Dean's message: 2010: 04: 16: Library hours and other services

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Library hours and other services

Recently I received a request from a writer for the Crow's Nest for me to respond to some written questions about library hours and services. The questions I was asked and the full answers I provided are included here below. As always, if you have comments or questions, please feel free to email me at hixson@mail.usf.edu

Currently, the library is open until 10 p.m. on weekdays. Have many students expressed to you that they would like the library to be open later?

We periodically hear from students expressing a desire to have expanded hours for the library. This is not unique to USFSP and is a request that is heard routinely at academic libraries around the country. When we conduct surveys or focus group interviews, longer hours are always mentioned. As the library has received requests for expanded hours (and other expansions of services) throughout the years, we have had to balance the wishes and needs of our students and faculty against the resources that the library receives to maintain its operations. The other responses will clearly outline these challenges and how the library successfully meets them.

What factors go into deciding the hours of operation for the library?

A number of important factors are considered in setting library hours. I would put these into five categories: campus need or demand, the availability of staff, financial resources, demands for new or expanded services in other areas, and student and staff safety.

Campus need or demand: As part of a long-standing program of assessment, the library continually performs assessments of student uses of the library's physical space and services, including head counts. Our most recent data of student use of the library building is from December 2009. In December 2009 for exam week, we stayed open until midnight Monday through Thursday, December 7-10. We had our security guards walk through the building at several points and count the numbers of students. Looking at the counts of students at 10:30 and 11:30 p.m., the average number of students in the building on those nights with extended hours were 48 (Dec. 7), 75 (Dec. 8), 27 (Dec. 9), 11 (Dec. 10) It is hard to justify keeping the building open and staffed when so few students are taking advantage of the
extended hours. I will be happy to provide the specific data on these dates and other earlier dates to anyone who wishes to see it.

**Availability of staff:** The Poynter Library has a total of 20 librarians and other staff, only some of whom are working in public areas. The only way we could keep the building open longer hours would be to hire new staff, pay existing staff overtime, or eliminate other services and reassign people to a new schedule and new job duties. The librarians and staff within the building play an important role in the academic success of our students at USF St. Petersburg that goes well beyond staffing the reference and circulation desks. During the past twenty-five years, USF St. Petersburg has grown from a commuter, branch campus with a small number of upper-level and limited graduate course offerings into a separately accredited institution with three times the number of students, a vibrant residential life program, and expanded curricular offerings. Yet, the number of librarians and other staff who are responsible for ordering books and resources, assisting students with individual reference requests, checking Reserves and other materials out, keeping our computer lab and other equipment up-to-date and functioning properly, running the campus ID service, providing distance learning and classroom technology support, and many other services has not changed for nearly twenty-five years (unless you count the loss of some positions recently). The number of people we are serving has tripled while our level of staffing has remained stagnant.

**Financial resources:** The funding the library receives in its annual budget pays for the books, videos, computers, and other resources in the building, as well as the staff to keep the building open and the services running. In addition, a significant and increasing part of the library’s budget pays for providing access to the thousands of databases and other electronic resources that all USFSP students have access to. Whether in the library, their dorm room, or while at the beach, whenever a student logs onto their Blackboard account to access JSTOR, Lexis-Nexis, or the hundreds of other databases, that access is made possible by the library’s funding. Also, when a student gets a book on interlibrary loan, the library absorbs the cost of shipping, insuring, and guaranteeing the safe return of those materials. What may seem “free” to the student does cost the library. Since 2007, the University, the campus, and the library have experienced unprecedented budget cuts. Without the intervention of federal stimulus funds, these cuts would have resulted in a decline in funding of over 30% since 2007. Even with stimulus dollars, the library’s budget has declined by more than 20%. We have cancelled some journal titles, we have reduced the number of scholarly books that we can purchase, and we have not been able to replace some staff positions. Up to this point, we have resisted reducing the hours we are open or reducing or eliminating some services entirely.

Later hours in the library impose additional costs on the University, and these costs must be covered from some funding source. You may have noticed that nearly half of the ceiling lights in the book stacks on each floor lack fluorescent light bulbs. The bulbs were removed from these fixtures a couple of years ago because the University was looking for ways to save electricity costs. In addition to reduced lighting when the building is open, the lights are turned off and the central air conditioning and heating units that service the building are shut off or placed on standby each evening after the library closes, as a way to save money. The additional costs for utilities, water, and maintenance if the building were kept open longer hours would require a source of funds to cover them. Expanded hours mean much more than keeping the light switch on and having a staff member behind the circulation desk.

**New service demands:** In addition to continuing to provide all the services that the library has long provided (some of which are not typically provided by libraries), we have also taken on or expanded a number of other services, including the cataloging of library materials (previously handled by Tampa), absorbing additional usage of the library’s computer lab with the loss of the College of Business computer lab, enhancing equipment and software to provide greater assistance for special-needs students, and more. Student government also comes to us from time to time with requests, such as providing a copy of every textbook in the Library’s reserve area,
that tax us financially as well as in the time it takes to negotiate for, establish, and maintain a new service.

**Student and staff safety:** Because we are an urban campus and because we are in a section of town where there are not many other public facilities, we face security challenges. To address the concerns of students and staff, we have hired two security guards for evenings and weekends. You may have seen the recent article in the St. Petersburg Times reporting on the spike in thefts at the USF Tampa library: [http://www.tampabay.com/news/publicsafety/crime/thefts-spikes-at-usfs-library-in-tampa/1086735](http://www.tampabay.com/news/publicsafety/crime/thefts-spikes-at-usfs-library-in-tampa/1086735) This past weekend, one of our security guards kept an eye on a student’s belongings while she used the restroom because he saw a member of the general public who was acting suspiciously. That same member of the public later attempted to steal some library property and was apprehended by the library’s security guard. To keep the building open longer hours would certainly mean that we would need to pay more hours for the security guards. And the concerns are not just about security of property but more importantly making it safe for students to study alone in remote corners of the library.

**For how long have the current library hours been established? Has the library ever had longer or shorter hours of operation?**

Aside from a brief period in 2006-2007 when library hours were expanded to midnight on Mondays through Thursdays and from 1:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m. on Sundays, our hours have the same since the late 1980s. The last substantial change to the hours was the expansion of Sunday’s closing time from 5:00 p.m. until 7:00 p.m. We expanded those Sunday hours to meet the needs of the students. The midnight hours during 2006-2007 coincided with the opening of Residence Hall One. These hours were reduced for two important reasons: 1) The budgetary reductions in 2007, and 2) A clear indication that usage patterns did not justify the costs involved. On some occasions, there were two or three students in the building at 11:00 p.m. It is not fiscally responsible to keep the building open and provide service for so few students.

**If students express that they would like the library to have later hours, do you know what the student body should do to have this established?**

Some library services are presently available 24/7/365. For example, students no longer need to visit the library to renew books online. Students today have access to a wide array of databases and electronic resources available through funding by the USF System of libraries. Students who live on campus already have some options for late-night studying in Residence Hall One. If students want expanded hours for the library, they should petition Student Government to work with the Library to determine the costs and provide the funding to hire the staff, security guards, and cover the additional expenses of keeping the building open longer.

**The library closes Sundays at 7 p.m., when many students have work to do for their Monday classes. Has there been any discussion that the library should at least be open later on Sundays?**

As was previously mentioned, until the late 1980s the library’s hours on Sunday were from 1:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. The decision to expand Sunday hours so the building would remain open until 7:00 p.m. was done as a way to expand services to students. This expansion of hours, however, did not bring the library any additional funding. If students want to have the library open longer hours, on Sunday or any other day, they should petition Student Government to work with the Library to determine the costs and provide the funding to hire the staff, security guards, and cover the additional expenses of keeping the building open longer.

**Are any changes coming to the library for the student body in the near**
future?

The Library is always reviewing what it does and how it carries out its responsibilities in order to provide the best service possible for the students of USFSP. You can check out some of our assessments online at: [http://www.nelson.usf.edu/sacs/outcomes.html](http://www.nelson.usf.edu/sacs/outcomes.html). We are always looking for ways to be more engaged in the life of the students and have increased the number of student-centered events, such as our recent Mardi Gras at the Library event or the National Library Week (April 11-17) poster contest. To stay apprised of what is happening at the library, I encourage you to check out the Messages from the Dean at: [http://www.nelson.usf.edu/info/dean](http://www.nelson.usf.edu/info/dean) where I’ll be talking about some of the issues or opportunities awaiting us, become a Fan of the library on Facebook at [http://www.facebook.com/pages/Saint-Petersburg-FL/Nelson-Poynter-Memorial-Library/131440917131](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Saint-Petersburg-FL/Nelson-Poynter-Memorial-Library/131440917131), or just come in and talk with any one of us!


_Carol Hixson_

_(with contributions from Jim Schnur, Special Collections Librarian)_

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