Moffitt Renovation Project, Student Focus Group Report

I. Background

On January 23, 2008, members of the Student Advisory Council on Undergraduate Education (advisory to Christina Maslach, the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education) participated in a focus group session designed to gather information pertinent to the reconceptualization and renovation of the Moffitt Library. Eight students were in attendance, including five seniors and three juniors. With the Sciences, Social Sciences, and Humanities all represented, student majors included: Development Studies/Peace and Conflict Studies, Chemical Biology, History, Rhetoric/Political Science, Genetics & Plant Biology, Psychology, Computer Science/Economics, Physics/Mathematics.

Session facilitators were Elizabeth Dupuis, Associate University Librarian for Educational Initiatives and Director, Doe/Moffitt Libraries; and Kathleen Gallagher, Undergraduate Services and Collections Librarian and Moffitt Renovation Project Leader. The session was divided in two parts of approximately one hour each.

Part One was designed as a loosely structured, interactive exploration of participants’ current perceptions and use of campus libraries and of the nature of their course assignments. Its purpose was to help identify needs, habits, and curricular trends that might shape the design of library facilities and services—as well as to test some of our assumptions on these issues.

In Part Two, the session facilitators presented a general overview of the plan to renovate Moffitt, and then asked students to consider three “themes” key to its reconceptualization. Divided into three smaller groups, students brainstormed an assigned theme, responding to one of the following prompts:

- Describe the characteristics and features of a place that would provide a technology rich learning environment
- Describe the characteristics and features of a place that would serve as a preeminent intellectual commons on campus.
- Describe the characteristics and features of a place that would welcome and acculturate undergraduates into the campus community of scholars.

The 15-minute period to brainstorm was followed by small group reports and discussion of ideas with the larger group.
II. Part One: Narrative Summary

Invited to relate their individual experiences using campus libraries during the first segment of the focus group session, the open-ended discussion shed light on the nature of student library use, the characteristics of preferred study/work spaces, and some particular areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the discussion revealed that the campus library most frequented by an upper-division undergraduate is not necessarily the one designated for the student’s major. Collection content was cited by only one of the participants as the main reason for regular use of a particular library (History major, Gardner Stacks). This is not to suggest, of course, that students do not use the collections; they may indeed use them, as needed, but for the purposes of study they are more likely to choose a library location based on ambience and/or accommodation of their study habits. Regarding ambience, students cited their preferences, variously, for spaces that are “cozy” (“the Rhetoric Department’s library”); “grand” (a Math/Physics senior, on why he uses Doe’s North Reading Room); and “aesthetically pleasing” (a Political Science major, on why he studies in the Music Library). Students also stressed the importance of comfort—a quality associated mostly with furnishings like sofas and ottomans— and mentioned the need to go outside the libraries to find spaces fitting this description. Eschelman Hall’s 24-hour “library” was mentioned in this context.

Unsurprisingly, students repeatedly held Moffitt up as the negative example of ambience and comfort (“it’s depressing” and “always freezing,” for example, and “there aren’t any bathrooms on the first floor”). Still another noted it was “too loud” and especially “hectic” during finals, and lamented the apparent absence of “patrolling” to maintain quiet. Functional inadequacies students noted included the insufficient supply of electrical outlets and inconsistency of wireless access. More than one student characterized Moffitt as the library of last resort, the place they went only when all others had shut down for the night.

Discussion of Moffitt was tempered by student appreciation of some of its unique amenities and services. Students expressed appreciation for its proximity to the FSM Café (but frustration with the café’s noise level and limited seating); its extended hours and abundant natural light—described as a relief from the darkness of the Gardner Stacks; for the informal, seemingly more conversation-friendly atmosphere of the first floor; and for the convenient, central campus location of the computer lab.

Moffitt’s Media Resource Center also won praise, some of it from unexpected quarters: The Math/Physics senior described it as a too-well-kept secret, a “free Blockbuster” that should be promoted more to students, and a place where he watched films for pleasure when he had time between classes. Another student appreciated the video checkout privilege he’d had as a DeCal instructor. Others felt the MRC’s shortcomings needed mention. In particular, they noted uncomfortable viewing stations, which forced the viewer to sit in a confining, upright position.
(“like a robot”) and too close to the screen. They also wanted to see the permissible viewing area expanded throughout the building.

Irrespective of discipline- and temperament-based preferences, strong consensus emerged on two issues: 1) food and drink are indispensable to staying focused on an intellectual task for long periods, and 2) the libraries—and campus in general—provide too few spaces for group discussion and study. Several students discussed their preference for working in campus libraries with a more permissive stance—whether official or unofficial—on food and drink: Both the Law and Chemistry libraries were mentioned as favorites for this reason. Others sought places where they could talk openly without feeling like they were disrupting a norm of quiet, solitary concentration. Among students in the sciences, the Chemistry Library, again, had a reputation for accommodating this need. The History major suggested that, while group work was less a feature of daily life for her than it was for students in the sciences, meeting in a classmate’s apartment or dorm room was the most commonly chosen option when these circumstances arose.

Also on the subject of group study space, students noted their appreciation of the group study rooms in the Gardner Stacks, but expressed frustration with both their limited hours of availability (they close when the Moffitt Circulation desk closes—long before the Stacks themselves), and the inconvenient reservation system. Currently, students must come to the library to reserve a room, not knowing before they come whether and when one will be available. The group suggested online and phone reservation options to eliminate this inconvenience.

Library collections, including licensed resources and search tools, were the subject of fewer student comments. (It is possible, of course, that the idea of a renovation project simply prompts fewer thoughts about collections than it does about facilities—no matter how broadly the invitation to describe “library experiences” is framed.) As mentioned earlier, the senior History major described the Gardner Stacks as the library she studied in most often because it had the collections she needed—whereas Moffitt, she added, did not. The senior Development Studies/Peace and Conflict Studies major noted that journals and documentary film in his area (Africa) were lacking, and that he sometimes turned to a friend at Cornell University to get what he needed. He also noted his preference for online materials, and his enthusiasm for Refworks, which he’d learned about through a friend. The Refworks comment aroused some curiosity, since most of the others were unfamiliar with this tool. The same student, apparently one of the group’s biggest users of library collections, wondered aloud when the Library would offer “a single search box, like Google, to search everything.” The comment prompted nods of agreement around the room.

Students were also asked to talk about “typical” assignments in their courses. Though the discussion was brief (time was running short) and shed little new light, it confirmed at least some of the conventional wisdom regarding the increasing pedagogical emphasis on collaboration. Across disciplines, but especially in the social sciences, students reported being
III. Part Two: Narrative Summary

Theme 1: Describe the characteristics and features of a place that would provide a “technology rich learning environment”

Asked to imagine a “technology rich learning environment,” students had as much to say about architectural and interior design as they did about hardware, software, and other equipment. The concept evoked a space with plenty of natural light (“long windows”) and “lightweight” furnishing that could be rearranged at will; students commented that the large, substantial “wood” pieces of more traditional spaces like Doe’s North Reading Room “wouldn’t fit” here. For one student, “technology rich” also suggested attention to sustainable or “green” design. Students also imagined a space that was not monolithic and monotonous, but “broken up” to accommodate a range of preferences, with areas differentiated by color, furniture, size (“cozy” versus “large and open”), and other design features. Desirable furniture they mentioned included “bean bags,” “futons” and “ottomans,” and they recommended creating “different environments on each floor.” Clearly, “technology-rich” for this group did not conjure images of uniformity or sterility.

Offering a few straightforward ideas about technology itself, students emphasized the importance of “perfect and fast” Internet access. They also said they would expect to find more readily available media projection equipment and smartboards. They imagined spaces with flatscreen televisions “artistically arranged,” and “touchscreen” stations strategically located for “quick information.” Noting that smartboards and other expensive equipment sometimes go unused, one student interjected a caution not to waste resources on technological showpieces, but to invest in solutions that meet real needs. Perhaps redirected by this comment, students cited a frequent need to visualize and “solve problems” together, and suggested imaginative, low-tech options that would accommodate doing so spontaneously—e.g., the availability of mobile whiteboards and writable/erasable wall space and tabletops. Other ideas on this theme included a “high tech” events board that would be accessible to student groups, and expanded availability of wireless printing from student laptops.
Theme 2: Describe the characteristics and features of a place that would “serve as a preeminent intellectual commons” on campus.

Students associated the “intellectual commons” concept as much with a particular kind of atmosphere and space design as they did with the specifically functional aspects of the place. To quote one student, “aesthetics play a role in how we operate,” and the group expressed a preference for a design that would communicate “casual, modern and chic.” Some also expressed a preference for “bright colors” and “openness” and emphasized the importance of the place being kept “clean.” In addition to “modern,” students valued “cozy, warm and homey,” and felt that furnishings should include “couches” and “rugs.”

Functionally, an intellectual commons had to accommodate “conversation,” “space for groups working together,” and space for “faculty and students to interact beyond a formal classroom setting.” For the latter function, they emphasized the importance of the “casual” and “fluid” nature of the interaction.

Students mentioned two program and service areas as being integral features of an intellectual commons. A “coffee bar” was described as an essential meeting place “between classes.” The location within the library was preferred over commercial cafés for the more “scholarly environment” and sense of “serious purpose”—but “food friendly” was repeatedly described as a characteristic of a vibrant intellectual commons. The second feature mentioned in this category was a “computer lab,” though students were quick to add that a computer-dominated landscape would be highly undesirable, and that the “human” feel of the environment should prevail. Similarly, the sound pervading an intellectual commons should be the “low hum” of human activity and interaction, not that of obtrusive technology.

Theme 3: Describe the characteristics and features of a place that would “welcome and acculturate undergraduates into the campus community of scholars.”

Students in this group found the concept of the community of scholars “the most abstract” and difficult of the three. They offered some initial ideas tentatively: A “community of scholars,” they suggested, might benefit from classes offered in the use of software programs, or in preparation for graduate exams (e.g., GRE, GMAT). In the same vein, they suggested that such a place might offer special meeting places for campus student organizations.

With a notably greater degree of confidence and conviction, students offered advice on the provision of reference or “research assistance”—perhaps because this is familiar “library” territory, and it’s arguably easier to imagine improvements to existing services than to invent new ones altogether. Whatever the reason, the response suggested a strong link for students between reference service and support for a community of scholars. Specifically, students recommended providing reference assistance on the model of the “Genius Bar” in Apple™ retail stores.
Desirable features of the Genius Bar include:

- **Strong branding and marketing:** Students felt that research assistance in the library was still not well publicized enough.

- **Visible placement in the facility:** The Genius Bar is a spatially prominent feature in Apple stores. Students noted that the research assistance desk, in Moffitt especially, was easy to overlook, and not located where students spend their time in the building.

- **No waiting:** Apple has an online reservation system, so the help seeker simply shows up at the appointed time. Students noted the inconvenience of a desk staffed by only one person, who may get tied up with another patron for as much as “30 minutes to an hour” while they waited.

- **Face-to-face help:** New communication technologies notwithstanding, students continue to find in-person support valuable.

Beyond the Genius Bar concept, students mentioned the desirability of peer assistance with research, noting that “it doesn’t always take a PhD in information science” to orient them to library electronic resources. Credentials of the provider aside, students were emphatic about the need for this type of service in person and at the point of need.

Finally, one student suggested that providing for the community of scholars should include special attention to the needs of underrepresented groups on campus. The student noted that Heller Lounge, home to the Multicultural Center in the MLK Student Union, was a popular study destination for underrepresented students, owing more to its “welcoming” atmosphere and sense of place than to any specific amenities.

**IV. Next Steps**

Asked their advice on continuing to tap student experience to inform the Moffitt Renovation, the Student Advisory Council recommended engaging underclassmen, specifically, and the residence halls as a possible venue for doing so. Offering food, they suggested, is usually sufficient inducement to attract participants. Site visits to Heller Lounge and the 24-hour Eschelman Hall “library”—both described as popular study haunts—to interview student users, also arose as a possibility.

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*February 15, 2008*