Envisioning our Future
at Temple University Libraries

RLIF Celebration
May 16, 2022

Nancy B. Turner
Director for Planning, Strategy and Organizational Evolution
Temple University Libraries

Thank you, Greg. What an honor it is to be presenting our project today. It’s been quite a journey.
When ARL put out its call for proposals, Temple was preparing to move to this very different library building - the Charles. We twisted the RLIF space question around a bit to focus on the staff experience of changing spaces and support for those changes.

And this was important because we were planning a move from a very traditional library space - browsing stacks, hundreds of study carrels and hardwired computers for students, private offices for staff, - to a very different library space with open offices, the bulk of the collections in an automated retrieval storage system, and a Scholars Studio with high end computers for specialized work, makerspace, a Virtual Reality lab and collaboration spaces.
Our initial research questions:

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

We used one-on-one, semi-structured interviews prior to the move to the new library, asking staff about the spaces they worked in as individuals, with colleagues and with users. We conducted a second set of interviews six months into the move. Our interest was as much about the space as the support for changes in space.
The response was pretty solid, with 29 interviews in the first phase and 29 interviews in the second, with about 50 % of interviewees participating in both.

A primary theme that emerged from those interviews was, not unexpectedly, the need for continual communication about change - staff endured many new building hiccups in the spaces they were using for their work - noise, technology was not all in place in meeting and instruction rooms. It was frustrating; But things were coming together and we were settling in to the space.

By the summer of 2020 we thought our project was complete. We wrote up our report, presented research results to staff, to ARL, I even presented at the Library Assessment Conference in 2020.
This is a picture of our staff work space now, and it prompts us to re-think what space for library work looks like in this hybrid work environment. This is a picture of the library staff area in the departments of IT and research and learning services, I took it a few months ago.

Our spaces for working as individuals, working with users, working with colleagues, are more likely virtual than physical. So it seemed a very good time to revisit our questions.
Hence, Phase III of the project - conducted in the Winter of 2021. We didn’t need to focus just on Charles Library in this phase, and we opened up participation to staff to other library buildings.
The bars show a schedule for Fall of 2021 - on any given day, there are many staff that are working remotely.
The experience of onsite physical work space has changed. The spaces that staff complained about because of noise and distraction are now very quiet. In fact, too quiet.

It doesn’t feel cozy because it’s very cavernous. It’s just cavernous and quiet, instead of cavernous and loud [Interview #21]

Most of the time when I come in, it feels like a ghost town, so it feels sort of performative. [Interview #10]
According to our interviews, many staff feel more productive when working from home. They save time not having to commute, and see savings in terms of preparing lunches, commuting costs and even dress.

There are a variety of spaces that staff use when working from home - that doesn’t seem to make a difference in terms of their satisfaction - though some reported enhancing their internet connections, reorganizing space, or buying some additional equipment or furniture.

What they valued most, and this isn’t tangible - is that feeling of being respected and trusted enough to do their work remotely.
These quotes speak to the idea of control of one’s day and space. Having the freedom to walk the dog or do a load of laundry.
- Feeling at times, more isolated and lonely
- Less sense of organizational cohesion
- Experiencing fewer serendipitous connection with colleagues outside immediate work groups and department

But staff working remotely also report…
Organizational dynamics are changing too. What is most interesting to me now are the ways in which our new hybrid work environment might in the longer term impact our organization. There is less spontaneous interaction between staff who are in different departments. We need to be more intentional in connecting with colleagues - and that may be harder to do with people outside our project or departmental teams.

Silo’s have always existed in the organization based on departments, staff level or functional area. There is an additional dividing point - and that is between staff who are onsite and staff who are not. Students have returned to campus, and to the physical library, in full force, but our reference staff now conduct 70% of their reference and consultation virtually, and that doesn’t include tools like chat. So we are finding new ways, like Slack, to connect with one another and to help patrons.

I worry what Covid had done to our cohesion as a staff and as an organization. I worry that it has taken an organization that was already pretty siloed and made it even more siloed because ... you’re not having those chance encounters. [Interview #17]

A lot of flexibility in our schedule, it’s very nice for life, right? But it’s weird for any kind of collegiality. [Interview #4]
Recommendations and Next Steps

- Make sure that technology in on-site meeting rooms meets all needs for seamless hybrid meetings
- Explore new workflows to allow for remote work when feasible and if desired
- Share best practices for hybrid meetings, to be inclusive of all voices, whether remote or in-person

- We have invested heavily to insure that the technology in our meeting rooms supports hybrid meetings.
- We will continue to look at new ways of working that provide more flexible opportunities for remote work, if that is desired.
- We will share best practices with one another; how to facilitate a successful hybrid meeting; not only learning the technologies that work best but insuring that meetings are inclusive of all voices, whether remote or in-person.
As any good research project, this one generated new questions for us to explore. What are the types of work that really do need to be in-person? What is done as well or even better in remote spaces?

What new ways of working together will help to create cohesion and a shared sense of purpose?
How are our various user communities impacted by these changes?

While this project has focused primarily on staff experience, including how staff work with users, we have yet to explore how students and other user communities experience the library spaces and resources now. And will their expectations change over time as well?
I wanted to quickly provide a shout-out to the staff participating as team members over the three phases of this project. This research is a lot of work, but it pays off in terms of building skills in conducting qualitative research, as well as learning about our colleagues. And of course, thank you to ARL, as their questions provided the impetus for all of this.