

Keeping the Doors Open: Exploring 24-Hour Library Access at Washington University in St. Louis

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Even as electronic resources become increasingly important to academic library users, access to libraries' physical spaces also remains essential to many patrons. Students responding to our Service Quality Survey in November 2010 sent this message to the libraries at Washington University in St. Louis.¹ Survey data shows that 72% of undergraduate respondents and 52% of graduate respondents visited the library at least once per week. Fewer than 2% of undergraduates and fewer than 3% of graduates reported never entering the physical library. Furthermore, undergraduate and graduate respondents alike expressed a need for Olin Library, the main library of the Washington University Library System, to expand its hours. While some students asked us to expand our hours on particular days of the week, many students told us emphatically to keep the library open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Their requests inspired our library to gather additional data about late-night and all-night library usage and to explore how we might begin to meet our students' expressed need for 24/7 library access.

Washington University Libraries' Service Quality Survey

Every three years, the libraries distribute an electronic survey to faculty and students to assess the quality of library service based on user expectations and to identify areas for improvement. Two main areas of the November 2010 Service Quality Survey revealed our students'—and especially our undergraduates'—desire for extended hours in the libraries.

Item 7 of the survey stated:

- The library will continue to purchase materials (print, online, digital, etc.) to support your work, but we would like to know what other services, facilities or resources might be useful to you. Please rank your 3 highest priorities for Library spending, other than collections.

Users responded by selecting priorities from drop-down menus. Among the 10 available priorities was “Extend Library hours.” While “Extend Library hours” ranked as the sixth priority for graduate students and faculty, it ranked as the second priority for undergraduate respondents, after “More study space.”

Questions 12, 13, and 14 of the survey were open-ended:

- Would you like to comment on a specific library?
(Comment on all that apply)
- What services could be provided that would better meet your needs?
- Anything else?

Undergraduates’ and graduates’ expectations about library hours emerged as a theme in their responses to these questions. Comments ranged from general pleas of “Extend the hours!” to more specific statements of need. One graduate student commented, “I am unsatisfied with the current library hours and I feel that there should be 24-hour access to the main library five days a week Sunday-Thursday. I feel that the university as a whole demands a high caliber of work from its students therefore they must provide proper resources for students to meet this requirement.” A first-year undergraduate requested, “Please extend the hours! Almost all universities of our caliber have libraries open 24/7,” and a third-year undergraduate said, “Please leave Olin open later! It is absolutely ridiculous that one of the best schools in the country doesn’t have a 24-hour main library.”

About Olin Library

John M. Olin Library is at the center of Danforth Campus, which is also home to nine departmental or school libraries. Olin’s five floors house general-interest materials and collections in the humanities, social sciences, and engineering. The Help Desk on the first floor is central to user services. Librarians, staff, and student workers at the Help Desk are cross-trained to assist users with both circulation and reference inquiries.

Olin is currently open 115.5 hours per week during the fall and spring semesters, until 2:00 a.m. Sunday through Thursday nights, until 8:00 p.m.

Friday, and until 10:00 p.m. Saturday. During reading and exam weeks, we remain open until 4:00 a.m. After midnight during the normal schedule and reading and exam weeks, the Help Desk is staffed entirely by student workers; permanent staff leave at midnight. Access to Olin is restricted to valid Washington University ID holders via card swipe after 9:00 p.m.

Olin has an attached café, Whispers, on the first floor. The 5,000-square-foot café serves as our 24/7 space during the fall and spring semesters and provides soft seating, tables, computers, printers, restrooms, and vending machines. Food service in Whispers ends at midnight Sunday through Thursday nights and at 3:00 p.m. Friday and Saturday afternoons. One security guard attends Whispers during the overnight hours.

Our Exploration of Library Hours

January 2011: Dean Shirley Baker engages ARL colleagues in discussion about library hours

Responding to user needs is, of course, a primary concern for our library, as is making decisions based on a complete investigation and data-supported understanding of the expressed need and how best to fulfill it. Recognizing that in their Service Quality Survey comments, students were comparing Olin Library's hours to their perceptions of other major research libraries' hours, Dean of University Libraries Shirley Baker initiated a discussion with her colleagues via the ARL Directors Discussion List. Gathering this information from our peers helped us to achieve a better understanding of how our current hours compare with those of other research libraries.

Dean Baker's message to the list included the following questions:

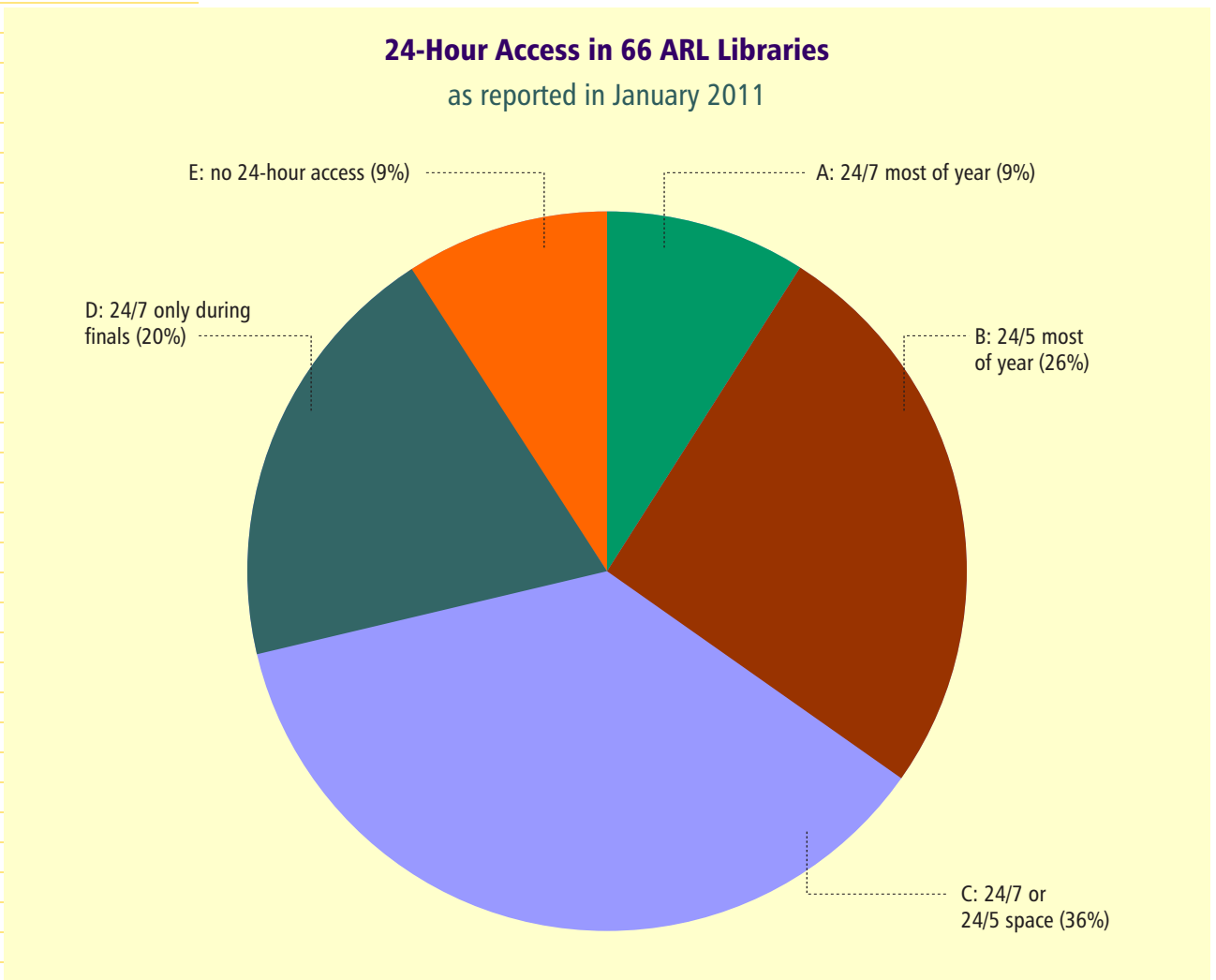
- Do you keep your main library open 24/7?
- If not, how many hours per week is your main library open?

Of the 126 ARL libraries, 66 libraries responded. Respondents fell roughly into five categories:

- A. Those with main libraries open 24/7 most of the year—6 total (9%)
- B. Those with main libraries open 24/5 most of the year—17 total (26%)
- C. Those with 24/7 or 24/5 spaces within or attached to the main library, or in a separate library—24 total (36%). Roughly half of the respondents in this group have a 24/7 or 24/5 space within or attached to the main

library, which can be closed off from the rest of the building. Some of these libraries have a “learning commons,” and others have only certain floors open for 24 hours. The remaining respondents in this group maintain regular 24/7 or 24/5 schedules in a library other than the main library, often in a science or engineering library.

- D. Those with main libraries open 24/7 only during finals—13 total (20%)
- E. Those with no 24-hour access indicated—6 total (9%)



The compilation of responses showed that, among the 66 respondents, Olin Library is situated within the largest group; like 36% percent of the respondents, we have a 24/7 space (Whispers Café), and this space is outside, though attached to, the main library. The responses also revealed other ways that ARL libraries provide 24-hour access. Among our respondents, more libraries operate

with a 24/5 schedule—opening on Sunday morning and remaining open until Friday evening—than with a 24/7 schedule.

February 2011: Formation of Library Hours Committee

Following our compilation of the responses to the ARL Directors List inquiry, Dean Baker appointed the Library Hours Committee to investigate issues related to our libraries' hours and to make recommendations for change to the Dean's Council. As the Library Hours Committee began its work, responses to the ARL list inquiry gave us a greater awareness of the possibilities for providing 24-hour access. In addition to reporting their hours, many respondents shared insights, suggestions, questions, and concerns about providing 24-hour access in their libraries, and these helped the committee to frame our own investigation:

- Some respondents recommended piloting 24-hour access before declaring it a long-term plan, in case the service needs to be revised after implementation or is not heavily used.
- Several respondents raised the question of what users really want when they ask for 24-hour access to the library: physical collections, course reserves, research assistance, computing resources, quiet study spaces, or a combination of these?
- Budgets were a concern. Some respondents share the cost of providing 24-hour access with their student government associations. Some are unable to provide 24-hour access due to budgetary constraints.
- Safety of users and security of collections were common themes. How can libraries ensure the safety of students arriving and leaving the library in the middle of the night? How can they ensure the security of collections and buildings? Would restricting access to only certain areas of the library help? Among respondents who provide some level of 24-hour access, deploying overnight security personnel is common.

**April and May 2011:
Gathering of data on late-night usage
of Olin Library and Whispers Café**

Library Hours Committee members knew that in order to make sound recommendations to the Dean’s Council, we needed statistical data on Olin and Whispers usage during late-night and overnight hours. No recent counts of users were available for Olin. Though our security gate automatically counts users entering and leaving the library throughout the day and night, counts of users arriving cannot be distinguished from counts of users who are leaving. Thus, the gate counts can provide a picture of general activity at the main entrance, but we wanted a more detailed picture. Taking a cue from questions raised by our ARL colleagues, we wanted to know how many users were inside Olin during the late hours, and we also wanted to know what these users were doing.

During one week in April and one week in May, Olin student workers performed headcounts of users during the late-night and early-morning hours. While one student worker counted users on all five library levels, another remained at the Help Desk to provide service. The week in April gave us a picture of use during non-finals time, and the May week provided a picture of use during final exams.

April Headcounts

Student workers counted users hourly for the last three open hours of each day: from 11:00 p.m. until 2:00 a.m. Sunday through Thursday; from 5:00 p.m. until 8:00 p.m. on Friday; and from 7:00 p.m. until 10:00 p.m. on Saturday.

April Headcounts

Date	Day of Week	11:00 p.m.	12:00 a.m.	1:00 a.m.	2:00 a.m.
4/11/2011	Mon. night/Tues. morning	223	173	110	15
4/12/2011	Tues. night/Wed. morning	211	169	114	5
4/13/2011	Wed. night/Thurs. morning	163	132	88	8
4/14/2011	Thurs. night/Fri. morning	71	39	32	1
4/17/2011	Sun. night/Mon. morning	147	104	70	4

Headcounts from the April week demonstrate that at 11:00 p.m., 12:00 a.m., and 1:00 a.m., headcounts were more than two times higher on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday nights than on Thursday nights. The 2:00 a.m. headcounts show that even after our final closing announcement each night, we still had some users present.

Headcounts for the last three hours of Friday and Saturday nights, when we close earlier than the rest of the week, show fewer users present than Sunday through Wednesday, and more than on Thursday. After the final closing announcements on Friday and Saturday nights, no users remained in the library.

May Headcounts

Date	Day of Week	1:00 a.m.	3:00 a.m.	4:00 a.m.
5/4/2011	Wed. night/Thurs. morning	N/A	N/A	20
5/5/2011	Thurs. night/Fri. morning	170	91	5
5/6/2011	Fri. night/Sat. morning	70	21	1
5/7/2011	Sat. night/Sun. morning	138	47	15
5/8/2011	Sun. night/Mon. morning	210	79	1
5/9/2011	Mon. night/Tues. morning	N/A	N/A	2
5/10/2011	Tues. night/Wed. morning	90	42	2

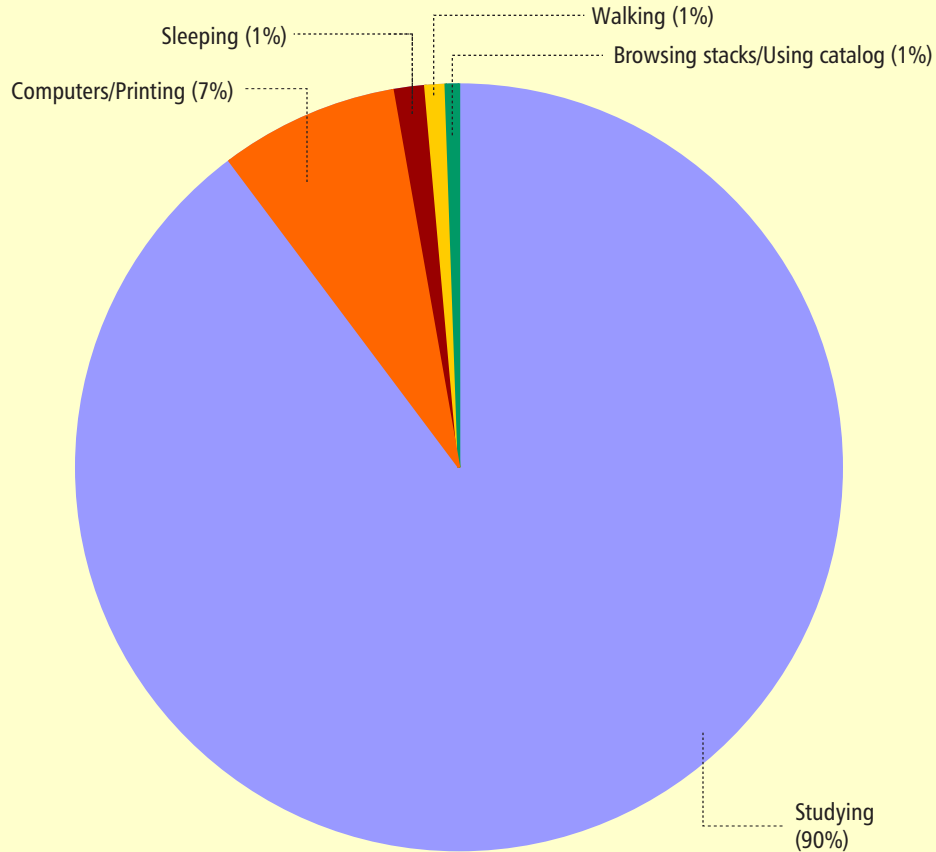
May Headcounts

During final exams in May, student workers counted users at 1:00, 3:00, and 4:00 a.m. (Because only one student worker worked on May 4 and May 9, 1:00 a.m. and 3:00 a.m. headcounts were not possible on those dates.) The available 1:00 and 3:00 a.m. headcounts demonstrate that in some cases, Olin contained a large number of users during the late-night hours. 4:00 a.m. counts show that after the final closing announcements, users remained in the library:

User Activity during Headcounts

While performing the April and May headcounts, Olin student workers made note of what users were doing: studying, using computers and printing, browsing the collections and using the library catalog computers, sleeping, and walking. We used the term “studying” somewhat loosely to apply to any

Percents of Users Engaged in Activities



person seated at carrels, tables, or soft seating and not engaged in one of the other activities, and we discovered that most users fit into this category. Of the 3,245 users counted during the April and May weeks, 2,916 (90%) were studying, 242 (7%) were using computing resources, 40 (1%) were sleeping, 28 (1%) were walking, and 19 (1%) were browsing the stacks or using the catalog computers. These numbers suggest that the majority of late-night users come to Olin for the space itself—not for the physical collections and access to Help Desk services.

Late-night Circulation Data

Circulation data for the late-night hours further supports the theory that our users are more interested in using the physical space than in using the collections and checking out material. A comparison of average checkouts after

midnight to average checkouts at other times of the day showed that circulation services are not used as heavily late at night. The low hourly averages of checkouts after midnight, compared to the hourly averages at other times of the day, raised a question. If we were to remain open all night, would we need library staff and student workers at the Help Desk?

Counts of Users in Whispers

When considering whether a large number of users would use the space if Olin were to remain open all night, we might have been tempted to look at headcounts of users in Whispers, our current 24/7 space, and draw conclusions based on these counts. If Whispers numbers were relatively low overnight compared to the number of users inside Olin approaching closing time, we might conclude that there is no great need to keep Olin open later. However, we could not draw this sort of conclusion, since users tell us regularly that the café atmosphere of Whispers is no substitute for Olin as a late-night study space.

Still, analysis of Whispers headcounts collected by the Whispers security guard from November 21, 2010, through May 10, 2011, revealed that users do use the space at all hours of the night. It also suggests a parallel between the most-used nights in Olin and the most-used nights in Whispers. Average headcounts reveal that Sunday through Wednesday nights in Whispers were significantly busier than Thursday through Saturday nights, and Olin student workers' April and May headcounts revealed the same about Olin.

July 2011:

Library Hours Committee proposes trial 24/4 schedule in Olin Library

Based on the Service Quality Survey data, counts of users in Olin and Whispers late at night, and late-night circulation data, the Library Hours Committee proposed to the Dean's Council a trial 24/4 schedule for the 2011-2012 academic year. The 24/4 schedule would begin the third week of classes during the fall and spring semesters. We would open at 10:00 a.m. on Sunday and remain open until Friday morning at 2:00 a.m. We would maintain our normal Friday schedule, 7:30 a.m.–8:00 p.m., and our normal Saturday schedule, 9:00 a.m.–10:00 p.m. During reading weeks and finals, Olin would implement a 24/7 schedule.

Card access to the building would begin at 9:00 every night. Circulation staff

and student workers would maintain their normal hours, with permanent staff working until midnight Sunday through Thursday and students working until 2:00 a.m. Help Desk services would end at 2:00 a.m., though Olin would remain open to students all night Sunday through Wednesday. Student workers would announce the closing of the Help Desk beginning at 1:30 a.m., encouraging users to check out all material before 2:00 a.m.

To staff the overnight hours during this trial period, we recommended hiring two security guards to patrol inside the building from 1:30 a.m. until 7:30 a.m., Monday through Thursday mornings. One guard would be stationed at the Help Desk to ensure that reserve material, audiovisual collections, and staff areas behind the desk remained secure. Another guard would walk throughout Olin, helping to ensure the safety of users and collections. The guards would perform hourly headcounts, record any questions asked at the Help Desk, and write reports of any problems that might occur during the night.

By introducing and promoting the 24/4 schedule to users as a trial, we would grant ourselves the opportunity to gather data, determine the effectiveness of the service, and make changes as necessary. During the trial period and the summer following the trial period, we would elicit feedback about the service from library users and analyze data collected by the security guards. Depending upon our findings, we would consider recommending full implementation of the 24/4 service.

August 2011: Dean's Council agrees with proposal, implements search for funding

The Dean's Council agreed enthusiastically with the Library Hours Committee's proposal. However, funding was not available in the libraries' fiscal year 2012 budget to hire two security guards. Dean Baker explored additional funding options with the university provost in an effort to implement the service at the recommended time. Ultimately, the Library Hours Committee learned that the trial period would be postponed. The libraries' fiscal year 2013 budget submission will include a request for funds to cover the cost of security personnel, and we expect to implement the trial in the fall of 2012.

Moving Forward

While we wait to begin the trial 24/4 schedule, we will perform additional headcounts of users in Olin Library, not only late at night, but also during the morning, afternoon, and evening hours. Doing so will help us build a more detailed picture of how late-night usage of Olin compares with usage at other times throughout the day, and the data could inform future decisions about library hours.

The Library Hours Committee's exploration of how to address our students' desire for 24-hour library access has been extensive. We are confident that the trial 24/4 schedule is the best way to begin to fulfill our students' requests for extended hours while also learning more about their needs. Until we are able to keep the doors open all night, we lack a complete understanding of how and when students will use our spaces and services. Keeping the doors open is an opportunity not only to understand our users more fully—it is also an opportunity to understand the extent of our role in their educational experiences and in their lives.

¹ Washington University in St. Louis Libraries' *Library Service Quality Survey 2010 Final Report* is accessible via the libraries' Assessment Team LibGuide at <http://libguides.wustl.edu/assessment/>.

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