Graduate Student Space UX Study - Final Report

What did we do?

1. The UX Team interviewed 12 graduate students in July 2018. These students were from Environmental Sciences (2), Sociology, Mathematics & Statistics (2), Rural Planning & Development, English, Food Science, FARE, Public Issues Anthropology, and Human Health & Nutritional Sciences (2). We spoke to the President and VP of the GSA.
2. Robin attended a Graduate Student Association meeting (15 - 20 attendees) on July 25th and led a discussion concerning graduate space at the library.
3. We conducted a brief environmental scan on graduate space in 10 academic libraries in Ontario. The information presented in the table below was gathered from each library’s website and refers to spaces reserved for registered graduate students only.

What do graduate students say about their space needs?

Graduate students’ understanding of the current situation in the library

Several of the grad students we talked to were aware of the library's graduate offices available to them and were planning on using them during a semester when the majority of their work would be writing their thesis/dissertation.

There was confusion about the carrel lockers. Some students had used the carrels, others thought they were only for a specific program, others were totally unaware.

Some students considered the 6th floor as the *de facto* graduate floor.

In general there was a sense that spaces for graduate students could be better promoted by the library.

- “One thing that I think is lacking is I feel like coming in as a master’s student there definitely could have been more preparation. You kind of just start. You don’t really know what to do with yourself. There is no orientation really about it. And so coming here as somebody who didn’t do my undergrad, I have know idea what or where anything is. It would be nice to get information from different departments saying here is all of the stuff you need to know...If they had specific grad spaces in the library, I would think that is something you want to tell people.”

Not all graduate students have study / research space in their home department.

There is a wide range of types of space offered for graduate students in their departments. At one extreme, some departments offer graduate students access a variety of different spaces for different purposes with 24 hour access, while others offer no study and research space at all.
But even those graduate students with access to departmental space depend on the library at least some of the time. Graduate students use library space when they don’t have access to space in their own department, when they require quiet, and when they need to avoid distracting colleagues.

● “Usually I will pick one of these big comfy chairs and just put my laptop on my lap and try to read in the library for a couple of hours. That’s what I would like to be able to use this space for but because it is always so busy I just couldn’t get anything done and stopped coming.”

● “I used to [use the departmental space] when I was in first semester because I was in a lot of coursework but then I found the more I got into my thesis work it just wasn’t really efficient because I’d go in and there’d just be a lot going on. Now that I’m doing my thesis I just need quiet and to be able to focus to be able to do what I need to do. It’s more individual work. And I’d like to do that in the library”

● “[I don’t study in the departmental space] because of the lack of windows mostly. But that does make a big difference. I think if the office had a window, it would be better. Also sometimes especially if there are other people there I know, it can be distracting because it turns into a social thing.”

● “I use library space when there is something in our office space that is preventing me from working so whether it is the temperature, our AC unit is broken right now, or just too many people talking. The library is somewhere I need as a backup.”

Graduate students desire quiet, private, assigned or bookable space

As a bare minimum, graduate students want to know that there is a space available for them when they come into the library. Whether that is assigned carrels or another solution, access to quiet and available space is the most important issue. Available, bookable space gives graduate students peace of mind that they will find a place to work.

● “I definitely think study space is probably my main concern. It is a university right, so I feel like that should be a priority so everyone has a quiet desk to work at... just focusing on making nice study space that would be, in my opinion, very valuable.”

● “Quite frankly just having the room to book out for some productive reason, no questions asked, not having to go into detail, just having access to it, like I want to do a Skype class, I want to do an interview, I want to practice my poster presentation, I want to conduct an interview for my research, just a multipurpose room and dedicating it to grad students and prioritizing it for them. I mean the rules could be applied as necessary for like how many and how long. That would depend on the needs, but that is really necessary.”

● “There needs to be the option to reserve space because grad students have various needs. That way I know that if I want to go I know I have time in this space, but if I need it I can reserve it and feel confident that it will be available and meet my needs because they haven’t been met that way.”

● “There is no private space here. I remember looking online into study rooms and I saw that it is group study only, and so the way it was explained was that it was for 2 or more people, so that was a deterrent for me. So it felt inaccessible to someone like me and that was a very necessary space. What if I wanted to do a job interview? Or what if I was sharing space with
roommates? What if I couldn't use my home? I feel like there should be a space on campus for that.”

- “I’ll be doing interviews for my thesis research so to be able to have a space where you know no one will be talking in your area and where you can just interview people privately. That would be really useful.

Researcher: Where are you going to do these interviews? They will be phone interviews so... [pause]. I actually don’t know. Hmm…”

Graduate students prefer to work among people with similar needs, i.e. other graduate students

The graduate students we spoke with described daily routines and schedules that are not compatible with undergraduate habits. The more frenetic nature of undergrad life—going to classes through the day, whispering with friends, etc. means they are using the library space differently. It is important for grad students to be in a space amongst their peers.

- “Just having people who kind of understand the same mindset and frame of mind that you are in especially if we are all writing at once. It is a pretty unique experience and so it is not something that people can necessarily relate to unless they have been there or are going through it at the same time. These kinds of emotions associated with a Masters or a PhD program come in natural cycles.”

- “I studied throughout my undergrad in the Science Commons and now during the school year I don’t want to go there because I see so many kids that I TA. And there has been times when I’ve been there, even if it is just doing group work with my group on the 3rd and 4th floor, and kids from my class will come up to me and ask me a question… and I’m like “I’m not on the clock right now. This isn’t my responsibility. You need to come to office hours”. Even if it is a simple question it interrupts my work so it is hard to do work around undergrads sometimes.”

- “It’s a weird thing, I don’t feel comfortable and sometimes I just don’t want to be around undergrads when I’m doing work because we have a different work mentality and there is a lot of come and go and when I come to the Library I have a full day off. And I’ll come at literally 10 am and I’m here until 5 pm. I don’t like the constant interruptions and distractions and people coming and going all of the time.”

Lockers are “nice to have” but not a priority for many graduate students

The most pressing concern for graduate students is lack of available study space. They do not want to spend precious time walking around the library looking for space. A nice perk of the carrel lockers for those who used them was the storage solution. Lockers never came up organically in conversation with graduate students; this was not a pressing issue for them. When we asked them, we heard mixed reviews and speculation about their usage of lockers if they were to be implemented. Several of the graduate students in arts programs said they would explore the option. Here is what one of them said:
● “It’s just easier for me to come in the morning [to the library] collect all my books, sit at a desk and process through them and then I don’t have to carry them because it is a lot to carry around.
Researcher: What do you do with the books after?
I either put them back on the shelf or if I’m on my way out, I just return them to the desk. I don’t actually borrow all of them. Some of them I do, like the ones I’m carrying around now, and then sometimes I’ll take them out. I’ve had two of these books out for a year now just because I’m using them so intensively in my thesis.”

● “A lot of my friends I know use their gym lockers as a way to just store books so it is on campus and they don’t have to haul it back and forth with them all of the time. So if it was in the library it would be even more convenient because it would be in the space where you need it.”

Graduate students would like a dedicated graduate space, but how would this be managed?
Most graduate students supported the idea of having a dedicated graduate library space but did not want to have to “police” that space themselves. The assigned carrel model worked because the carrel clearly belonged to one person. When we explained the possible solution of signs indicating desk space should be ceded to a graduate student, they were very uncomfortable with this idea. They imagined scenarios where they were mistakenly asking fellow graduate students to leave, or where they had to prove their status to others. The proposed “yield this space to grad student” model is highly undesirable.

● “If you made a space grad students only, there wouldn’t really be a way to patrol that. Even if there are cubicles that are reserved, or if 100 or so cubicles are just grad students only, we as grad students find approaching to say “are you a grad student?” and then how do you prove that very uncomfortable. And then someone else pointed out that they look really young for a grad student. So people would probably be coming up to them all day questioning if they were a grad student, so policing it would be really hard to do. Whereas right now, when they have your name on it, you can walk up and say “sorry can you please get out” and they have to get out. So one of the suggestions was having key card access and having it so you can’t go in the elevator without the key and also with the doors.”

What are other academic libraries doing for their graduate students?
Juliene conducted an environmental scan of 10 academic libraries in Ontario. The information presented refers to library space reserved for registered graduate students use only.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University Library</th>
<th>Assigned Carrels</th>
<th>Bookable Meeting Room(s)</th>
<th>Key Accessible Room(s)</th>
<th>Lockers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brock</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>- Graduate Meeting Room (max 10 ppl)</td>
<td>- Graduate Study Room (22 seats)</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carleton</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>- desks in shared study rooms</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>Available</td>
<td>Seminar Room (max</td>
<td>Group Study Rooms (max 6 ppl)</td>
<td>Entire 4th floor with social and quiet spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dalhousie</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12 ppl)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 Group Study Rooms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurier</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>- Individual Study Rooms (13 rooms for PhD candidates only)</td>
<td>- Graduate Commons (incl. Group study rooms, ind study space, tables, and soft seating)</td>
<td>Y (lockable drawers on carrels)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McMaster</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ottawa</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>- 8 rooms (max 6 ppl)</td>
<td>- Reading Room</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Conference Room (max 12 ppl)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen’s</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>Waterloo</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>- Graduate Group Study Room and Daily Research/Study Space</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(semesterly Graduate Office)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>- Graduate Student Reading Room (122 seats)</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations**

1. **Reinstate dedicated carrels for registered graduate students.** Graduate students want to come to the Library knowing they will have a space. Assigned seating whether that be in the form of carrels or another solution is the most important. The UX Team recommends that the library seize this opportunity to play a critical role in graduate student success. Also when compared to other academic libraries, we could be doing much more to support our graduate students.
   a. The number of dedicated carrels can be reduced to align with usage statistics from previous semesters but these carrels are desperately needed.
   b. Careful consideration around how to ensure the space is being used only for graduate students is required. Do not put graduate students in the position of questioning whether another student is allowed to use the space or not.

2. **Designate a few Group Study Rooms for graduate usage only.** This would mean that some of the current Group Study Room rules would also need to be changed. We recommend
allowing the rooms to be bookable several weeks in advance for up to 3 hours at a time. The Bookings web page would also need to be updated to allow for an individual to use the space versus specifying that only groups are allowed. We also recommend broadly promoting this space to maximize usage.

3. **Experiment with lockers.** Some grad students indicated a willingness to use said lockers to store books, but it is hard to anticipate their usage if they cannot find a workspace. If they have to come into the library to get their books but then cannot find a space, the lockers could turn into more of an inconvenience. To reiterate, available and quiet space is the primary need; storage is secondary.
   a. The UX Team also encourages expanding the usage of library lockers to commuter students. This is an opportunity to support an often overlooked demographic.

4. **Seriously explore a graduate student access space / floor.** Graduate students have different needs and work flows than undergrads. They use library space differently and are more productive when they are working amongst their peers.

5. **Maximum space use is not always the best solution.** The library has responded to student needs for study space by increasing the number of desks and chairs on many of the floors of the library. The participants in this study reminded us that we must balance quantity of furniture with quality of space. As the number of people we can accommodate increases, the library gets busier and noisier. Students--and in particular graduate students--come to the library for quiet.

6. **Promote graduate spaces broadly.** We have been seeing a decline in usage of graduate space which is most likely stemming from a lack of awareness from graduate students. We heard several times that grad students get a lot of information from admin staff and GSA reps. The UX Teams suggests targeting these two channels for communications.