



From solitary refuge to social hub, understanding the different ways students utilize the library is the key to boosting usage

Meeting Students' Need States

by Brian Mathews

When I lived in the Washington, D.C., metro area I frequently ate lunch at the gourmet-sandwich bistro Cosi. One evening I went there for dinner, and to my surprise it was a completely different experience. Instead of several clusters of small tables, the furniture was arranged to accommodate groups; instead of standing in line to order, there was table service. Dinner also featured wine, music, and mood lighting. Cosi adapts to the needs of its customers based upon the time of day; at midday the bistros provide a quick lunch, while in the evening they expand the menu and emphasize the atmosphere.

We can apply the same principle to libraries. We know that students need different things at different times of the day, as well as at specific points throughout the semester. Our challenge, then, is to align our products and services to be more optimal. What is it that students need in the morning, compared with the afternoon or late evening? A student asking a reference question during the day most likely has a different mindset than one seeking help at night: Is he on his way to class or did he just get off work; is she on her way to lunch or did she just eat dinner; is his assignment due next week or is it due tomorrow? While it is impossible for us to account for all possible variations,

anyone who has worked at a public service desk for several years recognizes patterns that emerge throughout the school year. By anticipating these patterns and building them into our communications strategy, librarians are better positioned to support users.

By categorizing the needs that typical students encounter you can understand not only how they perceive the library, but also the big-picture challenges that they face in college, and then work to fill those gaps. Once this foundation is in place, you can begin designing promotional strategies that effectively demonstrate the value of your library.

To determine students' needs, my advice is to start from scratch. Forget everything that you assume about the library. Leave your survey results,

gate counts, LibQUAL+ data, and any other reports on your desk for a moment and take a walk around the building. Spend time observing your population. How do they interact with each other, with library staff, with print resources, and with the environment? A person isn't just studying; he is tucked away in a quiet corner, hidden and possessive of his surrounding space. A group doesn't just sit together; they socialize, tutor, collaborate, and possibly motivate each other. Perhaps the most important question we can ask is *why*? Why are they using the library? What particular need is being fulfilled?

In the marketing industry there is a growing emphasis

on the concept of need states. These mental states are described as psychological or functional conditions that can be aligned with purchases, such as “grooming” or “snacks,” as well as with objectives such as “making dinner” or “getting ready for work.” By understanding the purpose of the shopping encounter, retailers can package items that directly match customer needs. Think of everything that you need for serving Thanksgiving dinner, taking a trip to the beach, or fighting the flu. These events transcend activities into emotional experiences: Thanksgiving is about “family,” the beach is about “relaxation,” and treating the flu is about “recovery.”

Need states are also present in the academic environment. Students moving throughout the day encounter a wide variety of obligations. Librarians can benefit by acknowledging these needs and aligning our services to address each one. I suggest seven categories representing the broad spectrum of student needs.

■ **Academic needs.** Not only do students spend several hours a week in the classroom, but they also attend labs, office hours, and reviews. Outside of these formal activities, students also attend informal study sessions, review textbooks and notes, and perform numerous other assignment-related tasks. Their academic responsibilities are an omnipresent part of their life.

■ **Social needs.** While academic needs may dominate the student schedule, social activities are also important. From hanging out with friends or developing romantic relationships, to talking with family on the phone or attending parties, students engage in a variety of social encounters.

■ **Entertainment and recreational needs.** Entertainment and recreation is another common theme, covering a wide range of activities such as leisure reading, creative expression, hobbies, games, concerts, movies and television, sporting events, and exercise. While many of these outings are social in nature, they are focused upon particular activities, elevating the experience above a mere conversational encounter.

■ **Service needs.** A commitment to service is present in many students’ lives. This can take the form of employment or volunteerism. Opportunities abound for participation in charity, religious, environmental, civic, political, and professional activities.

■ **Personal needs.** Students have a variety of personal needs: hygiene, shopping, cleaning, laundry, medical visits, and numerous other chores, errands, and responsibilities. Personal time is also necessary for reflection, meditation, assessing priorities, and planning.

■ **Travel needs.** A surprising amount of students’ time is spent moving from point A to point B. From home, to class, to work, to a friend’s house, they are in constant

motion. The modes of transportation may include cars, buses, and bikes, but most of the time is spent walking.

■ **Rejuvenation needs.** With such a breadth of activities packed into each day, sometimes students just need to unwind. Rest and relaxation occurs when possible; however, eight hours of continuous sleep is highly unusual. Food consumption is similarly scattered. Many students rely on naps and snacks to refresh, refuel, and replenish before returning to action.

Academics and atmosphere

To be user-sensitive organizations we must visualize how a trip to the library fits in with everything else students have going on. Librarians should integrate their products into the student lifestyle. How can we provide opportunities for students to fulfill social, entertainment, or service needs? To be user-centered, a library has to be more than just a great channel for academic services, but should also provide a rich atmosphere that supports cultural, social, leisure, and creative activities.

Students cannot be expected to study for several hours without an opportunity to revitalize both their body and mind. Libraries need to provide a variety of study environments ranging from quiet to noisy, from isolated to communal. A visit to the library should not be limited to fulfilling research needs, but should allow opportunities to grab a snack, to gossip with friends, to take a nap, or to listen to a motivating speaker. In short, we need to give them new reasons to use the library.

This concept of “filling the need” will factor largely into our messaging. We can present the library in many different ways. It’s not just for doing research, but also the place to start, edit, and finish an assignment. It is a pit stop during the day and a quiet couch late in the afternoon. It is a place to plug into the web and to discover new ideas and experiences. The library is a shrine of solitude, designed for introspection, discovery, and preparation; and it is also a social hub, filled with friends, activities, surprises, and chance encounters. Our central theme should be that the library is the place where things happen on campus, and our promotional efforts should align with these various need states. In this way, students won’t need to think about why they should use the library, but instead will simply see it as the logical destination. ■

How can we provide opportunities for students to fulfill social, entertainment, or service needs?



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