for 4 years, and, overall, liked Milner Library. He claimed he studied an even amount in three different places: Milner (when he really needed to get something done), home (at his college apartment), and the Coffee Hound. He mostly used the library for requesting and picking up items through interlibrary loan and also to look at current peer reviewed journals that do not leave the library.

During another observation a girl was heard talking about why she did not like to come to Milner; the reason, she explained, was that she did not have enough freedom there. “At home, I don’t even have to get dressed, I can go to the bathroom whenever I want, get a snack out of the fridge, and light up a cigarette.” For this student, being comfortable was a priority, and the library did not offer her the level of casualness and comfort she desired.

In September, 36 questionnaires were passed out on the 4th and 5th floors of Milner Library between 3:00pm and 4:00pm. The questionnaire consisted of a brief demographic section, questions regarding Milner in spatial terms, and questions regarding Milner’s offerings. Students were fairly split in terms of where they chose to sit in Milner, as well as whether or not students preferred enclosed or open study spaces. The majority of participants indicated that Milner does provide students with what they need to study.

Although our surveys reflect a general satisfaction with Milner’s study spaces, we found there is a population of students who are deliberately not using Milner. These students are probably more likely to be found doing homework, studying, or researching at home or in a face around town. There are students who seek quiet, and students who seek a productive space to do a
group project. Unfortunately, the latter interrupts the needs of the former, creating a need for both
spaces, separately.

**Milner’s Many Resources and Services**

*Students Think They Know More Than They Do*

Madison is a transfer student, and claims that although she did not have a tutorial or
explanation of Milner of any kind, she was able to learn, from prior knowledge, how to use the
library. We believe this isn’t uncommon for Illinois State students. Many students are exposed to a
library tutorial in at least one of their classes during their education. Even so, we’ve found the
library services probably are not utilized like they could be. In Madison’s case, even though she
was fully confident in her knowledge of library services, she had no idea that she was able to get a
book she needed from another school in Illinois. This concurs with a staff interview done with
‘Katie’ where she stated that many students assume online databases are free and relatable to
anything else they could find on the web but since the opposite of this is true there is a need to
educate students on the value and use of subscription databases.

Not only are library services overlooked, but also the people available for help. In an
interview with ‘Jane’ we learned that she knew how to request books from other libraries but that
sometimes she had a hard time finding applicable material. When I asked her if she had thought to
ask a librarian help her search, she stated, “I’ve really never considered that,“

Madison also felt like staff isn’t available enough to her and by stating that “we shouldn’t
have to go down to the second floor to ask a librarian a question.” When asked if she knew about
texting a librarian or IM a librarian, she said no, showing again that she is overconfident about her
knowledge of the library. These reactions are unsettling and beg the question: ‘how can library
staff be more proactive in letting students know research is something they are very qualified to help with?’ Maybe employing a reference librarian on each floor would help students feel help is more available to them.

**Staff perspectives: Milner & Heartland... What Librarians at Academic Libraries Have to Say**

‘Katie’, a reference librarian Colleen interviewed, has been working at Milner since 1990 and has seen many of the changes Milner has undergone, firsthand. She learned from Katie that each librarian has a field they specialize in and, when not at the desk, work exclusively with students under their expertise. Katie works with primarily graduate students and also teaches an average of 4 to 5 library classes a week. Katie mentioned that there is a huge push to get the library digitalized in order to keep it up to date and also to reduce cost and make all items accessible. In reference to research, Katie backed the findings in the Rochester study by stating that there is no ‘average’ student researcher, but that every student has a different understanding of how to search and where. The only common correlation between students is that most start with Google in their initial research and branch out from there. Speaking of Milner’s physical space, Katie mentioned that Milner is in dire need of complete reconstruction but lacks the fiscal means for certain necessary renovations.

‘Lyra’, the librarian at Heartland Community College, has been working in public and academic libraries since 1993. She has many responsibilities most of which include interactions with the students. The changes since then have obviously been drastic; now libraries are packed with computers and are pushed to get more and more information online for fast and accessible use. In response to these changes Lyra stated that, “The nature of the questions has changed (…) we aren't answering simple questions; we are guiding them to find their own answers.”
Looking Around: Cafés, Recommendations, and Renovations

Outside Milner Library: Cafes and Eateries as Study Spaces

We observed several study spaces outside Milner Library, Monday through Friday during the month of October between the hours of 12:00pm and 3:00pm to see where people were going to study other than Milner Library. Some of the places that were observed were The Cage II, McAllister’s, The Coffee House, and Fusion Brew. We chose these places to observe because they are near Illinois State University, and are popular coffee and eatery places among Illinois State University students.

These locations share many characteristics as they are all eateries and serve specialty coffee and tea beverages. They differ in size; The Coffee House on Beaufort is the largest of the three locations, and is the most widespread as far as seating space. There is no television or loud music, but soft music playing throughout the café. Artwork is placed on all the walls, but not in an overwhelming design. There are different kinds of tables to choose from depending on the size of your group and where you choose to sit. A rather quiet and peaceful atmosphere seems to exist though, which seems conducive to studying with friends or alone. The fact that they offer healthy and very reasonably priced food, some of which is organic and vegan (all of it is vegetarian), may be a draw for some students as well.

The Cage II on ISU’s campus in the Bone Student Center is also a good place to study it seems, but there may be more noise than some might prefer as it is in the lower level of the Student Center. It is smaller than the Coffee House and offers less of a selection of food items, but still has a good amount of seating for the space provided. A television is on at all times which may be a deterrent for those who have a hard time concentrating, and comparably, the noise levels seem to be louder than in the Coffee House when it was observed at similar times in the afternoon. When
the space was observed, it seemed that the majority of the students who were studying sat further away from the doors leading out into the student center, and there were not as many studying as there were eating and drinking.

Fusion Brew, located on Main and Hovey in Junction Place, is the smallest of all the locations, but still seems to be well utilized. They have the most unique beverage selection of all the cafes such as bubble teas and fruit teas, but serve very few food items. When it was observed, it seems that there were fewer people studying in the groups present, and some people were talking and playing table games while eating and drinking or waiting for their order. When people were observed studying there, it was usually in groups of two or single studiers, usually with laptop computers. They sat against the far wall in the room, most likely for privacy and access to wall outlets. Depending on the amount of traffic, it was quiet to mildly noisy, usually more noisy than the Coffee House (when observed), but not as loud as The Cage II. Overall, there seemed to be an air of courtesy when people were seen studying, and people tended to not speak loudly when sitting next to those who appeared to be studying.

McAllister’s is on ISU’s campus in the Bone Student Center where there are naturally more students and in greater numbers. When comparing McAllister’s to all of the places we observed, it seemed that eating was the priority and studying, a distant second. This is because it functions more as a restaurant, and the noise levels are naturally louder than in an area where food may not be the main focus.

All of the places that we observed had a common theme among them. Most of the people studying were doing so with other students, and often, they had some sort of food or beverage in their study space. We felt that as far as noise levels and space usage are concerned, that McAllister’s would be the least likely to study in, The Cage II and Fusion Brew were closely
ranked, with Fusion Brew being a bit “lower” because of space and noise, and The Coffee House would be the most conducive based on observations and these criteria. There are always preferences of students that may be different depending on what they need to feel comfortable and able to concentrate. For example: if they have a favorite drink or food item at a certain place, consuming that item makes their study experience better regardless of space and noise levels. It is hard to say what truly draws in students without doing a survey on these criteria; however, these observations are insightful because they tell us how people use a space, and what factors may go into choosing that study space.

How can Milner satisfy students and maintain their identity as an institution?

The purpose of our study was to shed light on what students at Illinois State University are using Milner Library for. Factors that come into play with this usage are the concepts of study space as well as increased use of digital technologies. We have learned that students prefer to study with food and drink and that study space choice is often impacted based on the ease of obtaining these commodities. Some students choose to bring their own food and coffee into Milner Library to study, while others choose to take their studying to other spaces that provide food and coffee, thus creating a different type of study space. In a staff interview done with ‘Katie’ she commented that, “the environment of the library has changed a lot in the years I’ve been working; now it is a much more casual place for groups of students to meet and hang out. Food and beverages are overlooked and the restraint on noise level is much more lax,” This shows us that the library is evolving into a different kind of space whether the administration approves it or not, therefore, staff needs to recognize the unmet need students have for using Milner in a more interactive way.

In order to meet this need, as discussed earlier, we believe it would be extremely beneficial to Milner Library to have at least one floor designated as a learning commons. This would be an
area specifically designed for students to collaborate with one another on their homework, utilize technology, have a meal or a snack, or enjoy a cup of coffee. Today an academic library can not be only tables, silence, and books. With the digital age, information can be accessed for research or studying purposes from anywhere, and with a learning common area complete with a coffee shop, we believe Milner can help give students what they need to learn. Having a separate floor for student activity would also separate students who need quietness from those who need interaction.

The library could use this floor to state its duality: it serves as an academic institution but also functions as an interactive social space. Common suggestions for improvement found in the surveys completed by students were enforcement of quiet areas within the library, having food and coffee accessible within the library, and more comfortable open sitting areas.

This is not the only way students learn, though. Throughout our study, we have discovered students choose Milner based on proximity, to escape distraction, and obtain materials not available anywhere else. These, along with a quiet atmosphere, are the main reasons why students choose to spend their time at Milner as opposed to elsewhere. The library still holds the image of a quiet studious location in which studying and homework can be done, which is important to maintain even in today’s world. In the future, it could be beneficial to conduct research comparing and contrasting the social and academic functions of university libraries in order to determine how these two functions work with or against each other.

Generally, when students choose Milner as their place to study, many gravitate towards the larger tables to get their studying done, even if it is just one person. We speculate that the reason for this is so they have enough space for all of their items. Often students have a folder, notebook, lap top, cell phone, and other various items out on the table while they are working, so they need enough space to spread out. This is beneficial for the single person, but when tables get filled up,
groups are unable to use them. A good idea would be to place many intermediate sized tables that are in between the large 4-person tables and the partitioned desks, intended for one person to spread out all their materials, or for two people to work together.

Time of day is another factor in how Milner Library serves its students. Students visiting Milner in the early morning tend to spend a shorter time in the library due to class schedules. Early morning studying on the day of an exam came up often as a reason for choosing to visit Milner. As the day progresses, more students plan for longer term stays than in the morning. Also, as the day progresses, floors 3 through 5 have more traffic than in the morning, where floors 2 and 6 tend to get more traffic. In the future it would be beneficial to concentrate more on observing behaviors within the library at many times of day as well as days of the week. Due to time and schedule constraints it was difficult to incorporate these two factors into our research.
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