Writing Our Story: Community Building in an Academic Library Using Portable Whiteboards

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Abstract

Portable whiteboards are ubiquitous in academic libraries and popular with the students and staff alike, both as study tools (students) and low- to no-cost, minimal effort assessment tools (staff). This case study discusses one Georgia academic library's use of these whiteboards for student engagement after COVID-19, in a project named #ProjectWhiteboard. The purpose of this activity began as a low effort way to obtain feedback from students during the fall of 2021, after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted and the libraries were seeing more traffic, and later became a fixture in the library as a community-building initiative. This project is ongoing and is being completed in multiple locations of an academic library.

Article Type: Case study

Institution Profile

Georgia Southern Libraries (GSL) serves a large, public, primarily residential university with an enrollment of over 25,000 graduate and undergraduate students located in southeast Georgia, United States, across three campuses. GSL has three main locations: Zach S. Henderson Library (Statesboro), Lane Library (Savannah), and the Learning Commons (Savannah).

Introduction

#ProjectWhiteboard (named by a GSL colleague) began in the fall of 2021 as a pilot project, when COVID-19 restrictions were being lifted and students were starting to return to life as it was prior to the pandemic. During that time, the staff at Lane Library in Savannah were searching for ways to engage and connect with our students and create a space that allowed students to see their voice had a place in our library. As the library is not tied to any campus department, we are "well positioned to develop unique intelligence about communities and needs on campus," while providing our students an opportunity to engage with the library so we can see how it fits into their lives, as opposed to the reverse (Profitt et al., 2015, p. 10). Based on previous scholarly research regarding endeavors in utilizing portable whiteboards for feedback (Sandelli & Cunningham, 2019), we decided to utilize one of our rolling whiteboards in a similar manner. Through trial and error, the boards became more than just simply feedback; they became a way to build community with our students and allow them some flexibility in their shaping of our library spaces. This created a unique opportunity for all visitors to view the

libraries as "space[s] receptive to authentic student voices and their efforts to 'invent the university' through playfulness, parody, and sometimes resistance" (Elmborg et al., 2015, p. 146).

The primary goal of #ProjectWhiteboard was to engage with our students and encourage their engagement with us in a less intimidating way than, say, an instruction session that might overwhelm them with all the resources available. We wanted to create a space for meaningful conversation and learn about "the complexities of students' experiences through students' own words" (Sandelli & Cunningham, 2019, p. 430). Not only that, but this was an opportunity to meet our students where they are and give them an opportunity to utilize the whiteboard as a "third space" to mold and shape at will however they saw fit (Elmborg, 2011; Elmborg et al., 2015).

This study utilizes principles of ethnographic research, "designed with the intention to learn more about a wide range of issues that often interact and cross over to create one *story* of students' lives" (Ramsden, 2016, p. 357, emphasis in original). Through the whiteboards, we are seeking to interact with students in their "everyday environments," allowing us the opportunity to understand more about the environment and challenges that students are facing when they're in college, while relating to them and trying to determine how they behave, free from assumption or expectation (Sandelli & Cunningham, 2019, pp. 426–427).

This case study will explore the use of the whiteboards at GSL: how we moved from a simple feedback instrument to a semesters-long community building initiative and what we have learned along the way. It will provide recommendations for replication in other libraries, as well as how this particularly provides value to academic libraries (although it absolutely has applications in all libraries).

Literature Review

Current literature on whiteboard surveys in academic libraries is sparse, but what is available shows that these surveys have been primarily used as methods of collecting feedback on academic libraries and their services (Camacho et al., 2020; Clemons et al., 2016; Ippoliti et al., 2017; Sandelli & Cunningham, 2019). Whiteboards have been chosen as feedback instruments due to their low-cost, low-effort nature, and students are often used to seeing them around the library. They also provide an easy way for libraries to capture student voices without creating a formal survey.

Whiteboards have been used as feedback instruments in a variety of published studies, either on their own or part of a larger study. At Oklahoma State University, the whiteboard/feedback wall was part of a larger study that asked the simple question "What if the library?" and students were invited to place sticky notes in answer to that question, and responses were collected and recorded (Ippoliti et al., 2017). This feedback wall was a part of a larger study to make long-term improvements in the library.

When previous library surveys yielded lower results, librarians at the University of Tennessee-Martin sought additional ways to obtain important feedback from students (Clemons et al., 2016). They utilized a whiteboard in the lobby of the library, with the question "What do you like & dislike about the library?" (Clemons et al., 2016, image 2). The question was attached to the board as a banner, rather than simply written on the board, which was thought to be more eye-catching for visitors to the library. Students responded so well to the whiteboard that they extended the original one-month duration by two weeks to collect additional feedback, with additional questions based on the feedback received during the survey period (Clemons et al., 2016). Even after the whiteboard survey period had ended, the dialogue had been opened for students to bring their feedback to the librarians regarding the library.

Inspired by other departments in the library using similar whiteboards, librarians in the Social Sciences department at Brigham Young University utilized a sticky note/whiteboard wall to get student feedback on the services of that specific department (Camacho et al., 2019). One notable difference between this survey and others is that students were offered an incentive to complete the survey in the form of candy. This survey ran for a total of 10 weeks and led to some changes at the service desk to ease patrons' experiences.

The longitudinal approach to collecting feedback via whiteboards came from a two-part study completed at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville (UTK) and the University of Richmond (UR) in 2015 and 2016 (Sandelli & Cummingham, 2019). Researchers were seeking to incorporate "direct, unmediated student perspectives" into their dialogue in the libraries and chose the already popular whiteboards to gather that feedback (Sandelli & Cummingham, 2019, p. 424). In the first iteration, at UTK, whiteboards were placed in three spaces around the library: a quiet study space, a transitional space near the coffee shop, and a collaborative learning space. The whiteboards had the same question written for 24 hours, over a 30-day period, and then the answers were documented and erased, and new questions were written (Sandelli & Cunningham, 2019). During the second iteration, UTK was joined by UR and the study was adjusted to account for "whiteboard fatigue" for participants and researchers (Sandelli & Cunningham, 2019, p. 432). The whiteboards posed one question a week for a period of eight weeks and were in roughly the same areas in the second iteration. Through this study, researchers were able to learn about various aspects of the student experience, including success, any demographic information, preferences, and community-building moments.

Whiteboards as Outreach in Academic Libraries

Whiteboards have been used for community engagement in the past as well, mainly through highlighting the art that is drawn on them (Elmborg et al., 2015; Owens, 2019; Pruneda et al., 2017; Rust & Brown, 2018). Previous initiatives have seen passive outreach like featuring student-drawn whiteboard art on social media, hashtags included (Pruneda et al., 2017; Owens, 2019). Whiteboards have also been used as informal poll opportunities, using fun and engaging questions to elicit student responses (Pruneda et al., 2017; Rust & Brown, 2018). At the University of Iowa in 2015, librarians were inspired by the anonymous secret initiative of PostSecret to create a secrets wall during finals, providing sticky notes for students to write secrets on and post. It provided students with an opportunity to have a back-and-forth with each other and a "messy, dialogic conversation" emerged (Elmborg et al., 2015, p. 147). Within this secrets wall, participants created an "asynchronous, anonymous, temporary community," which can have a powerful effect on how students and visitors view themselves within a library (Elmborg et al., 2015, p. 148).

Methodology

Initially, the whiteboard was placed in front of the circulation desk, about 10 feet away from the service counter and featured a question to collect feedback about the library: What is your favorite thing about the library? Responses were very limited, and not much data was collected from the first weeks. Library staff wondered if it was the location of the whiteboard being so close to the circulation desk, where library staff and student workers can see the responses and who is writing them in real time. The location is also near the front entrance, and it was not possible to place it in such a way that it could be seen and not infringe upon the walkway for students entering the library, particularly those wanting to visit the circulation desk. After that first question, the whiteboard was moved into the lobby, which is a more transitional space, where visitors can chat, get a snack from the vending machines, or look at the displays and flyers posted, where it remains to this day. Moving the whiteboard generated more responses to future questions. When both sides of the whiteboard

were filled, usually every third day of the week, responses were photographed and erased. Those photographs were subsequently uploaded to a secured drive. Questions were sourced from a combination of GSL employees and internet searches, with the simple aim of keeping the students engaged in the board.

Future iterations of #ProjectWhiteboard followed roughly the same format. Beginning in the fall semester of 2022, the whiteboard became a fixture in the lobby of Lane Library for all visitors to interact with. Questions asked on the board varied from getting to know the students' lives (What's your favorite song this week?), see how they are doing (Today I feel ___.), and deeper, more thought-provoking questions to make students think (What is knowledge?). The hashtag #ProjectWhiteboard was written on the board, giving more identity to the project, and we added a brief explanation of the intent of the whiteboard, as well as our commitment to providing a safe, welcoming, and inclusive space for all patrons who visit the library, how inappropriate responses will be erased, and the name and contact information of the staff member managing the project if visitors had questions or concerns. Again, questions were crowdsourced from colleagues, student responses, written in conjunction with an event or program at the library that week, and internet searches, including a LibGuide created by an academic librarian at DePauw University featuring their "Question of the Week" whiteboard (Hebb, 2023). All responses were documented and uploaded into a secure drive, organized by week. Any inappropriate or considered hate speech were documented and removed.

Results

The response to the whiteboard in the library has been overwhelmingly positive. Questions average over 50 responses per week, and students are quite engaged in responding to the white board every week. Questions about personal preferences (favorite song, best movie adaptation, etc.) tend to yield more results than questions that require more critical thinking, but overall, the whiteboard sees a high level of engagement. Students display a high level of vulnerability and honesty in interactions with the board, and most answers are thoughtful and in keeping with the question that is being asked. There have been a few instances of inappropriate or offensive things written on the board, which are promptly documented and removed. It is also commonplace to see students responding to each other, either with arrows, drawings, or their own comments to the original author, and on more than one occasion have sparked debates of their own within the answers to the board.

In addition to the responses to the questions, respondents use the whiteboards to communicate with each other. It is not unusual to see a note about something happening on campus that week, or a professor giving instructions to their students about where to go in the library for class. Students regularly use slang and other pop culture references in their answers, and there is very little self-censorship, meaning that curse words are also common. Several themes that emerge throughout the responses include stress about classes and finances, discussions about identities, anxieties that students have, and things that they are looking forward to. Due to the changing nature of the questions, it is difficult to determine specific themes outside of the answers to the questions that are present with consistency.

Discussion

This project is ongoing at Lane Library and continues to yield positive results. Students are constantly engaged with the whiteboard, and library staff are often made aware of positive feedback from the Georgia Southern Armstrong campus community.

- Students were overheard discussing how much they enjoyed the whiteboard in the library during a class (which met in a different academic building).

- During an orientation event in 2022, library staff were asked if the whiteboard was going to go back up and were delighted to hear it already had.
- A student stopped at the Circulation Desk to say how much he enjoyed the whiteboard and reading the responses every morning when he came in.
- Circulation Desk staff and student workers have observed students stopping in front of the whiteboard on their way into the library, either on their own or in groups and discussing it amongst themselves.

This project has been successful due to the commitment of the staff member in charge, as well as the level of participation and respect that students have shown in their responses. The question is changed weekly, usually on Saturdays, ensuring that students have a new question to answer every week. Students have maintained a level of respect in their answers while still being able to express themselves and are able to contribute a small part of themselves to the library in ways that they cannot often do.

#ProjectWhiteboard has been just one of many improvements at Lane Library to attempt to capture that feeling of the library as a "Third Space" for students to enter, interact with and shape to their needs (Elmborg, 2011; Elmborg et al., 2015). It is a project designed specifically for students to engage in a dialogue with us and each other, "humaniz[ing] spaces by allowing creativity, improvisation and humor… and creates democratic and authentic moments of mutual recognition and shared human reality" (Elmborg et al., 2015, p. 146). Through the dialogues that occur on the whiteboard, we can understand more about our university community and its culture and allow us a more complete understanding of our students and their needs.

Research Limitations

#ProjectWhiteboard has had an overall positive impact on Lane Library, but limitations also exist. Whiteboards were installed in the other Georgia Southern Libraries locations and were not as successful due to the more transitional nature of the spaces, and lack of available whiteboards would sometimes lead to the whiteboards being moved by students, losing the data.

Secondly, resources and budgets are limited, and while we have sought to provide a variety of colored markers for students to use to make the board more fun and engaging, they occasionally disappear or dry out. For a while, the markers were tied to the whiteboard to keep them with the board so they were not removed. Currently, the supplies are being purchased with a department budget that is limited and other expenses often take priority over markers for the whiteboard.

Thirdly, the whiteboard is in a public space that is not easily monitored by library staff, meaning that responses are not checked, which can lead to inappropriate or offensive answers being written. While library staff examine the board daily, we are unable to monitor it continuously, and the freedom given to students is, on rare occasions, abused.

Finally, due to the fluid nature of the study, examining direct impact has proven to be difficult. Most of the impact data that we have collected comes from anecdotal evidence, which, while helpful and positive, is not concrete. In future iterations, we hope to be able to measure impact on the Lane Library/Georgia Southern community, though currently much of our research has been determining what types of questions students are most likely to respond to.

Conclusions

To conclude, this project has given us a valuable insight into our students' lives, and given them a small, but creative way in which they can contribute to making the library into a space where all feel welcomed. Providing this opportunity for our students allows them to contribute to making the library their space and expressing themselves in a new and creative way. We are hoping for the opportunity to expand back to our other GSL locations and

glean perspectives from students who might utilize those spaces more frequently. This project has given us a valuable look into the lives that our students are leading right now, and the longitudinal nature of our project has given us an almost three-year look into how our students' lives have changed since COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, if at all. The best part? This is completely feasible for other libraries to replicate, either in the short or long term, and can be used as the beginning of a feedback/user experience/customer satisfaction survey, or as a passive outreach program. Most importantly, it can provide academic libraries with an important look into students' lives in unconventional ways, which can allow us to find new and creative ways in which we can contribute to student success.

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Appendix

Questions for #ProjectWhiteboard:

Fall 2021
1. What is your favorite thing about Lane Library?
2. What would you change about Lane Library?
3. Today I feel _____.
4. What's the hardest thing about college?
5. Life is hard right now… Drop a favorite resource to help with: studying (no cheating), mental health, food insecurity, or life! Let's help each other!
6. What is the library's most important role?
7. What are you excited about this week?
8. What does the library mean to you?
9. How can the library support you during finals?
10. How are you doing?
11. Should we keep the whiteboard next semester?
12. What should we talk about?

Fall 2022
1. Welcome back! How are you feeling about school starting?
2. How do you define "success"?
3. What advice would you give to your younger self?
4. What is something that you weren't taught in school that should have been?
5. Today, I feel _____.
6. What inspires you?
7. Where/when do you feel the most censored? Where/when can you most freely express yourself?
8. What is the meaning of life?
9. What specific parts of your culture do you think are most important to preserve?
10. Leave a note of encouragement or draw a picture for your fellow students.
11. What is a notable local legend/story from your hometown?
12. Who benefits most from open access to information?
13. Best comfort food?
14. Tips or warm fuzzies for improving mental health?
15. What are some of your favorite ways to de-stress?
16. Leave a note of encouragement, draw a picture or simply vent your finals stress.
17. What questions do you want to see on the whiteboard in 2023?

Spring 2023
1. Welcome back Eagles! What are you looking forward to in 2023?
2. Draw your best _____.
3. Using pictures, describe how you're feeling right now.
4. Where on campus do you feel like you belong?
5. Debate: Did dinosaurs growl? Hiss? Chirp? Other?
6. What is knowledge?
7. What's your favorite song this week?
8. What's something that's made you happy today/this week?
9. What are your spring break plans?

10. Why did the chicken cross the road?
11. Whiteboard was left blank and placed in the lobby to see if students would still write on it.
12. What's the best TV show ever?
13. Morning person or night owl?
14. Title of your autobiography?
15. How can the library help you in a zombie apocalypse?
16. What makes you happy?

Fall 2023
1. Welcome back Eagles! What are you looking forward to this semester?
2. The title of your autobiography is the last tv show/book/song you watched/read/listened to. What is it?
3. How are you doing today?
4. What do you love about fall?
5. Should AI be used to replace human workers? How should it be used?
6. If animals could talk, which one would be the rudest?
7. Best remake or adaptation of a book, movie, tv series, etc.?
8. Debate: Does censorship/banning books help or hurt society?
9. Fairy tale morals are not relatable in the 21st century. Yes, or no?
10. How are you doing today?
11. How are you celebrating Halloween?
12. You ever seen a ghost?