

Complaints have forced library administrative staff to re-examine their policies around the use of library space

Noise levels, food waste, and laptop cords across aisles were producing an environment in Biko Library that was not conducive to learning and that violated health and safety regulations.

“We heard from a lot of students who said ‘I would never go to the library to study’,” Peggy Lunn, Library Administrative office manager, told Arthur. “We knew we had to do something.”

She added that the library could be liable for thousands of dollars in fines due to the food waste and laptop cord issues.

Library administrative staff found a traditional blanket policy of no eating and no talking unenforceable. They chose instead to implement “learning zones” based on those they observed at the University of Toronto Mississauga and the University of Western Ontario.

The learning zones are meant to comply with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. Accessibility includes accommodating different “learning styles,” Lunn said. For instance, “red zones” are “traditional morgue library” areas for those who need silence to study. Yellow zones are for “collaborative learning” – that is, quiet study in small groups.

“Collaborative learning is not the same as kicking back and having a party,” Lunn stressed. “That is not the library’s mandate. Our mandate is to provide support for academic learning.”

In past years, the library has been as much a social space as an academic learning space. With few casual spaces on campus with seating and other amenities like electrical plugs for laptops, students living in residence and those on campus between classes tend to use the library to hang out, eat, and socialize.

Eating will no longer be banned, but restricted to certain areas.

Biko* introduces Learning Zones

Written by Brett Throop

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“We aren’t a food service establishment. We don’t have people that come along behind you like they do at the Great Hall and clean the tables,” she said.

The new learning zone policy is designed to preserve the library as a place for academic study rather than a casual place to hang out.

“There is an issue of casual student space on campus that many student groups and the university need to address,” Lunn said. “One of the needs the library was filling was casual student space and it was causing conflict with students who felt that the library’s primary role was to provide silent space for study.”

TCSA President Sheldon Willerton shares that concern. “There is a lack of student space at Trent, more specifically a lack of group work space,” he said. “The TCSA has consistently lobbied the university to provide more space for students and invest in existing space.”

The new learning zones will take some getting used to. Signs to mark the different zones and list acceptable activities in each are already up and will be the main tool for enforcement. In addition, Lunn says that library employees are going to be “a bit more visible” and student service agents will provide information on the learning zones policy.

However, she added that “correcting other people’s behaviour is not our job.”

Security guards will be the last resort for enforcement.

“We don’t want to be one of those schools with security guards walking around giving monetary fines.”

She hopes the signs will prevent it from getting to that point.

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If a student is distracted by noise in the library, they can ask those making noise to be more quiet or speak to a library staff person.

“Most people’s behaviour is not intentionally malicious,” Lunn noted. She said that most people listen when asked by peers or library staff to quiet down.

Biko Library also increased the number of electrical outlets at work spaces over the summer and will soon be adding counter-height wired work spaces along the apex on the second (main) floor.

*Wait. Biko? What are we talking about? Isn't it called Bata Library? During the 1980s, Trent students sought to rename the library originally titled for the owners of the Bata Shoe Company, in protest of the company’s actions in South Africa under apartheid and its refusal to report its South African labour practices to the federal government. Trent administration may have refused, but the tentative new name, Biko Library, still stuck.

“The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.” – Steve Biko, 1976