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## Expectations & Excitations: The Library as a Happening Place

Alan Bernstein

Valdosta State University, [abernste@valdosta.edu](mailto:abernste@valdosta.edu)

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# GOING WHITE PAPER

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## Expectations & Excitations: The Library as a Happening Place

by Alan Bernstein

The academic library is an exciting, bustling, sometimes mysterious, place. The Odum Library at Valdosta State University sees over 600,000 people pass through its doors annually. Every single person who comes in the library has a purpose, a motive, an expectation, a reason for being there. What are these expectations? What are these motives? What are the reasons that people come into the library? And, more importantly from a librarian or library employee standpoint, are these expectations met? Is the typical patron, whether student, faculty, or community user, satisfied with his/her library experience? Does s/he enter the library expecting that whatever his/her needs and reasons for being there will be successfully met? Does s/he exit the library sometime later, whether five minutes or five hours, satisfied that the incoming expectations were, indeed, met? Or, do they exit the library, dissatisfied, confused, concerned, unhappy, or disappointed?

It is an interesting experience to sit unobtrusively observing the patrons come into the library heading in a specific direction (or perhaps wandering, seemingly aimlessly). Watching the student reach a long, solid study table, placing his/her books down, sitting down sometimes with quickness and excitement, sometimes almost painfully grudgingly, ready, if not necessarily willing, to begin to work. There are those who move into the library quickly, scout around the myriad computer workstations looking for an empty seat. They sit and begin typing furiously, checking their e-mail for a message from a friend, beginning a chat session with a group of friends, or, perhaps, opening a word processor and beginning to type diligently an assignment for class. Some patrons head directly to a service desk, perhaps circulation, perhaps reference, perhaps the information-technology helpdesk, questions in mind, ready and hopeful of receiving satisfactory answers to their questions. Often, groups enter the library, two or more patrons in tandem, as a team together on a mission. The

library, for that moment, is the hub, the locus of that mission.

How does one measure the success of the library in meeting patron expectations? The literature on the subject<sup>1</sup> talks of surveys, questionnaires, and the formal and informal polling of library directors at schools of similar size to the library in question. Frankly though, surveys, questionnaires, and polling other library directors seems a bit sterile and insensitive to the reality of the scene in front of me. To actually observe droves of students coming in and out of the two entrances to the Odum Library — to watch them, moving to and fro, finding their desired place, enmeshing themselves in their work — this is the sign of success (or failure). Literally being in the field, observing the patrons in action, participating in their experience, or lurking in the shadows was the primary way I intended to discover whether the library in which I am employed was successfully fulfilling its most primary and fundamental mission — satisfying patron expectations.

To be sure, more than unobtrusive observation was necessary for me to determine whether, in any systematic or consistent way, the library was, indeed, fulfilling that mission. Thus, my involvement in this study was more than mere lurking. Much of my observation was participatory, sitting down with patrons, talking to them informally and probing their needs and wants vis-à-vis the library, finding out whether the library was doing an adequate, sufficient, or even an out-standing job of fulfilling its mission of producing satisfied customers.

Beyond the observation and the informal involvement with patrons of the library, I conducted more formalized interviews with several library patrons. These interviews were free-flowing. My intent was to prod and probe, poke and push, ferret and furrow, all the while attempting to ascertain whether the library was

sufficiently and satisfactorily providing the desirable level of service to patrons. My analysis following the interviews proved entirely consistent with my analysis, following both my discreet and participatory observations: the library, as a collective entity, is doing a fine job of meeting users' needs.

I am in a unique position. I manage the circulation department of the Odum Library. In that role, I am the first line of observation and contact for the many patrons who enter the building. On a regular basis, I deal with the problems, issues, concerns, complaints, tales of lost books, dog-eaten books, books "clearly returned" ("though your records seem to show otherwise..."), books "never checked out," and books "I knew I should never have loaned to my friend." I am interested, as fundamental to my job (a job that I thoroughly enjoy), in how we are succeeding or failing in our mission of satisfying patrons. Not all of this is unique. What is unique, though, is that I also have an interest in qualitative study, and, quite conveniently, I have had the opportunity this semester to put my interest in qualitative study to work exactly in an area central to my job and the library's mission. Doing what I enjoy doing (observing library patrons at task in the library and trying to ensure their satisfaction with their library experience) while simultaneously having an opportunity to test the waters

in basic interpretative qualitative research is somewhat unique for a library employee. It has been a stimulating experience. I suspect it will not be the last time.

A concern or caveat heading into this study was whether my quite visible employment with the library, and, specifically, the nature of my job, would make me an awkward participant or interviewer. Would patrons, many of whom I recognize and know on a day-to-day basis, confide in me, trust me, allow me to interview and observe them freely? Would the observed, the interviewees, feel ill-at ease? Would they alter their responses so I would hear what they believed I "wanted" to hear? Would their observed actions demonstrate legitimate interaction with the library environment or would they be stilted, feigned, manufactured, or artificial?

Rather than hide my librarian status and anxious to publicize my research intentions, I took a dramatically forthright approach with those I observed and those I interviewed. I explained the nature of my inquiry and solicited their help. I invited their participation and requested their indulgence in speaking honestly, straightforwardly, and unapologetically. Tell me the truth. Be sincere. If you have good things to say, say them. Do not exaggerate for effect. If you have things to say, to contribute, to rant about, let them out. Again, you do not



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have to be histrionic. Just be yourself—whatever that means. Though I have no empirically verifiable way of determining with exactitude whether my desires were heeded, my sense of both my participatory observations and my one-on-one interviews was that the comments, responses, attitudes expressed verbally and in body language were, indeed, real. I was comfortable with these patrons and they were comfortable with me. I did not lead them on; I did not set up false scenarios inviting them to praise or criticize the library. I asked simple, probing questions and they answered. I watched them “do their thing” in the library, and I recorded the observations. At times, it was extremely boring. At times, it was enlightening but hardly earthshaking. For the most part, I had affirmation of my preconceived mind-set regarding library service. Occasionally, I gleaned something new. My approach was seemingly haphazard with an overriding purpose. I spent several hours in different locations in the library casually observing patrons. The sites I selected to observe varied. I sat in an active computer lab — more than 20 students sitting at workstations. I sat in a third-floor open area where there are twelve, long 6-8 person study tables. I sat in the periodical reading room which houses over 2000 current journals and magazines, as well as numerous study tables, soft, comfortable chairs, and both wired and wireless network access.

However, the comments, the observations, and the interviews confused me or, at least, disturbed me. They were not what I was expecting. Ah, well, I should not be “expecting” anything. I was observing and I was supposed to be observing with a clear, unsullied, objective eye. I was observing students at work, at play, relaxing, studying, reading, sleeping, crouched seriously over a computer monitor, typing furiously. I observed animated conversations between students, students scurrying around pulling books or journals off shelves, stacking them neatly (or not so neatly) on large tables, then sitting down and sorting out their impending work. I watched students, sometimes four or five students in a group, practicing a presentation together, arguing quietly, discussing how best to present their mutually gathered information. There was joking, quizzing, and ogling; there was concern and fear at having waited too long to start, disdain for the assignments, boredom with the class, anger at the instructor. All this was in the public eye; all this was palpable, conspicuous, and clear.

And then an epiphany occurred — an epiphany that undermined, yet liberated, my librarian subjectivity, an epiphany that transformed, morphed, and matured my exploration and research pursuit in a new direction. I had been approaching this study narrowly focusing on the

specific question of whether the library was meeting patrons’ expectations. Now, to be sure, that is an important question. But it is a question specifically geared towards active engagement involving a library service (for example, interaction between patron and librarian at the reference desk). What my observations and patrons’ comments made during my observations revealed were that patrons’ expectations were not the principal interest of the patron; it was the role or utility that the library played in the patron’s particular and individual routine. Of course, the library fulfilled the patrons’ expectations. They would not be coming to the library otherwise. However, what became interesting, revelatory, and overriding in my study was how patrons viewed, used, and embraced the library and their library experiences.

This revelation redirected my focus. I reread my field notes, my observer’s comments, my interview transcript. I began looking not so much for themes relating to library expectation and fulfillment, but comments and patterns relating to general use of the facility. Why were people coming to the library? What were they doing here? How have these reasons for coming changed over the last year or two? My ethnographic study shifted unexpectedly. I refocused my librarian eye. I attached another lens. I was not interested in whether the library gave the students what they wanted in service, personnel, and facilities. That would wait for another time, another study, another project. I was now interested in why students came and what experiences in the library were important to them.

Now, this may seem an extremely subtle shift, indeed, a very mundane change in focus. But, in fact, it is not. The general knowledge of why people use the library at all is significantly distinct ethnologically from whether they are having their needs fulfilled. I realized in reading over my notes and analyzing my data that some very consistent patterns emerged. Though I only interacted directly with six or seven students, and only did a full length interview with two, it was apparent from recurring observations and remarks that these students *like* the library. They like it as it is and for what it provides — a comfortable, large, and engaging place to do many different activities. Not one student I observed, questioned, or interacted with stated that first and foremost the library was the obvious place on campus to *study*, to do *schoolwork*. It was the single, universally accepted place on campus that was enjoyable to visit, hang out, meet friends, and study or do schoolwork. The latter was always a tagalong. There was no embarrassment or hesitation here. It was not as though the students seemed apologetic for this attitude. No student said anything to the effect of “yeah, I know the library is the place to do research, reading, writing, seek professional help, etc., and I hate to admit it, but I

don't do those things there. I just like to hang out, check my email, and relax."

Looking at the notes, looking at the comments, watching the patrons at work (or at play), my analysis became more unidirectional. Was the library meeting "expectations"? Students were *using* their library — that, in itself, was the principal expectation being met. What was interesting was *how* they were using it. All observations, all interactive involvement pointed to the same point: students were comfortable in the library. They may have all been doing different things, but they found a place to successfully do them here. Everyone had carved out their own niche. Some sat alone in study carrels, wearing headphones, submerged in their own silent world, reading, sleeping, studying. Many sat at open tables, work laid out before them, taking advantage of the open space, unsubmerged but just as wrapped up in their activities. The library is a magnet for group work—two or more students working together. My observations and discussions with students clearly indicated equal satisfaction in how, again, the library provided a site for them as well. It might be noted here that the library has (deliberately) no formalized policies regarding food and beverage or noise. Patrons police themselves and the results have been consistently excellent. This is in stark contrast to older times when not

even a sealable bottle of water was allowed in the building and the "shushing" of the bun-headed librarian was as ubiquitous as the massive card catalogs.

Time and again, the same comments were repeated, if not verbatim, then clearly in essence: "The library is fun," "The library is a cool place to hang out," "I enjoy being in the library," "It's a comfortable place," "I can study here, I can relax here, I can visit with my friends here." Essentially, the library has become a hub on campus for many students. It has replaced or usurped the student union, the recreation center, the dining hall, and the university center as the most "happening" place on campus. And though, obviously, there are many activities that simply cannot be done in the library, there are many that can keep our attendance numbers rising significantly every year. Analysis through interpretation of comments revealed satisfaction in all user services but, more importantly, contentment with the atmosphere of the building, the *soul* of the building. The library was not an austere, frightening place. It was a welcoming, engaging place where serious work could (and is) done, but much more happens within its walls as well.

The confusion expressed both in body language and verbal response to my enquiries regarding "expectations"

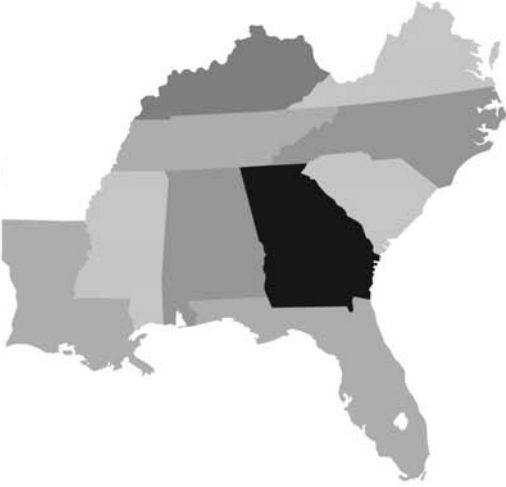
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signified to me an important characteristic in this terse ethnographic study: Students do not view the library as a study hall or traditional place of research *per se*; they see the library as a safe haven on campus, sort of an academic sanctuary. The library is a place to escape, relax, chill-out, psyche-up, eat, drink, and be merry. The merriment is revealed in all sorts of ways.

Can any substantive conclusions be drawn? Can I make anything out of the relatively brief observations and interviews conducted? I would contend the answer to these questions is a definitive "yes." Times change, infrastructures change, and the uses of infrastructures change. The academic library is not what it once was. The design of buildings, the bundles of spooled, coaxial cables spinning their way through plastic conduits, snaking through ductwork, and hidden by ceiling tiles allow power and networkability to reach hundreds of small personal computers. Our library's floors are filled daily with hundreds of students sitting at these hundreds of machines. This was not the case when I was an undergraduate; students have fun in the library now. Bun-headed women with steely wills, "shushing" mouths, crooked fingers, and faces of iron do not patrol the floors; food and beverage is no longer confiscated at the door, the atmosphere is somewhat carefree, casual, and inviting. Can serious work still be done? Yes, indeed, it can and most certainly is. Nothing from the library of yesterday, in that regard, is any different. But the heart and, perhaps, spirit of the library are different. The library is much more than merely the research center on campus; it is a focal point for student interaction (and, though I have not discussed it in this paper, faculty interaction as well). It is a springboard location for students to congregate and meditate, interact and investigate. And this all occurs in an environment where the staff welcomes patrons happily and excitedly.

Drawing too generalized a set of conclusions is perilous. Such a small sample of interviewees, so little time invested in unobtrusive and participatory observation makes me extremely uneasy to pontificate about the station of the academic library of today. Nevertheless, I would contend that an unambiguous conclusion is inducible regarding our library at VSU: It is used, a lot, and it is venerated and appreciated by the students who use it. ►►

**Alan Bernstein is Circulation Manager at Valdosta State University's Odum Library.**

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Bridges, Karl (ed.), *Expectations of librarians in the 21st century*. Greenwood Press, Westport, Colo., 2003; Herson, Peter, *Assessing service quality: satisfying the library customers*. American Library Association, Chicago, 1998.

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