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Using Evidence in Practice

24/7 Library Operations – Will They Actually Come?

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Setting

Rowan University, a public comprehensive research institution with approximately 17,300 students, is located in southern New Jersey.

The University is comprised of seven colleges and five schools on three campuses. Rowan is one of two public universities in the country to offer M.D. and D.O. medical degree programs. Campbell Library is the undergraduate library of Rowan University Libraries system located on the main campus in Glassboro, New Jersey. Even though Glassboro is approximately 20 miles from Philadelphia, the campus is considered to be a rural college campus where over 60% of the undergraduate students are classified as commuters.

Campbell Library, a 5 story – 130,000 square foot building, is located near the centre of the main campus next to the student centre and recreational centre. It is open 99.5 hours during a regular semester week and has seating for over 800. The building also houses

the Writing Center, two college departments (Sociology/Anthropology and Law/Justice Studies), and five university classrooms that can have classes scheduled between 8:00a.m. to 10:45p.m.

Problem

Student organizations approach many academic libraries about providing 24/7 library operations especially at finals time. But just because students think they might use it, it does not mean they will. In the fall of 2013, Rowan University Libraries' new administration was approached mid-semester about providing 24/7 hours during finals. The Administration did not have sufficient information to determine if use would justify the cost. What they did know was (1) the undergraduates were primarily commuter students which can impact usage, (2) the cost of full-time library staff to cover the additional hours, as well as a staff member to conduct the head counts, would be expensive, and (3) the

staff were concerned about safety so a public safety officer would have to be hired. The compromise was to initiate a Pilot Project to extend the hours during finals and conduct head counts to evaluate building use during those extended hours and to determine the continuation or expansion to overnight hours during future finals.

Evidence

The library hours during the fall 2013 finals were adjusted for the days the building was already open until midnight and extended to 2:00a.m. The staff member conducting the head counts walked the building, recording the number of students in each of the different library spaces, as well as recording whether or not the students were using technology (computers or similar devices). The head counts as seen in Figure 1 were about what the Administration expected to see with a decline in the counts starting by 11:00p.m. That fall semester also had some weather consequences for the library hours. The library closed early on the first Sunday due to a snow storm and the entire university was closed for another storm on the Tuesday of finals.

The staff that conducted the head counts were debriefed after finals. Their observations included:

- The group study spaces were not adequate in quality or quantity. Groups were putting individual tables together to make group space. Furniture and chairs in the group study rooms were in poor condition and were mixed and matched.
- Space and furniture across the library needed improvements. Many spaces seemed old, dim, and dingy. Stained and broken chairs had to be removed on a regular basis.
- Some spaces were underutilized such as the spacious photocopy rooms which creative students would take over as study space.
- Students needed more public computers. During prime times, students would line up waiting to use computers and printers.

Upon review of the usage, the Administration considered the pilot project a success and agreed to extend building hours the following semester.

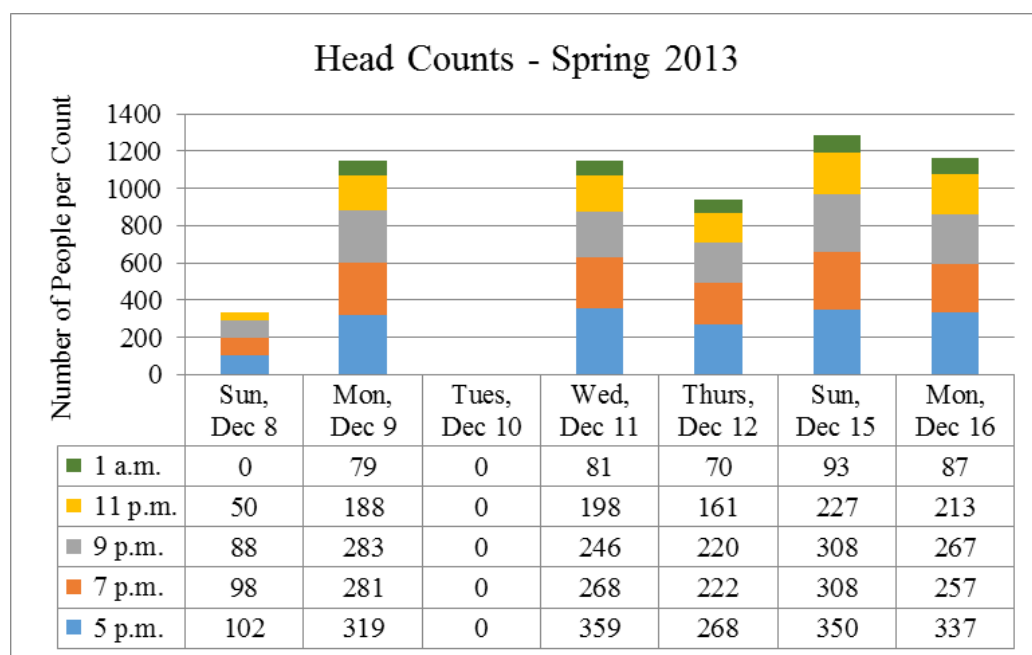


Figure 1
2013 head counts – fall semester pilot project.



Figure 2
Before and after photos of 4th floor open study room.

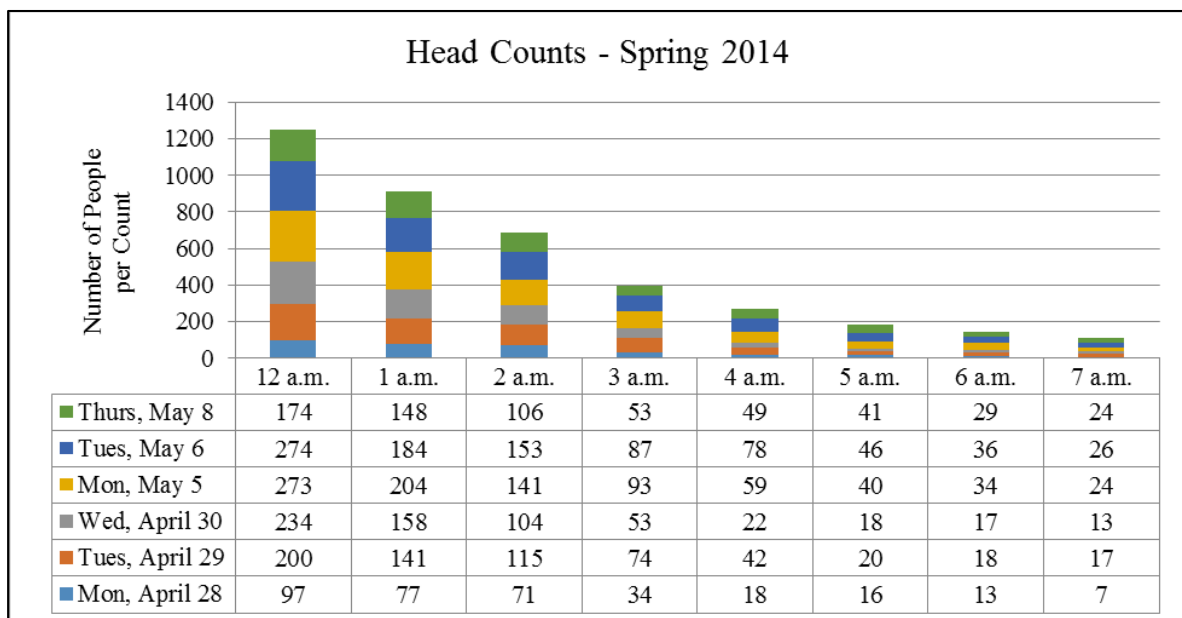


Figure 3
2014 head counts – spring semester.

The pilot project observations also helped inform renovation plans that were conducted the following semester and implemented in summer of 2015. The 4th Floor Open Study Room had been a collection of mixed and matched tables and chairs that were at least 20-30 years old. See the before and after photos in Figure 2.

Implementation

The results of the pilot project were sufficient enough for the Administration to proceed with expanding hours during finals. Since one snap shot of usage is not enough to make permanent changes, the Administrators committed to collecting data to determine how to optimize use of the building and the costs to keep the building open. The Administration

has since approved the head counts to continue for seven semesters.

Spring 2014 Implementation

The spring semester of 2014, the building hours were expanded to be open four consecutive days (Sunday through Wednesday) the week before finals and four consecutive days during finals. The Thursday through Saturday hours stayed the same. The staff conducted the head counts during the extra hours (midnight to 7:30a.m.) but due to staffing, only six of the eight overnight extended hours were counted as seen in Figure 3. As expected by the Administration, the usage declined after midnight with a significant drop between 2:00a.m. and 3:00a.m. Unlike the pilot project counts, the library was not closed during the spring finals due to the weather.

Fall 2014 Implementation

The fall semester of 2014, the building hours were expanded to be open three consecutive days during finals. The Administration was concerned about the potential of weather

closures like the previous year and limited the days. Like the previous semesters, the head counts were conducted only during the expanded hours and the same decline in usage appeared as seen in Figure 4.

Spring 2015 Implementation

During the spring semester of 2015, the building hours were expanded to be open seven consecutive days (Wednesday through Thursday) the week before finals. The staff conducted the head counts during the extra hours during the weekdays from midnight to 7:30a.m., and most of the hours on Saturday and Sunday. As seen in Figure 5, the trend line continued to be the same downward line from midnight to 7:00a.m., but the number of students in the building at midnight and 1:00a.m. were higher than the previous semesters.

As seen in Figure 6, the hourly counts during the weekend mornings were low, however that would be expected from a commuter campus. Days and hours of service are usually controversial. As Lawrence and Weber (2012) reiterate, certain late hours such as Friday and Saturdays are not used (p. 543). The graphic also shows the early evening dip on Sunday before increasing toward midnight.

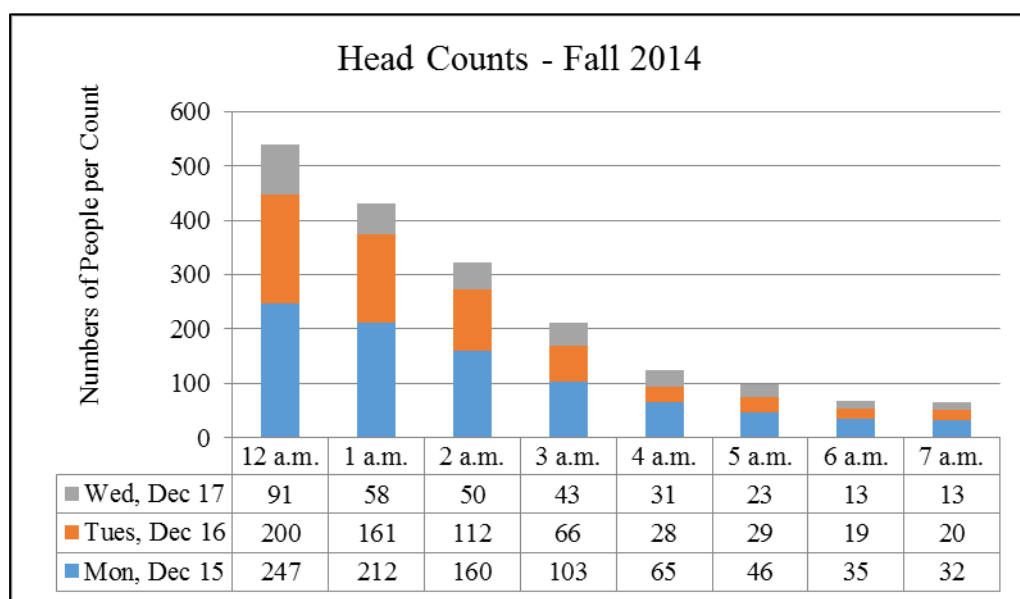


Figure 4
2014 head counts – fall semester.

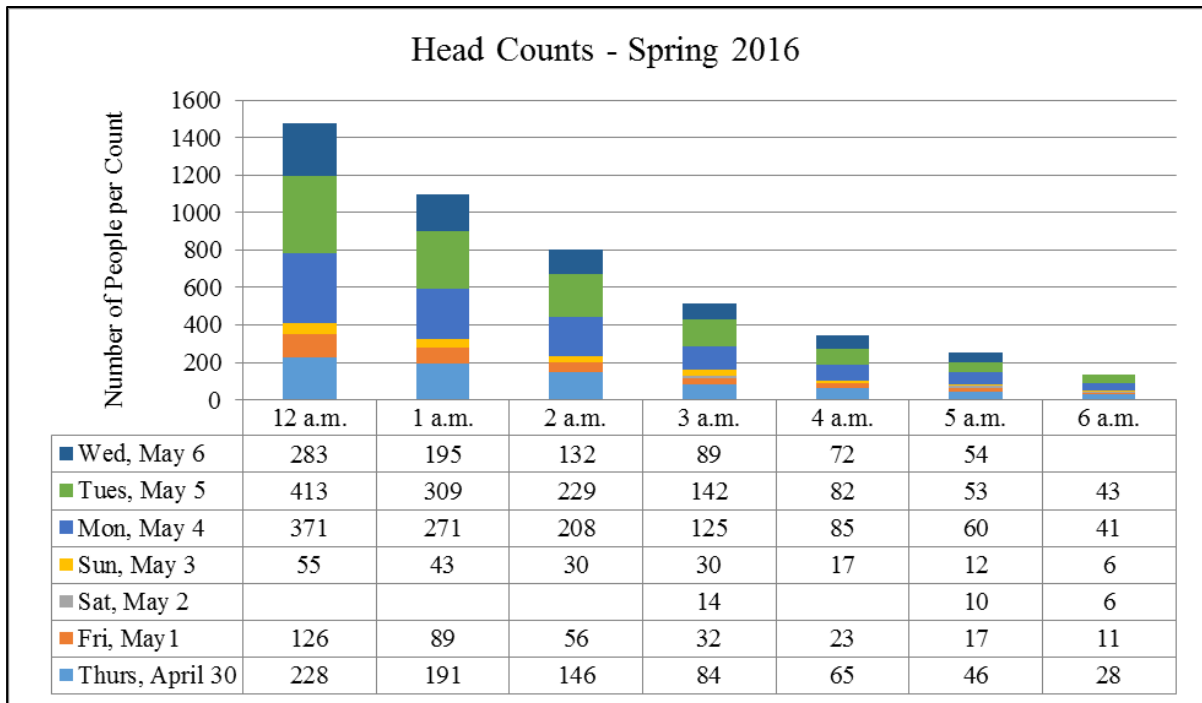


Figure 5
2015 head counts – spring semester.

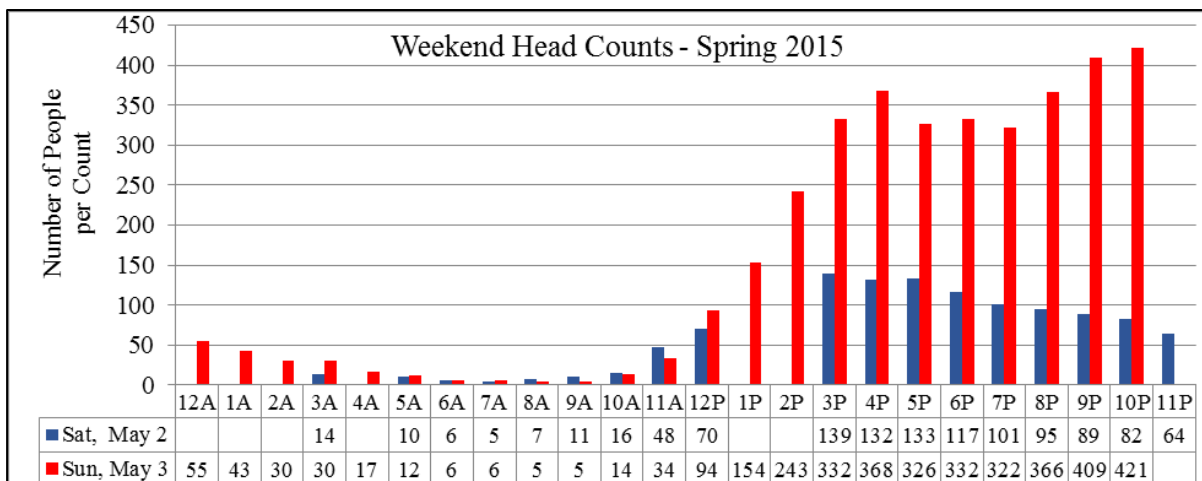


Figure 6
2015 weekend head counts – spring semester.

Fall 2015 Implementation

During the fall semester of 2015, the building hours were expanded to be open two consecutive days the week before finals and 3 consecutive days during finals. The Administration also agreed that all hours should be counted during the extended hours (day, evening, and overnight). As seen in

Figure 7, the hourly counts tell more of a story. One could have hypothesized that the midday counts would be busier than the early morning hours, but the double bumps were not obvious via observation and only detected with the head counts. One thought was the students leave to eat dinner and then return. Another thought was the second bump was a different group of users than the early afternoon group.

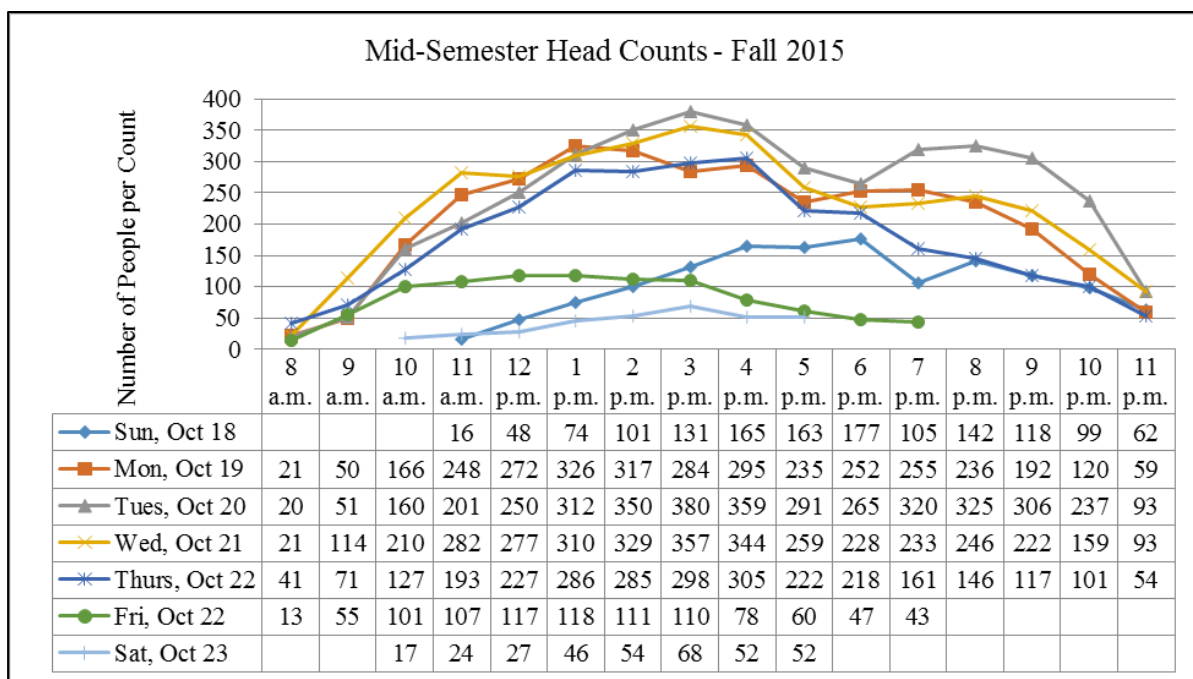


Figure 7
2015 mid-semester head counts – fall semester.

Spring 2016 – Spring 2017 Implementation

The building hours were expanded during the semester finals for 2016 and 2017 including overnight hours. The head counts were taken during mid-semester and at finals. The numbers and the trend lines continued to be consistent with the previous semesters.

Outcome

The implementation of the head counting project has had positive impact. In less than four years, the number of students using the library during the extended hours has increased. The head counts from the end of the semester and the mid-semester were used by the Administration to adjust the building hours during finals and regular semester hours. Additionally, the collected data and observations led the Administration to update the study and collaboration spaces to better serve the students. The library Administration is now positioned to explore different assessment approaches to demonstrate the library’s impact on students.

Reflection

Conducting head counts is not as easy as it sounds when people are busy moving about the building. The staff conducting the head counts had to agree on their approach. For example, they did not count university staff or library student employee staff. When they were walking the building, they counted only the people in front of them. If they had already passed an area, they would not turn around and try to recount.

Comparing the results between days of the week or between semester counts became difficult because the finals did not always start on the same day of the week and different days have different dynamics that would impact the counts. Seasonal weather changes and general differences between the fall and spring semesters made it difficult to try to compare counts.

Since the data collected were just counts and did not include any interaction with the students, the Administration cannot determine what might have caused the increase of use through the years. One major point to



Figure 8

The 4th floor open study room – spring 2017. acknowledge is over the last 3.5 years, the library has completed 3 room renovations (all included new furniture); added 7 group study rooms (for a total of 18), and added 16 computer work stations (for a total of 36). Renovated spaces and new furniture and equipment yield interest and use. Even the 4th Floor Open Study Room that was renovated three years ago remains one of the most popular places in the building (see Figure 8).

Conclusion

Assessment is a very important tool for decision making. This basic head count activity has helped improve services for students, provided information for scheduling building hours, and informed the Administration on space planning decisions.

Will students come for 24/7 library operations during finals? Yes. The question is whether it is economical for the library to be open just in case a student might come to the library. The next step is to start inquiring with students about their use of the library.

References

- Lawrence, P., & Weber, L. (2012). Midnight-2:00 a.m.: What goes on at the library? *New Library World*, 113(11/12), 528-548. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/0374801211282911>