alterline

Estates Futures

The role and impact of space and buildings on the university community

Public Report: November 2019

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In 2017 the National Student Survey (NSS) introduced a question, question 21, which asks students about whether they feel they are a part of a "community of staff and students". After some disappointing results Alterline created this research using online student photo journals, online focus groups and campus based ethnographic observations to explore how spaces and buildings impact the development and maintenance of community for students on campus.

Key finding 1: Students prefer communal campus spaces for both studying and socialising. These spaces increase motivation and student wellbeing.

A sense of collective purpose is built when students are able to study alongside others who are completing similar tasks. Being around other students who are in similar situations is good for student wellbeing.

"Everyone is working and that brings a feeling of community because you know you are all in the same boat."

Students often choose to sit together in clusters whilst studying.

At both university libraries, during quieter periods when students had choices of where to sit, they could be observed choosing to sit in spaces which were close to, but not directly next to, other students - in 'clusters'.
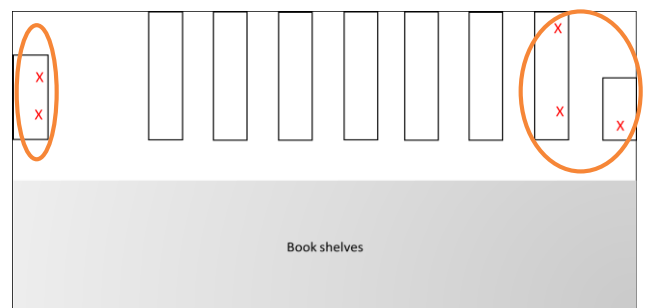

Book shelves

Figure 1. A map demonstrating clustering of students in a library space.

The communication which is allowed in communal spaces is important, since students on the whole tended to express that they find a certain level of noise (though not too high) can actually be "useful for focusing" and conducive to aid concentration.

Again, this is linked to feeling that other students who are 'in the same boat' are around.

Key finding 2: The four key spaces that promote this sense of collective purpose and community on campus are: libraries, students' unions, green space and cafes/food outlets.

Libraries

The sense of community, collective purpose and motivation is particularly strong in the library. Choosing to study in the library is a decision made by some students as they feel it builds on their identity as a student and motivates them to work when they feel this sense of collective purpose.

"I usually study in the library because I feel more motivated there, having other students around studying."

Students' Unions

The students' union is seen as the 'heart' and 'hub' of the community at the universities. The use of these descriptions construct an image of the students' unions being integral spaces on campus which are full of activity, communication and interaction.

"It's a great hub for students to meet, talk and socialise. I think the Students' Union building is the heart of the campus."

Green spaces

Students often referred to the green spaces on campus as neutral and welcoming to everyone. They were discussed as spaces which could aid student mental health and wellbeing. These were also the spaces that students mentioned when asked about improvements on campus, suggesting they wanted more trees, plants and grass.

"I like to sit here and watch the world go by...it's really calm and quiet, which makes it a really good place to take a breather."

Cafes/ Food outlets

As well as cafes and food outlets acting as spaces where students can socialise, they also help to provide relaxed study spaces on campus where students can eat, drink and talk whilst they work.

"Sometimes I like to go to cafes to study, this is because it has a relaxed atmosphere and drinks and food are a shorter time away."

Key finding 3: Students desire more relaxed spaces on campus where they are able to utilise the space in different ways according to their needs.

Study and social spaces where rules are relaxed around eating, drinking and talking are the most popular spaces.

Students expressed an appreciation for spaces which are a balance between more formal settings, such as silent study zones in the library, and relaxed study spaces, such as cafes and students' unions. They are able to adapt these spaces to suit their needs, and can even block out sound if they need to using headphones.

"The reading room on the ground floor of the Library is a great space where you can study, eat and talk with your friends at the same time, without [the] need to be [in] a silent room because it answers different needs. It's something between a study and a social space and this is why I like it."

Key recommendation

Make sure that communal, open, social learning spaces, which allow low levels of noise and talking, are the priority on campus, maintain a smaller number of specific types of space (e.g. silent working areas) to suit different learning styles. These spaces should also allow for food and drink to be consumed and should have comfortable and usable furniture for working.

Key finding 4: Overcrowding in communal spaces means that students' sense of community can become inhibited, impacting their wellbeing.

Students may choose to go home and therefore can be missing out on community and relationship building as a result of overcrowding.

"I am put off studying in the library/prompted to leave sometimes by the overcrowded feeling it gets at busy times."

"The library is too small and therefore hard to find a space, easier to just go home."

Overcrowding has a negative effect on student wellbeing.

Students expressed that when places were too busy, they found it difficult to be able to do their work, either because they were unable to physically find a space to work or because they found the space too 'claustrophobic'.

Students also felt that overcrowding affects their ability to interact and socialise with each other at both universities, particularly in the students' unions.

Students discussed how this would generally put them off going to the space at all, or some students try to use the spaces, however, then have to choose somewhere else to go when this space is full.
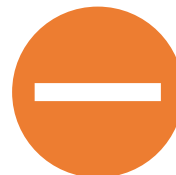
Key recommendation

Introduce more social spaces that have relaxed rules around food, drink and conversation. As these were seen to be the most popular, having more of these available on campus would mean they become less crowded as people have more to choose from.

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