

Library Impact Practice Brief

The Future Is Now: How We're Working at Charles¹

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¹ Pre-COVID-19

Issue

This research was conducted by staff at Temple University Libraries as part of the libraries' participation in the ARL Assessment Framework project to address the question of "how library spaces facilitate innovative research, creative thinking, and problem-solving." Our research focused on how changes in library space impact the work of staff as individuals, when working with colleagues, and in their work with users. We asked how staff are supported as they make changes in space and how users are supported in that space.

We had a unique opportunity to explore these questions when we opened the new Charles Library in August 2019. Prior to the move, in the spring of 2019, we interviewed 29 staff members about how they envisioned their work changing in the new library space. The change entailed more than a physical move. In the new library building, there is different access to physical collections (limited open stacks), robust technology, and instruction spaces, as well as open staff work areas with no private offices.

Six months after the move, we interviewed staff again with a set of similar questions:

- How is the space making an impact on how you work?
- What are the opportunities in the new spaces?
- What are the challenges?
- What are the ways in which you feel challenged in handling these transitions?
- What are the ways you feel supported in making these transitions?

The timing of the second set of interviews provided participants with some perspective on their work after the move, although it was recognized that changes were still happening in the spaces. Then, just two weeks after our last interview, the building closed down entirely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why It Matters to Research Libraries

Libraries invest heavily in providing spaces conducive to the learning, teaching, and research needs of students and faculty. In building projects of this scale, there are many external stakeholders, in addition to budgetary and time constraints. As noted in the report, the Charles Library and its notable architecture is a tremendous source of pride for Temple University, as well as the city of Philadelphia.

While there is much assessment research related to the experience of users in library spaces, particularly learning spaces, the needs of staff and their experience with the space are less studied, and should receive equal attention.

Objectives

- Understand more fully how staff experience different types of library spaces in their work as individuals, with colleagues, and with users
- Understand best practices in supporting staff as they transition to new ways of working in different spaces with new ways of providing for library services and resources

Key Performance Indicators

This was a qualitative research project, and exploratory in nature. There was no specific metric or hypothesis that we were attempting to measure or prove. While the results of this case study are very relevant to the library as a self-study, the generalizability of the findings may be limited by the unique situation at Temple.

Data

- Our data set was full textual transcripts of 38 audio-recorded interviews conducted during the course of the project (about 400 pages). The project was conducted in two phases, with about 50% of interviewees participating in both phases.
- In Phase I of the project (conducted in the spring of 2019), each interviewer (a member of the research team) was responsible for transcribing the interview they conducted. This turned out to be time-consuming. Because recordings were transcribed using different tools, the result was differing levels of detail in transcription.
- In Phase II, we outsourced the transcription of the recordings. While this was more efficient initially, it required careful review of each transcript.
- After the transcript was reviewed for accuracy and personal names were removed, the transcript was shared with the interview participant. Only then was the transcript shared with the other members of the team.
- The interview protocol (questions) is included as Appendix I.
- There were challenges in the handling of data.
 - Our institution does not consider this type of research to be human subjects research, and the protocol was not subject to review. However, we were very sensitive to the needs of individuals because of the confidential nature of what they were sharing with us.
 - Phase II interviews were conducted in a library study room, providing a neutral, relatively private location. The acoustics in the room were not ideal, and some recordings were not optimal for outsourced transcription.
 - Managing the data collection in a systematic and ethical way takes careful attention to detail.

Resources Required

Time:

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Responsibility</i>
Recruitment of research team	1 hour	Principal investigator
Skills training	Various	Principal investigator
Team meetings	1 hour per week	All research team
Scheduling and conducting of interviews	1 hour per interview	All research team
Transcription	Up to 2-3 hours per interview	All research team
Review of transcripts	1 hour per interview	All research team
Coding of transcripts	1 hour per interview	All research team
Writing reports	1 month	Principal investigator
Review of reports	4 hours	All research team
General project administration	1-2 hour per week	Principal investigator

People: The recruitment email for the research team went to all staff. In the first phase, our research team was made up of nine librarians and staff from several departments in the library. The Phase II team was much smaller—a group of three librarians. In each phase, Turner served as project lead.

The research team members volunteered for different reasons. Several members of the team joined in order to get experience in qualitative research. Others wanted to be part of a project endorsed by ARL, perceived to be a prestigious opportunity. Participation, for librarians, contributed to the portfolio of librarians working towards promotion.

Skills: The most essential skill for this research project was conducting a semi-structured interview that is neutral, yet probing. Trust and the ability to keep confidential material was the most important skill that our research team members brought to the process.

Technical resources: We used a shared Google drive for meeting notes and transcripts. In Phase I, researchers used various tools for transcription. In Phase II, we outsourced the transcription of audio recordings.

Costs: It cost approximately \$1,000 for the outsourced transcription of 29 45-minute interviews. Staff time was the real cost. While meeting and interview times were predictable, the time for analysis and writing were substantial.

Lessons Learned

Research Findings

Note: The full findings of the project are more completely described in the final report (see link below).

Physical Spaces

What we learned was not unexpected. Staff have different attitudes towards the new spaces they are working in, and even at the individual level there were mixed feelings. The spaces make it easier to do some kinds of work (instruction is an example, with more robust technology equipment), but working at the public service desk is more difficult.

Many of the concerns expressed during this project related to the physical spaces in which staff work as individuals. These issues of space related to the configuration of desks, articulation of policies and procedures, use of telephones, and location of staff seating in relation to each other. Due to COVID-19 and the majority of staff now working remotely, many issues of concern may cease to be relevant.

Providing for Communication, Transparency, and Dialog

As many staff readily agreed, change is difficult and stressful. At the very start of the semester in August 2019, it was hard for staff to adjust to different work spaces and simultaneously provide our users and community with the many virtual and physical services they expected. Added to that

high demand were the ongoing infrastructure inconveniences and temporary inadequacies of the brand-new building. Understanding, empathy, and appreciation for the work that staff do at all levels of the organization cannot be underestimated. As we have learned less than a year after the move, the conditions of work are volatile and require clear communication, dialog, and trust—whether we are moving to a new building or enduring the COVID-19 pandemic.

Process Lessons:

- We used a much smaller research team in Phase II. The smaller size, although creating more work per person, allowed for a more cohesive team with a more consistent approach to interviewing and coding of transcripts.
- In addition to using a smaller team, there was a better sense of time commitment and roles in Phase II of the project. It was helpful to set the expectations for participation level early on in the process.

Value

- This research was of definite value as a self-study, providing insights into how staff felt about and accommodated their work to adapt to the changed work spaces. While the methodology used was time-consuming, it contributed to insights that were rich and heartfelt.
- The closing of the libraries due to COVID-19, of course, put a wrench in our capacity to consider, much less put into practice, the recommendations related to the physical spaces.
- To address this challenge, we divided our recommendations based on the research into two sections. The recommendations related to physical space and suggestions for enhancements to increase flexibility, for example, may not ever be relevant. It is expected that many staff will never return to the office space full-time.
- The recommendations related to communication and organizational change have more relevance than ever in our current pandemic-stressed environment. An example is the more regular, frank, and accessible communication to all staff via Zoom on the handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Ironically, Zoom makes it possible to reach all staff in ways that in-person meetings did not.
- Finally, many staff members gained valuable experience in conducting qualitative research. The many skills they developed include a deeper understanding of confidentiality, how to ask questions in a neutral manner, and how to collaboratively analyze themes emerging from text. Research team members learned to be good listeners—a skill that can be applied in multiple contexts, both research-related and not.

Recommendations for Future

- Overall we are very satisfied with the project and the outcome. The interview questions worked well, and we were fortunate with the recruitment of participants and timing of our interviews.
- Using mixed methods can amplify the power of research. In this case, an all-staff survey may have been interesting and perhaps would have allowed us to enhance our findings. However, while a survey would have allowed for anonymous participation and additional reach, the research questions were not particularly conducive to this approach.
- It would have been interesting if survey findings corroborated our qualitative findings. Although we were systematic in our approach and strove for neutrality in presenting the results, qualitative findings are not always considered to be valid.
- We aimed for research that resulted in actionable findings. It can be challenging to turn qualitative research into direct actions, as experiences of staff are mixed. Additionally, there are limitations to the changes that can be made to the physical spaces.
- It would be fascinating to conduct a Phase III for this project to explore these same questions as staff are working remotely.

Suggested Links

A full report of Phase II is forthcoming on the [Library Assessment Conference website](#).

Appendix I: Interview Guide

Introduction and Context

1. Experience at Paley Library

- Can you tell me how long you worked at Paley?
- We will get into specifics later on, but in general, what did you like most about Paley?
- What did you like least?

2. Current Work Activities

- Tell me about what a regular day looks like for you
- What are your primary activities?
- How much activity do you do on your own, how much is interacting with colleagues, and how much is working with users - that could be students, community or faculty.

Differences between Then and Now

Now I'm going to ask you a set of questions related to the differences between your current work spaces and what you had at Paley.

3. Individual Work

First let's talk about the space you use for your individual work. What are the spaces that you use for your work?

- How is this space like what you had in the old library?
- How are these spaces different than what you had before?
 - Physical similarities and differences
 - Ambience similarities and differences
- In what ways does it work better for you, in your individual work?
- What are the challenges it presents?

4. Working with Colleagues

Tell me about the spaces you use for your work with colleagues; when you get together to talk one-on-one or with a group; this could be informal meetings, or more formal meetings.

- What are the spaces that you use? What are the similarities and differences between these spaces and those at Paley?
 - Availability
 - Convenience
 - Technologies
- What do you experience as the opportunities for working with colleagues at Charles?
- Are there any particular challenges that you are experiencing when working with colleagues in this new space?
- In terms of behaviors, do you feel that those have changed in your work with colleagues?

5. Working with Users

You said earlier that you do work with users. Could you describe the nature of the work you do?

- What are the spaces that you use? Here at Charles.
- What are the similarities and differences between the spaces you use now and the spaces that you used when working out of Paley?
- In what ways does it work better in your work with users?
- In what ways does it present challenges?

6. Feelings about Changes

- We've been in the building now for about a semester. Recognizing that Charles is still changing, how do you feel about your experience in the building so far compared to Paley? Has it been positive, has it created challenges?

7. Support for Transitions

- What are the things that have helped you, or supported you in managing the transition from Paley to Charles?
- What kind of support would make you feel more comfortable in making these changes?

Wrap Up