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Student Demand for Extended Library Hours

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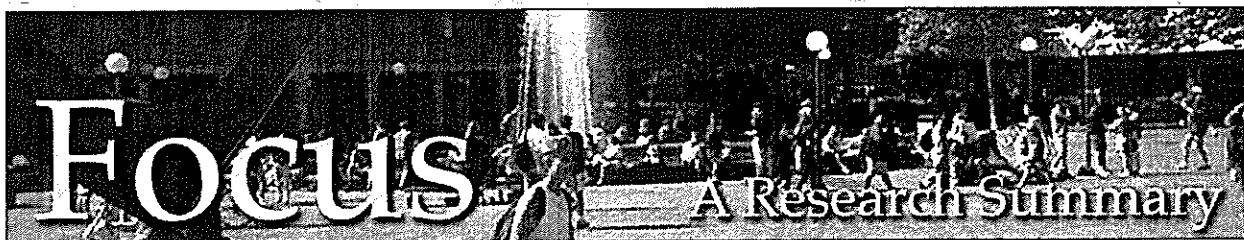


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Student Demand for Extended Library Hours

Prepared by Carl Simpson, Linda Clark, and Gary McKinney

The goal of this brief issue of *Focus* is to report our findings concerning the relative student demand for various possible extensions of library hours. Western's libraries have received requests and suggestions concerning the extension of library hours. The need to balance service to Western students against the cost of extending Wilson Library's operating hours called for additional information. At the request of the Acting Director of Libraries, Marian Alexander, the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing and the Office of Survey Research undertook a brief

survey to examine the likely value to students of various possible additions to library hours.

More precisely, a special set of items was included in our most recent survey (see Methods below). That survey did not provide a representative sample of Western students and should not, therefore, be taken as a completely accurate gauge of demand for different additions to library hours. However, the survey is adequate to give a useful approximation of the student body's relative valuation of the alternative library hour expansions put forth in the survey.

METHODS: During spring, 1996, the Office of Survey Research conducted a follow-up survey of the 601 students who had been interviewed in fall, 1994, when they first entered Western. Just over half the sample had entered as freshmen, the rest as transfers. Interviews were completed with 449, or 74.7% of the 601. Of these, 62 (13.8%) were not enrolled at Western during spring, 1996. Eight had graduated. Twenty were planning to return to Western after taking from one to three quarters off; and thirteen were planning to return after taking a year off. Twenty-one were not planning to return at all. Two of these had decided against a college degree; the others had transferred or were planning to transfer. Along with other questions, the 387 currently enrolled students with whom we completed interviews were asked about their use of Wilson Library, and their likely use of additional library hours. In a number of ways, this survey was a less-than-ideal vehicle for these questions. The sample was not large and, as a follow-up of students who entered in fall, 1994, it was not representative of all Western students. However, while not representative, the survey did offer a reasonable sample of sophomores and seniors. Most who entered as freshmen in fall, 1994, were late sophomores when interviewed in the spring, 1996. Most who entered as transfers were late seniors in the spring, 1996. In short, though they cannot be generalized accurately to the entire Western student body, the findings are meaningful enough to use and perhaps to point to the advisability of collecting more data.



FINDINGS

STUDENTS' USE OF WILSON LIBRARY

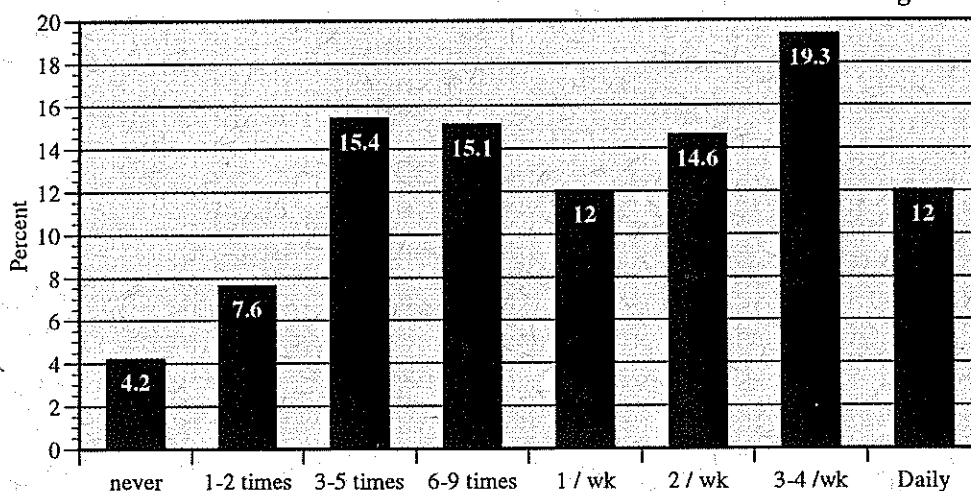
As a backdrop to interpreting students' demand for additional library hours, it is useful to assess their current use patterns. In addition, we may choose to attribute greater importance to requests for more library hours from a student who uses the library frequently than from one who uses it seldom.

As a rough indicator of library use, we asked students, "During Winter quarter, approximately how often did you use Wilson Library?" with an answer scale varying from "never" to "daily." Winter, 1996, was our base because the survey was conducted during Spring quarter, 1996. Figure 1 shows 57.9% saying they used the library at least once per week, with only 4.2% saying they never used it. At the high use end, 31.3% report using Wilson at least three times per week. At the low use end, 27.2% say they used it once every two weeks or less often.

Spring '96 Follow-Up of Fall '94 Entrants

During Winter Quarter 1996, Approximately How Often Did Students Use Wilson Library? (n=384)

Figure 1



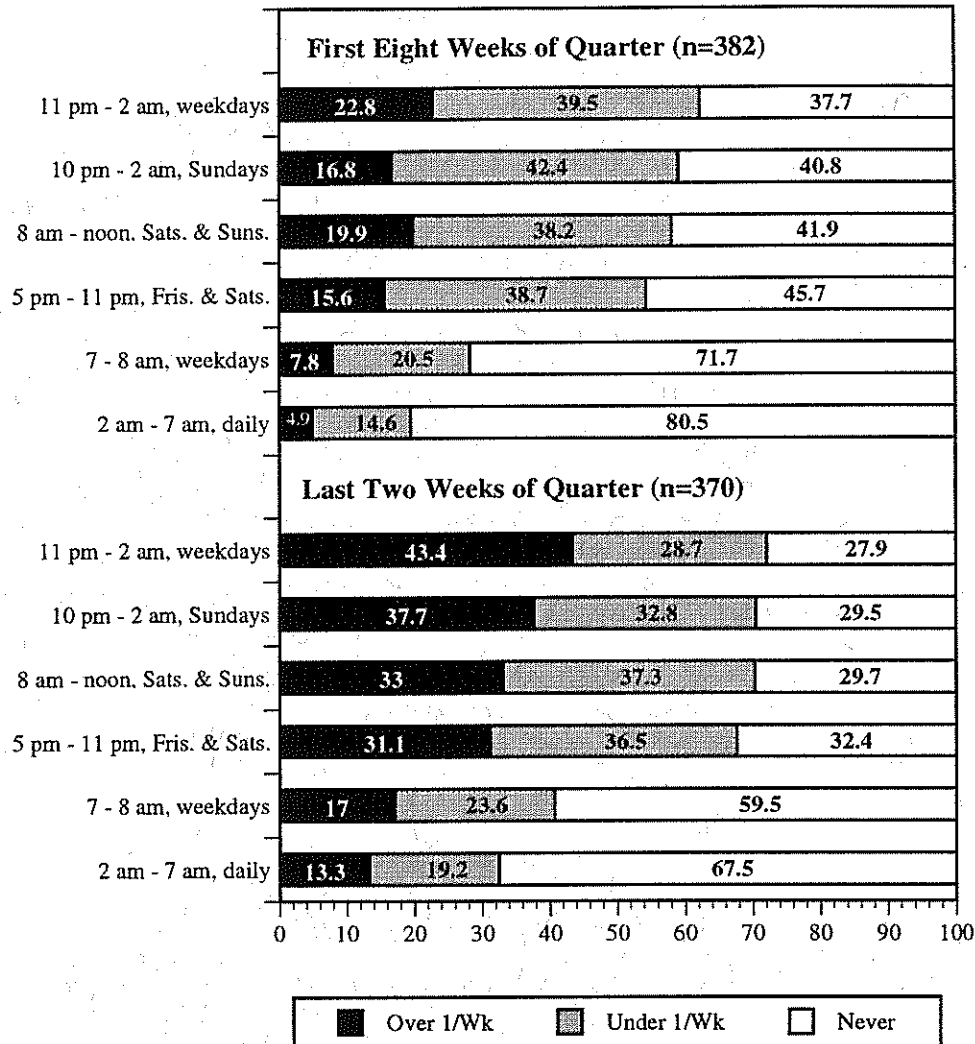
STUDENT DEMAND FOR ADDITIONAL LIBRARY HOURS

We asked students how often they would use the library during each of six possible time periods that could be added to the present schedule of open hours. Because students' need for quiet study areas and library materials increases significantly toward the close of the quarter, we asked about demand separately during the first eight weeks and the last two weeks of the quarter. The full question read: "Realistically, if Wilson Library hours were extended, how often would you make use of each of the following hours? Please answer for both the first eight weeks of the quarter and during the last two weeks of the quarter (dead week and finals week)." Because students were required to respond to so many possibilities, we used rather truncated answer categories: never, less than once per week, and more than once per week.

Findings are displayed in Figure 2, sorted by the most popular to least popular options. No option would be used by as many as three-fourths of students. Similarly, any of four options would be used at least once by about 70.0% of students during dead week and finals and by about 60.0% during the first eight weeks of the quarter.

If Wilson Library Hours Were Extended, How Often Would Students Make Use of Each of the Hours Listed?

Figure 2



A somewhat more conservative estimate is, however, safer when interpreting these findings. In general, responses to hypothetical survey questions such as this are prone to inflation (most of us plan to do more than we actually do). We can safely assume that all those who say they would use the library more than once a week during some hypothetical time slot will use it at least sometimes. If we assume that about half those who say they would use it less than once a week will in fact do so, we might conservatively estimate that 43.0% would use the 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. weekdays slot during the first eight weeks and about 58.0% during the last two weeks of the quarter. For the three possible week-end time slots, this conservative estimation procedure would generate estimates of a bit under 40.0% during the first eight weeks and about 50.0% during the final two weeks. The early morning and 2-7 a.m. options fall to about 18.0% and 12.0%, respectively.

Comparing the different time slots in which the library could invest staff time to increase its hours, two conclusions appear most clear:

- Use is likely to be considerably higher during the last two weeks of the quarter than during the first eight (although we did not ask students to estimate the number of hours they might stay during any one visit).
- Early mornings and a 24-hour schedule would be useful to many fewer than late nights (the most popular option) or additional week-end hours.

FACILITIES NEEDED BY STUDENTS DURING EXPANDED HOURS

The cost of keeping the library open and also the advisability of opening facilities other than the library are influenced by the reasons why students would use the space during extended hours. If students are looking primarily for a place to study, then other, smaller facilities might be opened for them at less cost or the library could be opened but with smaller staff. If students want full services, then expanded staffing would presumably be required.

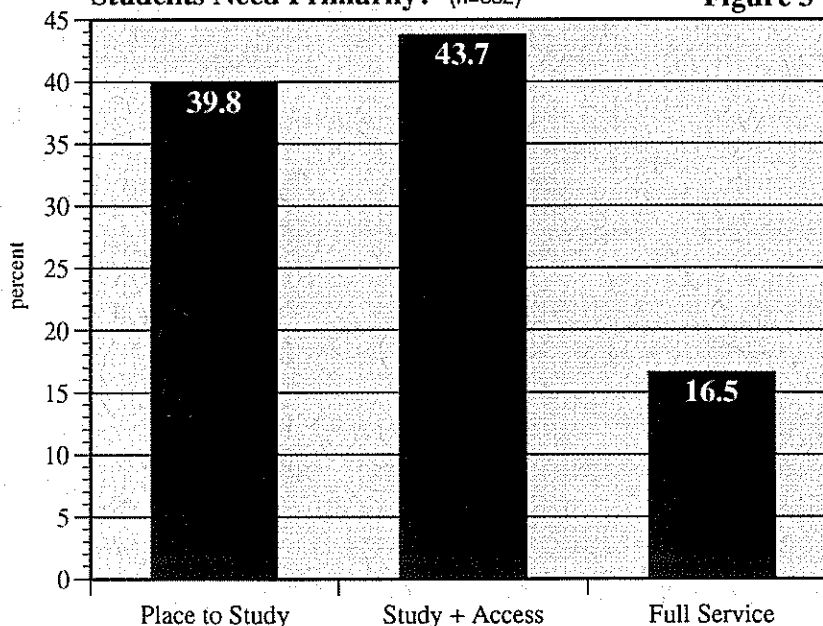
What students tell us is that few need full services, but 60.1% do need more than a place to study (see Figure 3). They want either access to collections (43.7%) or full services (16.5%). Of particular interest is that during certain time slots the students who say they will make the greatest use of extended hours are least likely to request only a place to study. Very few would want the 7-8 a.m. weekdays or the 5-11 p.m. weekends slots for studying only. The 2-7 a.m. slot, on the other hand, would be used primarily for studying (53.0% say studying only). Given the small numbers who would use the 2-7 a.m. slot and the fact that the majority want only a place to study, options other than the library might be sought, if any action were to be taken. For all other time slots, 40-50.0% of those making greatest use of the library would be using it as a place to study.

Findings like these suggest that if budget considerations prevent particular expansions of library hours, one option might be to open selected lounges or classrooms to study instead of the library. A significant number of students want primarily a safe, convenient place to study at odd hours.

Spring '96 Follow-up of Fall '94 Entrants

**If Wilson Library Hours Were Extended,
Which of Three Options Would
Students Need Primarily? (n=382)**

Figure 3



SAFETY CONCERNS DURING EXTENDED HOURS

A potential problem associated with extending library hours into the wee hours is the perception and possible reality of personal danger. In addition to the university's responsibility to ensure safety on campus and the obvious desire that students be safe, it is also the case that a student's perception of danger during certain extended hours reduces that student's likelihood of making use of those hours.

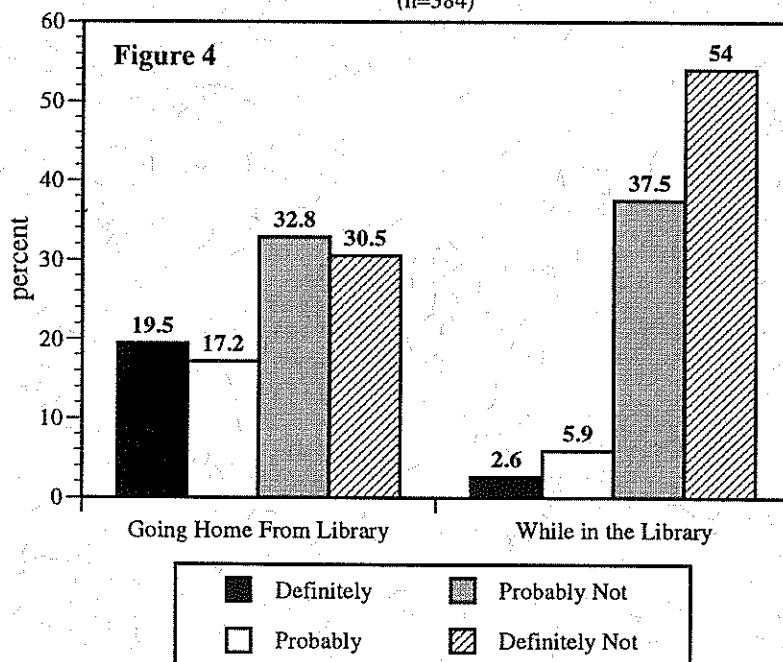
To examine students' perceptions of danger or discomfort, we asked two questions concerning the 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. period: "Assuming the library were open additional hours with a staff of 2-3 librarians throughout the building, would safety concerns prevent you from using the library during the 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. period a) while in the library and b) going home from the library?" Findings are displayed in Figure 4.

Although few students would avoid these extended hours because of safety concerns while in the library, more than one-third (36.7%) would be prevented by concerns about safety returning home. When we checked which extended hours students say they would use, those who report they would be fearful about returning home in early morning hours do, in fact, much less often indicate that they would use the library either from 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. or from 2-7 a.m. What this means is that the estimates reported above are slightly higher than actual use levels might be if no safety steps were taken at all, but they are also lower than actual use levels if safety were assured. It is also worth noting that students for whom safety is a greater concern are also more likely to indicate that they would use the library during less frightening hours. If safety concerns were addressed, some of them would presumably use the late hours, making our estimates for other hours somewhat higher than actual use would be under those circumstances.

Spring '96 Follow-Up of Fall '94 Entrants

Assuming the Library Were Open Additional Hours With a Staff of 2-3 Librarians Throughout the Building, Would Safety Concerns Prevent Students From Using the Library During the 11 p.m. - 2 a.m. Period?

(n=384)



As would be expected on the basis of real risks in our society, women are much more likely to feel concerns for safety going home from the library after midnight. In every category of extended hours except those late at night, women are more likely than men to say they would make use of extended hours, but women are much less likely than men to use hours after midnight. It appears that one major issue involved with decisions about which hours might be extended is equal access, or more precisely, access with equal safety, on the basis of gender.

CURRENT AND EXTENDED USE

By a slight margin, students who make greater use of the library now say they would make greater use of all extended hours except the 2-7 a.m. slot. Students who report using the library twice a quarter or less often are especially unlikely to say they would use extended hours. Such findings are not surprising. Instead, they reinforce our faith in the estimate produced in this report, since hypothetical extended use patterns correlate with current actual use patterns.

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