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Using Evidence in Practice

Increasing Student Engagement in a Re-opened Regional Campus Library: Results from a Student Focus Group

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Setting

This article describes the Stockton Campus Library's challenges in increasing student engagement in the library, and the development of a student focus group used to aid in library space, service, and collection planning and design. The Stockton Campus Library (SCL) services students at the California State University (CSU), Stanislaus, which is a Hispanic Serving Institution—an accredited institution in the United States with at least 25% full-time enrolled undergraduate Hispanic students (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

The Stockton Campus is the only 4-year public institution in Stockton, a city with a population of over 320,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). In fall 2022, the Stockton Campus served 11% of CSU Stanislaus' full-time enrolment student population (Stanislaus State, 2023). Our student population is diverse; 64% of Stockton Campus students are first generation students (i.e., students whose parents did not complete a 4-year college degree or a university degree), 72% are women, 58% are Hispanic/Latino/a, 13% are Asian, and 5% are Black/African American (Stanislaus State, 2023).

The SCL occupies a 1,400 square foot suite at the Stockton Campus and offers a collection of over 600 print books, a reservable study room, a reading lounge, computer workstations, and 50 study seats. The SCL aims to increase student engagement in library services, including library spaces, programming, and the use of its print book collection.

Problem

The Stockton Campus Library (SCL) re-opened in fall of 2021 after having discontinued most of its services during the 2008 housing market crisis (Vargas, 2023). Developing services to increase student engagement at the recently re-opened SCL has been difficult due not only to limited resources and funding but to campus-wide challenges as well. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the Stockton Campus has been facing challenges as it aims to increase student enrolment, which decreased by 7% from 1,234 in fall 2021 to 1,153 in fall 2022 (Stanislaus State, 2023). The decrease in student enrollment has affected the use of library spaces and the development and design of current and future services.

Apart from creating a welcoming environment, the library plays a fundamental role in providing areas for studying, researching, learning, and collaboration. To increase student engagement, I focused on enhancing our library study spaces and study room. My goal was to have spaces that are “aesthetically attractive ... functionally comfortable ... physically comfortable ... and physically and socially warm” (Gorantonaki & Uzzell, 2018, p. 102). I also worked on building and promoting our library collection and designing and offering more inclusive and relevant library events and programming for our students.

I reviewed the use of the library’s study room, programming and events, and print collection and determined that the current library study spaces did not provide private study areas and that both our study spaces and print collection were not being used. I also found that we needed to increase student engagement in our programming.

Evidence

In spring 2023, I used a Stockton student focus group to inform and to aid the enhancement of library services. I recruited students for the focus group by offering a gift card incentive via Instagram, posting flyers, and encouraging faculty to share the information with their students. In total, 13 students signed up for the focus group, however, due to scheduling conflicts, only six students participated. The focus group was split over two days; two students participated on the first day (Group A) and four students participated on the second day (Group B).

Each focus group session was scheduled for 60 minutes and was conducted on campus, in the library’s reservable group study room. I prepared 14 guiding questions regarding students’ preferred spaces to study, types of programming and events they’d like to see offered at the library, and their reading preferences. The questions were modified during the session, based on the direction of the conversation. Before the focus group, all students signed a consent form. I audio-recorded their answers using a GoPro and my cellphone. Their answers were transcribed, anonymized, and saved in my cloud storage. The student participants were identified with numbers. For example, Group A student 1 was A1 and Group B student 4 was B4.

The student participants’ demographics, such as their area of study or major, and whether they were a transfer, international or undergraduate student, are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Student Participants' Demographics

Student Identification	Area of Study	Transfer Student	International Student	Undergraduate Student
A1	Business	Yes	No	Yes
A2	Child Development	Yes	No	Yes
B1	Liberal Studies	Yes	No	Yes
B2	Business	Yes	No	Yes
B3	Criminal Justice	Yes	Yes	Yes
B4	Kinesiology	Yes	Yes	Yes

The following sections outline and describe the main themes from the results of the focus group.

Study Spaces

Library spaces are integral and must be inviting to students to encourage engagement. Student participants were asked several questions relevant to their satisfaction with the library spaces and furniture. When the student participants were asked if they would use the library to study, they expressed their discomfort with how open the space was. Because of its shape and because the center of the library is essentially a hallway connecting two ends of the building, the library open study space does not invoke a sense of privacy. Students explained that there are “always people passing by” and they feel that when they enter the library they have to “walk by fast.”

When student participants were asked how the library can improve its spaces, particularly with library furniture, they responded that they liked the lounge chairs and cubicles at the main campus library in Turlock because of the privacy they offer.

Study Room and Technology

In addition to upgrading library furniture, students also wanted improvements in the technology offered in the library study room. When asked how we can improve the study room and increase its use, students stated that a digital screen to connect to their laptop would help them collaborate, share their screen, and join virtual meetings.

Events and Programming

Focus group participants were asked about preferred library programming, events, and offerings. Overall, they wanted programming that encourages student interaction, as well as a book club, a podcast, poetry reading, or similar programs to bring the “community together.” They also expressed gratitude for the current speaker series that the library hosts and suggested we offer similar programs to showcase local authors.

Library Collection and Recreational Reading

Students were asked about their reading habits, if they read as college students, and what types of books they would like to see more of in the library collection. When asked if they read for fun, most participants

explained that they have an overabundance of already scheduled academic readings and that it is hard to find time to read, so they feel “academically...burnt out.” However, a few students commented that reading for fun could alleviate their academic stress.

When asked if they had time to read books and what books they’d like to see in the library collection, students’ subject and genre preferences varied. Some types of books participants asked for were self-motivational books, cookbooks, art books, Black history books, spiritual or astrological books, books from international authors, books in Spanish, fictional books like comics, romance, mysteries, and others. Some students wanted to see more books relevant to their areas of study.

Implementation

Implementing the results of the student focus group began in the Summer of 2023. To renovate the library suite and implement library programming, I was awarded a grant from an outside organization in June 2023, and received funding from my library department in fall 2023.

New Furniture and Technology

The grant and additional library funds were used to upgrade furniture in library spaces and to add technology in the group study room. Technology additions included a digital screen, mobile stand, and web camera. I consulted the library’s information technology consultants when purchasing the new technology; the equipment was installed November 2023.

For new furniture, I worked with our library department’s administration team, our campus interior designer, and the vendor’s design team. With the student participant’s desire for private library spaces in mind, I advocated for additional private and comfortable spaces in the library. Because of the small size of the SCL suite, it was crucial to balance using each square foot of space with providing different types of furniture (Allen & Moyer, 2021). The final approved design for the library spaces included private study pods, private study panels, a lounge area, study booths, and study tables.

Stockton Bookis

During the focus group, students expressed wanting a book club, podcast, or similar program or event. In fall 2023, I designed and implemented the Stockton library book club, later named Stockton Bookis by the students in the club. The idea book club idea originated from a student, so was designed as a student-led book club, with the librarian (me) as the facilitator.

I promoted the book club during campus events and collected names and emails of students interested in Stockton Bookis. I created a web form to gather information on preferences for book club guidelines meeting dates and times, and book selections. Students used the web form to submit and vote on book recommendations; a book was chosen by majority student vote.

Although the book club had guidelines for procedures, such as “books are selected by student majority vote” and guidelines for behavior, such as “respect others’ turn to speak,” the format was generally informal. We met three times in fall semester 2023, in the library’s group study room. I also created a Zoom room where students who couldn’t participate in person could join virtually during the meeting dates and times.

Books Lists and Popular Books

I continued to purchase books for the library’s print collection, guided by what students asked for in the focus group. I consulted online recommended book lists and lists of popular books for college students. In addition to purchasing books relevant to major programs and areas of study at the Stockton Campus, I purchased cooking books, self-help books, commercial fiction, and motivational books relevant to college student success and struggles.

I also created printed brochures with recommended books for students based on their area of study or interest. The brochures were booklists covering nine subjects: business, psychology, criminal justice, nursing, teacher education, creative arts, science & technology, self-help, and environmentalism. I printed 20 copies of each brochure and placed them next to the library’s print collection.

Outcome

New Furniture and Technology

Compared to previous study room usage statistics, and after the new technology was installed in fall 2023, the study room increased in usage (Figure 1). In fall 2022, the study room was reserved 20 times, and after the installation of new technology in fall 2023, the study room was reserved 158 times. However, the usage of the study room could have also increased since more students are becoming aware of the library after our initial opening in 2021.

There are areas in the SCL that students like to use, particularly corners and private spaces. The new furniture purchased, including study pods, lounging area, and study booths, is still awaiting installation, so there is no data yet to determine whether or not the new spaces in the library suite are preferred by students. Because the furniture will provide comfortable and private spaces for students, I anticipate that we will receive positive feedback.

Study Room Reservations 2022 - 2023

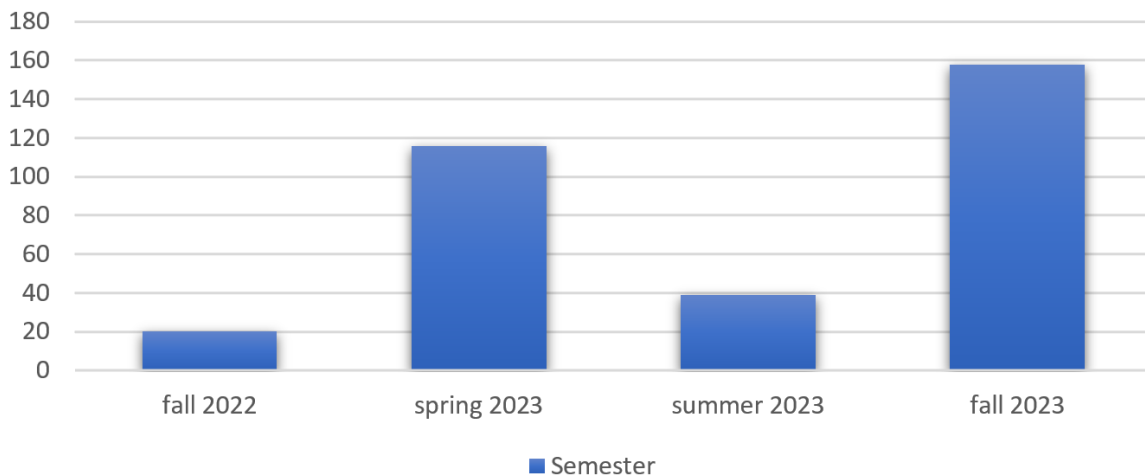


Figure 1
Study room reservations by semester, from 2022-2023.

Stockton Bookis and Library Events

Prior to the student focus group, I began implementing library events in fall 2022, and designed our first event, Loteria: Learn Research Skills and Play Mexican Bingo, and the speaker series event, Stockton Talks, which showcased the creative works and research efforts by Stockton faculty and graduate students. I continued to host Loteria and Stockton Talks in fall semester 2023, since students in the focus group appreciated these events, and they have increased student engagement.

I promoted Stockton Bookis at a display table during a campus student event in fall 2023, and by word of mouth. Students interested in participating in Stockton Bookis provided their contact information. I invited them to fill out a web form asking them about books they'd like to read and their preferred meeting dates and times. The top three genres students advocated for were fantasy, young adult, and romance. Ultimately, the students chose to read *Fourth Wing* by Rebecca Yarros. I purchased copies of the book for each book club student to keep and an additional copy for the library collection.

Three book club meetings were scheduled for fall semester. Meeting times were set based on responses from a Doodle Poll shared with the book club. Although we had productive student participation in the book club meetings, some factors affected overall engagement. Not all students who signed up for the club could meet during the scheduled days and times, and some students expressed that they didn't have time to finish the book. Students who could not participate in the book club sent their comments and feedback via email to share during book club meetings.

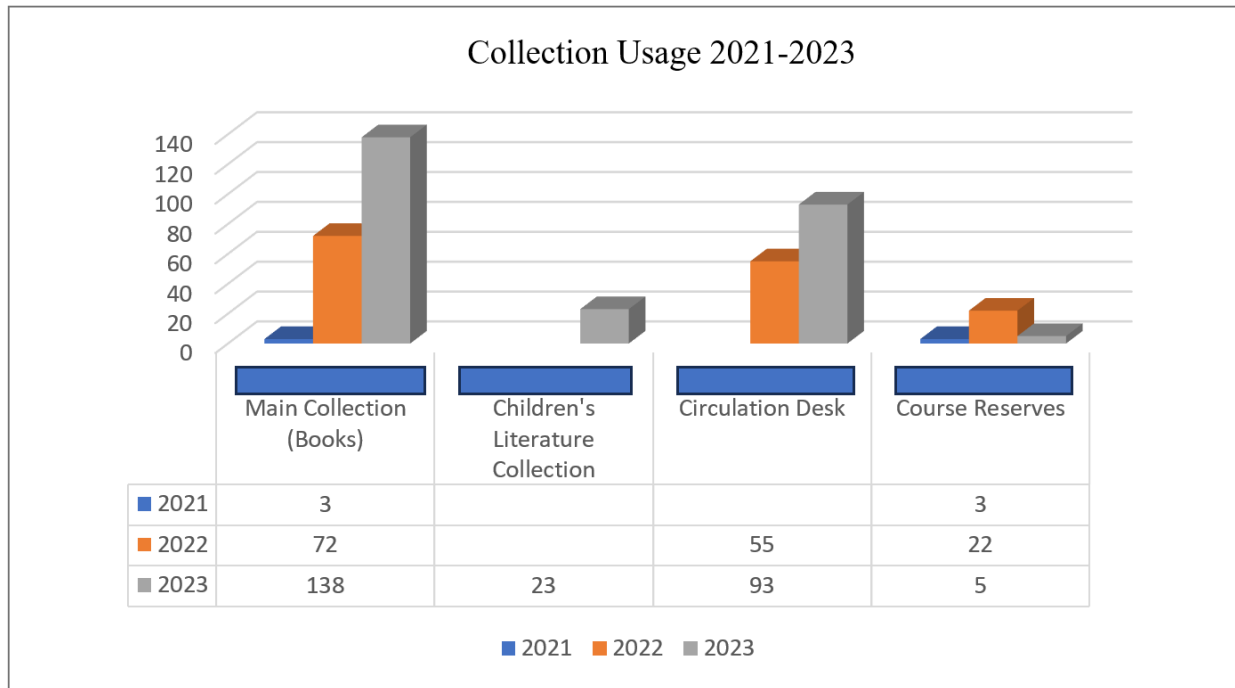


Figure 2
Print collection usage by academic year and collection type, from 2021-2023.

Book Lists and Popular Books

The SCL re-opened in fall 2021 with less than 10 print books in the library collection. As of December 2023, after purchasing books that students in the focus group recommended, the print collection at the SCL had over 600 books.

Print book checkouts increased since the purchase of new books after the focus group in 2023 (Figure 2). The recommended books list brochures located next to the print collection have also been taken and used by students.

Reflection

Overall, I am satisfied with the technology and furniture purchased and their impact on student usage of the library. I will continue to advocate for more funding and seek additional grants to continue improving library spaces for students. Analyzing the use of the group study room and aggregating usage statistics, especially after the new furniture is installed, will be crucial for determining whether or not students are satisfied with the study room. Library spaces will be monitored after the new furniture is installed, and I will record which pieces of furniture students prefer to use over the upcoming academic year.

Stockton Bookis increased student engagement at the library. Not all students who expressed interest could participate during the book club meetings because of scheduling conflicts. This is something that is challenging to overcome, since class times and work shifts vary per student. However, students are excited for the upcoming book club and are looking forward to meeting. Students have since shared invitations with their friends and other Stockton students to join the book club for spring 2024.

Because some students didn't finish the assigned reading for the book club, it is beneficial for book club moderators to select books that are not overwhelming or long. Additionally, using web forms and creating surveys is instrumental in gathering data to see what books students favor. Students in the book club enjoyed the club's informal structure – no presentations or lectures, just conversation about the scheduled reading and character and plot development. As stated in Jessica Hilburn's article on successful book clubs, "...no book club should feel like an assignment or work" (Hilburn, 2019, p. 17).

Although the focus group was flexible in conversation and allowed students to build on collaborative ideas, it did not represent the views of the entire Stockton student body, especially in regard to purchasing books for the general collection. Thus, I also plan to use a follow-up qualitative survey to determine what books to purchase for students, particularly for recreational reading. Focus group students' reading interests varied, and I foresee they will also vary across the larger population of Stockton students. The survey's data will also guide purchasing of specific genres of books. The library is expanding its role and services as a space that not only offers academic reading but recreational reading as well.

In terms of the new furniture and technology, students unanimously agreed on what they wanted: private study spaces. As I worked to bring private study spaces to the library, I ran into design challenges because of the limited space we have in the library suite. For future renovations, if spacing continues to be a challenge, I will ensure that the proposed design uses the utmost capacity of the library before requesting for funds. Because students in the focus group didn't advocate for more computers, I do not plan to renovate the computer area, and will reallocate those funds.

I did not promote the book club and the acquired furniture and renovated spaces via social media or through our institutional communication channels in 2023. To increase student engagement, I will post via social media and communicate to students about these services in the future, especially once all furniture is installed, more books are purchased, and as we continue *Stockton Bookis*.

The focus group served its purpose to enhance our library's spaces and services. With the guidance of student input, I re-designed the library study space layout to provide quiet and private areas, upgraded the reservable study room, purchased more relevant and engaging books for students, expanded the print collection to include fiction books, and implemented a book club. These activities increased student engagement and the focus group provided a framework that I can apply in the future.

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