

## **Assessment 360: Mapping Undergraduates and the Library at the University of Connecticut**

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### ***Executive Summary***

In January 2009, two members of the brand-new Undergraduate Education Team at the University of Connecticut Libraries attended Nancy Fried Foster's CLIR-sponsored Faculty Research Behavior Workshop at NYU. By the close of that workshop, the outline of an ambitious multi-part study of undergraduates at the University of Connecticut had been drafted; it was formally launched in January 2010 as a four-part study called Assessment 360. The study's intent was to map where undergraduates were in terms of technology use, their academic study habits, and their use of space. With those positions, or coordinates, captured—if only fleetingly—the library could then assess its current position in relation to undergraduates' habits, needs, and wishes in order to make immediate changes and outline future work.

The study drew heavily on Foster's *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester* (2007), but was also motivated by what seemed to be a deluge of provocative research reports on technology use and research trends from EDUCAUSE (ECAR), the Pew Internet & American Life Project, the British CIBER group and others. Equally influential was an emerging body of library-based research such as Project Information Literacy that, like Foster's work, emphasized the importance of testing assumptions against one's own users, of letting well-designed local assessment have the final say. In particular, we were influenced by the work of Char Booth, whose online survey of technology and library use at Ohio University (2009), a carefully crafted instrument aimed at a well-articulated user group, provided a model for the one non-qualitative piece of Assessment 360, a technology survey.

Once fully developed, Assessment 360 comprised four distinct instruments: Focus Groups on the learning commons at the University of Connecticut's main library, a technology survey, filmed interviews with undergraduates about doing academic work, and an instrument created just for this study: the filmed work-space monologue.

The results of each part of the study were at once predictable and suggestive. The focus groups confirmed that our creation of a Learning Commons by that name had gone largely unnoticed by our students. They valued its resources—especially the computer areas and quantitative tutoring center—but they had little or no concept of it as a unified common space with any intentional design behind it. Quite the contrary, they found the space arbitrary in layout (tangles of chairs, tables, lounges) and difficult to navigate. Despite this, they clearly identified the floor as the location of both resources (e.g., computers and printers) and help (e.g., tutoring and tech assistance). One key finding was that students used the space during the day while they were in transit: to print something or checking Facebook in between classes. Evening use was more focused: writing papers, reading, creating presentations, etc.

This obvious finding really brought home the extent to which library staff were rarely in the building when the bulk of the academic work we talk so much about was actually taking place. The other greatest take-away from the focus groups was that, beyond the universal cry for more power outlets, students had quite reasonable desires; none of our magic-wand questions turned up unexpected or pie-in-the-sky requests (e.g., tiki lounges or retractable ceilings).

The technology provided great baseline data. Half of our undergraduates said they spent 25-50% of their time online doing academic work and over a quarter of our students told us 75% of that time online was spent doing such work. Corroborating the 2010 Pew Internet findings that a significant percentage of smartphone owners were *not* using those phones to access the Web, only 33% of our students were doing so at the time of the study. Although 75% of students that spring were sending texts with their phones, 37% of them said they'd be "extremely unlikely" to send a text to a librarian if they needed help. Although neutral about the idea of library-created browser extensions (52% said "maybe" they'd use one), 41% said they'd be "fairly likely" to "extremely likely" to use a chat widget embedded in the university's courseware.

The filmed interviews echoed the findings elsewhere in firmly locating academic work in a technology-oriented world: their primary "desktops" are online ones and they get work done there by moving back and forth between courseware, the Web, and peripheral tools and distractions (Wolfram Alpha would be one of the former; Facebook would be a primary example of the latter).

The richest results came out of the filmed Work-Space Monologues, in which we asked students to film spaces they frequented to do academic work while narrating responses to questions about the space (When did they go? Why did they like the space? What would they improve? Etc.). Beyond the more predictable (but useful to confirm) facts—e.g., students find studying in their dorm/bedrooms comfortable—we got some really useful information about how students judge spaces both within and outside the library. Book stacks take up valuable study space, proximity to food is essential, and social interaction is important—although maintaining distinct "social" and "alone" spaces is also important. Students like control over their spaces, and if others are nearby, they still want autonomy within whatever private (or alone-in-a-crowd) space they have carved out.

In aggregate, the study was a great success both in terms of findings and in terms of providing the team with an invaluable roadmap for doing similar future work.

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To read the full report on Assessment 360, click on <http://www.clir.org/pubs/resources/Assessment360.pdf>