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# After the Ribbon-Cutting: Guerilla-Style Assessment of Two Brand New Learning Commons

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## Abstract

Two new learning commons were opened on the Dalhousie University campus in the 2015/16 academic year. In order to swiftly ascertain if the new spaces fit user needs and behaviours, library staff conducted assessment studies using guerrilla-style methods. These practical methods proved effective in order to gather important user feedback that prompted immediate changes to furniture layout and equipment. The authors suggest that even when user-input can be gathered during the pre-design phase, it still behooves libraries to conduct user-satisfaction and user needs assessment in the months that follow the opening of a new learning space.

## Keywords

learning commons; learning spaces; library assessment; observation; survey; user experience

## Introduction and Background

In 2010, Dalhousie University released the Dalhousie University Campus Master Plan: Framework Plan in which the idea of Learning Commons “Hubs” on each of the university’s four campuses was highlighted. These hubs were proposed to “strengthen concepts of student-based interdisciplinary learning, foster academic integration and provide high-tech, state-of-the-art flexible group study facilities” (Dalhousie University, 2010). Two of these hubs were to be the Wallace McCain Learning Commons (WMLC) for the Sciences on the Studley Campus, and the Kellogg Library Learning Commons (KLLC) for the Health Sciences on the Carleton Campus.

Planning for these learning commons began before the release of the 2010 Framework Plan. Earliest talks of the Collaborative Health Education Building (CHEB), which now contains the KLLC, began in 2008/2009. A Project Development Committee was established for the CHEB in 2009 and was comprised of key stakeholders in the project including the University Librarian. The Faculty of Science secured an \$8 million dollar donation for the development and construction of the WMLC from Dr. Margaret McCain and the late Dr. Wallace McCain. This gift was announced shortly after the passing of Wallace in 2011. A Project Development Committee was then established to begin planning the facility.

The WMLC Governance Committee was established in March 2015 and includes the Dean of Science, the University Librarian, and the Vice-Provost of Student Affairs. The CHEB Governance Committee includes the Deans of Medicine, Health Professions and Dentistry, and the University

Librarian. Both Governance Committees are chaired by the Vice-Provost, Planning, ensuring there is a close link with the Provost's Committee.

As the WMLC entered the final design phase, consultations expanded to include the Head of the Killam as well as the Library IT Director, the Manager of Financial & Physical Resources as well as the Science librarians. Their feedback was well received by the Project Manager and architect and changes were quickly introduced in response to suggestions. Though the Head of the Kellogg Library was involved from an earlier stage with the KLLC, it was difficult to effect change with the plans throughout the process; however, feedback regarding the need for additional electrical and network outlets was incorporated into the final plans.

During initial planning for the KLLC, prior to 2011, the University conducted student consultations, but by the time the plans were being finalized those students had graduated. The current body of students expressed that they had not been sufficiently consulted and a number of meetings were held with student representatives to address their concerns. Planning for both facilities included reviewing LibQual response data as well as informal feedback such as very active comment boards at both the Killam Library and the Kellogg Library.

Even though the planning process for each facility differed in length, both learning commons opened within two months of each other. The WMLC opened on October 15, 2015 as an extension to the Life Sciences Centre. It is a single-level facility of 13,600 square feet with lots of natural light. The building features a partial green roof, skylights, LED lighting throughout and is a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Gold candidate.

The WMLC was open for use following the opening ceremony and was instantly occupied by students. The entire facility has a seating capacity of 265 and includes 30 computer workstations, one large quiet study room and 16 group study rooms, considerably increasing the availability of bookable group study rooms on the Studley Campus. On-site Science librarian services are provided during the fall and winter terms and the facility is staffed at all open hours by Help Desk Navigators. The WMLC also includes the Science Academic Resource Centre which provides peer-to-peer academic support for Science students. This is in addition to various student academic support services that are offered in an office shared with the Science librarians.



*Wallace McCain Learning Commons: View of Group Study Rooms and Quiet Study Room (Photo credit: N. Pearce, 2015)*

The CHEB, which houses the KLLC, had its ribbon cutting on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015. It is a 5-floor building that is also a LEED Gold candidate with LED lighting throughout, and 36% of the building materials were made from recycled content. The building officially opened for use on January 4, 2016.

The KLLC is located on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the CHEB and has a seating capacity of 400 and includes 100 computer workstations, 8 bookable group study rooms and one silent study room. There are also 60 seats on the first floor that are considered casual student study spaces and an extension of the KLLC. The KLLC features lots of natural light as well as comfortable work spaces for both personal study as well as collaborative work. The KLLC is staffed by librarians and staff of the Kellogg Library along with Help Desk Navigators. For both learning commons, the Dal Libraries operate as the building managers, and are responsible for staffing the spaces.



*The Kellogg Library Learning Commons: View of the Quiet Study Room (Photo credit: M. Charlton, 2015)*

As custodians of these two new learning spaces, the Dal Libraries acknowledged that, due to circumstances, the pre-construction user-consultation was limited, and so planned on conducting a post-construction assessment. It was important to act quickly upon the opening of these two new learning commons, so we could remedy any discrepancies between user needs and design.

### **Assessment Method**

Because it was the first to open, the WMLC was the first to be assessed. An assessment team was formed, consisting of the three Science librarians, the IT services manager, and the Assessment

Librarian. In order to plan the study, the team reviewed the three different types of workspace in the WMLC (the 16 study rooms, a quiet room, and the general LC with a mix of computers and tables and chairs), and discussed their own observations of the LC during its first few weeks. They needed to work in a short time frame to gather feedback in a way that would be easy and appealing to the users, and so decided to use various, “guerrilla-styled” assessment tools – that is, alternative, low-cost, high return, flexible methods of gathering user data and input.

Guerrilla-style methods, whether or not they are labelled “guerrilla”, have taken their place in the toolkits of assessment librarians. This type of assessment has arisen out of opportunity, necessity and practicality, in situations where economical and timely user data is required to inform decisions affecting services, resources and spaces. Guerrilla assessment is useful, particularly in circumstances where more formal assessment methods would delay decisions or actions.

Zsusa Koltay, in her presentation at the Eastern New York ACRL Spring 2012 Conference, described guerrilla assessment as inspired by guerilla marketing: it is “low cost”, “unconventional” and has a “big impact”. She encouraged the library assessment community to be resourceful and economical in their assessment efforts, such as mining library data that is already collected and partnering with other university survey projects. Lisa Gayhart and Debbie Green, in their guerrilla assessment presentation to the Canadian Library Assessment Workshop in 2015, promoted impromptu, “in the field” testing of wireframe solutions directly with potential users. In 2011, Jennifer L. Jones and Brian Sinclair referred to their iPad-supported, roving, in-person survey as “guerrilla-style” assessment, noting the convenience and appeal of the device, which helped achieve a very high survey response rate in a short period of time.

Many readers can think of a time when they employed atypical means to obtain user feedback. A few years ago, the lead author responded to a fire-drill on a fine summer day, finding herself outside the library building with mock-up bookmarks in her hands. With students standing around, waiting for the all-clear to re-enter the building, she began asking them for feedback on the bookmarks, whether they found the information on the bookmarks helpful, and whether they understood the terminology. This guerrilla-style method was timely and resulted in significant improvements to the bookmarks.

Other recent space studies have employed simple and multiple means to study library space use (though they haven’t necessarily labelled their methods as “guerrilla”). The Rochester Undergraduate Study led the way with employing multiple ethnographic methods, using interviews, flipcharts, and photo surveys, among other means (see Foster & Gibbons, 2007; and Foster, 2013). The ERIAL Project (Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries) used interviews and mapping diaries among their study methods (ERIAL Project, 2016). In Canada, Holder and Lange at McGill University assessed two newly renovated library spaces, using paper and online surveys, questions on bulletin and white boards, and seating sweeps (2014). These are just a few examples of many space studies that employed thrifty and appealing means of gathering user feedback.

For the WMLC, we decided to put question slips in each of the 16 study rooms, and circulated three whiteboards with questions on them from room to room, in order to gather study group feedback. Since most of the remaining areas of the WMLC are occupied by students working individually, we decided to leave question cards at each seat to obtain individual feedback. The cards had two different coloured backings for two purposes: for easy retrieval (respondents were asked to place the cards upside down after completing them) and to allow us to differentiate responses by the two different areas - the general LC (with red backs), and the quiet room (with red and white backs). The questions on the slips, cards and whiteboards were simple:

- what do you like about this space?
- what would you change?
- what are you using this space for?

Because initial observation of the quiet room saw that users were repurposing a room-length bench at the back as a work surface, we added to the quiet room cards:

- would you change the furniture?

The question slips and cards were deployed and retrieved for a one-week period. Headcounts were already being recorded on an hourly basis, and two staff conducted six, 1-hour observations at various times during the week. (Nancy Fried Foster's 2015 "The Art of Observation" post on the Ithaca S+R blog provided simple background and guidelines for conducting ethnographic, participant observation.) The assessment study of the WMLC took place in late November, 2015 – five weeks after opening.

Because the guerrilla-styled approach was successful at the WMLC, the assessment team for the KLLC opted to employ similar methods. This team consisted of the Health Sciences librarians and library staff, the Head of the Kellogg Library, the IT services manager, and the Assessment Librarian. To plan the assessment study, they reviewed initial feedback gathered via whiteboards immediately upon opening, as well as staff observations. The KLLC is a larger learning commons than the WMLC and has more types of workspace: 8 study rooms, 8 group study booths, a silent study room, the computer workstation area, the back corridor, and the front study area. Since a whiteboard was already used in the space to gather initial feedback, only question slips were placed in the study rooms. Question cards were deployed in the remaining spaces, with backings colour-coded to the six distinct areas.

Questions on the slips and cards were similar to the WMLC's and were deployed for one week. Headcounts were taken for two weeks, in the morning, afternoon and evening, and three staff conducted eight, 1½-hour observations at different times of day. Because there was a concern about low computer use, computer usage data was gathered via an application already installed on all learning commons computers. The assessment study of the KLLC took place in late February, 2016 – seven weeks after opening.

Coding of all response data was performed, using excel, by both the Assessment Librarian and a librarian/staff member of the appropriate LC. In total, 404 question slips and cards were received for the WMLC, and 243 slips and cards were received for the KLLC. Results reports for each of the learning commons were prepared, combining the data from the question cards and slips with the whiteboard responses (WMLC), observation notes, headcounts, and computer usage data (KLLC).

### **Results and Recommendations - Highlights**

Due to the limited length of this paper, only results highlights and general summaries are provided herein. Results of both studies were very satisfactory, producing actionable recommendations which were or are being quickly implemented.

When asked what they liked about the new WMLC, respondents were impressed by the lighting and general design elements (see Figure 1). Furniture deficiencies, however, were their top complaint (see Figure 2).

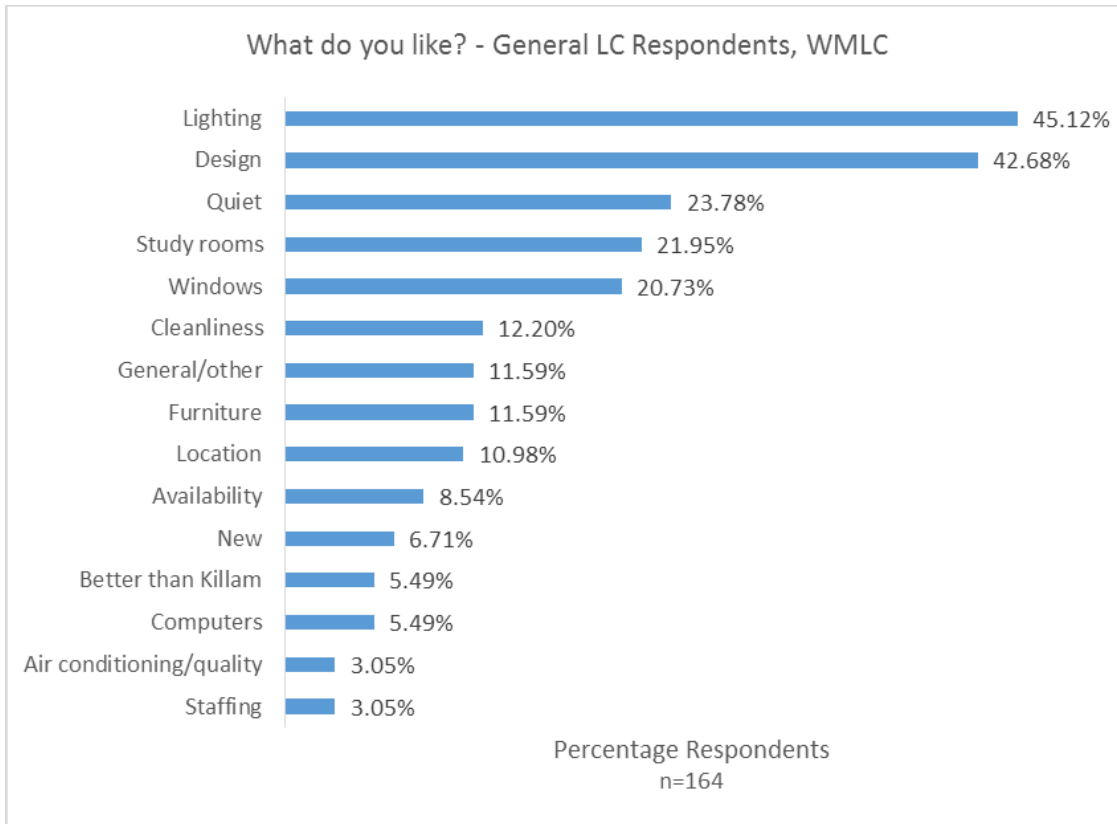


Figure 1: Positive Comments, General WMLC

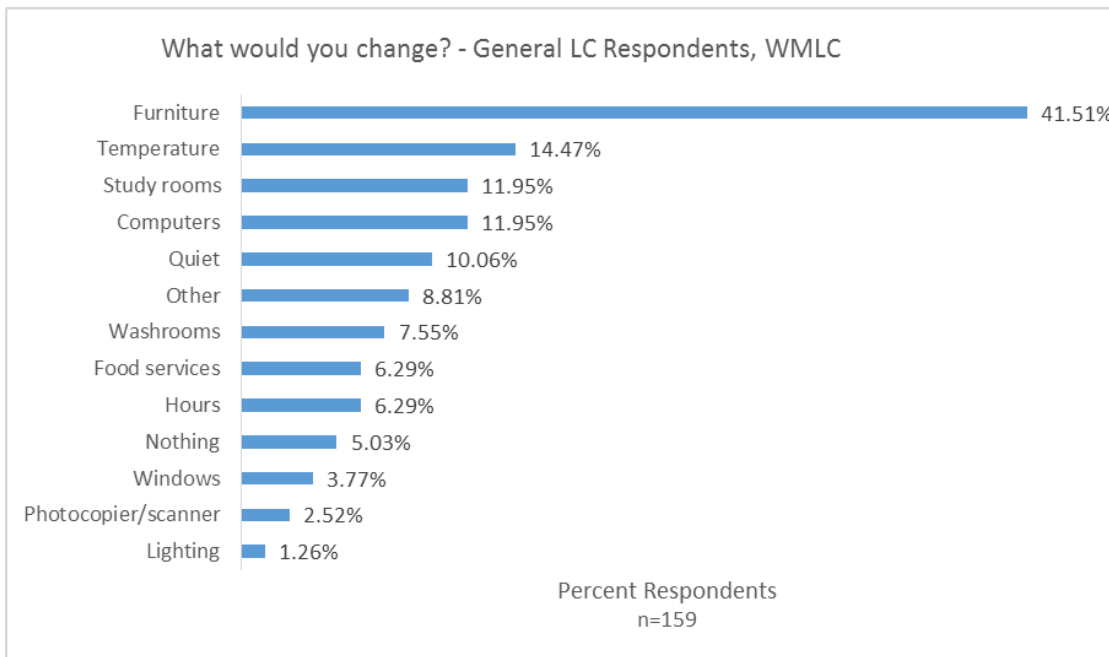


Figure 2: Negative Comments/Suggestions, General WMLC

This became clearer in the quiet room response data. In response to the question, “would you change the furniture?”, 59% pointed out the ergonomic deficiencies of the soft seating and low tables (see Figure 3). The following are a few examples:

“Taller tables would be perfect. The ones now are a little too low. They are not useful to do homework on.”

“Some belly level desks would help. I get pain from constantly leaning over.”

“Needs some more tables/chairs that you could do homework, write, and use laptop on. Take out some of the comfier chairs and add ergonomic working spaces. It hurts my back trying to use my laptop or write.”

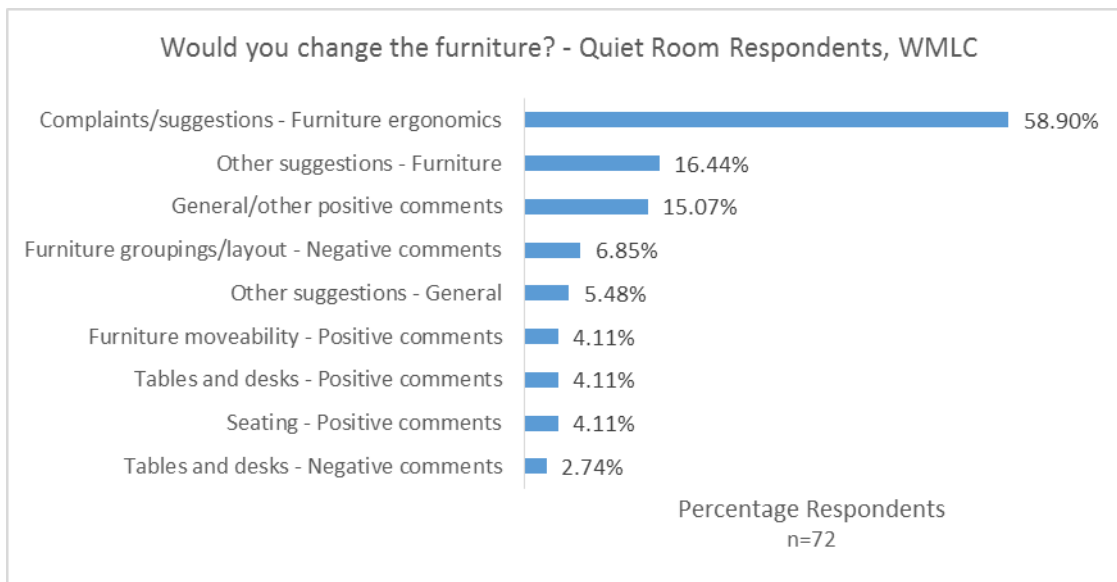


Figure 3: Furniture Comments, WMLC Quiet Room

The need for furniture designed for work rather than comfortable chairs designed for seated study or leisure was also evidenced by observation, as the bench at the back of the quiet room was in constant use by occupants leaning over their laptops which they placed on the bench. With this data in hand, a recommendation was clear: the quiet room must have ample furniture to support seated work, rather than just the original furniture more suited for reading. The addition of tables and chairs was necessary.

Other recommendations following the WMLC guerrilla assessment study included revisiting and editing the study room capacities listed in the online booking system. Observations and some complaints from study room respondents indicated cramped workspaces. When estimating seating capacities for study spaces, classroom seating capacity formulas are not applicable, as students studying and working on papers need more space than what is required for classroom seating (see Garritano & Yacilla, 2014). Thanks to this guerrilla study, construction errors in the soundproofing between study rooms 7 and 8 were also identified by respondents. The need for clearer signage indicating “quiet conversation” in the general LC also became evident. Cold temperature complaints have also been shared with Facilities Management, and Mondays through Wednesdays were identified as the best evenings to pilot extended hours, thanks to headcount data.

Respondents in the KLLC were, just like the WMLC respondents, enthusiastic about the lighting and general design elements of their new learning commons (see Figure 4). “Spaciousness” was



another general theme arising out of the response data, particularly among the users of the study rooms and study booths.

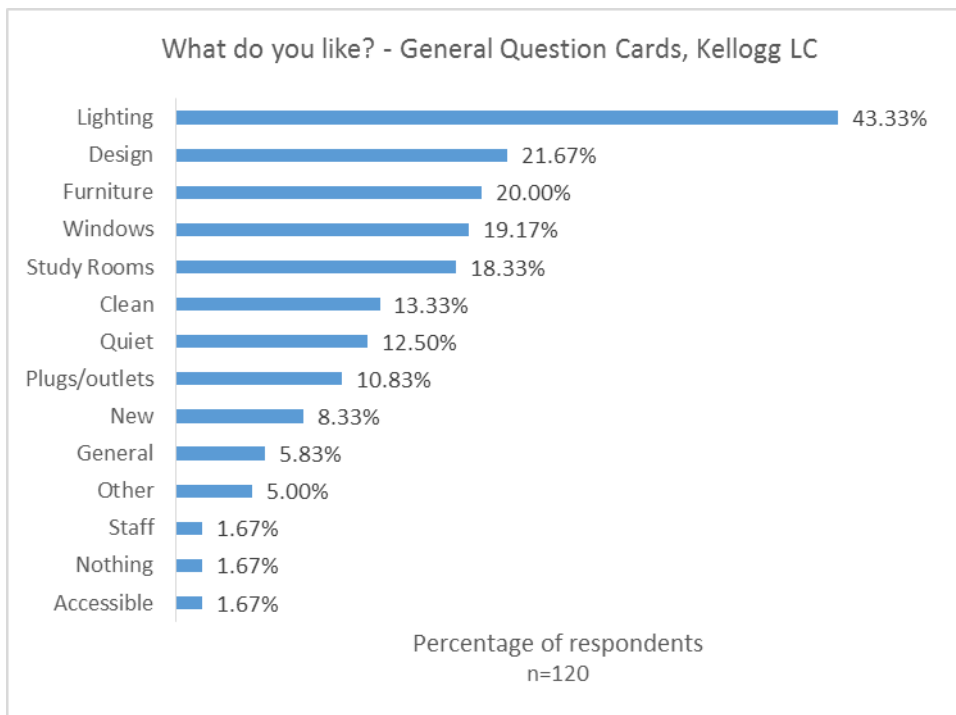


Figure 4: Positive Comments, KLLC Silent Study Room, Back Corridor & Front Study Area

However, when asked what they would change, users complained of too many computers and not enough individual and quiet study space. Figure 5 depicts the responses to “what would you change?” from the general question cards. 38% of respondents said there were too many computers. Even 22% of the computer workstation respondents stated there were too many computers (see Figure 6) and also complained that their desktop workspaces were too small (47%). Responses included:

“More study spaces - perhaps replace some of the computers with cubbies (lots of computers) or use another floor/part of floor.”

“I think removing 1/2 of the desktop computers to make more study space.”

“More study space, don't need so many computers, they take up tables that could be used for studying.”

Computer usage data comparing usage in the new KLLC to the old also showed a drastic drop in use.

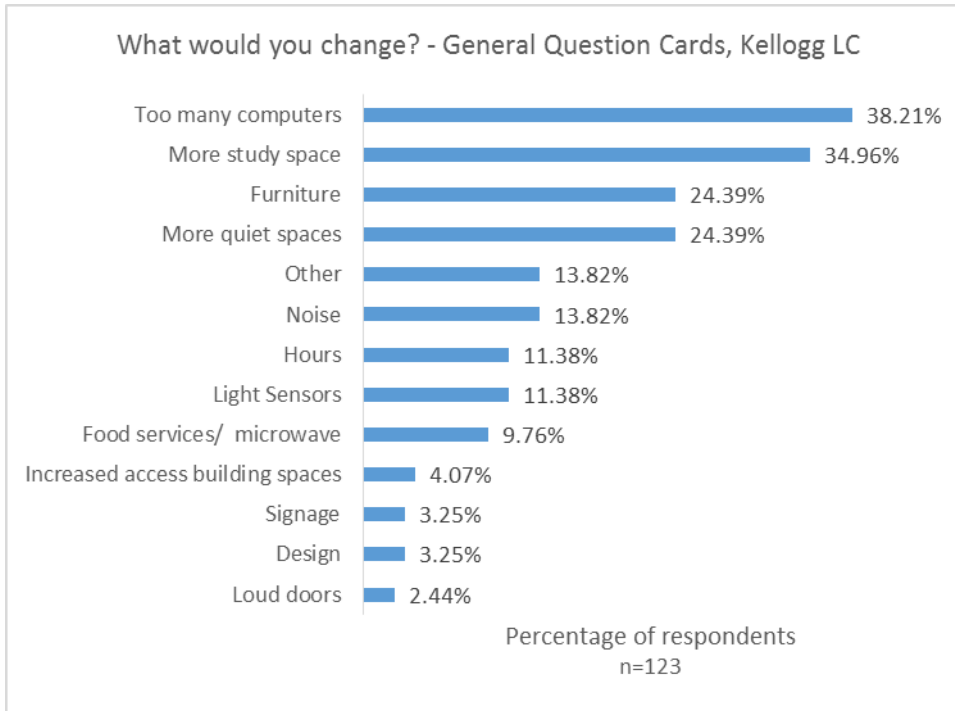


Figure 5: Negative Comments/Suggestions, KLLC Silent Study Room, Back Corridor & Front Study Area

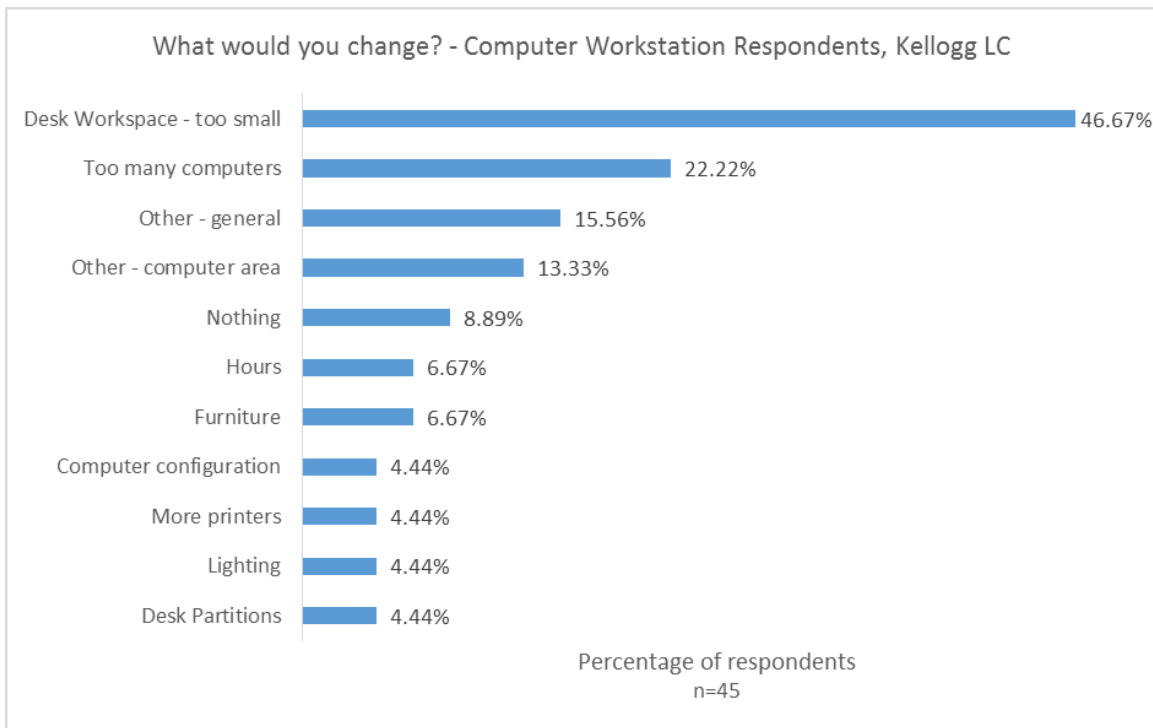


Figure 6: Negative Comments/Suggestions, KLLC Computer Workstations

The overabundance of computer workstations and not enough individual, quiet study space became the major finding of the KLLC study. All four methods of assessment (the question cards/slips, observation, headcounts and computer usage data) indicated that the computer workstations are underused while the individual work spaces are in heavy use with many of these unfortunately situated in naturally noisy areas – particularly the back corridor, which is heavily trafficked, and prone to noise and conversation from washrooms, elevator use, and general passers-by. Observations here, by three different staff, were in agreement: the back corridor is far too disruptive for individual study. Further analysis of the response data, indicated that while 24% of all question card respondents requested more quiet spaces, 33% of the back corridor respondents made this request.

The most important recommendations from the KLLC study were to replace about one-third of the computers with individual study carrels or pods of tables and chairs, increase desk space at the remaining computer workstations, move study carrels from the back corridor to the front study space and move the comfortable seating from the front study space to the back corridor. Other recommendations included relocating the silent study room (at the end of the busy back corridor) to a quieter location off the computer workstation area. Signage to promote the wireless printer service was also recommended since 38% of computer users said they only use the computers to print. Finally, in response to both assessment studies, a trial of 3-hour study room bookings (instead of a 2-hour limit) has been suggested for all learning commons on campus.

### **Assessment Follow-up**

Following the guerrilla assessment studies of the two new learning commons, surplus tables and chairs were identified and placed in the quiet room in the WMLC during the last week of winter semester classes. Initial observations showed the tables and chairs to be in use; however, many occupants still seemed to prefer their habitual study spots at the end of the room, utilizing the bench as a work surface. This is not surprising, as many studies have shown that library space users can be creatures of habit when it comes to choosing where to sit (see Sommer, 1970; Schaeffer & Patterson, 1976; Young, 2003). This may change when the new academic year begins. “Quiet” signage has been improved, and the construction company has ordered material to fix the sound proofing discrepancy in the wall between study rooms 7 and 8. Temperature issues have been investigated by facilities staff. The Assessment Librarian will assist staff with re-measuring the study room seating capacities.

Follow-up observation assessment will be carried out in the WMLC quiet room shortly after the start of the 2016 fall semester to attempt to measure satisfaction and use of the new functional furniture. A more thorough assessment project of the entire WMLC will take place during the winter 2017 semester.

At the KLLC, plans have been put in place to relocate 30 computers to other learning commons spaces where they are needed. Individual computer desk space will be expanded as surplus computers are removed. Shortly after this work, the study carrels in the back corridor will be moved to the front study area and replaced with the comfortable seating currently in place there. A move of the silent study room has been deemed unlikely due to building infrastructure; however, frosting will be placed on the glass wall of the silent study room to minimize external visual disruptions. Once these changes have taken place, demand for the study rooms will be reassessed to determine the feasibility of a 3-hour study room booking trial.

A focused observation study will take place in the KLLC shortly after the removal of the computer workstations and the relocation of back corridor study carrels to the front study area. As with the WMLC, a full follow-up assessment study will take place the following winter. At this moment it is unclear if more rigorous, formalized assessment tools will be utilized, as the one-week question card method appeared to be quite adequate and induced healthy participation.

## **Guerilla Reflections**

While we may have learned much about the use of and satisfaction with our new learning commons, we also learned a lot about the value and execution of guerrilla-style assessment methods in learning spaces. The following is a summary of what we discovered and our suggestions for use in other studies:

- Guerilla-style assessment, particularly using mixed methods, is a powerful means to quickly formalize user feedback and gather evidence to identify and support immediate changes to a newly designed space in order to better support users at their work.
- Don't let its name fool you: depending on the method, "guerrilla assessment" can still involve laborious analysis of the copious amounts of qualitative data gathered.
- One week is plenty of time to gather learning commons user feedback via question cards. The bulk of completed cards were retrieved within the first 24-48 hours. Just make sure to time the assessment period around normally active times of the semester.
- Moving the whiteboards from study room to study room in the WMLC was a lot of work, considering the limited amount of feedback acquired this way. If using whiteboards to gather feedback, consider using just one or two for general feedback in general areas.
- When analyzing response data and drawing conclusions, be sure, as with all assessment projects, to be cognizant of how the data was gathered, and the possible weaknesses in the methodology. Often, it is through discussion of the results and the methodology that staff come to agreement on how convincing the data is and what follow-up actions should be taken.
- When it comes to newly designed spaces, allow the space "to breathe", for users to interact with it and repurpose it for a while before embarking on any form of assessment. Knee-jerk reactions to new spaces are often not useful, and casual observation and interactions with users in the first few weeks can inform what types of questions and what types of data should be gathered with your assessment instrument.

## **Conclusion**

Guerilla-style assessment in the two new learning commons at Dalhousie University resulted in actionable findings, based on input of users, with an approach that made participation easy. Participant design – that is, obtaining user input at the outset of planning new learning spaces – is ideal, but not always possible. Where it is not possible, participant input can follow space design and implementation - as in our case with the WMLC and KLLC – thereby effecting the proper changes to bridge the gap between user needs and space design. The authors posit that even with participant-informed design, it behooves the learning space custodians to follow up with users, assessing their needs and their satisfaction with the space. Informal, low-cost, quick and flexible means – guerrilla, if you wish – are a valuable, effective way of doing so.

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<sup>i</sup> We also requested respondents' program affiliation. Results revealed interesting seating choices of the different disciplines but did not factor into the main findings and recommendations.