

## **FOCUS GROUP REPORT (2008)**

**Site Visit and Focus Group Session Assessment, Ottenheimer Library, University of Arkansas – Little Rock, (17-19 November, 2008)**

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This report constitutes a brief assessment of current user perceptions of the Ottenheimer Library at the University of Arkansas-Little Rock based on background materials from the Strategic Planning Assessment Taskforce, three focus group sessions held 18 November, 2008, and written responses from session questionnaires and feedback forms. While these inputs may provide some measure of the changes instituted as a result of earlier study (previous focus groups and LibQUAL), they may also be significant in providing opportunities for further articulating and updating the Ottenheimer Library Strategic Plan, and possibly provide concrete directions in which to proceed.

The focus sessions attempted to examine participant understanding of and attitudes toward three major focal points: the library as place, the library as people, and the library as collections and services. Twenty-five participants (sessions of five, ten, and ten) provided feedback to these topics in the three one hour and fifteen minute sessions. Student participants were fairly evenly distributed among the four undergraduate classes with a small number of graduate students. Unfortunately only one regular faculty member in addition to a couple of graduate assistants/graduate students and one regular staff member were among the participants. However, all were active participants. In addition, two general community members participated, and while they were not active discussants, they did provide some detailed written feedback.

## **Major observations and themes**

### General observations:

1. The process of continuous, ongoing planning appears to be well in place. Previous sessions, the LibQUAL Study and subsequent actions, followed by additional planning that has been formalized in an ongoing way, have produced a positive culture of continuous improvement.
2. Place is important. Despite the development of online curricular processes and the presence of a number of electronic resources, Ottenheimer as a place, as a library building, is quite significant.
3. The culture of good will toward the Library continues to exist. Library personnel were consistently seen as a caring, helpful group.
4. Much of the feedback presented certain contradictions, not so much in a pejorative light, but rather as a challenge to further articulate services and collections to the campus community.
5. As a corollary, some changes made during the past year have to an extent exhibited the law of unintended consequences.
6. Finally, there is evidence of developing partnerships and opportunity to continue them.

### **The Library as Place.**

When asked what came to mind with the term “Ottenheimer Library,” or when asked what the Ottenheimer Library means or signifies, typical responses led to one of two threads, each somewhat antithetical to the other. Respondents tended to think of it as a place for quiet, reflective study or research, an “escape” as one participant put it, or, as a place for group discussion, learning, and preparation. This dichotomy leads to a number of positives – the most obvious that Ottenheimer is providing layered environments for its users. The challenge lies in adapting, modifying, and monitoring available space for both constituencies and the sub-species that come with them. Depending upon what parts of the Library respondents were referencing,

the more general concept of space presented a duality. Users who reflected primarily on floors one and two generally talked in terms of the Library as a spacious environment, while participants who talked with reference to floors three – five spoke more in terms of a confining, more closed-in, tighter structure, mostly as a slight negative. One respondent suggested spreading out the “closed-in” feel of the stacks on levels three and four and part of five to get away from the feeling that one was in a “used book store.”

Understanding and articulation of both of these perceptions (quiet vs. group; expansive vs. confining) also were related somewhat to perceptions about major changes on the first floor (computing lab) and furniture upgrades. The overall response to the expansion of the computer lab in the former reserve reading area was highly positive with respect to online connectivity and availability, although in what one might see as an application of the law of unintended consequences, many who had been used to using the reserve room as either a reading or study area perceived themselves to be displaced further into “frontiers” of the Library. One perception somewhat generally, but not universally felt, was that the first floor is now busier and noisier, and that if one is in the quiet study camp, one has to go further and further into the Library to find such a place for focused study or research. The perception was that “too much was going on” and that noise was interfering with the desired effect of a more reflective atmosphere. It is as if users wanted all services and all variations to be present within a short distance of the entrance to the building. An occasional ancillary concern was the perceived need for more connectivity in terms of outlets on the upper floors.

Interest in both sequestered individual study space and in expanded group study remains strong, and as well, space that could be developed for certain types of connectivity to develop, preview, and rehearse group projects that might involve presentation software. Those who advocated such an approach also commented on the need for more conventional tools such as whiteboards in those areas as well. In addition there is continued interest in individual quiet study space and curiosity about accessing private study space. There was also significant interest in study carrel policy.

Another aspect of space that was of interest to participants was navigability of the Library. While there is signage in various parts of the Library and maps available regarding Ottenheimer, many respondents expressed a need for additional or more refined direction in using the building.

The new plasma screens elicited a fair amount of feedback, somewhat mixed, although much of it suggested that while the information on the plasma screens was of interest, some users questioned relevant detail and suggested more specific Library related direction, and indicated a perceived need for specific point of need signage on each floor, presumably near exits and elevators to indicate clearly what was on each floor. While some thought the plasma screens too small and not easily viewable with an attendant need not to rotate or scroll information as quickly as they currently do, others found the placement of the screen quite appropriate, with generally useful information. A few respondents suggested lower tech basic directional signage near the entrance, such as a brief directory of collections and services by call number and format types available on each floor. Additional suggestions included quick reference to available copiers, restrooms, etc. Focused, specific information for the user generally seemed of more interest to participants than broader information. A specific concern expressed at one session was a perceived need for clear signage regarding the purpose and intent of the entrance with handicap access.

Furniture continues to be an issue of interest. Many praised the addition of the new furniture on the first floor, both in esthetic and practical terms. Some had not noticed or were unaware of the upgrades, and many referred to what they perceived to be older, uncomfortable furniture on the upper levels of the building. An upside to these perceptions is that users were interested in using those areas – primarily for individual or quiet study, but were at the same time expressing a sense that the usability of the area could be enhanced with better furniture. Unfortunately, they also did not recognize something often affecting structural improvements – that costs can dictate phased implementation.

Finally, students did express a perception that the Library is a central place on campus, both literally and figuratively. At least two respondents pointed out that they found the Library convenient because of its generally central location and its proximity to Donaghey Student

Center, and one expressed the idea that its physical orientation reinforced the more abstract notion that Ottenheimer was central in terms of content and services as well.

### **The Library as People.**

As noted in last year's focus sessions, respondents were universally positive in their description of Ottenheimer personnel as extremely friendly, helpful, and knowledgeable. Reference, Interlibrary Loan, and Instructional Media Services were areas frequently mentioned. Staff were cited for their knowledge and for their empathetic approach to users' information needs. Out of the twenty-five respondents in the three sessions there were only two negative experiences articulated, both having to do with student assistants in the circulation area; otherwise, Library personnel uniformly were seen as a major asset to Ottenheimer.

The only concrete suggestion about personnel was the observation that it would be useful to have Library staff distributed throughout the building, i.e., not just on the major service floors (1, 2, and 5) but also on 3 and 4, i.e., on the quiet floors as well as the service floors to assist in locating materials. This discussion ties back into the discussions of group vs. quiet study areas as well as the issue of signage, given that most of the expressed need here was directional vs. substantive.

### **The Library as Collections & Services.**

#### **Services.**

Service is to some extent tied to space. The major issue, alluded to in the discussion of Place above, has to do with the partnership of the Library with Computer Services to refit the reserve room to expand computer lab services. While clearly an example of the partnering of two agencies for a common positive, the results have been interesting. Generally the expansion is viewed very positively, providing additional access to resources and infrastructure within a facility that is readily accessible to students for long stretches of hours. Another perception, noted above, is that some previously existing quiet space has been displaced, with most students expressing this opinion having moved to other parts of the first or second floors and finding it more active and noisy. As might be expected, respondents also expressed an interest in

additional, specific software to be available on all machines. Generally more machines, more software, more hours (particularly for non-traditional students) were the themes that focus groups expressed as a response to the area.

General library hours were not a significant topic although they were mentioned, particularly by the non-traditional students who felt that their schedules were less in sync with those of most students and the Library. Comments were made regarding the synchronization of Library hours with those of the computer lab. Extended hours for finals were viewed positively. There was also some discussion of late night security and the potential of having some coordinated approach to safe egress from the building at such times.

Service connected with people was again seen as uniformly positive, whether it was the manner in which staff worked with individuals to find relevant information or to orient students to resources. Some participants expressed occasional difficulty in utilizing electronic journals, expressing a desire for uniformity in online format. There were suggestions about more virtual ways to provide such information for students either in the building or through remote access. Interest in color copying was also expressed.

Discussions of bibliographic or information literacy instruction did not indicate a strong sense that more is needed or that current approaches need reappraisal, although those who had been exposed to such sessions expressed positive value in such experiences. There was little comment on questions relating to specialized or point-of-need instruction. In part this may have been due to the small number of faculty in the focus group participants.

There was some expressed need for more articulation of online resources, i.e., some respondents perceived that navigation of the Ottenheimer web site to find specific resources was difficult, and some felt that the main Library site should be more prominently placed in the University's overall web structure. For those less familiar with Ottenheimer, there was significant interest in simplifying the web site and more clearly noting basic services and resources and, as well, utilizing more "layman's terms." To some extent the difficulty lay less in the true navigation of the web site and more in understanding the resources that are available and what resources would

be most appropriate in a given instance. Interestingly, this discussion exhibited some disconnect with the lack of strong opinion about literacy instruction. However, such perceptions are not uncommon among users, i.e., a sense that finding or navigating appropriate resources is somewhat difficult, with a parallel sense that users often prefer to learn by trial and error rather than specific instruction.

### **Collections.**

A number of respondents, primarily undergraduates, expressed the opinion that the collections were generally satisfactory in providing them with the basic information they required for the course of study. Areas receiving positive comments were books in Middle Eastern studies and more generally the array of e-resources and databases available to users. In addition, there were specific comments both on the utility of the media collection and the service users received there. There were expressions of need for current anthropology and archaeology materials, particularly peer reviewed journals, as well as core social work materials. Participants appreciate the amount and variety of electronic resources, noting particularly the databases and electronic journals as specific positives.

There was a significant amount of discussion of assigned class reading, with some respondents indicating a desire for more copies of, or greater access to books and other resources directly tied to assigned readings. In some instances, a lack of understanding of the reserve system and how it worked was apparent. In others it appeared that students were competing for single or a small number of multiple copies of more heavily used material, a not uncommon situation in such circumstances. Other respondents noted they wished for longer reserve time limits.

### **Possible Future Directions.**

These recommendations are based principally on the feedback and the brief follow-up discussions with the Assessment Task Force. In some instances there may be services, policies, and collections already in place that address some of these issues.

### ***The Library as Place***

1. The dichotomy between different types of user needs is good in the sense that Ottenheimer is providing multiple environments. One approach to this broad question would be to review some of the issues connected to space:
  - a. Are there better ways to publicize the types and locations of spaces that are available for various types of user needs?
  - b. Are there pathways, appropriate signage that guide or pull users to certain destinations, depending upon their purpose?
  - c. The exit of the Sequoyah Research Center/American Native Press Archives provides opportunities for redistribution of space, particularly group or individual study possibilities.
  - d. Would further articulation or clarification of quiet and group zones be helpful?
2. Group and individual study spaces.
  - a. The potential implied by the freed-up space noted above provides opportunities to seriously explore ways in which group study could be more adequately sequestered.
  - b. It also provides opportunities to explore ways in which connectivity and other infrastructure might be used to maximize the utility of at least part of the group study areas, based on the expressed needs of focus participants.
  - c. Review and public articulation of policy regarding individual study carrels, given the interest shown by focus group participants, might prove useful.
  - d. The new furniture that was added was well received, and additional upgrades will clearly be viewed positively as time and resources allow.
3. Spatial orientation and signage.
  - a. A “trail” or path-oriented review of signage, based on function, collections, and services could clarify needed changes or confirm appropriateness of existing guides.
  - b. Likewise, a review of the content and organization of information on the plasma screen might make an excellent technological application more useful.

### ***The Library as People***

1. An assessment of the distribution of personnel by function on an ongoing basis is always useful.
2. The expressed need for more service in the quiet areas of the building (primarily 3 and 4 and to some extent 5) is generally not practical, and doesn't reflect the concentration of service needs. However, a review of guides, signage and organization of those areas might ameliorate perceived service needs in those areas, which appear to be primarily directional.
3. Given the positive perception of Ottenheimer staff, additional opportunities for professional personnel development would make a good staff even better, and further cement the idea of Ottenheimer's staff as the core to a successful library.

### ***The Library as Services***

1. The principal issue here is to routinely review existing services to stay current with or to anticipate shifts or evolution of user needs.
2. Encouraging existing partnerships – particularly with Computer Services in coordinating services in the computer lab since that service is perceived as a major library service. Coordination of hours and ongoing discussions about types of computing resources available for students, based on library resources and curricula, are important.
3. Continue ways to seek partnerships with faculty, either on an individual level, or on a structural or organizational level to develop and enhance library services such as information literacy. The lack of faculty participation in the focus sessions is probably in part due to competing activity, but faculty have the potential to be strong advocates, particularly if they understand the benefits of effective partnerships to curricula and research.

### ***The Library as Collections***

1. Given the natural evolution of curriculum delivery and user habits, the continued development of e-resources that are currently seen as a positive should be continued.
2. Incorporate the noted subject areas of perceived need (anthropology, archaeology, and social work) into regular, ongoing collection review processes. These are noted simply because they were expressed. Such expressions may or may not be well founded depending upon users' skill in understanding library organization or finding aids.
3. Review policy and approaches to reserve materials. It may be that merely further articulation of reserve processes and policies are sufficient, but it may also be useful to examine the relationship of such materials to the core collections.