Using the Physical Academic Library to Cope with Stress

ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Today's undergraduate college students experience high levels of stress from both academic and non-academic sources. While there has been research on the various strategies students use to manage their stress, it is unclear what role academic libraries play in stress coping. A qualitative study conducted at a regional campus of a land-grant institution in the Spring of 2020 used a grounded-theory approach to evaluate how students used the physical library to cope with their stress. The findings suggest that students who experience high levels of stress use the library to purposefully cope with their stress. Three categories of library use were identified, which align with specific stress-coping strategies. This theory has implications for the division and use of library spaces, as well as the impact that institutional investment in the physical library has on student wellness.

KEYWORDS

Stress, Coping Strategies, Academic Libraries, Library Use, Library Space

High stress levels are a common experience among undergraduate students, with more than half experiencing notable levels of stress (Gustems-Carnicer, Calderón, and Calderón-Garrido 2019, 382; Brougham et al. 2009, 85; Dyson and Renk 2006, 1231). Their stress can arise from a variety of sources, such as their personal relationships, families, and employment, as well as their coursework. Universities are aware of this fact and invest significant resources to address this issue with academic libraries generally following suit. In recent years, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, academic libraries popularized mental health and wellness initiatives in their physical spaces (Bladek 2021, 4; Cox and Brewster 2020, 3). These initiatives are usually temporary and invite students into the library to partake in an activity such as petting therapy animals or getting a massage. However, researchers typically have not examined how students use traditional library spaces, services, or resources to deal with the pressures of academic life.

This qualitative study examines how undergraduate students cope with their stress through their everyday use of the library and its physical spaces. Librarians at a regional campus of a state land-grant institution conducted a series of focus groups in April 2020 at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. While library programming was the original focus of the study, the librarians were struck by the number of students who expressed their feelings of stress, even though they were not directly asked about it. Many of those comments were associated with library spaces and services that students used while they experienced these feelings of stress, suggesting that stress and their library use are related.

Literature Review

While stress is historically common to college and university students (Gallagher 2008, 13; Blanco et al. 2008, 1434), recent college students tend to experience it in greater intensity and frequency than students from previous generations (Sax 1997, 259; Sax 2003, 19). Several factors cause stress, but some, such as academic performance, financial concerns, post-graduation plans, and quality of sleep, cause students the most concern (Beiter et al. 2015, 92). Other causes include homesickness, low self-esteem, and problems with friends and significant others (Joseph et al. 2021, 2602).

Long-term exposure to stress can put students at a higher risk for physical and psychological impairment (Misra and McKean 2000, 41). Specifically, it can lead to negative mental and physical health effects (Barker et al. 2018, 1261; Pascoe, Hetrick, and Parker 2020, 107), especially depression (Salmela-Aro et al. 2009, 1324), which can negatively impact academic achievement and lead to burnout (Struthers, Perry, and Menec 2000, 589; Schaufeli et al. 2002, 477; Väisänen et al. 2018, 311–312). Students who suffer from burnout can develop feelings of exhaustion, cynicism, and inadequacy (Väisänen et al. 2018, 302). Burnout can promote indifference towards students' studies, a focus on the "here-and-now," and a decreased ability to ignore "irrelevant stimuli," leading to procrastination (Kuittinen and Meriläinen 2011, 44). Procrastination can compound the stress students experience, which can exacerbate their problems and make it much more difficult to succeed academically. Therefore, colleges and universities need to intervene to help students manage their stress. With their growing role as a supporter of student wellness (Rose, Godfrey, and Rose, 2015, 4), academic libraries must also work to address this issue.

Stress has become so ubiquitous among college students that it is almost endemic to the undergraduate experience (Winterdyk et al., 2008, 6). Unless students can effectively manage their stress, many may struggle to achieve their academic goals, which could snowball into a number of issues around retention and graduation. Some students may not be equipped to properly cope with their stress, the process of altering one's thought processes or behaviors to ease the demands of pressures that induce stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, 141). Even those that can manage their stress are often not given the space and time on campus to effectively do so. Providing students with better strategies and designated spaces for managing their stress can potentially lead to better academic and personal outcomes.

Stress coping strategies differ from person to person and vary in effectiveness. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) organized the types of coping mechanisms into two categories: problem-focused coping—coping strategies that are "directed at managing or altering the problem causing the distress," and emotion-focused coping—strategies that are "directed at regulating emotional response to the problem" (150). Specific problem-focused strategies include seeking social or professional support or creating a plan to resolve the issue, while emotion-focused strategies include social support and wishful thinking (Gustems-Carnicer, Calderón, and Calderón-Garrido 2019, 383; Renk and Smith 2007, 421). Later research further divided both categories into "active" and "passive" subcategories (Lin and Chen, 2010, 71). Some methodologies (Endler and Parker 1990, 846; Halstead, Johnson, and Cunningham 1993, 339; Twamley, Hami, and Stein 2004, 267; Iwanaga, Yokoyama, and Seiwa 2004, 14), group specific student relaxation behaviors as a separate "avoidance" category, while others include avoidance strategies under the umbrella of emotion-focused coping.

Academic libraries have embraced the opportunity to provide support for stressed students by developing a growing number of wellness programs, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bladek 2021, 8). Many of these

initiatives take the form of electronic resources, such as curated guides of stress-reducing resources or links to online tools made available on the libraries' website (Cox and Brewster 2020, 6; Hall and McAlister 2021, 941). Others involve collaborations with external departments or organizations, which share their expertise relating to students' wellness (Hall and McAlister 2021, 941–942; Ramsey and Aagard 2018, 330–331). As a natural extension of the library's traditional roles, some librarians create specific wellness collections, incorporate more wellness resources into the general collection, or increase the marketing of specific wellness resources (Bladek 2021, 4–5; Henrich 2020, 239). Academic libraries frequently offer other "unconventional stress relief offerings during finals" (Bladek, 2021, 5), which, according to Meyers-Martin and Borchard (2015), can involve extended hours, pet therapy, games, and arts and crafts (518). While many of these studies examine isolated examples of wellness programming, a smaller number of articles describe this type of work as a core part of the library's mission (Cox and Brewster 2020, 6; Merga 2021, 672).

Beyond wellness programming, the library remains a popular place for students to study and socialize (Kim 2017, 213; Choy and Goh 2016, 26), with many students considering the library to be essential to their higher educational experience (Soria 2013, 467). While students primarily perceived the library as a place for "learning and information seeking" (Kim 2017, 214), a growing number of students perceive the library as a space for collaboration, socialization, and quiet contemplation (Kim 2017, 214; Castro, Spina, and Xu 2019, 599–600; Choy and Goh 2016, 26). This perception has informed the transition of libraries from the traditional information-commons model to a learning-commons model (Delaney and Bates 2014, 31; Mehta and Cox 2021, 5). Kim (2016) found that students perceived and used the library in three ways: to seek information and services, to read and study, and to relax (512). Students also described the library as a space to seek out fun and enjoyable experiences (Sare, Bales, and Budzise-Weaver 2021, 27). This idea ties into the work of Montgomery and Miller (2011, 234) who studied students' perception of the library as a "third place"—or a space that is neither work nor home—on campus. Students describe the library as possessing a level of "homeness" (Mehta and Cox 2021, 25) and as a place where they "feel settled" and consider a "safe haven" (Sare, Bales, and Budzise-Weaver 2021, 25).

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It is important to acknowledge the shift in the literature regarding the study of library space and student stress since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of campuses and the move to remote learning affected both the amount and intensity of stress students experienced, as well as how students used the library's space when it was available (Cox and Brewster 2020; Cox and Brewster 2022; Merga 2021; Hall and McAlister 2021; Bladek 2021; Babicka-Wirkus et al. 2021).

While a major focus of the literature discusses student use of the library and student stress independently of one another, there is little that explores the value of traditional library use in addressing this epidemic of student stress on college campuses. As the so-called heart of the campus, academic libraries are well situated to meet the mental health needs of its student population. Yet most research focuses on extracurricular activities students can engage with in the library as opposed to the impact that everyday library use can have on student stress (Cox and Brewster 2022, 112). This study will explore how traditional library use can manage student stress, examine the stress coping techniques

students use in the library, and reevaluate the role of the physical library on college campuses.

Methods

The author collected data for the study via a series of five focus groups consisting of a total of twenty-four undergraduate students at a regional campus of a state land-grant institution located in the suburbs of a major metropolitan area in the Northeastern United States. The campus is diverse, with a majority-minority population of about 3500 students FTE. The campus library is located in one of two academic buildings on campus and consists of three floors with the third floor being reserved for quiet study and the main and lower levels open for collaborative study and events. Of the twenty-four students who participated, ten were first-year students, five second-year, three third-year, and six graduating seniors; all twenty-four participants represented seventeen different majors. While the population skewed heavily towards first- and second-year students, that is representative of the campus as many third- and fourth-year students choose to finish their degrees at the main campus. To promote privacy and encourage student participation, responses by individual students during the focus groups were not tracked.

The author used a grounded theory research methodology to analyze responses to the survey. Grounded theory is a form of qualitative analysis originally theorized by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967). It is a collection of systematic but flexible methods for gathering and analyzing qualitative data, emphasizing multiple iterations of data collection, analysis, and constant comparisons, ultimately leading to the formation of theories "grounded" in the data itself (Charmaz 2014, 1). In a grounded-theory analysis, qualitative data is analyzed for themes, which are constantly compared to each other to identify connections and larger themes. This process continues until an overarching theme or theory is identified. It has since been expanded upon by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Charmaz (2014). For this study, the author followed Corbin and Strauss' (2008) recommendations for employing grounded-theory analysis.

After the study received approval from the University's IRB, the author invited students to complete a recruitment survey from late January to early March of 2020. Sixty-one active students completed the recruitment survey to participate in the study. The author scheduled the in-person focus groups for mid- to late March of 2020. Due to onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus groups were moved online and delayed to April 2020. The number of participants subsequently dropped to thirty-two, who were rescheduled into five focus groups to be conducted via Zoom. Of those, twenty-four attended the focus-group discussions.

The transcriptions of the focus groups were analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software program, utilizing an open coding system. Codes were developed during the coding process in response to themes pulled directly from the participants' responses. Memo writing was employed during open coding, which assisted in the organization of ideas and in-depth exploration of themes and concepts discovered in the data. Memo writing also informed the reorganization, removal, and creation of new codes throughout the entirety of the open coding process, which led to the writing of additional memos. Throughout the entire coding process, the author used constant comparisons to group individual codes into larger themes and concepts. As a result, the author identified three primary ways students used the library to address their stress: to be productive, to de-stress, and to socialize. Due to the

online nature of the conversations, the use of theoretical sampling beyond the original focus groups was not possible.

Results

Students in the focus groups were asked nine primary questions mainly focused on library programming, spaces, and feelings of belonging in the library. Upon analyzing their responses, several themes were identified. First, the students' responses provided unique insight into how they used the library's spaces, resources, and services. Analysis of their responses identified several themes, including three distinct reasons for students to use the library: to be productive, to de-stress, and to socialize.

Student Productivity in the Library

Students commonly used the library to maximize their productivity. They described the library as the place to "get stuff done." Consistently, students spoke of the library as providing "the focus I need to crank out a paper" or describing it as a place where they "can really focus. . . because the whole environment is really based on studying." This contrasted with how students viewed their dorm rooms or apartments, which were not considered conducive for completing rigorous academic work. Some students went to the library even when it was inconvenient for them. One student noted, "[E]ven though sometimes I do go [elsewhere] because I don't feel like going all the way to the library, I eventually leave . . . and I go to the library because I feel like I'm just not able to study there."

Some students specifically sought quiet spaces within the library to work on their assignments. One student described how ". . .if [the main floor is] too loud for me, I'll go downstairs because it's just a little bit quieter. And then if I want absolute silence, I'll go to third floor." Another student mentioned she likes "going into the [study] rooms . . . it really helps having a quiet space with no other students in there, so I can focus." Students seek out spaces where they can focus and limit distractions in order to be most productive. Students described other locations on campus where they attempted to study but ultimately deemed them unacceptable because they were too loud or too distracting, indicating a need for a certain atmosphere to be productive: ". . . if I tried to study in a cafeteria, sometimes, it's like too many people in there, so I can't focus. So the library is just much better."

Though some students prefer a quiet space when they need to be productive, others use the library to work collaboratively with others. Several students enjoyed the library as a place to "study with a group" because "even when you're with groups of people [in the library], the idea is really to study." Students sought specific spaces in the library to conduct such collaborative work, such as the library's "group cubes,"—open cubicles on the main and lower floors of the library—and study "rooms in the lower half of the library." Some used the rooms to attend their remote classes: "Sometimes actually, we would have an online class there, and I have a couple of friends, we would just rent out a room there and use just one screen for the class."

Students Using the Library to De-stress

Students also used the library to "relax," "chill," or "take a break" throughout their day. One student described conversations she had with her friends about why they did not attend any campus events: "they say it's because they just came from a class where they just saw a PowerPoint presentation or they just learned, so they just want to relax and sit down and go on their phones." Another student used the library "as a space where I

can be on my phone or just using the computers." A third visited the library to "walk around and just relax a bit." This is even without acknowledging neurodivergent students or those with religious needs. One student specifically sought a "multiuse quiet room" on campus because she has "a lot of friends who are either practicing Muslims or deal with anxiety or just need a general space to nap, and they don't necessarily have that space on campus. And I think the library with all the different conference rooms would be . . . the space to have that, like it makes sense."

Several students identified and utilized library spaces as a place to take a nap. Whether from commuting to school "so early" in the morning, working after class, or just getting "tired in class," students consistently described themselves as being tired. Sleep, or the lack of it, is such a concern for students that some requested the library purchase "nap pods" they have "seen at other colleges," or that the library create "a designated nap area." Even without those designated spaces, students see the library as a "space to turn down." This may be due to the welcoming nature of the library. As one student put it: "the fact that I can take a nap on the lower floor and no one really says anything about it, honestly, makes me feel pretty welcome at the library."

While many students use the library to relax, others seek out the library to engage in fun activities. Several attended fun programs in the library: "So the library did a late-night study session last semester . . . And it was just a very nice environment and it was fun. I told my boyfriend actually. I was like, we're going to do this again next semester. We're going to keep coming back." Other students shared this line of thinking, indicating a desire to seek entertaining events on campus. One student would ask himself questions like "'Will this be fun?'" and "'will I make a good memory?'" to identify which events to attend. Students especially sought out events if there was free food: "Whenever there was an event that offered free food, I always try to go."

Many of the students' comments imply a sense of "homeness" that they feel in the library. Echoing Mehta and Cox (2021), students described several traits that correspond with the feeling of "homeness" such as rooting themselves in a part of the library for extended periods of time ("I'll go [to the library], and then I'll go to class, and I'll come back."), regeneration in the library space ("I spent a lot of time on the silent space upstairs taking a nap"), and the warmth of the space ("I always felt comfortable going to the library, and I feel respected by other people.") (9). They perceive the library as a comfortable and welcoming space where they can be themselves and let down their guard.

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Student Socialization in the Library

Many students considered the library to be a social space in addition to an academic and relaxation space. Several identified specific areas within the library as the place "to go with people" to hang out. Many described the main floor of the library as the "social floor" where they can "hang out with my friends." Others see the library in general as a social destination. ". . . if I'm talking to any of my friends and they're in a different class and their class just ends, I tell them just to come to the library because it's like a social hangout." One student will come to the library "to just have fun with my friends." Part of this draw is due to the events held in the library. A student described how he "usually socialize[s] when I go" to events in the library and that he either goes "with a friend or . . . plan on meeting a friend there."

However, sometimes students just want to use the library's space for their own fun. One student described how she uses the library's collaborative spaces with friends to "play board games, and . . . just discuss different anime we watched." Others simply use the library to "chill with my friends, just sit around, maybe just talk about something."

Student Feelings of Stress

An unexpected theme that arose from the focus groups is the prevalence of the stress students felt. Even though no students were asked questions about their stress, they consistently described themselves as "stressed" or "super tired." The fact that the sentiment of feeling stressed was so common among the students suggests that student stress is underrepresented in the data. One student sometimes felt like she was "drowning in homework." Others sought "time off from a busy schedule" or spaces and programs that were "really relaxing and [help] to de-stress a little bit." Another student visited the library "just to wind down, I guess, relax," suggesting he was under a constant level of stress. Several described long commutes. One student said he lived "an hour away" from campus, while another had to "make sure I can get on the shuttle bus so I can get to a certain train." Other students described having to "work in the morning and then come to school after that" and dealing with other responsibilities outside of their classes. The students' insights into their stress indicate it is very much on their minds and informs many of their daily decisions.

Association between library use and stress

Considering the number of students who expressed feelings of stress unprompted in the focus groups, it was assumed that their stress regularly influenced their behavior on campus. Student responses regarding their library use were compared to the emotion-focused and problem-focused coping styles on Lin and Chen's stress coping inventory (2010, 71). A connection was observed between library use and different stress coping strategies. Of the twenty-eight coping styles included in the inventory, eight were clearly evident in the students' responses surrounding library use. Of those eight, four are categorized as active emotion-focused coping styles, three active problem-focused, and one passive problem-focused coping style (see table 1).

Students were most likely to describe problem-focused coping strategies, which attempt "to actively alter a problematic situation" (Dyson and Renk 2006, 1233). Most specifically described active problem-focused strategies, wherein students "solve their problems by looking at the centre of the problem and assist themselves or search for assistance" (Lin and Chen, 2010, 71). Some students searched for information from the library or internet for homework: "most of the time I'm in the library using the computer because I'm either doing an assignment or I'm looking up something." Others discussed academic issues with instructors or classmates: "I didn't really know what resources the library had, so I asked for a librarian to help me." Many, if not most, students used the library to focus and work hard to complete their academic tasks: "I had a four-hour break between classes. I would spend it [in the library] working on homework, projects, whatever. Sometimes more." These coping strategies all align closely with the *Be productive* category of library use. However, some students mentioned that they would procrastinate and put their responsibilities aside, at least temporarily: "nice to take a break from our finals and just get some snacks and relax." Procrastination is categorized as a passive problem-focused coping strategy that aligns more closely with the *De-stress* library use

Coping type	Strategy	Library practice	Evidence
Active emotion-focused	Seek social support	Seek support from friends and family	"I go with a friend, or I plan on meeting a friend there. And because I have, I guess, an anchor, it's a lot easier"
	Seek out pleasure	Fun events	"I would definitely choose [fun events] because everyone needs some time off from a busy schedule to enjoy"
		Food	"Whenever there was an event that offered free food, I always try to go"
	Actively calm the mind	Find a place to meditate or relax	"I usually go just to wind down [and] relax"
		Sit and just be	"I'll just sit there [in the library]"
Active problem-focused	Seek academic resources	Navigate library databases	"looking up something"
		Check out books on reserve	"go over to the library and check out the textbook"
		Utilize hardware and software in library	"I use [the] computer [Mersive Solstice station] for [sharing my screen]"
		Access online tutorials	"used a lot of the resources they offer online"
	Work hard	Focus on work	"focus and get my work done"
		Stay for long periods of time	"stay late and work on everything in the library"
		Studying or taking quizzes or exams	"take my online quizzes or borrow a book and do homework"
		Work on homework or projects	"using the computer for doing my homework"
	Seek professional support	Talk to front desk for checking out items	"I'd ask the people at the front desk a question"
		Research help from librarians	"asked a librarian to help me"
		Online chat tools	"I asked [some] questions and [the librarian] emailed me back"
	Collaborate	Group Study	"I would go with my friends . . . and we would study together"
		Group projects	"I used to spend mostly my time at the library because we have projects, and then we have group meetings"
Passive problem-focused	Procrastinate	Watch videos or surf web on device	"I'll just use it kind of as a space where I can be on my phone"
		Nap	"Something that I actually use the library for pretty often is a place to nap"
		Socialize with friends	"sometimes, I just go there, chill with my friends"
		Snack	"take a snack at Noon"

Table 1. Coping styles for stress

category, though procrastination has the potential to be detrimental to students' academic success.

Students also used the library to address their emotional response to stress by "adopting the attitude of emotional adjustment like positive thinking emotions and self-encouragement" (Joseph et al. 2021, 2600-2601). Some actively addressed their mental state through purposeful relaxation: "I usually go just to wind down [and] relax." Others would temporarily separate themselves from their stress by seeking out pleasurable experiences: "I would definitely choose [fun events] because everyone needs some time off from a busy schedule to enjoy"; "I'll just use it kind of as a space where I can be on my phone." These types of responses also align with the *De-stress* category of library use.

Many students actively sought the support and companionship of their friends and classmates in the library. It is important to point out, however, that the types of support their friends and classmates offer can be both problem-focused and emotion-focused depending on whether they use their friends for academic assistance ("I would go with my friends . . . and we would study together") or emotional support ("if I'm talking to any of my friends . . . I tell them just to come to the library"). Similarly, if the purpose is to use the library to spend time with friends for non-academic purposes, those social interactions best align with the *Socialize* category. However, if the purpose of those peer interactions was to support each other in completing their academic tasks, they would better fit into the Be productive category.

After analyzing how student library use aligned with problem-focused and emotion-focused stress coping styles, a central theme came into focus. Different students in the focus groups described using the library in one of three distinct ways, but for apparently different purposes. One characteristic that almost all students seem to share was the stress they experienced. Considering that all three types of library use align with different stress coping strategies, the central theme that using the library is a form of coping with stress itself was generated. How students cope with their stress through their use of the library could be divided into the three categories of library use (see figure 1).
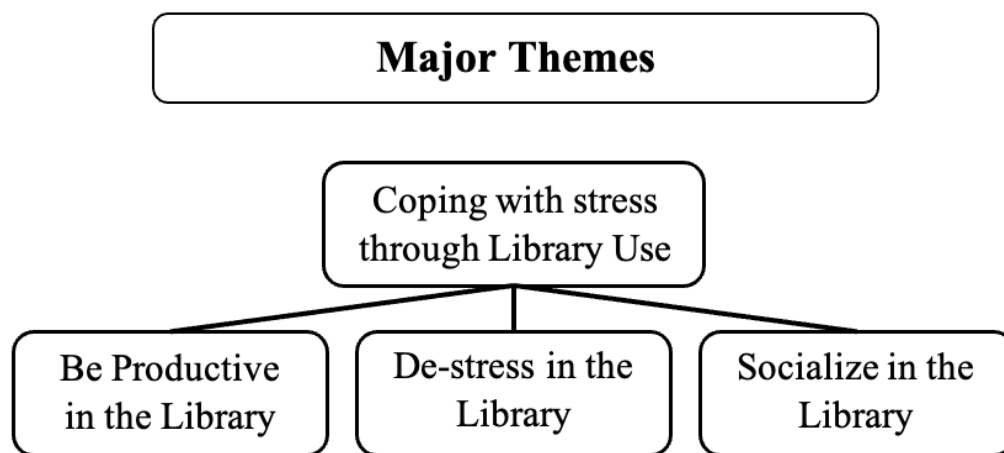

Figure 1. Major themes

Discussion

The association between student stress and library use identified in this study has three implications for the design and purpose of physical library spaces. Academic libraries should not just consider but emphasize the creation of quiet, comfortable library spaces that promote calmness and relaxation

through emotion-focused stress coping practices. Library spaces traditionally encourage students to employ problem-focused coping strategies through independent study in study carrells or desks. However, recent library trends are moving towards the inclusion of more group study and workspaces, turning the library into a collaborative learning commons (Oliveira 2018, 70). The novel takeaway from this study is the inclusion of space for neither independent nor group study, but for students to visit the library and just be. While students still primarily use the library for working on academic assignments, a significant portion of the participants in this study purposely used the library to address their stress through emotion-focused coping strategies. Library administration should keep these students in mind through the creation of dedicated relaxation spaces or by allowing students to use existing spaces for relaxing, non-academic purposes. This use of library space may not initially appear to serve the scholarly mission of the academic library but there is clearly a need that is not being met; providing easy access to such spaces has the potential to offer significant mental and emotional benefits for students and, ultimately, improve students' capacity to achieve their academic goals.

The variety with which students use the library to manage their stress speaks to how students perceive the library as a space on campus. The fact that students use the physical library for both traditional academic purposes and to cope with their stress supports the idea of the library as a third place on campus, which echoes the work by Montgomery and Miller (2011, 234). A "third place," as described by Oldenburg (1999), is a public space that hosts voluntary and informal gatherings of people outside of one's home and professional workspaces (14). While some students may use the library solely as a work or home-like space, across all study participants there was a diverse mix of uses which blended these concepts together, leaving the library somewhere in between. The students' comments not only support this idea of the library serving as a place that fits between one's home and work but also reflect the importance students place on such spaces on campus. Considering that students seek the library for this unique combination of reasons indicates how crucial physical library spaces are for students and how "third places" need to be accounted for in library space design. It also comes back to speaking to the library as the true heart of the campus where work and play, motivation and relaxation, can occur in the same space and can assist students in achieving their academic and personal goals.

The concept of the library as a "third place" supports the diversification of library spaces to support multiple types of use by students. Considering the variety of stressors students face, and the variety of coping styles they employ to manage their stress, different students need different spaces to employ their individual coping style. This suggests that libraries should not aim to transform into a massive learning commons at the expense of quiet, independent study spaces. Likewise, academic libraries should not explicitly label spaces for academic purposes only or repurpose popular group study rooms into silent meditation spaces. Academic libraries should reflect the diverse needs of their students by creating and maintaining diverse spaces that can allow students to cope with their stress in a way that suits their individual needs. This is not to say that learning commons or traditional library models are inherently wrong; they both serve valuable roles in the library. But the exclusion of one for the other—or prioritizing solely academic spaces over spaces that encourage relaxation and emotion-focused coping strategies—is doing a disservice to a large portion of the library's student population. While this balance of new and traditional library spaces can, and should be, considered in large-scale renovations of the physical library, it can also be met through

small modifications of existing spaces, such as dividing larger open spaces into smaller collaborative ones or adding comfortable chairs near outlets or other strategic points. Even small changes to library spaces have the potential for a significant impact on student well-being.

Limitations

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus groups that we planned to conduct in person in March 2020 were moved online and delayed until April 2020. This may have affected the results in several ways. Lacking visual and auditory cues, the moderators may have been less effective at directing follow-up questions to relevant participants. Gauging levels of agreement and dissent among participants was also more challenging. The virtual format also made interchange between multiple participants difficult. As a result, the data may have been less nuanced and represent fewer perspectives than anticipated. However, the remote sessions may have enabled more students to attend than normally would at the commuter campus. Though some students were quieter in the remote discussions, as was expected, others seemed comfortable with the online format and offered ample contributions. The virtual format also provided moderators the opportunity to ask about library space at a time when that space was not available, potentially prompting new insights from the students. Though most questions asked students about their in-person experiences in the physical library, they answered them in an online, remote environment. While it was only a couple of weeks removed from their on-campus experience, and students often referred to previous semesters as well, this may have skewed their answers of how they utilize the library. Additional research exploring in-person experiences in an in-person environment is needed.

Finally, the qualitative analysis of the study occurred after the initial round of focus groups had finished, preventing the use of theoretical sampling in the development of this theory. Participants were selected as part of convenience sampling as an alternative, which may have prevented the full in-depth exploration of some of these concepts. Further research with different samples may be required to fully flesh out these ideas. Additionally, the author was the only coder and, considering the small sample size of this study, the results cannot be generalized for larger populations. Further research is needed to determine if this theory can be applied to different student populations and libraries at different campuses.

Conclusion

The participants in this study described using the physical library not just to study but also to cope with their stress through problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. Students are subject to elevated levels of stress from their academic, familial, and employment responsibilities and they recognize their need to address their stress on campus. Students utilized the library's quiet and collaborative spaces to employ problem-focused stress coping styles. By using the library to complete assignments and directly address a cause of their stress (i.e., deadlines or coursework), students can cope with their stress, supporting previous findings about the library's role in promoting student well-being (Cox and Brewster 2020, 8–9; Merga 2021, 672–673). In the library, students also applied emotion-focused coping strategies to manage their stress and avoid burnout. Students employed physical breaks—such as naps—and mental breaks—such as attending fun events or just looking at their phones—to address their emotional response to stress in the library. Socializing with peers in the library served as both a problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategy for students depending on the purpose of the interaction.

Academic libraries should, therefore, emphasize their physical existence on campus as a space whose mere presence provides support to the whole student. While much effort has been put into online resources and services recently, the value of the physical library cannot be overstated; it is crucial not only to students' academic achievement but to their overall well-being. The physical library continues to be one of the few spaces that addresses multiple needs, including serving as a space where students can attend to their stress. Given the level of "homeness" students feel about the library, relying solely on other campus spaces to address specific students' needs ignores those qualities that make the library an attractive and unique space for students. The library offers a "one stop shop" of services that appeals to students who may not have the time or energy to spend traveling around campus. Libraries can provide spaces conducive for this purpose by promoting the physical library as a "third place" on campus and creating library spaces for both quiet study and relaxation and social collaboration.

Knowing this, library administrators should encourage further investment into the physical library. Students continue to seek out physical library spaces for a variety of reasons and this research suggests that investment in such spaces can potentially help students better manage their stress, which can lead to better academic performance and retention. The findings from this study extend beyond academic libraries to suggest that colleges and universities may not need to seek out every new, innovative initiative for helping students manage stress. By investing in the existing academic infrastructure, they can make a meaningful impact on their institutions' well-being by promoting their students' well-being.

Appendix I: Focus Group Questions

1. How often do you come to the library and how long do you usually spend here?
2. What do you usually do in the library?
3. How does the library compare with other study spaces on campus?
4. Do you feel like you belong in the Abington College Library?
5. What kinds of interactions have you had with the library staff?
6. Have you ever used the library for help with a class assignment?
7. Have you ever attended an event at the library (such as Finals Recharge, Research Party, poetry reading, workshop, etc.)?
8. What kind of events are you interested in?
9. Do you have any other comments you'd like to share that we haven't covered in the earlier questions?

Acknowledgment

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