

From Study Carrel to Classroom: Supporting Undergraduate Learning

Advisory Committee on Academics and Student Life Spring 2009

Recognizing the clear connection between learning in the classroom and students' work outside of class, the Advisory Committee on Academics and Student Life (ACASL) decided in Spring 2008 to explore how, when, how much, and where Notre Dame undergraduates study. ACASL utilized a three-pronged approach to its exploration of this topic: a) a survey on undergraduate study habits; b) a comparison of student behaviors and faculty expectations; and c) a campus-wide inventory of study space. Based on its findings, ACASL formulated a number of recommendations, listed at the end of this report.

I. Undergraduate Student Survey on Study Habits

With support from Mark Gunty, Assistant Director of Institutional Research, ACASL developed and administered a web-based survey on undergraduate study habits in February 2008. Students were asked to describe:

a) The nature of their studying or homework. In order to capture all forms of study, students were asked to choose from a list of 20 activities, including reading assignments, writing research papers, writing lab reports, researching on the internet, studying in a group for exams, preparing as a group for presentations or projects, performing computer calculations, practicing a foreign language or music, receiving tutoring, and drawing, designing or creating.

b) How many hours per week they spent studying or doing other homework. Given that their workload is likely to fluctuate at various points in the semester, students were asked to specifically consider four different timeframes: a typical week and their busiest week after 2007 Fall Break; and a typical week and their busiest week of the spring semester up to that point (about the third week of February).

c) Whether they are likely to "multi-task" while studying. Students were asked to choose from a list of likely activities, which included eating, sending text messages, making/taking phone calls, watching TV, and listening to music.

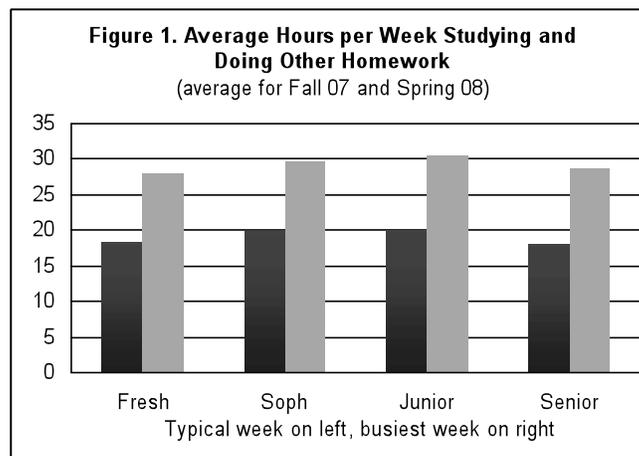
d) The times of day they find most productive for study.

e) Where they prefer to study (e.g., their room, their residence hall, library, LaFortune, classroom buildings, etc.)

Four hundred and fifty students completed the survey (response rate of 37%), with representative samples from each class year as well as from the five colleges. The sample did not include students studying abroad in either the 2007 Fall or 2008 Spring terms.

A summary of the survey findings follows:

- When asked about the kind of work they do for their courses, 78% indicate “a lot” of their work consists of “individual study,” while 58% indicate that “a lot” of their work consisted of “assigned reading.” There were four kinds of writing tasks listed, and 65% marked “a lot” for at least one of them. Only 10% indicate that “a lot” of their work involves “meeting with professors outside of class time.” Not surprisingly, the nature of student study varies widely among the various colleges: AL students spend more time than others reading, writing research papers, and doing library/internet research; BA and EG students spend more time on group presentations and group study; SC students spend more time on lab reports and attendance at help sessions with TA’s; and AR students spend more time drawing and preparing individual projects.
- In a typical week, students report spending an average of about 19 hours studying or doing other homework. Sophomores report spending the most time studying (about 20 hours/typical week), while seniors and 5th years spend the least amount of time studying (about 18 hours/typical week). During their busiest weeks, students report spending an average of just over 30 hours per week studying or doing other homework. See Figure 1 for details.



- In terms of “multi-tasking,” 41% report listening to music frequently while studying. Other behaviors marked “frequently” were eating (22%), using Facebook or other social network sites (22%), and talking with friends nearby (19%). Virtually all students engage in some kind of other activity while studying or doing other homework, at least occasionally, from watching TV (42%) and IM-ing (51%) on the less common end, to eating, listening to music, talking with friends, and taking phone calls (all 78% or higher) on the more common end.
- By an overwhelming margin, the time of day that most students find “very productive” for study or homework is 8 p.m. to midnight (78%). The second most commonly cited productive period is 4 to 8 p.m. (36%), followed by the period after midnight (31%). The fewest students find 7 a.m. to noon to be very productive (10%).
- When asked about their preferred study spaces on campus, students rated the University libraries best, with 73% indicating this space is “good” or “very good” for study or homework. Other highly rated spaces are student rooms (48%), classroom buildings (46%), and residence halls (45%). Students were asked to rate selected places “whether you use them regularly or not,” so these results do not necessarily indicate which places are used most often.
- Students were asked, at the end of the survey, to share their thoughts on where they studied for different purposes. More detailed results of the open-ended comments are

available through ACASL, but a common theme was that different environments suit different purposes. Populated places such as LaFortune or the lower floors of the Hesburgh Library are good for group study or what students called “social study,” while a quiet atmosphere and isolation work better for individual studying. Many places are used for transitional studying between classes. Two places mentioned with some regularity that had not been anticipated by the committee were the dining hall and outside (the survey was drafted and administered in winter).

II. Comparison of Faculty Expectations and Student Behaviors Related to Class Preparation and Study

In Fall 2007, the new Course Instructor Feedback (CIF) form was piloted in 90 courses. Question 14 asks students to indicate how much time they spent in an average week doing work for that course outside of class. Instructors in 28 sections participating in the pilot responded to a short follow-up questionnaire which asked how much time they (a) expected students to spend on course-related work each week and (b) believed students probably did spend. The instructors’ responses were correlated with student responses to CIF Question 14.

On average, 42% of students reported spending as much or more time per week as the instructor thought was ideal. In those courses where student and faculty expectations did not align, the disparities were quite striking, with faculty often expecting double the study/preparation time students reported. When comparing students’ actual reported hours per week with instructors’ best guess about how much time their students spent, about half of the faculty overestimated.

III. Inventory of Campus Study Space

ACASL collaborated with Academic Space Management (ASM) and the Office of Information Technologies (OIT) to complete an inventory of study space in all academic and residential campus buildings. No such inventory existed previously. In assessing various spaces, the committee considered the following: a) the capacity of each space; b) student usage (high, average or low); c) the adequacy of the furniture (appropriate for study, reasonably comfortable, and in good repair); d) the availability of wireless connection; e) adequacy of lighting; and f) well-regulated temperature.

In the short-term, ACASL’s inventory is a first step in assessing the quality and quantity of available study space. The information collected should be disseminated to students so that they are aware of the full range of study spaces available to them. As one might expect, the spaces varied widely across campus. In the newest classroom buildings, there is ample and well-appointed study space; this is true to varying degrees in older buildings. In some instances, space that was originally designed to serve as student study space has now become office space.

Similarly, the study lounges in the University’s newest residence halls are generally far more comfortable and better equipped than in the older halls. In many of the older residence halls, study lounges have been transformed into student rooms to accommodate the demand for on-campus housing. As the University implements its Undergraduate Residential Master Plan and two additional residence halls are constructed, the number of students assigned to existing halls can be decreased and the study lounges reclaimed.

In the course of conducting its campus-wide inventory, the committee noted the need for different kinds of study spaces--e.g., individual and group, quiet and “noise permitted.” We also found that students need study spaces designed for “transitional study”, where they can study while waiting for their next class or meeting, as well as spaces for “destination study”, where they can settle in for an extended period. ASM has recently refurbished several spaces in the corridors of DeBartolo to provide more places for “transitional study.” Student response has been overwhelmingly positive, and ASM hopes to create similar spaces in other, high-traffic classroom buildings. With regard to “destination study,” the committee learned that many campuses open their classroom spaces for student study. Currently, only about 30% of Notre Dame’s classroom spaces are made available for evening study because of concerns about potential damage to classroom technology. At a recent meeting of the Higher Education Facilities Managers Association (HEFMA), an informal poll revealed that the Big 10 schools and the University of Chicago make all of their classrooms available for student study when they are not otherwise in use. These institutions report minimal difficulties with theft or damage.

The committee believes the study space inventory contains useful information which can guide future decision-making, even as it acknowledges that some questions need further consideration: What is the “right” amount of study space on campus, and how much of the each kind of space (e.g., individual versus group, “transitional” versus “destination”) would be optimum? How can we make more classroom spaces available for student study when they are not otherwise in use? Which study spaces are in need of renovation and/or refurbishment? Are study spaces accessible to students at those times of day (and night) when they study? Is the necessary technology and furniture in place to support student learning in campus study spaces?

By virtue of ACASL’s exploration of study space, there have already been some positive developments, relatively small in scale but noteworthy nonetheless. In order to provide more group study space on campus, The Career Center agreed to open its interview rooms in Grace Hall for evening usage. Also, Student Government worked with Food Services to open a wing of North Dining Hall for study during final exams. This kind of creative and collaborative usage of space is essential going forward.

Recommendations

1. Disseminate this report widely, to deans and department chairs as well as to Student Affairs administrators and Student Government, as a means of encouraging discussion about how best to support student learning outside of class time.
2. Actively encourage instructors to discuss with students their expectations regarding the amount of time to be devoted to class preparation, homework, and study.
3. Encourage faculty to utilize the data collected through the new CIF system regarding student study. As faculty receive section-specific feedback regarding the average number of hours per week students report studying and the degree to which students feel intellectually challenged, this may influence their decision-making about course assignments.
4. Conduct additional inquiries about students' study habits. Questions worthy of further exploration include: What do students understand about their own learning styles? How can we help students to develop stronger study skills? What additional learning resources, if any, should the University put into place?
5. Consider student needs and preferences when making decisions about hours of operation and staffing for campus buildings that house study spaces, e.g., ensuring students have access to ample study space across campus during the peak study hours between 8 p.m. and midnight.
6. Open classroom space for study when not otherwise in use. Address concerns about securing classroom technology.
7. Create a working group, to include Academic Space Management, OIT, the Registrar and other key decision-makers, to oversee campus study space and allocate available resources.
8. Ask Academic Space Management, OIT, and the Registrar to collaborate to create an on-line pictorial directory of campus study spaces for students.
9. Utilize technology to make it easier for students to find study space on campus. Possibilities might include creating a system which allows students to reserve group study rooms and setting up Web-cams in popular study spaces, e.g., 1st and 2nd floors of Hesburgh Library, Coleman-Morse lounge and LaFortune basement.
10. Update ACASL's inventory of campus study space at least once every three years, to address any deficiencies and ensure that current student needs are being met.
11. Reclaim residence hall study spaces through implementation of the University's Undergraduate Master Plan. Commit to reserving these spaces for study, not as overflow bedroom space.
12. Allocate limited resources to improve current hall study spaces where feasible.

13. Incorporate effective study spaces in the design of new academic buildings to invite both “transitional” and “destination” study.
14. Allocate limited resources to create updated study spaces in selected areas in high-traffic academic buildings, as has been done in DeBartolo.
15. Create more outdoor study spaces.