



Column: A New Generation in Librarianship

Come Chill Out at the Library: Creating Soothing Spaces for Neurodiverse Students

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ABSTRACT

As more neurodivergent students enroll in college, academic libraries need to examine how accessible their space is for these students. Susquehanna University, a private, four-year college, has many neurodiverse students on our campus. When librarians met with the Counseling and Psychological Services ASD and Neurodiversity student group, they discovered the library was a difficult space for many of them to use. To create a more welcoming space, the library purchased fidget toys for in-library use, created an occupancy counter, and renovated three study rooms into sensory-friendly spaces. Librarians learned a lot from this experience about groups to collaborate with and things to be mindful of when working with neurodiverse students.

KEYWORDS

neurodiversity, accessibility, accommodation, student collaboration, space planning

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Susquehanna University is a small liberal arts college located in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania. We have about 2,300 students, most of whom are undergraduates. According to our Disability Services Office, about 20% of Susquehanna students have a documented disability. Of that 20%, most students are neurodiverse, but this does not provide a complete picture of the total number of neurodiverse students on our campus. Many students who are neurodiverse choose not to document it with the Disability Services office, so the actual number of students needing a more accommodating space for neurodiversity is unknown.

After attending the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) virtual conference, *Managing and Marketing Inclusion in Libraries*, we became aware of the need for more welcoming library spaces for neurodivergent users. We contacted our university's Counseling and Psychological Services to work with their ASD and Neuro-Diversity Student Group. Throughout the '21-'22 academic year, we attended two group meetings and a group lunch, as well as completed walk-throughs of the library with two of the students. The students were open and honest about what barriers or difficulties they faced at the library. While we offered some suggestions to the students about viable solutions, most of our changes came from the students' suggestions. Throughout the process, we updated the students on the changes we made and kept them in the loop about the timeline of larger changes.

Occupancy Counter

The students we met with spoke at length about their anxiety when entering Blough-Weis Library (BLW). Walking through the main doors between 8 am and 4 pm, one immediately reaches our café, Scholarly Grounds. It is common to hear the whirring of blenders, the grinding of beans, someone shouting names when an order is ready, and loud conversations. For students who are sensitive to noises and sounds, this causes sensory overload and is upsetting. Bloss et al. came to a similar conclusion in their research on library services for neurodiverse users. They claim, "The main entry to many modern libraries can be a loud and chaotic place with people moving about or working together, fluorescent lights buzzing, printers whirring, and a plethora of signs that most people ignore. This type of environment can be distressing for some neurodiverse users" (Bloss et al., 2021, p. 185). How crowded the library is also ebbs and flows. The students did not know how many other students would be in the library at any given time, so many chose not to go because they wanted to avoid crowds. After brainstorming with them about things we could do to make the library more accessible, one of the students suggested we implement an occupancy counter, like the ones many businesses have on their websites or Google. Our Systems Librarian, Brianne Dort, began to work on this. Luckily, BWL is equipped with a door counter. Brianne and Amanda decided, for safety reasons, not to include the exact number of people inside the library at any given time. This decision came about out of concern for the safety of our campus. To make the counter more accessible, Brianne placed it on the library's homepage, and it is now one of the first things you see when you land there. The counter shows an estimated occupancy, for instance, sixty to one hundred people. There is also

an “average occupancy” link you can click on. This shows the user how busy the library is during the week at certain times. About a month after we embedded the occupancy counter on our website, we checked in with the students. One of the students, a junior, said that because of the occupancy counter, she used the library for the first time. All of them agreed that the occupancy counter helped them feel more at ease because they could check how busy the library was before heading over.

Fidget Toys

One of the requests we received from the neurodiverse students was to have fidget toys available in the library. The students felt that the fidget toys would help them deal with stress and help them focus. The students also requested that we purchase wipes, so they could disinfect the toys before using them. For some of these students, cleanliness is extremely important. We bought several large variety packages of fidget toys. Different students had different preferences for the feel and texture of the toys, as well as the type of fidget toys. Some preferred squishy toys, while others preferred spinners.

We placed the toys in a visible spot at the desk for students to check out. One of the librarians created a barcode to track them. However, when we checked in with the students in the group about a month later, we got some helpful feedback. They told us they disliked going to the front desk to check them out because it made them feel self-conscious and uncomfortable. They did not want to draw attention or be judged for being neurodivergent. This feedback was important for us to know since the purpose of the fidget toys was to make the students feel more comfortable in the library. For the fall semester, we are piloting a new system for fidget toys. Toys will not need to be checked out and are in the “chill out rooms” near the elevator on the main floor. The students can access them more easily and use them privately if they choose to. Upon student request, we also purchased disposable earplugs and noise headphones, now available at the front desk.

Chill Out Study Rooms

The library should be a useful study space for all students, but the feedback we received from the student group was that, due to several factors, they found studying in the library difficult. Like many academic libraries, the Blough-Weis Library has different study rooms to meet the various needs of our students. However, what makes many of these rooms aesthetically pleasing also makes them unusable to neurodiverse students. All our study rooms feature walls almost entirely made of glass, with no way to control the lighting and uncomfortable furniture. Each floor presents its own set of challenges as well. For example, the ground floor features some quiet study rooms, but the rooms have large windows, and the temperature is also very warm or cold, depending on the time of year. On the main floor, the café produces sensory overload from the noisy blenders to the permeating smell of burnt bagels. Even the top floor, the

designated quiet floor, hosts harsh, bright lights, and the floor is so quiet that the students complained of not being able to concentrate over the noise of the buzzing lights.

People who are neurodiverse have unique sensory needs, and these needs can be drastically different between one neurodiverse individual and another. Whenever we make changes to our space, we always want to ensure that they are driven by student feedback to ensure the changes help our students. We met with the student group twice to ask them what their ultimate wish list would be if there were no limits on what we could change about the study rooms. Amanda also toured the library individually with two students from the group to gather more feedback on how they perceived the current space.

The students had many suggestions, but they were also mindful that these changes would cost money. Overall, they were glad someone asked them what would make the library more accessible. The students made it clear that they understood we had budgetary constraints and said they would be happy with any changes we were able to make. We also understood we had budgetary constraints, so we decided to call upon our university's Student Government Association (SGA) to request funds to help cover the renovation costs. We had many recommendations from the students that we wanted to implement, and we began pricing out the renovation cost.

One of the common complaints was that the windows in the study rooms distracted students from studying or using the rooms because they felt they were being watched. To remedy this, the students suggested we either get curtains to put across the windows or frost the windows. They also said the lights in most of the study rooms were too bright for them to focus, so they said it would be helpful if the lights were dimmable. This would allow them to adjust the lights to where it was comfortable for them. Another major concern was the furniture. Some students liked the feel of the hard, rigid desks and chairs, while others did not. Some students said they preferred to work standing up, while others said they preferred to sit on the floor. To accommodate this range of preferences, the students recommended an adjustable desk and several different seating options.

We decided to equip the rooms with frosted windows, dimmable lights, and adjustable desks. We also wanted to purchase bean bag chairs, wobble stools, sound machines, and weighted blankets as these were among the items students said would be helpful. Our initial estimates came out to about \$400-\$700 to convert one room, and we planned to ask the SGA to cover \$500 of this cost. When we presented to the SGA, we relayed the struggles we had heard from the student group, but we also enlightened them on the number of neurodiverse students on our campus. Our presentation not only swayed the SGA to help us convert one study room, but it inspired them to give us all the funds needed to convert three. They also encouraged us to reach out if any costs exceeded the original budget (which it did).

With these funds, we could create three sensory study rooms on our quiet floor in time for the fall 2022 semester. The last hurdle for us was what to call these rooms and how to market them to students. When we discussed this with our student group, there were mixed reactions. Several students were hesitant to have any signage that indicated the room was designed for neurodiverse students as they felt this would “out” them as neurodiverse to their peers.

However, there was concern that students who are not neurodiverse might monopolize the room if they did not know who the rooms were for. We decided to label the rooms as “Chill Out Study Rooms.” This label marks these rooms as different from our other study rooms, but it does not single out those who are neurodiverse. We have signage outside these rooms that lists the items in the rooms. The assumption is that neurodiverse students will know this is the room for them, but it does not associate the room with a disability. If the students who we know are neurodiverse express that the rooms are constantly in use, we will use this to advocate for more study rooms like these. Sarett states that “Creating an accepting campus community that boasts a UDL approach to learning is one-way institutes of higher education can both ensure they are aware of student needs and address them in a way that reduces the stress of disclosing one’s disability status” (2017). By giving the neurodiverse students agency in naming the room, we hope they will feel more comfortable using the space without fear of being stigmatized.

Figure 1

One of the Chill Out Study Rooms with a thank-you note from a student that says "Thank you for this space, one of the best things @ SU since I arrived."



Lessons Learned

Creating the chill-out rooms was a rewarding and informative process. Here are some of the lessons we learned while working on this project:

- **Go to the source:** The greatest wealth of knowledge came from the students. It was the students who shared with us the specific things about our library that did not work for them and prevented them from using the space. The students made suggestions about what could be done to improve our space.
- **Stay in communication:** Keeping the students updated about our progress not only helped build trust, but also enabled us to receive feedback from the students. For instance, we did not know that many students disliked the initial placement of the fidget toys until we checked in with them.
- **Think outside of the library's funding:** We knew we had budgetary limitations when we started outreach to the neurodiverse students. What we were not anticipating was the positive response that we got from SGA, who secured additional funding. We now know that if we want to transform more rooms, we will have supplementary funding.
- **Be patient:** Some changes take a long time. We put in a work order to have dimmer switches for the overhead lights, but our facilities department has been backed up. The adjustable tables we ordered were delayed because of supply chain issues due to the pandemic.

Conclusion

Working on this project had many positive outcomes. We were able to build trust with some of the neurodiverse students on campus and learn more about their challenges with our library. We spoke to the students and learned the ways that the library was inaccessible to them. Based on their suggestions, we implemented changes and received positive feedback. We were surprised that the SGA wanted to offer us additional funding; this made it possible for us to convert three rooms into Chill Out Rooms. This signaled that students outside the group were excited about our ideas and wanted to support us. In the future, we will continue to think outside of the library's budget when seeking funding. As we move forward with improving the library, we will continue to empower our neurodiverse and disabled students to be active parts of our process. Their input is integral to our library being a more welcoming space.

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