



Extended Library Hours

A SPEC Kit compiled by

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SURVEY



Executive Summary

Introduction

New libraries, renovated libraries, new students with non-traditional expectations of access and service—all combine to present challenges to academic libraries. Among those challenges is finding the right number of hours during which the library is available to users. We are told that consumers have different values to which we must respond: convenience, timeliness, cost effectiveness, and speed are among them. For libraries, customer values are expressed in demands for hours that meet individual needs for timely, and indeed, non-traditional access to facilities and services. As a result, academic libraries are studying library hours more regularly and closely than they have in the past to determine where changes need to be made to meet demands.

This survey was designed to provide a description of how libraries are responding to demands for greater hours of access and service. Survey responses indicate what hours of access and service libraries are providing and for what parts of the year. They answer questions about staffing, security, which specific library areas are opened additional hours, partnerships, and special funding that supports extended hours. They also describe how libraries are evaluating extended library hours and what libraries plan in the future.

Background

The response rate to this survey was a satisfying 52% or sixty-three of the 121 ARL member libraries. Of those respondents, 83% have some form of extended library hours. While one library reports beginning extended hours in the 1970s, the majority (69%) have implemented this service within the last seven years. The interpretation of extended hours varies from being open until 2 a.m. during

exam periods to being open twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week, most days of the year. However defined, it is clear that in the latter part of the last decade libraries began to respond to new demands/opportunities and established library hours beyond the traditional schedule.

Most of the responding libraries extend hours between Sunday and Thursday nights in the academic year, choosing to provide more traditional hours Fridays, Saturdays, and during break periods. Exam periods are another popular time to extend hours. There is great variation in the combination of hours, days, and times of the year—all pointing to the creative attention being directed to establishing library hours that meet local demands. Those libraries able to provide 24/7 access in all or part of the library still are in the minority.

Reasons to Establish Expanded Hours

Most responding libraries have established a practice of examining library service hours on a regular basis, using gate counts, circulation data, and other measures to indicate how and when the library is being used. Within resource availability, there is an effort to adjust hours as generously as possible. Overall, student requests have been the overriding reason to extend hours (49 responses or 94%)—a measure of both student interest and influence. Requests from library administrators (25%) and faculty (19%) have also influenced this decision. To a lesser degree, the decision has been swayed by requests from library staff, affiliated researchers, and campus administration. Opening a new library that has high demand services and equipment provided an impetus—and support—for greatly expanded hours for some libraries. Occasionally, requests were accommodated through the availability of special grant funds or access to new students fees or tuition.

Areas and Services Accessible during Extended Hours

Study space—both individual and collaborative—is the area of the library most often open during extended hours (48 responses or 92%). The stacks (77%), computer lab facilities (64%), and copy machines (67%) also rank high, however. Some libraries have study rooms or areas—such as a reserve room—that can be secured from the rest of the library to accommodate extended hours of access, if not service. The need for food and coffee during the wee hours was recognized by the 19 respondents (37%) who provide access to food or vending service.

The services provided during extended hours vary greatly, but most libraries offer access to online resources (83%) and the general collections (77%) in addition to the study areas. More than half (58%) provide circulation services—some by means of self-check units. Laptops and laptop ports are starting to be available for extended hours (17%). In only one case was access to special collections available. Very few libraries are able to provide services that require extensive staff expertise such as reference (19%) and technical support (12–15%).

During extended hours the open building areas and services are typically made available to affiliated students, faculty, and staff. Seventy-five percent of the respondents also permit access to other affiliated researchers. More than half (56%) allow use by the general public. In one case, members of the general public may purchase a card that permits six months of access. The library areas and services that are made available during extended hours influence both the type of staff and security that are needed.

Staffing for Extended Hours

Often staffing is not an issue when the accessible area is outside the security envelope of the library or if library services are not provided. Staff reassignment is the most common way to provide any necessary staffing (35 responses or 67%). Those reassigned generally are support staff (71%) and students (63%). A number of libraries successfully rely upon staff to volunteer to cover the extra hours,

usually with overtime pay. Many libraries report using existing security staff or hiring only a small number of new security personnel when hours are increased. New staff was hired to cover expanded hours in fewer than half (46%) of the responding libraries and most new hires were students (67%).

Security during Extended Hours

Respondents report working closely with campus police who either provide security service or train library staff and oversee security concerns for the library. Security personnel generally are deployed at least for the extra hours the library is open, but a number of libraries have such personnel on duty all the hours the library is open. Libraries use a variety of systems to protect users and facilities during extended hours. Security walk-throughs are common (73%), as is a staffed security desk (53%). Video cameras and alarm systems are the next most frequently used (33% and 25% respectively), while technologies such as key cards (14%) and motion or glass break sensors (12% and 8% respectively) are less frequently employed. More than half of the responding libraries (56%) report that staff training for security is something they still need to address and several mentioned it as the next step in their work. When training does occur, it typically includes basic first aid, personal safety procedures, and how to handle facilities emergencies.

Partnerships and Special Funding to Support Extended Hours

Creating partnerships to help support extended hours still is not common. Only 18 libraries (35%) reported partnering with another institutional unit. When partnerships are formed, they generally are with campus police (72%) or another group that focuses on individual safety. Students groups, including ROTC in one case, that have “safe walk” and other escort or night van services are typical partners (22%). Since extended library hours are usually in the middle of the night, this is both natural and appropriate. The few partnerships with information technology units (22%) on campus permit the library to give expanded technical support.

New and base funding was received by fewer than half of the libraries (44%) that extended their hours. New money generally came from campus administration (52%). In some cases, student groups provided both pressure and funding to expand hours (13%). Special fees and access to tuition increases to support generous hours were reported, but are rare.

Evaluating the Success of Extended Hours

Traditional use measures guide evaluation of extended hours programs with circulation, head counts, and computer use being relied upon most heavily. User surveys and informal information gathering methods, such as suggestion boxes, rank just below service and facilities use measures. Many libraries do make an effort to hold focus groups and meet with student groups and administration to solicit feedback on access and service needs.

Future Plans

While a few libraries (6%) report declining use of extended hours or lack of demonstrable demand, most (82%) proclaim success in the regular or pilot program and plan to continue. A few (10%) are still assessing demand and use to determine whether to continue the pilot program.

Conclusion

Increasingly, the provision of extended hours is becoming an expected component of the academic library program. Demand and demonstrable need guide most decisions to expand hours while the availability of new money is less a factor. Safety is a clear element in planning and implementing extended hours and most campus partnerships relate to security issues. We expect more experimentation with library hours and perhaps the physical reorganization of libraries to accommodate safe use at a minimal cost. As library users come to expect increased hours of access to library study space, it will be interesting to see if their expectations expand to include more access to higher-level services.