

WPLC User / Non-User Research Project Proposal

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Project Overview

Most observers would agree that libraries have changed over the years, regardless of whether they would agree that the change is good or bad. As libraries offer new and different services outside of the traditional role of lending of items, it's important to understand the role that libraries play in the lives of users. The Portage County Public Library (PCPL), headquartered in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, serves approximately 75,000 residents through four uniquely diverse locations and the library is preparing to begin its first strategic planning effort since 2008. Key to the planning process is the question of how people use the library and how the library can use that information to better fill resident's needs? Traditional library measurements fall short of providing those answers. While stakeholders still seem content to use circulation and door count numbers to measure success, that data doesn't totally answer the deeper question of how residents are interacting with library spaces.

The city of Stevens Point also recently started implementing portions of a parking plan designed to recover some of the cost of providing and maintaining parking spaces in the downtown area. The plan would install parking kiosks and meters for all spaces and lots within two blocks of the Stevens Point branch of PCPL with a one-hour limit. To make the argument that the library requires some flexibility from the planned one-hour parking limit, library representatives have attempted to make city planners aware that residents often spend much more than one hour at the library building. Unfortunately, the library's case is made from staff observations, not actual data, so stronger evidence needs to be developed.

The purpose of this project is two-fold; a) determine the amount of time users spend at the library during a normal visit and b) find out how residents use the library when they visit the facility.

Partnerships

In an effort to provide more comprehensive findings across a varied spectrum of library types, the Portage County Public Library is partnering with the La Crosse Public Library (LPL) in La Crosse, Wisconsin to conduct a simultaneous study. Established in 1888, the La Crosse Public Library serves 55,000 residents within the La Crosse metropolitan region from three branch locations. It is a member of the Winding Rivers Library System and the main branch is located

in downtown La Crosse. This partnership allows us to compare the survey results of a multi-branch urban library system (LPL) with a county system consisting of individual branches in different municipalities (PCPL).

Project Timeline

Survey Instrument Development-June 12th - 30th

Data Collection - July 16th – 22nd & August 13th – 19th

Data Analysis – August 20th – September 15th

Completed Written Report – September 29th

Formal Presentation At WLA – October 17th – 20th

Methods

This project was developed using a similar study, “Sweeping the Library: Mapping the social activity space of the public library” (2003). To accomplish this project, a sweep survey instrument will be developed that lists all possible locations in PCPL and LPL that users can access, and the range of activities they could be involved in at the time of the sweep. The sweeps will be conducted over the course of two weeks, with three sweeps per day. One sweep will be conducted in July and the second sweep in August. The sweep surveys will be conducted three times a day during the collection week and will be collected each day of the survey week.

Data collectors will walk the floors of both libraries and observe users, marking down the space they have selected to occupy, their demographic information, their activity at the time of the sweep, and any tools they are using to accomplish the task. For example, a data example might show that a female, aged 20-25, was sitting in the reading room, using her lap top, and drinking coffee. No interaction with the user is required and collectors are to remain unobtrusive while gathering the information.

During the same week that the sweep surveys are being conducted, a separate survey will ask users how much time they spent at the library. This survey will be voluntary and consist of an easel pad at the library exits where patrons will be asked to mark down how much time they spent during their visit to the branch. This method of collection was selected after being successful during the Portage County Public Library’s National Library Week activity. At that

time users were asked to voluntarily mark down why they had visited the library that day. The exercise generated over 200 responses.

In the original sweeps study cited above, researchers Given and Leckie conducted survey sweeps of the main branches of the Toronto and Vancouver Public Libraries in Canada. It was part of a larger study to explore the role of large central libraries in an urban setting. For the purposes of our project, the main branches of PCPL and LPL also provide the widest possible range of library activities. However, in the future the sweep surveys can be expanded to the other branches of our project libraries, or any other library system that wishes to use this method, in an effort to see how the usage of different locations within a single system might vary. PCPL and LPL will also incorporate other data, as needed, like circulation numbers, Wi-Fi use, program attendance, door counts, reference questions, or other available measures from the survey weeks. It will be analyzed alongside the data gathered by the sweep surveys, in order to give a fuller picture of library usage.

The project data will be analyzed for significant spatial and activity patterns with the assistance of the South Central Library System Data Services Consultant, Jody Hoesly.

Generalizability

The methods described above should be easily repeatable in all types of library settings. For replication purposes the methods were kept simple. The main variation between the data collected by different libraries will be the availability of different spaces provided by the participating libraries. For example, not all libraries may have a “snack area” or “reading room”, so sweep surveys will need to be adapted to fit each library. For the purpose of this study the survey tool will be generalized as much as possible so data from PCPL and LPL will be comparable, without rendering the details from the individual libraries useless.

Anticipated Outcomes

In the end, the Portage County Public Library and La Crosse Public Library should have a detailed report on how residents use their respective libraries and the environments each provides. In studying a range of actions by users, we can expect to see users pick specific locations in the libraries to achieve their goals, such as users wanting to study will likely seek out more isolated areas while users engaged in casual Internet browsing or reading might select more casual locations within the library, if they are provided. The resulting survey data should help both libraries make informed choices on possible workflow and redesign decisions for the future, especially if data shows residents using spaces in unintentional ways.

Given, L.M. & Leckie, G.J. (2003). Sweeping the library: Mapping the social activity space of the public library. *Library & Information Science Research*, 25 (2003), pp. 365-385.