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Beyond the Bubble: Undergraduates, Commuting, and the Academic Library at a Flagship Public University

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Beyond the Bubble

Undergraduates, Commuting, and the Academic Library at a Flagship Public University

Students at flagship public universities often fit the profile of a traditional undergraduate student in the United States. They enter college after high school, are generally between the ages of 18 and 24, are dependents, work part-time or not at all, and are enrolled as full-time students. While there have been explorations of the academic library situated within students' lived experiences in different campus settings, there has been little examination of the role of student commutes (Duke and Asher 2012; Foster and Gibbons 2007). The studies that have examined students' commutes are situated on campuses that identify as commuter schools (Regalado and Smale 2015; Delcore, Mullooly, and Scroggins 2009; Brown-Sica 2012). Large public universities, where it is often assumed that students' lives are centered on or adjacent to campus, are largely unexamined.

At the University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder), the main campus and the surrounding area are often referred to as "the bubble," suggesting that students' lives are primarily contained in this area. The university is faced with the related challenges of accommodating increased enrollment on a campus with limited growth opportunities, identifying parts of town where the campus can expand, and being situated in an area with a rising cost of living, especially related to housing costs. As the university tackles these issues, what

impact do these same challenges have on students' academic lives and where they live, work, and study? Currently, very little is known about how CU Boulder students travel to and within campus spaces and the barriers they face.

At CU Boulder, researchers in the library studied a typical academic day for undergraduate students as part of a larger, multi-institutional project comparing undergraduate experiences across the United States. This study revealed that the commutes of CU Boulder undergraduate students were more complex than anticipated, including those who lived in on-campus housing. In examining our students' daily lives, we found that many factors influenced where students live and how location impacted their commutes and academic work. Moving to off-campus housing often allowed for a less complicated commute and provided the individual student with greater control over her study environment. A deeper understanding of how our students moved between home, class location, workplaces, extracurricular activities, and other commitments illuminates gaps in library services, spaces, and resources and helps identify possible partnerships with other campus initiatives.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

CU Boulder is a flagship, public university with 33,771 students, 27,846 of whom are undergraduates. The university is a national public research university that provides a rigorous education, supports the community, and ensures access. The average age for a CU Boulder undergraduate student is 20.4 years of age, with only 5 percent of undergraduate students over the age of 25 (University of Colorado Boulder 2017a). A majority of our undergraduate student population can be categorized as traditional college students: they are dependents and are not responsible for caring for any other family members. As a state institution, a majority of our undergraduate student body, approximately 60 percent, is comprised of Colorado residents, and 7 percent of undergraduates are international students. Almost 70 percent of the undergraduate student body identifies as white, non-Hispanic, while 2 percent identify as black or African American, 5 percent as Asian, 11 percent as Hispanic/Latino, and 5 percent as two or more races. In the 2016/17 academic year, 1,133 undergraduate transfer students enrolled in CU Boulder (University of Colorado Boulder 2017a). Based on academic year 2016/17 financial aid data, approximately 17 percent of students were dependents that were Pell Grant eligible, while 54 percent either demonstrated no financial need or did not submit a FAFSA.

The CU Boulder campus is situated in the southern part of Boulder, a city with a population of roughly 100,000 people. The main portion of campus is over 300 acres and contains academic buildings, student support services, and thirteen residence halls. On the southern edge of campus is a section known as the Kitteridge loop that contains a planetarium, the law school, and

a cluster of six residence halls. Approximately a mile and a half from the center of campus is Williams Village (Will Vill), a 66-acre residential academic village containing five residence halls, a dining facility, and more recently, student support services such as tutoring and health services. This area is connected to the main campus by a multi-use path and a university shuttle bus known as Buff Bus that runs every twenty minutes. East Campus was recently developed on an additional 200 acres located approximately a mile away from the main portion of the university, and is comprised primarily of research centers and institutes. As university enrollment and programs continue to expand, other areas of town, particularly another 300 acres on the southern edge of Boulder, are being identified and developed for campus expansion to provide additional residence halls, academic buildings, and research facilities.

First-year students at CU Boulder are required to live on campus unless they obtain a waiver for alternative housing arrangements, such as living at home or with other relatives, resulting in approximately 95 percent of first-year students living on campus. While CU Boulder is not known as a commuter campus, in fact only 26 percent of its undergraduate students live in campus-owned and operated housing, leaving only 1,100 students residing on campus after their first year (University of Colorado Boulder 2017a). While there is no official tracking of off-campus housing, CU Boulder's Office of Institutional Data estimates that based on the provided home addresses of students, approximately 4,000 students reside in areas outside of Boulder zip codes (University of Colorado Boulder 2017b). Available data suggests that these students commute anywhere from 20 to 90 minutes from their home location to campus. There is little information available regarding CU Boulder students' selection of off-campus housing, but housing affordability is a concern in Boulder due to its limited and costly rental market. Students comprise approximately 14 percent of the Boulder rental market, where the average monthly rent is now \$1,418 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2017). Increased enrollments have resulted in on-campus housing reaching capacity, and the university is currently in the process of building another residence hall to accommodate an additional 575 students.

The CU Boulder University Libraries is comprised of five library locations situated in areas throughout the main portion of campus. Norlin Library is often referred to as the main library and is a large, sprawling building at the base of a main quad. It has seen numerous additions throughout the years, which have resulted in five floors and complex navigation. In addition to housing various book stack locations, library instruction spaces, a learning commons, and common library functions, Norlin Library also includes an outpost of the Writing Center, IT support, the Honors Program, and other university programs. There are four branch library locations situated in academic buildings: Business, Earth Sciences, Music, and Math, Physics, and Engineering. The University Libraries is currently running a pilot program to provide access to library materials to researchers located on the East Campus, but it has yet

to expand services and resources aimed at undergraduates much beyond the central portion of campus. A recent examination of campus space use determined that the University Libraries had insufficient space for student use. Our Association of Research Libraries peers on average have seating capacity to accommodate 10.5 percent of FTE students, whereas CU Boulder can accommodate only 6.8 percent of FTEs across all five library locations (Huron Education 2015). This assessment of space has provided a push to increase the libraries' seating capacity for student use, and different locations are considering how to reimagine spaces in such a way to increase the number of available seats while maintaining the connection to library services and resources.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

The "A Day in the Life" project sought to holistically understand the lives of undergraduate students across the United States, with CU Boulder one of eight participating institutions. Student research participants indicated one of two weekdays to receive a series of text message surveys. These messages were sent seventy-five minutes apart and asked the students to share their current location, indicate the activity they were engaging in, and how they felt at the time. After the survey was completed, the research team created a map of each student's day that was used to guide an interview about the student's daily tasks and activities, the spaces and locations in which the student conducted academic research and day-to-day work, and the student's overall educational experience. Students were asked to describe other life factors such as employment, extracurricular activities, and decisions around university selection, in addition to academic work and study habits. All study protocols were approved by the Institutional Research Board (Asher et al. 2017).

Participants at CU Boulder were recruited through flyers and handouts in five library locations across campus and through a posting on an electronic bulletin site that announces research studies and other campus events. These various recruitment efforts were used to capture students who regularly used the libraries, along with those who relied on other locations for academic work. This led to a convenience sample of 25 participants, 20 of whom were undergraduate students who completed the day's responses and the follow-up interview. All participants were full-time undergraduate students covering a range of academic years and majors, 6 were transfer students, and 15 indicated working part-time, with hours worked ranging from 5 to 30 per week. Of those that worked, most had employment off campus or had a mixture of on-campus and off-campus employment. Sixteen students identified as white, two as Hispanic/Latino, one as African American, and one as Asian. A majority of students resided in off-campus housing, with only four students living in residence halls, all of whom were first-year students.

UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' DAILY LIVES AND COMMUTING BEHAVIORS

Survey responses allowed us to map each student's daily movements and determine distance between points throughout the day. These stops included home, work, class locations, study spots, and recreational and social activities. While the geocoded data centered around the campus, the debriefing interviews demonstrated that students' daily movements are far more complex by highlighting gaps in student maps and variations based on the day of the week.

Distances Traveled and Time Spent on Activities

Based on survey responses, CU Boulder participants traveled a median distance of 8,001 meters, with a median reported commute time of ten minutes and an average distance between locations of 1,557 meters. Students distributed their time in a single academic day similarly to those at other institutions across the United States, spending 27.6 percent of their time studying, 19.3 percent spent in class, and 7.3 percent of their time commuting (Asher et al. 2017). On a typical academic day, most students' map points were

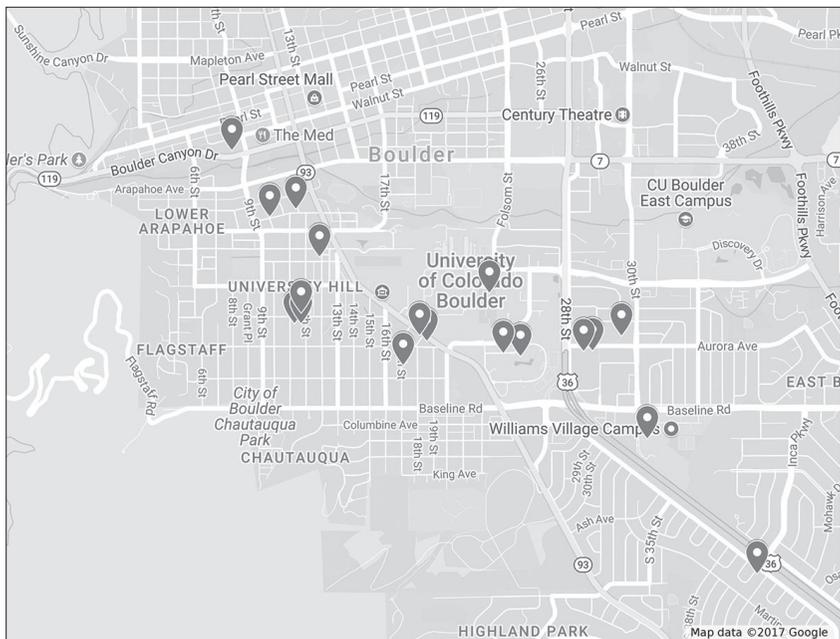


FIGURE 4.1
Student home locations within the city of Boulder, CO

between home, class, and studying or other academic work. Points identified as off-campus employment often fell later in the day, while work at on-campus jobs commonly occurred before or between classes. Compared to other primarily residential institutions in the study, CU Boulder students had a similar reported commute time but traveled greater distances between locations throughout the day. A student might leave home to travel to the East Campus for work as a research assistant before heading to the central portion of campus for classes and studying at the library, and then end the day at practice for an athletic team. The geocoded data showed that while there were some outliers, student movements centered on the campus itself, suggesting that students' lives were primarily contained in the CU Boulder bubble (figure 4.1).

Choosing Where to Live

Student decisions about where to live were driven by many factors including cost, availability, environment, and convenience of location. The first-year students participating in the study indicated that they had little choice in their residence hall preference. Some chose to participate in a Residential Academic Program (RAP) that guaranteed them a room in a specific hall which often corresponded to their major or area of academic interest, such as engineering or global studies. Some students indicated they chose their current or former RAP based on the residence hall location, knowing it would be more convenient or offer additional amenities. The upperclassman research participants who discussed living on campus their first year often expressed frustration at the challenges of living in the residence halls. These frustrations included residing in a location far from classes, having little control in selecting roommates, and living in a disruptive environment.

Since a majority of CU Boulder students move to off-campus housing after their first year, this study shed light on how our students select off-campus housing. Rental costs were one major factor in this decision-making process, but students also considered the number of roommates, commuting options such as bike paths and public transportation, and proximity to campus, including the characteristics of the neighborhoods. For one student, living close to campus was of highest importance when selecting a living location, but she indicated that she worked longer hours so that she could afford to pay for the apartment. This student reported spending very little time socializing or participating in extracurricular activities, and a majority of her time was spent in class, studying, or working. For others, financially feasible housing close to campus meant living with upward of eight roommates where their personal space was not much bigger than a closet. These students prioritized proximity and cost effectiveness over a quiet or spacious home environment.

Several students noted selecting housing based on neighborhood for proximity not just to campus, but to where a majority of their classes are held.

For students in the College of Arts & Sciences, courses are primarily held on the western portion of campus compared to courses in engineering or business, which are situated on the eastern edge. As students progress in their college careers and are primarily enrolled in major courses, class locations are more likely to be situated in the areas of campus related to their college. This sentiment was echoed by numerous students, and many cited choosing to live on the side of campus based on where their disciplines were concentrated.

Others noted choosing locations farther away from campus for reasons related to cost and atmosphere. The neighborhood approximately three miles south of the campus is a mix of university students and community residents and tends to attract more graduate students. One student said that she chose that location because it was more affordable and provided a quieter environment desired by her and her roommates. For this student, these benefits far outweighed the challenges of this locale, which involved traveling farther to get to campus. Two transfer students lived in a town approximately fifteen miles away due to the significantly lower cost of living there. These financially independent, returning students noted that by residing outside of Boulder, they were able to moderate the number of hours worked and devote more time to their studies, despite longer commutes.

Commuting to and Around Campus

Where students chose to live impacted the time spent commuting and the transportation method used for getting to and around campus. Students who resided in centrally located residence halls or secured off-campus housing adjacent to the campus reported making more stops home during the day. These students would go between the campus for class and their residence halls or apartments for meals and studying before heading to work or other activities in the evening. Yet for some on-campus students, returning home was difficult due to their residence hall location. First-year student residence halls can be found interspersed with academic buildings in the center of the campus, sitting on the edge of the campus, and located in the resident academic village approximately a mile and a half from the center of the campus. As one student described it, “main campus is downtown and Kittredge is like the suburbs, and Will Vill is . . . the boondocks.” For those students who reside in the “boondocks,” there were fewer reported stops throughout the day, and upperclassman participants who had resided there in their first year mentioned that their commutes were less complicated now that they had moved off campus. One sophomore student noted about her off-campus apartment:

I'm super centrally located, there's no reason for me not to get to class, my classes are basically closer living where I am now than living on campus, which is kind of funny.

We do not often think of on-campus students having a commute, but the ways that participants discussed their time, current or past, living in residence halls reinforced the complexity of navigating a large college campus.

Since a majority of participants reside in close proximity to the campus, driving was not a preferred commuting option, and commutes often involved multiple methods of transportation including bus, bicycle, and walking. Commutes were further complicated by other factors such as class schedule and other commitments including work, internships, or extracurricular activities. Limitations on parking meant that those students who did drive to campus must either purchase an expensive parking permit, pay an hourly rate at a meter that only allows for two to four hours of parking, or locate free city parking at a more distant location. One student who traveled from the more distant town attempted to purchase a parking permit only to find out that none were available. His solution was to park in a neighborhood adjacent to campus and then bike from there: “I just throw my bike in my truck and ride to campus, ride back [to my truck].” Others living in more distant neighborhoods mentioned that while they did not drive to campus, they sometimes relied on friends or roommates who do have a car and a parking permit.

Students also utilized local and regional buses to get to campus and around town. The Boulder area has a robust bus system, and students are provided with a free pass for the regional transit system. Additionally, the campus provides shuttles to the East Campus and Will Vell in order to assist students and researchers to travel to these outlying locations. While students mentioned using the campus shuttles, they noted that they only relied on these forms of transportation during inclement weather. One student residing outside of Boulder depended on the regional buses to get from home to campus and then to Denver. She noted that she kept her bike on campus because she was not guaranteed a spot on the bus to transport her bike, and she needed it to traverse the large campus when she only had ten minutes between classes. This student also indicated that she scheduled her classes to limit the number of days she came to campus. By restricting her classes to three days out of the week, she was able to limit her commuting to campus and better balance her time between work and school. Most students reported walking and biking as their main forms of transportation, since the town and campus are most friendly to these forms. However, many noted that using these forms of transportation had their own limitations, mostly in how long it took to get from one part of campus to another. Students echoed the sentiment that after their first few semesters on campus, they learned not to take classes back to back since the ten- or fifteen-minute breaks between classes did not allot enough time to travel between points.

While many students reported fairly short commutes by bus, bike, or walking from home to campus, a handful of students indicated that on days other than when the study was conducted, they may travel farther due to

internship or work opportunities. One student whose academic day for the study looked like the typical CU Boulder bubble, indicated in the interview that on two other days of the week he drove twenty miles to the health sciences campus for an internship that lasted from 7:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. This student's internship days looked drastically different than his typical class days and were often more hectic, since he had to return to Boulder in time for an afternoon class and then immediately go to work off campus that evening. Other students noted that they pursued work and internship opportunities in Denver, approximately twenty miles away, because the opportunity was too good to pass up. But this meant longer, more complex commutes whether they drove to their destination or took public transportation.

How Commutes Impact Academic Work

Where students lived and with whom they lived had a strong impact on how and where they conducted their academic work. Only one participant indicated studying while commuting to campus on a regional bus, a 45-minute ride from a town fifteen miles away. This student often carried numerous bags for the day containing schoolwork materials and other personal items. She noted that she tried to prepare for the bus ride by downloading materials onto her laptop since there is no Wi-Fi, or she chose to focus on work that did not require a laptop such as language class homework. This student noted that while she preferred to use her commute time to complete academic work, it could be difficult due to insufficient space to carry out the tasks.

I've had situations where I can't work on the thing I was going to work on because I need a book open and I need my laptop, multiple things, I have my lap and I have a backpack on my lap and I have my feet but I can't move them because I have my pannier . . . sometimes it's a little challenging.

While this student preferred to use her commute time for doing academic work and preparing for the day's classes, the heavily used commuter bus did not provide enough space to contain her personal belongings and still have enough room to bring out materials needed to study.

For the two students who lived in an even more distant town, the library served as one of their primary locations to conduct academic work both due to its location on campus and the services it provided. One noted that she acquired a locker in the library after she saw them in the corner of the first floor and inquired with the circulation desk about their availability. Campus affiliates can check out these lockers on a semester basis, which this commuter student mentioned as providing a space to store personal items and books, reducing the amount she carried with her on a daily basis. The location is

convenient, since she uses that library location for her studying and the locker allowed her access to schoolbooks and materials without having to carry them around all day. The other student noted:

I work from one to five [in the morning], so then from there I go to Norlin, the library here 'cause it's open twenty-four hours, which is pretty sweet and then I do some homework for two and a half, three hours or whichever time I have left before class.

For these students, the library provided services not otherwise found on campus. Other campus buildings do not open until later in the morning, and for off-campus students, the only other early-morning options are some dining halls or the recreation center, both of which cost additional fees to use. Because the library information commons was open twenty-four hours a day, this student with an alternative work schedule had a place to conduct academic work prior to his classes. This area also contains a microwave and other useful amenities for someone who often brings their own food to campus.

Whether the students who live in close proximity to campus return home throughout the day depended on a number of factors including home environment, number of roommates, and preferred study setting. Some students carried everything with them for the entire day, often leaving home by 9:00 A.M. and not returning until late in the evening. Sometimes this was due to extracurricular activities and employment, while other times it was due to not having a conducive study environment at home. These students noted that campus libraries served as frequently visited spaces between classes and other commitments. One student who regularly spent all day on campus in spite of living in close proximity exclaimed that:

I was really excited when I learned you can check out textbooks at the library here, that was really awesome . . . that should be a thing for like every single class because boy does that make my life easier.

Not having to carry heavy textbooks or worry about forgetting the book needed at home saved this student physical and mental stress. Others noted that roommates and a lack of dedicated study space at home meant that they relied on the library for a space to conduct focused work. They usually sought out library study rooms or spaces designated as quiet zones, citing that the presence of others engaged in work encouraged them to complete their own work rather than socialize with friends.

Those who primarily studied at home shared two characteristics: a dedicated study space and fewer than two roommates. One student mentioned that her most productive place to study was at home since she had it set up with markers, highlighters, notebooks, and everything else she needed, including textbooks; she noted her frustration when she went to study elsewhere only to discover that a book or other course material she needed was left at home.

Three students indicated that their roommates shared their major and often had classes in common and could assist one another with their work. Being at home with food, having a study partner, and not worrying about leaving personal items unguarded were cited as strong reasons for studying at home.

For students who preferred to study later at night, the issue of parking could be problematic. Some student participants reported not wanting to walk long distances across campus and city neighborhoods at night, and the available parking was expensive and inconvenient, causing them to locate alternatives for their main study locations. One student noted that rather than going to the library, she would study in a common room located in an academic building at the edge of campus. This area had free parking after 7:00 P.M. and was located adjacent to the building. Students who lived in residence halls in the “boondocks” felt it was easier to study in their academic village rather than traverse the campus.

BARRIERS AND FRUSTRATIONS THAT STUDENTS ENCOUNTER

Our study of the daily lives of our students provided us with a better understanding of how to approach removing these barriers and frustrations we were already aware of. Students discussed spending time between classes trying to study, usually in the library, but it was often difficult to locate a place that suited their needs. The students wanted space to spread out since they were often using books, notebooks, and a computer to complete their academic work. Additionally, these students often desired quiet spaces to engage in focused academic work and expressed frustration at not locating a space in an area that was quiet, or because other students would be making noise in what were perceived to be quiet areas. Our participants all seemed to have study locations they used repeatedly, primarily in the main library, that they had found when they first used the library, and they were unaware of other study spaces in the large, maze-like building.

Access to electrical outlets was key for the students since they often charged multiple devices: all of our library locations suffer from lack of electrical outlets. Students noted that it was frustrating to locate a prime study space only to discover they did not have access to an electrical outlet or they had left their charger at home. Some participants noted that they relied on library computers since theirs might be old and inefficient or they were too heavy to carry around all day. The library has reduced the number of available computer terminals over the past few years, and students noticed that there were fewer stations and longer waits.

INTERVENTIONS AND INITIATIVES

We used information gleaned from the study to bolster existing services, make adjustments to learning spaces, and lay the foundation for new initiatives. Through these students' lives we were able to see the complexity of the day-to-day student experience and how commuting to and around campus was an important factor.

This study highlighted that students were unaware of many library resources and services regardless of the time they spent conducting academic work in the library. Many library users would benefit from long-standing services like course reserves. Since this term does not resonate with students, we are examining how to market reserves in a more approachable way. We are working with our communications team to devise a strategy to highlight this service, and to partner with instructors to stress the importance of making course materials available through reserves. We are also discussing open resources as an alternative. This study highlights how materials on course reserves assist students in completing their academic work for a variety of reasons, including reducing financial costs or making materials available without their having to remember each text or being limited in the amount they carry with them.

Additionally, one library location checks out cell phone and laptop chargers for limited use, usually set for two hours. Study participants who were heavy library users noted the frustration of limited access to electrical outlets and of leaving chargers at home, yet none were aware that the library provided chargers and power strips for checkout. However, this service is not available at other library locations across campus, and we are exploring how to expand the checkout of commonly used chargers.

The University Libraries are currently examining ways to expand the availability of lockers. Even without any advertising about their location, availability, or purpose, the lockers are full each semester, and at times have a waiting list. Further investigation found that there are scant opportunities on campus for students to lock up their belongings. No other buildings on campus provide access to lockers without a fee or membership in a specific college or department. The libraries are investigating possible locations and alternative reservation procedures for additional lockers. Options include making some lockers available for daily use only, placing some in the learning commons portion of the main library which has 24-hour access, and expanding the service to branch locations.

Information gathered from the research participants combined with other user assessments has driven furniture purchase decisions and space enhancements. To solve the problem of insufficient seating across all libraries, there has been a recent effort to adjust underutilized spaces and consider how other spaces in the libraries might be reimaged to provide additional learning environments for users. For example, the learning commons area was able

to purchase new furniture that included tables with integrated power outlets. The original layout for the learning commons was to have flexible seating in order to encourage collaborative learning, and over time, we determined that students were looking for more individual work spaces even in an area that has a louder noise level. By reimagining the space, we have been able to increase seating capacity, retain some of the flexible seating features, and add in furniture that meets the needs of how our users work. While lounge seating was included as part of the original design, we paired them with large tables to provide needed work space.

Since this study was conducted, the libraries have undertaken an initiative to craft signage to indicate quiet and group work spaces across all locations. Library spaces have been zoned based on feedback from students and library staff familiar with the areas. The zones are still in a testing phase, so they can be adjusted as we observe student use and can make improvements to the signage. As these zones are finalized, we are working to craft maps of each library location, indicating different zones available so that users can locate spaces conducive to the work they need to engage in. While creating the zones in the Norlin Library, there was debate surrounding how much of the spaces needed to be zoned for collaborative work. Using information gleaned from this study, reinforced with observation of user behavior, provided the argument to zone more spaces for quiet individualized work.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

For students who conducted their academic work in alternate locations other than home or the library, it was illuminating to learn about these preferred study spaces. While some of these preferences were driven by noise level or crowding, other factors pushed students to use alternate spaces. For those who cited parking or walking across campus later in the day as barriers to using the library, we can assess how the library might fit into the identified alternate spaces. We cannot solve the campus parking issue, but we can think of the other spaces available to students for their academic work and think of how we might highlight library resources and services in those spaces. For example, the resident academic village recently opened a new dining hall that incorporates student support services such as health care and tutoring. The library could partner with these existing student support efforts to promote library resources and services and test initiatives such as peer-to-peer reference support. Since the residence halls in this area are comprised of mainly first-year students, this could be an opportunity to connect with students and emphasize the value of the library as more than just a physical location on the other side of campus.

This study has also left us asking new questions about our students. Future plans include examining the commutes of the 4,000 undergraduate

students living outside of Boulder in order to gain an understanding of the decisions and challenges of residing outside of the bubble. This study demonstrated that on-campus students can face more complicated commutes than those off campus. In what ways can the library play a role in supporting student academic work when physical locations are not in close proximity to the residence hall? We are exploring increased offerings aimed at first-year students in order to promote library spaces and services and better understand the needs of incoming students. As the campus grows to other locations such as the CU South expansion, we will need to address the question of how the library fits into these spaces. Some CU Boulder librarians are partnering with our transfer student office, and study results are informing their initiatives and research questions. Even more so, the results from this study remind us that student lives are complex and that they are often negotiating multiple identities in their time as students, regardless of whether or not their commutes take them beyond the campus bubble.

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