

I study in my car. How a study habits survey helped to change and champion the library at two California Community Colleges.

Presented at the California Academic & Research Libraries 2018 Conference
April 13-15, 2018
San Francisco, California

Brian M. Greene, Librarian, Columbia College.
Elizabeth Horan, Librarian, Coastline Community College.

Abstract

Library surveys. Been there, done that. But what happens when you take the library out of the survey and start asking students about their study habits and preferences? Things start to get real. And the data that comes back can be valuable for shaping library services, facility re-design, and building empathy with students. A survey isn't sexy, but it definitely rocked our world and inspired change at our libraries

In our session we shared the survey, talked about some design “ah ha” moments, and showed how data helped build a case for library change while at the same time highlighting some of the things libraries do really well.

Introduction

In fall 2016 Greene and Horan were invited to contribute a chapter to a book about libraries serving commuter students. This began a collaboration to look at the study habits of commuter students at two community colleges in California; Modesto Junior College (Greene) and Coastline Community College (Horan). Modesto is in the Central Valley east of San Francisco. It is an agricultural area with lower than average incomes and lower rates of higher education attainment. Modesto is in a multi-college district with Columbia College, it's much smaller sister institution. Coastline, in contrast, is in Orange County, which has higher than average income levels while educational attainment is about average. Coastline is in a multi-district college with Orange Coast College and Golden West College.

At the time of the survey 77% of Coastline students were taking distance education courses; a number that's gone up since then. Only 30% of students were less than 24 years old, so an older student body. In terms of ethnic diversity, there were similar percentages of Asian, Hispanic and white non-Hispanic students. Lastly, a majority of Coastline students were part-time.

Modesto is the larger institution, with nearly twice as many students enrolled as Coastline. The student body is younger, with 66% of students under 24 years old, and the ethnic breakdown is different, with Hispanic students making up nearly half of the student body. Distance Education is less prevalent at Modesto, with just 17% of students taking distance education courses. In short, our colleges were pretty different, in terms of demographics, in terms of institution size and focus on modality, and in terms of community.

With the assistance of the research office at Coastline Community College, Greene and Horan created a survey that was administered at each college over a four week time span. The results of that survey and some lessons learned were presented at CARL 2018 - Academic Libraries in Times of Change (Greene & Horan, 2018). The book chapter is published in *Academic Libraries for Commuter Students* (Regalado & Smale, 2018) from ALA Editions.

Literature Review

Student study habits have been studied often, but the authors were surprised to find the lack of studies on community college students, especially from California with its 114 community colleges. There was also a lack of specific studies on commuter students, which almost all California community college students are. In reviewing the literature on study habits it became obvious that almost all research focused on residential undergraduate students and the experiences of those students was likely very different than the students at Modesto and Coastline. Studies from the University of Rochester (Foster and Gibbons, 2007), University of Minnesota (Badger, 2014), and Kent State (Kretovics, 2015) all centered around students at four year institutions. When they identified any of their students as "commuter students," the idea that libraries and college services were available 24/7 was very different than the reality of what California community college students had access to. Another difference noted was that a lot of California community college students were working and had family obligations that were not mentioned in studies we found about student study habits.

Especially relevant for the circumstances at Coastline, where roughly 77% of students were online, Kretovics declares "distance students are essentially commuter students who use a different vehicle to arrive on campuses" (2015, 73).

Methods

A survey instrument (Appendix 1) was developed that included 19 questions across four categories: Life, School, Study Habits and Research Tools. Feedback on the instrument was provided by the editors of the book that prompted the survey and the Dean of Institutional Research, Effectiveness and Planning at Coastline Community College. Slight variations (e.g. campus-specific names) in the survey instrument were made to reflect differences between the two colleges when it was deployed. The survey was distributed in different ways at each college: at Coastline, the survey was embedded in the annual Service Area Outcomes (SAO) survey by the research department and sent to all students who had taken a Coastline class in the last three semesters. At Modesto the survey was distributed to current students from that semester with Modesto using email addresses pulled from the integrated library system (ILS).

The authors used several data analysis techniques once the surveys closed. One method utilized the services of the Coastline research office, which performed a data analysis for Coastline (Zentner, Covit, and Homestead, 2017) and Modesto (Zentner and Greene, 2017) that summarized the data. The authors also used SurveyMonkey's text-analysis functionality to validate the categories found from the research office analysis. Finally, and perhaps most insightfully, the authors manually reviewed the data, including all open-ended responses.

The Coastline survey received 1,030 responses while the Modesto survey received 558 responses.

Results

Given how different Modesto and Coastline were – in terms of demographics, surrounding community and focus on distance education – the authors were surprised at how similar the survey results were. For example, the life challenges students experienced, their accomplishments and hardships were similar in the Work/Life section of the survey. The percentages who studied in their cars, the times they studied, the study environments preferred, the technology used, including mobile phones to do research, and that people like to eat while studying were also similar. The results that follow show that student experiences and study habits share many commonalities despite the substantial differences between the student bodies themselves.

A defining characteristic of the survey was that it included a number of open-ended questions. This was a blessing and curse. On the one hand it provided the most insightful data that was collected, while on the other hand it was challenging to code and analyze. The survey asked the following open-ended questions:

- How do you balance life, school and/or work commitments?
- What is your favorite place to study and why?
- What is your least favorite place to study and why?
- If you multitask while studying, what kinds of activities do you do?

Favorite Place to Study

The average respondent at both colleges had completed multiple semesters and earned more than 61 units with a GPA of 3.01 or higher. One difference is that respondents at Coastline were far more likely to be taking a single course (35%) than at Modesto (12%).

Students at both colleges wanted to be close to resources such as textbooks, librarians, etc. The study environments students preferred were quiet, comfortable and had wifi. The top three locations students preferred to study in the survey were home, library, and coffee shop.

Now, Coastline doesn't have a physical library so this was confusing at first. Through the open-ended questions the authors were able to decipher that Coastline students were studying at other college libraries, at public libraries and at the tutoring centers on campus that they thought were the library because of the textbook collections housed there.

The overall study environment that students said was their favorite place to study was their home. However, some found studying at home to be too distracting and therefore unproductive. Some students liked being able to multitask while at home or found their home to be the most comfortable place to study while other students found the chores, family obligations or simply the noise of their home environment to get in the way of their studying.

A substantial number of students at both colleges said their favorite place to study was in their car. In fact, at Coastline 17% of students cited their car as a favorite place to study while at Modesto the number was even higher, 28%. When you think that students wanted a quiet and comfortable place to study it makes sense that place could be a car. Of course there is a lot about students studying in cars that the authors don't know. For example, if the studying is context appropriate (i.e. listening to audio versions of textbooks), or if they're drivers, passengers or even if they're in a car that's moving. Indeed, some open ended responses suggest students use their car as a room; a place to get away from distractions.

Smartphones

The idea that students were studying in their cars humbled us a little bit and made us look at Library resources and how well they are accessible by phone/mobile if that is what a student in a car is using to look up something. This ties into a request from the editors of the chapter to include the topic in our survey. As it turned out, smartphones were one of the top five research tools used at both colleges. Yet when asked the percentage of research done on a smartphone, most students reported 1-25%, suggesting that while smartphone use was widespread it was also somewhat shallow. Still, these results highlight the importance of smartphones in students' research practices and led to an outcome for both Coastline and Modesto to find more effective ways to help students conduct research on their smartphones. Smartphone-specific tutorials and specific library instruction focused on mobile environments might better prepare students to work with library resources as they are likely to do in practice. At the same time, librarians need to continue working with database vendors to advocate for more mobile-friendly products.

Study Times

The results showed that 8pm to midnight was the most common study time at both colleges. This is of course is a time period when many colleges are winding down for the evening or closed. Especially at commuter colleges, students often aren't on campus late into the evening. Students reported that returning to campus would mean finding child care, leaving family, transportation time, and finding parking, all just to study in the library for one more hour. In the past when Modesto's piloted later hours there simply wasn't enough usage to justify continuing it.

The majority of Coastline students are part-time students and report working during the week. The 8pm to midnight study time is the highest typical study time for these students who report “getting to study” when all their other duties and chores were completed.

Conclusion

While the authors both had experience doing informal surveys, they were both novices when it came to formal surveys and, especially, analyzing the results in a comprehensive way. Going through this process they learned a number of lessons, some of which perhaps should've been obvious. For example, each of the colleges administered the survey and in the end some of the questions were configured slightly differently. This made apples to apples comparisons challenging. The survey also ended up with some data that the authors didn't use, which emphasized the importance of really thinking through what data you want to get to avoid asking unnecessary questions.

When looking at surveys we now think it is really important for librarians to look at the raw data and to do their own analysis, especially for open-ended questions. Think of it as closing the loop in a survey process. A summary- analysis created by the research office at Coastline for each campus individually was nice because it validated what we had found, but the authors own analysis of the data was incredible powerful. When thinking about your own surveys and future surveys, we need to continue to ask questions that help tell stories and are valuable questions for the Library.

Overall the survey was an excellent experience. We encourage librarians to be part of the whole survey process, especially in terms of evaluating responses. And be sure to ask meaningful questions in surveys that help demonstrate value of the library and can help create change. When the authors set out they were curious how the college library intersected with student study habits. After the survey and writing the chapter the authors changed their view to now be focused on how the library can support student study habits at multiple levels.

References

- Badger, C. W. (2014). "A student perspective: Commuter student experiences, definitions and self-identification." *Humphrey Public Affairs Review* 1 (1).
<http://humphreyreview.umn.edu/student-perspective-commuter-student-experiences-definitions-and-self-identification>.
- Foster, Nancy Fried, and Susan L. Gibbons, eds. (2007). *Studying students: The undergraduate research project at the University of Rochester*. Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries.
http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/publications/booksanddigitalresources/digital/Foster-Gibbons_cmpd.pdf.
- Greene, B. & Horan E. (2018). *I study in my car. How a study habits survey helped to change and champion the library at two California Community Colleges* [Presentation]. San Francisco, CA. California Academic & Research Libraries 2018 Conference.
<https://goo.gl/38Fy3L>
- Kretovics, Mark. (2015). "Commuter students, online services, and online communities." *New Directions for Student Services* 2015 (150): 69-78. doi: 10.1002/ss.20128.
- Regalado, M., & Smale, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Academic libraries for commuter students: Research-based strategies*. ALA Editions.
- Zentner, Aeron and Brian Greene. (2017). "Modesto student study habits." *Modesto Junior College*. http://libguides.mjc.edu/ld.php?content_id=32782626.
- Zentner, Aeron, Raissa Covit, and Steven Homestead. (2017). "Coastline student study habits." *Coastline Community College*.
<http://documents.coastline.edu/research%20and%20planning/Research/Research%20Studies/2017%20Student%20Study%20Habits.pdf>.

Study Habits of Community College Students

School

1. How many classes are you taking this semester?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6+

2. How many college semesters have you completed?

- First semester
- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5-6
- 7+

3. How many college units have you completed overall?

- Less than 12
- 12-24
- 25-36
- 37-48
- 49-60
- 61+

4. What is your current cumulative GPA?

- Less than 2.0
- 2.01 to 2.50
- 2.51 to 3.00
- 3.01 to 3.50
- 3.51 to 4.00
- Other (please specify)

Study Habits of Community College Students

Life

5. How many people do you live with?

Number of People

| | |
|----------------|----------------------|
| Alone | <input type="text"/> |
| Family members | <input type="text"/> |
| Roommates | <input type="text"/> |

6. Do you have a job?

- Yes
- No
- Other (please specify)

7. How many hours a week do you work?

Number of hours

| | |
|-----------|----------------------|
| Monday | <input type="text"/> |
| Tuesday | <input type="text"/> |
| Wednesday | <input type="text"/> |
| Thursday | <input type="text"/> |
| Friday | <input type="text"/> |
| Saturday | <input type="text"/> |
| Sunday | <input type="text"/> |

8. How do you balance life, school and/or work commitments?

Study Habits of Community College Students

Study Habits

9. How much time do you spend studying in an average week?

| | # of Hours |
|-----------|----------------------|
| Monday | <input type="text"/> |
| Tuesday | <input type="text"/> |
| Wednesday | <input type="text"/> |
| Thursday | <input type="text"/> |
| Friday | <input type="text"/> |
| Saturday | <input type="text"/> |
| Sunday | <input type="text"/> |

10. Where do you study? (Select all that apply.)

- Car
- Coffee Shop
- College Cafeteria
- College Classroom - Before class
- College Classroom - After class
- College Hallway
- College Library & Learning Center
- College Lobby
- College Pathways Center
- College Student Success Hub
- College Veterans Center
- Home
- On a Bus
- On a Train
- Public Library
- Recreation Center
- Restaurant
- Outside
- Work
- Other (please specify)

11. What is your favorite place to study and why?

12. What is your least favorite place to study and why?

13. What time do you typically study? (Select all that apply.)

- 4am-8am
- 8am-Noon
- Noon-4pm
- 4pm-8pm
- 8pm-Midnight
- Midnight-4am
- Other (please specify)

14. If you multitask while studying, what kinds of activities do you do?

Study Habits of Community College Students

Research and Study Habits

15. What technology do you use to help you study? (Select all that apply.)

- Apps
- Desktop computer
- Laptop
- Smartphone
- Tablet
- I don't use technology to study
- Other (please specify)

For the next four questions, think about the last assignment you did that required research.

16. Overall, how many hours did you spend working on this assignment?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10+

17. What research tools did you use for this assignment? (Select all that apply.)

- Canvas
- Citation Machine
- EasyBib
- Ebooks
- EBSCO
- Gale
- Google
- Google Scholar
- Internet search
- Librarian (College)
- Librarian (Public Library)
- Library books
- Library databases
- Library website
- NoodleTools
- Public Library
- Proquest
- Purdue OWL website (Online Writing Lab)
- Smartphone
- SmartThinking
- Textbook
- Tutorials
- Videos
- Other (please specify)

18. When researching for this assignment, what percentage of research do you estimate you did on your smartphone?

- None
- 1% to 25%
- 26% to 50%
- 51% to 75%
- 76% to 100%

19. Who did you ask for help with this assignment? (Select all that apply.)

- Classmate
- Family member
- Friend
- Instructor
- Librarian
- Tutor
- Did not ask for help
- Other (please specify)