“Why Would You Do That in the Library?”:
Reshaping Academic Library Spaces to Meet Students’ Spiritual Needs

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User-centered academic libraries strive to meet the diverse needs of college students by modifying user spaces. Library spiritual spaces, from chapels to reflection rooms, are now featured among the many new student-centered areas taking shape in higher education. Students often use non-designated spaces to carry out spiritual practices as well. In this paper we use surveys and focus groups to explore student use of library spaces and other campus spaces to meet their spiritual needs. Based on these findings, we recommend options for library professionals to implement inclusive practices and provide convenient spaces for student spiritual practices in the library.

Introduction
User-centered academic libraries strive to meet the diverse needs of college students through extended hours, numerous seating options, and reinventing user spaces. In our exploration of campus spiritual spaces, we have found they exist in libraries and they take many names and formats, from chapels to reflection rooms. In the absence of a designated spiritual space, students might use any available areas to accommodate spiritual practices, with or without the permission or knowledge of library staff.

Librarians and others in their campus communities may question the presence of spiritual spaces or practices in an academic library setting, especially at secular institutions. When we surveyed students about praying in the library, one responded, “Why would you do that in the library?” Those who do not conduct daily spiritual practices might not realize the need for a convenient, quiet, place to pray on campus. They may not consider how the availability of such spaces is inclusive to those who pray regularly. In our conversations with student who do pray regularly, we found that providing resources that focus on non-academic student needs can have an impact on students by reducing time lost in traveling to other parts of campus to meet these spiritual needs, which students may consider central to their identity and well-being. Our research seeks to bridge the gap between existing bodies of research in student life literature and library literature to uncover, beyond anecdotal evidence, how common library spiritual spaces are, what they look like, how they are used, and why they are important to those who use them. Discussions of physical library spaces and their use or modification must examine change driven by contextualizing our resources beyond the traditional academic role of quiet study spaces. A place to pray, reflect, or simply be still can be a learning need for many students, religious or not.

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Literature Review

Student affairs research has long highlighted the role of student involvement and belonging as factors in student satisfaction with their campus experience and their persistence towards degrees.¹ Students’ intersectional social identities, which may include religion and/or spirituality, affect students’ sense of belonging and take on heightened importance in particular social contexts such as academic spaces where they face difficulty in studying, learning, or retaining unless their need to belong is met.² Recently, student life researchers have probed the importance of religious and spiritual development during the college years.³⁴ Some findings indicate that students who are religious and feel that their religion is accepted by their institution feel a greater sense of satisfaction with their experience overall.⁶ These studies, however, often use Likert scales or similar measures for students to report their level of religiosity and/or satisfaction, rather than examining the types of religious/spiritual accommodations or activities available to the student body. Web searches reveal that academic libraries are developing spaces to meet the spiritual needs of their students, but there is little in the scholarly literature that analyzes these spaces and their use. In the library literature numerous studies have discussed the evolving landscape of library spaces, library usage, and the emerging role of the library as place.⁷⁸⁹ Some specifically examine how places that meet students’ holistic needs contribute to student belonging and ultimately to success, however the role of religious or spiritual accommodation is less explicitly explored.¹⁰

College Students and Religion

Religion and spirituality are deeply personal and are practiced in many different ways. When examined generally, however, the majority of incoming freshmen “report high levels of spiritual interest and involvement.”¹¹ A national, multi-year study as part of UCLA’s CIRP Freshman Survey found that 80% of respondents have an interest in spirituality, 79% believe in God, and 69% pray.¹² Beyond individual beliefs, students also indicate that it is important that colleges welcome people of all faith backgrounds. The Interfaith Diversity Experience and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) found that 85% of students expect college campuses to welcome students of all religious or non-religious identities, but also perceive a less welcoming campus environment for students who are Muslim, Mormon, or atheist.¹³ This mismatch of expectations and perception of welcome presents an opening for libraries to meet a need. As Jackson and Hahn found, there is already a connection between libraries and sacred spaces for academic library users.¹⁴ Libraries also often analyze their spaces and use to determine what makes different groups feel welcome in the library.¹⁵ In light of the many potential uses of library spaces in the daily lives of students, it is worth assessing if college students are using or would use their academic library spaces to fulfill their spiritual needs.

Not Just Prayer

Though prayer and meditation are contemplative practices common to many religions, they can also be practiced apart from religious tradition.¹⁶ Numerous studies have found that mindfulness practices are beneficial to college students in relieving stress and anxiety.¹⁷ As higher education begins to recognize that student success and retention are directly impacted by a whole host of student needs, student affairs educators have been at the forefront of developing programming, offices, and spaces, including ones that meet students religious and spiritual needs.¹⁸ Likewise, current trends for libraries include rethinking library spaces and valuing user experiences in the physical space.¹⁹ A better understanding of spiritual practice in library spaces will inform stakeholders in student success and experience in making decisions to respectfully accommodate common student needs.
Methodology

This research project utilized mixed methods from January 2017 through April 2018 and consisted of both quantitative and qualitative data gathered through both surveys and subsequent focus groups. Both studies were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Penn State University. The scope and depth of the project was made possible with a Penn State Abington faculty development grant and a Penn State University Libraries Library Faculty Organization research grant.

Surveys

The first round of data collection consisted of a nationally distributed survey to multiple campus stakeholders including library professionals and students. In this paper, we will focus on the results of the student survey. The web-based survey was distributed through select ACRL listservs and the academic library divisions of each state library association, a student affairs professionals listserv and the Penn State Abington Student Participant Pool. Student participants responded to twenty-eight multiple choice questions; seven of the questions allowed optional text-entry for more detail. The questions collected information regarding institution demographics, participation in campus-based religious organizations, prayer behavior on campus, spaces available or used for prayer on campus, and requests for spiritual spaces on campus.

Focus Groups

Following analysis and coding of the survey, we conducted a series of student focus groups at four of the largest campuses of Penn State University: Abington, Berks, Erie, and Harrisburg. Student survey responses were limited due to narrow distribution to a few listservs and no specific marketing to students who pray or conduct spiritual practices regularly. Focus groups could provide more detail about student behaviors and perceptions related to spiritual practices on campus and in the library. We conducted the focus groups and acted as data analysts for the project; however, we hired the Center for Survey Research at Penn State Abington to assist with more in-depth analysis, coding, and focus group design. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and coded for emerging themes.

The moderator guided all participants through six questions and discussions of a description of their individual spiritual practices, the location spiritual practices are conducted on campus, if and where spiritual practices are conducted in the library, and to imagine and describe their ideal spiritual space on campus. General recruitment was conducted through student emails and fliers on campus. Targeted recruitment was conducted through direct outreach to any recognized student spiritual or religious organization on campus. Though our surveys were open to any respondent who worked or studied at an academic institution and was over age 18, the focus groups were restricted to students on that campus who self-reported praying at least once per week.

Results

Survey

Our survey elicited 128 student responses, the majority of them from Penn State Abington's subject participant pool since that was the primary means of distribution. Respondents were provided with the following definitions of prayer space at multiple points in the survey:

**Prayer Space:** Any designated space on a college or university campus for prayer, reflection, meditation, or other spiritual practice. The space may be designated for one specific faith, multiple faiths/interfaith, or have no faith designation. A prayer space can be both formal or informal.

**Definition of Formal Prayer Space:** Any space on a college/university campus that has been specifically designated or set aside as a space for prayer. This space is not used for any other purpose than a prayer space.
Definition of Informal Prayer Space: Any space on college/university campus that can be or is used as a prayer space but is not exclusively reserved for prayer. For example, a study room that students may use when they need to pray.

When asked whether their campus had a designated prayer space, fourteen percent (17) indicated that their campus had no designated space available for prayer, reflection, meditation, or other spiritual practice, while sixty-five percent (79) indicated that they did not know if there was a prayer space on campus. Despite the majority (90%) of the students that responded indicating that they did not belong to a campus-based religious or spiritual club or organization, twenty-nine percent (36) of the students still indicated that they had prayed on campus. When students were asked to check all that apply regarding where they prayed on campus (Figure 1), the library and a classroom building were most often selected.

![FIGURE 1](student/prayer-spaces.png)

Students indicated where they prayed on campus

Those that indicated they prayed in the library were asked to indicate their primary reasons for praying in the library (Figure 2). The majority of the respondents pointed to the elements of quiet and privacy as their primary reasons for praying there.

Focus Groups
We conducted 4 focus groups with a total of 23 participants. One focus group was conducted on each of four large Penn State Commonwealth Campuses. Penn State Berks, total enrollment 2,719, was the smallest focus group, with one participant. Penn State Harrisburg, total enrollment 5,077, was the largest focus group, with 9 participants. Penn State Abington, total enrollment 3,893, had 7 participants and Penn State Erie, total enrollment 4,502, had 6 participants. Focus group participants primarily identified as Muslim (11 participants).
or Christian/Christian denominations, including Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox, and Russian Orthodox (11). One of the Christian participants also identified as Jewish, and one participant identified as Hindu.

The majority of participants indicated they prayed daily (21) and a minority indicated praying weekly (2). Most participants also belonged to a campus-based religious group like Cru (a Christian organization) or Muslim Student Association (19).

Each campus has different spaces available for accommodating individual student spiritual practices. On the formal end, Erie has a standalone chapel with a congregational prayer space and one individual prayer room. Erie campus disability services also has a “relaxation room” some students use for prayer. Harrisburg has a spiritual center in a student services building with a congregational space and an individual prayer room with a wudu (ritual washing) station and two private prayer spaces. Harrisburg Library previously provided a prayer space in a staff area, but it closed following the opening of the spiritual center. Berks has a designated prayer space in a library study room. Abington has no formal prayer space on campus.

In addition to available designated prayer spaces, the libraries on each campus have study rooms that students are able to reserve in advance or use when they are not in use by another reservation. Participants at each campus indicated during discussion that they had previously used library spaces, like study rooms, desks, or stacks, for individual spiritual practices, and had reserved library study rooms for group prayer, bible study, or a student religious group meeting.

In our focus groups, students gave answers similar to those in the survey. Though each campus was different in terms of focus group size, participant religion, and location or availability of a designated prayer space, students echoed many of the same themes regardless of location or prayer practice.
Designated Space

Students at Erie and Harrisburg, who have regular access to a formal prayer space expressed the significance of having a designated space. Due to the amount of time students spend on campus, many found it impractical to travel home in order to pray, so prayer on campus is part of their daily experience. To the students, a designated space meant that they would have some privacy. A designated space also affords them some respect and dignity in their spiritual practice. They knew they would not be questioned or asked to leave the space. Some students in the Harrisburg focus group previously used the library prayer space, which was much more basic than the current spiritual center. Even though the previous prayer space was imperfect, students expressed appreciation that it was available, though they preferred the amenities of the prayer spaces in the spiritual center.

Students at Abington, where there is no designated space, expressed frustration with inability to find adequate spaces to pray, such as empty study rooms or classrooms, during busy times on campus. When they can use a study room, they might be interrupted by passersby. The students concurred that a designated space was desirable for the same reasons indicated by students who had access to a designated prayer space: privacy, availability, common purpose. Though Berks has a designated library space for individual prayer, it is not generally advertised. The Berks participant was unaware that the space was available, but did regularly reserve a library study room for a student religious group. The participant indicated a designated space large enough for group prayer would be welcome.

Convenience

Students said that regardless of the existence of a prayer space, they will pray where it is most convenient, though they did prefer to have an actual designated campus space with privacy. Campus layout was a large factor in student response to the most convenient location for a prayer space. Most buildings at Harrisburg campus are centered around one quad—the spiritual center is in the building next to the library. Students at Harrisburg, all of whom indicated they pray daily, said they preferred to go to the spiritual center for prayer, as it isn't far from the other buildings where they study to take classes. But things like bad weather, a tight schedule, or the inconvenience of packing and moving all their belongings sometimes means praying wherever they are at the time they need or want to pray—on the floor near their desk in the library, in hallways, or empty classrooms. The students indicated they did not mind praying in a non-designated prayer space because they felt welcome and accepted on campus, and did not have any negative experiences praying openly in a relatively public space.

At Erie, the campus is less centralized, and students had different spaces they found to be most convenient, from the chapel, to the relaxation room in the student center, to the library. This seemed dependent on where students spent the most time and what was closest to their housing, as well as their schedule. The chapel is not open in the evening, but the student center and library have longer hours. Abington's lack of designated spaces also means student pray where it is most convenient, often in the library's study rooms or classrooms across campus in buildings where they spend most of their time. The Berks participant found the library to be the most convenient space for the student religious group to meet. The library on each campus typically has the longest hours of the campus buildings—other spaces become inconvenient if they are not open when you need them.

Privacy

Students at all campuses expressed a desire for some privacy in their individual prayer practices. Some students said they avoided praying on campus for this reason—none of the available spaces are private enough for them. Study rooms typically have large windows; campus spaces have thin walls that allow others to hear you; the chapel prayer space requires that the door be left open at all times. Some were concerned about being stared at or
questioned about what they were doing if people were to see them pray. Congregational prayer or meetings had less cause for privacy concerns.

**Flexibility**

Many of the focus groups included students who practiced differing religious and spiritual practices. Students expressed a desire to make designated prayer spaces more flexible with storage for materials important to their religion that could be used during prayer but put away and left securely in the space afterward such as icons and prayer rugs. The students recognized amongst themselves that accommodating each religion would not allow for these materials to be left out permanently, but were frustrated that the materials needed to be brought in by the individual when they wanted to use them. Designated spaces at Harrisburg and Erie contain religious texts from a number of religions and prayer rugs. The circulation desk at Berks checks out a prayer rug to students. However, none of the campuses provided item storage for individuals or student religious groups.

**Ownership of Space**

In a similar respect, students generally expressed a desire to have some ownership over current or proposed spiritual spaces, such as spaces for their religious groups to store items, and an easier process for reserving the space. At Harrisburg and Abington, students felt the process for requesting a space was cumbersome. It must be done in person at a campus office using a paper form, though the university has largely moved to electronic scheduling for most spaces. The students are generally able to get the times they request, and there are regular services on Fridays for Muslims and Sundays for Christians, but the congregational space in the Harrisburg spiritual center is locked when not in use for a reserved meeting. Students find this unfair and limiting. Abington students must submit three potential locations whenever they make a meeting request and are not guaranteed to get even one of the spaces they list.

Erie students are able to reserve lockable desk areas in the library each semester, which they viewed positively, and provided them a space to store group materials for those religious groups that met in the library. Active campus ministries regularly hold services in the campus chapel. At Berks, the small student religious group is able to regularly reserve a library study room without issue, but a separate religious space would still be welcome.

**Ideal Space**

When asked to think about their ideal campus prayer space, students gave very similar answers. Though there were no limits placed on their answers, students generally expressed the desire for a simple space that is quiet and provides privacy for individual prayers. Students would like the space to include a large room for group prayer and religious services, a washing station (modesty curtains for the washing station were requested by some female participants), and secure storage for religious items. Students also want easy scheduling of the space, convenient hours, and a central location. Interfaith cooperation seemed to be an overall theme of student answers, even though those words were not explicitly used. The student envisioned the space as a place for all of the religious or spiritual practices represented on campus, where everyone could practice their own faith, but also learn about others.

**Purpose of Prayer**

In addition to viewing prayer as a way to express thanks to God or be compliant with their religion, students also described their prayer practices contributing to a sense of personal peace and calmness. One student said praying quelled her anxiety. Students frequently described praying while studying for tests in the library, or taking a break from their coursework in the library to pray and relax themselves.
Religious Accommodation
Students at all campuses generally felt that their religion is respectfully accommodated by the university, the library staff, and others on campus. Students feel comfortable praying on campus, even if there is no designated space to do so. The campuses are flexible and allow students to use the spaces they need for spiritual practice. Some students said that friends have made fun of them for religious behaviors, but it is not widespread, and they have never had negative interactions with faculty or staff related to their spiritual practice.

Discussion
Role of the Library
Students at every campus used the library for spiritual practice either through the presence of a formal, designated space or informal usage of a space for prayer, and for both individual and group practices. Many of the students were using library spaces for spiritual practices without the direct knowledge of library staff. This is not a problem—our students use library spaces for many purposes that are not investigated and approved ahead of time. However, it is helpful for staff to be aware that this may be happening in the library so that we do not misinterpret what we see and hear in our libraries and thus provide students with dignity and respect in their individual spiritual practice. There are a number of factors that lead students to use the library for spiritual practice, even if a formal prayer space is available elsewhere. These include the amount of time students spend at the library, the location of the library, convenient hours, quiet environment, and availability of study rooms or other small and somewhat private spaces. It seemed that smaller student religious groups preferred to meet in library study rooms because they could book the spaces more easily than other meeting rooms on campus.

When describing their prayer practice, a number of students indicated they prayed when they felt overwhelmed and needed to relax. At the library, we are not strangers to stressed-out students and often offer de-stress activities during finals or other busy times during the semester. Spiritual practice can be viewed as another de-stress activity that can contribute to student wellness.

Sample Size and Context
The results of these studies are not generalizable due to small sample size and methodology. When studying student populations, it is challenging to get a large sample. When recruiting for the focus groups, we faced a challenge in generating interest from the general student population, and had the most success recruiting participants from student religious groups. Therefore, it's likely these students are comfortable identifying themselves as religious and discussing their spirituality, because they belong to a group that specifically identifies them by their religion. However, we feel that student responses give helpful insight when considering library policies about space use and generating general awareness amongst library professionals about student spiritual practice in the library.

Convenience
Convenience outweighed many other factors when deciding where to pray. Students may not use a well-appointed campus prayer space if it is not convenient to them at their time of need. If students feel safe conducting their spiritual practice on campus, they will do it in the most convenient spot they can find. Anecdotal evidence continues to support this finding. At Harrisburg campus, which has a multi-use, multi-faith spiritual center, students are still found praying in the rear stairwell.
Designated Space
While recognizing that space convenience is important, students also wanted a space that is set aside for spiritual practice. At campuses without a designated space, students faced challenges in finding a place to meet because they had to compete with all campus events. It was important that this space have individual and group meeting spaces, and that it be easy to reserve and use. Students in the focus groups wanted more ownership of the space than campus administration seemed prepared to give. Given the personal nature of spiritual practice and the sacred feelings students have towards their practices, it seems understandable that they would want to control some aspects of the environment and have the ability to use meaningful or sacred objects during their practice. These desires may run afoul of risk management and liability, however, so it may be necessary to manage student expectations about realistic accommodations.

Conclusion
Gathering student data and feedback about library usage for prayer and spiritual practices through surveys and focus groups is insightful and gives additional context to observations of library staff. The quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the surveys confirmed that some students do indeed use library spaces for spiritual practice, and that the common qualities often associated with academic libraries – quiet, flexible spaces, long hours, convenient location—are what also make it conducive for fulfilling spiritual or religious needs. The focus groups, while non-generalizable, nevertheless provided insight into the needs of students who practice their faith and spirituality regularly on campus. Student responses revealed that, at least for those who self-selected into the focus groups, libraries should consider the insights of the student life literature around the importance of student faith, meeting the needs of the whole student, and showing respect and openness to spiritual practices, especially if the library is conducting space planning assessments or usage studies or are part of larger campus space planning discussions. Though creating new spaces may seem daunting, the focus group data indicated that students’ needs and wants with regards to spiritual spaces were relatively simple and could be easily accommodated.

If library professionals have observed students using academic library spaces such as stairwells or study rooms for prayer or spiritual practice, or have provided spaces like their private offices or other staff areas for this practice, we recommend conducting formal observational studies or focus groups as part of usage assessments. Academic libraries should make every reasonable effort to respectfully accommodate students who conduct spiritual practices on campus, as these accommodations are far from onerous and go a long way in making students feel included. There are sources available that provide guidance to higher education sites who are looking to create welcoming and inclusive interfaith spaces.20, 21 Those who question the role of the library in accommodating students’ spiritual needs should ultimately consider the traditional qualities that make an academic library a natural fit for this purpose; libraries provide peace and quiet, privacy in public, and often have sacredness in the eyes of the user. Campuses must meet the needs of the diverse student body, including many spiritual practices. Combining these traits with current design trends towards flexible, user-centered spaces that are responsive to user needs is a perfect equation for spiritual inclusion at your library.
Appendix A. Selected Student Survey Questions

Definitions for the purpose of this survey

**Prayer Space:** Any designated space on a college or university campus for prayer, reflection, meditation, or other spiritual practice. The space may be designated for one specific faith, multiple faiths/interfaith, or have no faith designation. A prayer space can be both formal or informal.

**Definition of Formal Prayer Space:** Any space on a college/university campus that has been specifically designated or set aside as a space for prayer. This space is not used for any other purpose than a prayer space.

**Definition of Informal Prayer Space:** Any space on college/university campus that can be or is used as a prayer space but is not exclusively reserved for prayer. For example, a study room that students may use when they need to pray. Please keep these definitions in mind as you complete the survey.

Are any of the following located on your campus? Select all that apply.
- Chapel
- Spiritual center
- Interfaith Center
- I don't know
- My campus does not have any of those

Is there a designated prayer space available on your campus?
- Yes, a formal space
- Yes, an informal space
- Yes, both formal and informal are available
- No spaces are provided
- I'm not sure if there is a prayer space

What kind of prayer spaces are provided? Select all that apply.
- Space for individual prayer
- Space for group prayer

Where is/are the prayer spaces located? Select all that apply.
- In the library
- In a classroom building
- In the student union or student center
- In a chapel or spiritual center
- In student housing
- Other. Please briefly describe.

Have you ever prayed on your college or university campus? Select all that apply.
- Yes, in a formal prayer space
- Yes, in an informal space
- Yes, but I did not use a prayer space
- No, I haven't prayed on campus

What is the primary reason you haven't prayed on campus?
- I prefer to pray at an off-campus location or at home
- I do not have time to use the prayer space on campus
- The campus prayer space is inconvenient due to location and/or hours
- I do not need a designated prayer space
• I do not pray
• Other. Please briefly describe.

Whether you use a designated prayer space or not, where do you pray on campus? Select all that apply.
• In the library
• In a classroom building
• In the student union or student center
• In a chapel or spiritual center
• In student housing
• In a staff or faculty office on campus
• Other. Please briefly describe.

What are your primary reasons for praying in the library? Select all that apply.
• Quiet
• Privacy
• Small room available
• Convenient Location
• Safety
• Convenient Hours
• This is where the designated prayer space on campus is located
• Other. Please briefly describe.

Do you have any concerns about or have you encountered any problems praying in the library?
• Yes. Please describe in detail.
• No
Appendix B. Focus Group Questions

1. I’d like each of you to talk about the level of importance prayer has for you.
   Probe: How often do you pray?
   Probe: Describe your practice.

2. In your experience, where do students pray on campus?

3. Do you feel comfortable praying on campus?
   If yes, where do you feel comfortable praying on campus?
   » Describe what about those spaces makes you feel comfortable?
   If no, why not? What are the barriers that keep you from being comfortable praying on campus?

4. Have you ever prayed in the library?
   If yes, describe your experience praying in the library.
   » What about the library made you comfortable to pray there?
   » What spaces did you use? How often?
   If no, could you share why you haven’t prayed in the library.

5. Were you aware there is a space for prayer/meditation in the library? (where relevant)
   If yes, have you used it?
   » If yes, what was your experience like?
   » If no, what are some reasons why you haven’t used the space?

6. Describe where your ideal prayer space on campus would be and what it would look like.

Notes
2. Terrell E. Strayhorn, College Students’ Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students (New York: Routledge, 2012).
8. John E. Buschman and Gloria J. Leckie, Library as Place: History, Community, and Culture (Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 2007);
11. Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, Cultivating the Spirit.
12. Ibid.