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Focus Groups: Zooming in Duke's West Campus Libraries

Executive Summary

Duke University Libraries AUXS department held two focus groups with student advisory boards to understand how students use library spaces for Zoom meetings.

Recommendations

1. Explore additional/modified communication to support adherence to study room policies.
2. Implement study room check-in/check-out features.
3. Pilot a designated Zoom Hall in a noise appropriate area of the library.
4. Convert some large project rooms into individual reservable spaces.

Background

Duke University Libraries (DUL) conducted a biennial survey that revealed student concerns about the lack of designated "Zooming" areas in the West Campus Libraries. An initial environmental scan offered a few possible solutions, but the report emphasized the need to consult with students on their experiences and needs. To gain deeper insight into students' perspectives, the AUXS department commissioned additional research on the topic of "Zooming."

DUL's Assessment and User Experience Strategy (AUXS) Department convenes two student advisory boards to gather student perspectives on library operations and the experiences they offer. These groups meet two to three times per semester and provided an opportunity to collect further data about student "Zooming."

Research Question

What are students' experiences with using Zoom in the West Campus Libraries, and what solutions do they prefer for addressing the challenges they encounter?

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Methodology, Metrics, & Tasks

Two focus groups were conducted: the first with four graduate students and the second with four undergraduate students. During each session, students engaged in two research activities—dot voting and sticky note affinity mapping—to share and prioritize their experiences.

Each session began with a dot voting exercise (see figure 1) where multiple-choice questions (see appendix a) were displayed on large sheets of paper. Students placed stickers next to their preferred options, then participated in group discussion to explain their choices and elaborate on their experiences.

In the second part of the session, students worked in small groups—except in the graduate student session, where some students arrived late, resulting in a single group. Each group was asked to identify common challenges related to Zoom use in DUL spaces and to brainstorm possible solutions. Students recorded their ideas on sticky notes, which were then added to a shared display for a group review (see figure 2). The moderator remained available to answer questions and offer clarification as needed but did not otherwise participate in the discussion.

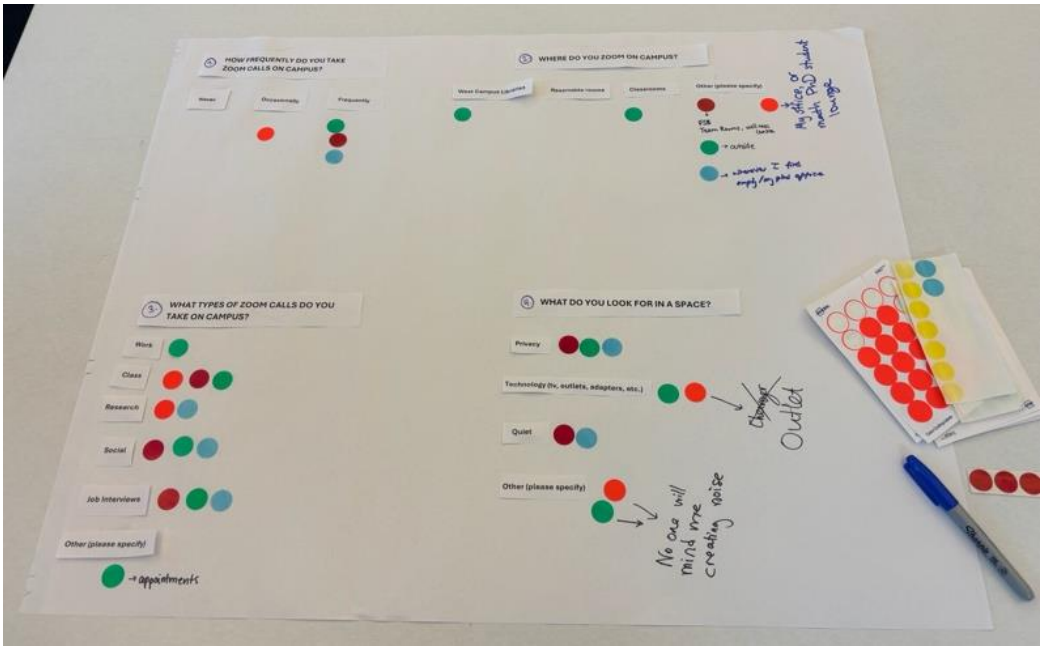

Figure 1

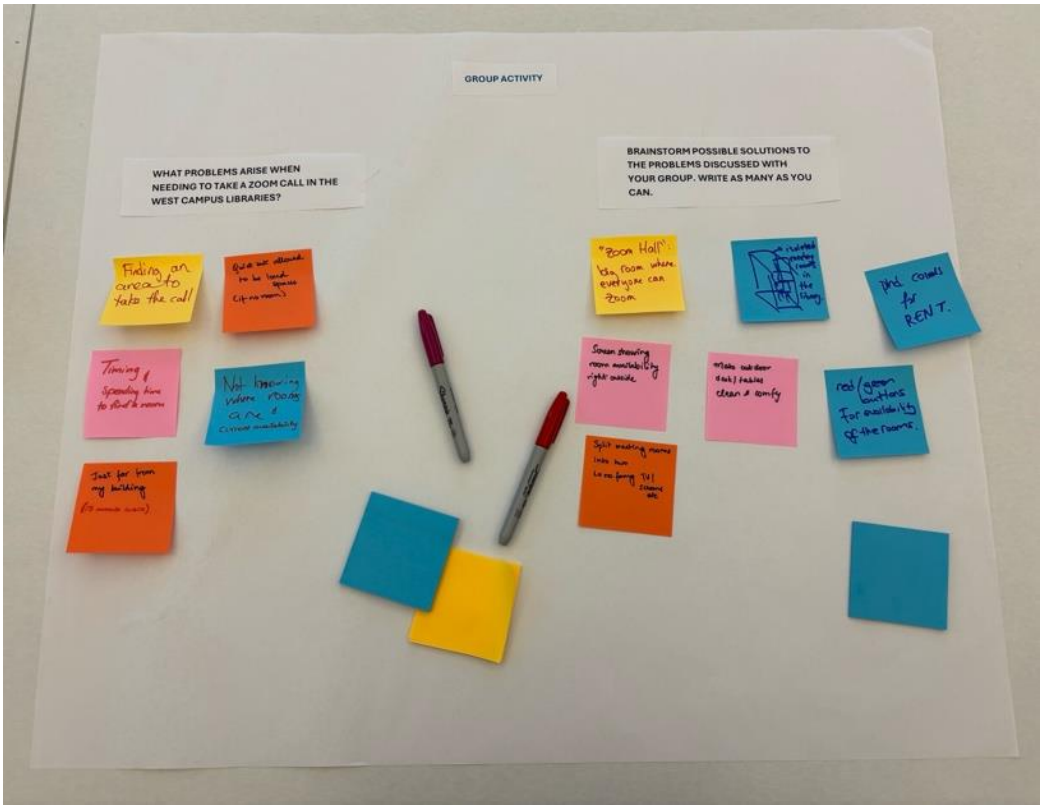

Figure 2

Participants

This study drew on insights from eight students—four undergraduates and four graduate students—who participated in focus group discussions facilitated by Duke University Libraries' Assessment and User Experience Strategy (AUXS) Department. These students were members of the department's two student advisory boards, which meet two to three times per semester to provide feedback on library services and operations. Their perspectives offered valuable qualitative data on the challenges and needs associated with using library spaces for Zoom meetings.

Detailed Findings

Dot Voting & Discussion

Of the eight students who participated in the focus groups, seven reported using Zoom on campus frequently, aligning with findings from the library's student survey which indicated that virtual meetings commonly occur at Duke. However, when asked where Zoom meetings most commonly occur on campus, students mention DUL less frequently.

Graduate Students

Participant	How often do you Zoom on campus?	Where do you Zoom on campus?	What types of Zoom calls do you take on campus?	What do you look for in possible areas to Zoom in?
Participant 1	Frequently	West Campus libraries, classrooms, outside	Work; class; social; job interviews; appointments	Privacy; technology; where no one will mind noise
Participant 2	Occasionally	Office; math PhD student lounge	Class; research	Okay space to talk; outlets
Participant 3	Frequently	Main academic building for their program; wellness center	Class; social; job interviews	Reservable room; quiet space; privacy
Participant 4	Frequently	"wherever I find empty"; PhD office/library carrel	Research; social; job interviews	Privacy; quiet

Undergraduate Students

Participant	How often do you Zoom on campus?	Where do you frequently Zoom on campus?	What types of Zoom calls do you take on campus?	What do you look for in possible areas to Zoom in?
Participant 1	Frequently	Any quiet area	Tutoring	Private, enclosed space
Participant 2	Frequently	Their own room or outside	Job interviews; work calls; seminars	Private areas with note much sound leakage
Participant 3	Frequently	Divinity School Zoom Pods or outside	Job interviews; work calls	Private areas
Participant 4	Frequently	Any private/quiet area	N/A	Rooms where doors can be shut

Challenges & Solutions

This section of the report answers the research question: "What are students' experiences with using Zoom in the West Campus Libraries, and what solutions do they prefer for addressing the challenges they encounter?".

As part of the focus group sessions, students were asked to identify challenges they face when taking Zoom calls in DUL and to brainstorm possible solutions. Students seemed to have found it easier to articulate the challenges they face than to generate solutions, particularly given the constraint that DUL cannot add or purchase new private rooms for Zoom calls. Their responses reflected a range of concerns tied to the physical environment, reservation system functionality, and communication around room use.

Across both groups, undergraduates and graduates, students emphasized the importance of having access to private, acoustically secure spaces, and voiced frustration over frequent disruptions and limited availability of suitable rooms. They also cited difficulty in finding and reserving spaces—especially on short notice—and confusion around how to navigate the reservation system or interpret room status in real time.

To address these issues, participants proposed a mix of system improvements and environmental interventions. These included enhancements to the room reservation platform (such as check-in/check-out features), clearer communication of room use policies and expectations, and the introduction of alternative Zoom-friendly spaces like a "Zoom Hall". Additionally, students suggested practical, low-cost solutions such as using room dividers to increase capacity in larger spaces.

Challenges

1. **Privacy:** Participants underscored the necessity of access to private, acoustically secure spaces for attending Zoom meetings. While several students identified phone booths (located in the Divinity School Library) option—citing their relative quiet and privacy—reservable rooms were critiqued for poor sound insulation, which allowed disruptive noise to pass both in and out. Students are both concerned with being interrupted and interrupting others. In addition, students reported frequent intrusions during their Zoom calls, as others entered their room despite its reservation. Despite their advantages, the phone booths were described as insufficient in number and frequently unavailable, often leaving students with no alternative but to conduct virtual meetings from their dormitory rooms.

2. **Room Availability & Reservation Constraints:** Students reported frustration with both the availability of rooms and the limitations of the current reservation system. Many reported that rooms are often fully booked during peak academic hours, making it difficult to find a space when they need it most—particularly for urgent or unplanned Zoom meetings. In addition, the policy limiting students to one reservation per day further restricts flexibility for those with multiple virtual commitments. Several participants also noted that the reservation system is not intuitive and that it's difficult to assess room availability at a glance, due to lack of clear indicators such as signage or digital displays. These factors combine to create a system that students perceive to be inflexible, unclear, and often misaligned with their scheduling needs.

Solutions

1. **Enhanced Room Reservation Policies and System Features**: To optimize room usage and reduce reservation conflicts, students suggest that enhancements to the current reservation system should be explored. DUL currently sends confirmation and reminder emails to students upon booking, which include links to cancel the reservation if needed. While these measures support responsible room use, additional system features could further improve access and efficiency. For example, implementing check-in/check-out functionality could help automatically release rooms that go unused, making them available to others in real time. A pilot or limited-scope test of such features would allow the library to assess their feasibility, impact on space availability, and student adoption.

2. **Reserved Room Expectations Communication:** To reduce confusion and improve the overall room reservation experience, students recommended enhancing communication around room usage policies and expectations. While students currently receive confirmation and reminder emails upon booking, these messages could be revised to more clearly convey key guidelines—such as expected start and end times, the importance of canceling unneeded reservations, and norms around privacy and noise.

   In particular, students expressed frustration with frequent interruptions during Zoom calls, even when they had a room reserved. This suggests a need for clearer signage or visual indicators (e.g., "In Use" signs) on doors, and stronger messaging to the broader library community about respecting reserved spaces. Additionally, participants noted uncertainty around the daily reservation limit and how to interpret room availability at a glance, indicating that communications could also include tips for navigating the reservation system and troubleshooting common issues.

   Beyond automated emails, periodic outreach—such as a beginning-of-semester guide or reminders during peak times—may help reinforce respectful and effective room use, especially for new students or those unfamiliar with DUL systems.

3. **Zoom Hall:** This solution responds to the need for accessible alternatives when private rooms are unavailable. By offering communal Zoom spaces that tolerate a higher noise threshold, DUL could alleviate the demand for acoustically secure rooms while reducing pressure on limited phone booths and reservable rooms. A Zoom Hall has the potential to accommodate students who need a space on short notice while alleviating concerns about disrupting others during virtual meetings.

   However, this approach comes with limitations. Due to the shared and open nature of such environments, communal Zoom spaces would not be appropriate for confidential or sensitive virtual meetings. Additionally, without clear expectations and sound management strategies, noise levels in these spaces could rise to the point of distraction, potentially reducing their effectiveness as a productive alternative.

4. **Low-Cost Spatial Division with Existing Rooms:** To improve the efficiency of existing reservable spaces, participants proposed low-cost physical dividers—such as curtains, cloth partitions, or mobile whiteboards—as a means to subdivide larger rooms. This approach could increase room capacity and usability, particularly in cases where a single student occupies a space intended for six to eight individuals. By enabling multiple users to share one room while maintaining a degree of visual separation, the library could better accommodate demand during peak hours.

   However, while this strategy may improve spatial efficiency, it offers limited benefits in terms of sound insulation and may not meet the needs of students seeking privacy for sensitive or

confidential virtual meetings. Nonetheless, it represents a feasible interim solution that can be implemented with minimal cost and infrastructure changes.

Next Steps

The student-generated recommendations in this report have been informally prioritized based on two key criteria: ease of implementation and potential impact on the student experience. This initial prioritization is meant to guide short-term action and inform ongoing conversations within the libraries. However, a more structured cost-benefit analysis may be necessary to fully evaluate the feasibility, resource implications, and long-term sustainability of each recommendation.

The next step should involve presenting these recommendations to relevant DUL leadership and departments, such as Facilities & Distribution Services, Research and Public Services, and Digital Strategies and Technology, as well as Communications staff. Their input will be critical for assessing technical feasibility, operational fit, and alignment with existing policies and infrastructure.

Where feasible, pilot tests or low-cost prototypes (e.g., temporary signage or a trial of check-in/check-out software) may help evaluate the effectiveness of proposed solutions before broader rollouts. Similarly, ongoing student input—either through advisory boards or surveys—should be incorporated to refine any implementations based on real-time feedback.

Additional next steps to consider:

- **Reviewing and updating digital reservation systems** for usability improvements and better alignment with student expectations.
- **Mapping available room types and capacities** across DUL to identify where adjustments (e.g., dividers or repurposing) may be most beneficial.
- **Developing targeted communications** (e.g., beginning-of-semester email campaigns, signage, or in-app guidance) to clarify room policies and availability.

By approaching the recommendations with both student needs and operational realities in mind, DUL can make meaningful, incremental improvements that enhance the Zoom experience across its West Campus Libraries.

APPENDIX A: Focus Group Agenda

Activities for Focus Groups on 4/3/25 and 4/8/25

- **Introductions and an icebreaker**
    - Tell us your name and one fun thing you've done since the last time we met (about a month ago)
- **Introduce the topic:**
    - "Today, we're going to talk about students taking Zoom calls on campus, with a focus on the West Campus libraries—Perkins, Bostock, and Rubenstein. Survey feedback shows this is a common issue, so we'll use our time today to explore it further. We'll start with a few individual reflection questions, then break into small groups to brainstorm challenges and possible solutions."
- **Dot voting** with introductory questions
    - How frequently do you take Zoom calls on campus?
    - What types of Zoom calls do take on campus?
        - Class
        - Work
        - Job Interviews
        - Research
        - Social
        - Other (please specify)
    - Where do you typically Zoom on campus?
    - Do you ever Zoom in the West Campus libraries (Perkins, Bostock, Rubenstein)?
    - What do you look for in a space?
    - Is it distracting when other students take Zoom calls from the libraries?
    - *Backup if students don't really take calls on campus* – "we've collected survey data that shows students are doing this, imagine you were in this situation, can you think about some barriers" (basically fast forward to the first group option, ask them to put themselves in the shoes of students who do use the library to take Zoom calls)
- **Group Stickies**- Brainstorm struggles/problems
    - What problems arise when needing to take a Zoom call in the West Campus Libraries?
        - *Discuss in small groups and write down all the problems or potential problems on sticky notes.*
- **Group Stickies** - Brainstorm solutions and alternatives (to individual rooms)
    - What are some possible solutions to the problems that we discussed earlier?
    - Take time to discuss them in the same groups and write down possible solutions on sticky notes
        - *If they mention Zoom rooms* encourage them to do more brainstorming.

APPENDIX B: Images

Duke Libraries Reservable Study Room

Divinity Library Phone Booths

APPENDIX C: Digital Dot Voting & Stickies

For record keeping purposes student responses were transferred to the following digital white board: https://www.figma.com/board/wvNDuh4Pn59ybXuX0esFHQ/Advisory-Boards?node-id=0-1&p=f&t=qNoNRUW9CyIfnonW-0