A final course project. Years ago, the ideal study space was a secluded wooden carrel with a shelf for books. Today, it might be an Agati pod, mod modular furniture also in the microclimates that, which when arranged in a serpentine formation allows students to be “alone together,” the preferred Gen Z mode of study. Beyond adapting to changes in study habits and modes of learning, the Libraries strive to be proactive in responding to larger societal shifts.

The evolution of the Library environment takes many forms and comes in all sizes, from updating a sign on a restroom door to reconfiguring the Learning Commons’ layout, and the adaptations are data-informed, not random. Gathering information on how students use the Library is a unique team of researchers: other students. “Data keeps us grounded,” is how Sarah Hutton, Head of Undergraduate Teaching and Learning Services, puts it.

This ethnographic approach to research began with a conversation five years ago between Hutton and anthropology professor Art Keene. Out of that talk came a pilot course bringing anthro students into the Library to do research. Anthropology professor Krista Harper took over the project when Keene retired a year later. Since then, Harper, Hutton, and Learning Commons Coordinator Carol Will have been steadily deploying forms and comes in all sizes, from updating a sign on a restroom door to reconfiguring the Learning Commons’ layout, and the adaptations are data-informed, not random.

The undergrad research project is an ideal situation, says Harper; “a chance to work with a client committed to the user experience. I’ve never met anyone more service-oriented than people who work at the Library.” Students hone their research skills, grow their CVs, and build foundations for careers. “Some of the undergraduates have published their work,” notes Harper. “Grad students have presented their work at professional conferences.”

For students, the research project is a chance to "alone together," the preferred Gen Z mode of study. Beyond adapting to changes in study habits and modes of learning, the Libraries strive to be proactive in responding to larger societal shifts.

The research culminates in public presentations to library staff. Says Hutton, ‘‘Staff come from all over the Library, everyone is interested.”

Beginning the process are consultations with staff who share their “questions, problems, spaces to be renovated or reimagined,” says Harper. “How do students use the spaces, and which do they prefer? How does studying at the Library compare with a dorm room or a café? How do students find resources? What’s underused? What’s missing?”

Not all insights can be acted on during financial planning. But many issues that come to light are addressed without delay. For example, one study found that when a group of students who needed a group study room saw it occupied by just one person they were reluctant to oust them. “A group of students who needed a group study room saw it occupied by just one person they were reluctant to oust them,” says Harper.

How do you feel when you walk into a public place: energized or intimidated? Secure? Uneasy?

Walk into the W.E.B. Du Bois Library just about any time of the day or night, and the vibe can be summed up in a word busy. Students are making the most of Du Bois’s spaces and services, whether hunkered down at computer stations, poring over texts in quiet study areas, putting their heads together over a class project, or building a 3D prototype in the Digital Media Lab. Of course, there might be someone taking a study break, aka a nap, on one of the lime green couches in the “microclimates” area—a space for students to test out new furniture. There’s more to this obvious success story than meets the eye—at least the untrained eye. For starters, this academic hive didn’t just happen. The Library works hard to cultivate and sustain the busyness. Underpinning efforts is research: into how students learn, how they use technology, how they interact with librarians, how they perceive the Library, how it makes them feel.

In a landscape where term papers used to be the norm, now a video or PowerPoint presentation might serve as a final course project. Years ago, the ideal study space was

Students study alone together on Agati pod furniture.

"We never met anyone more service-oriented than people who work at the Library," says Krista Harper, Professor of Anthropology.

Illustration by Chloe Deeley ’17
reserves, interlibrary loan, and a writing center, all located on the same floor, the LC setup of separate service desks hasn’t been as user-friendly as hoped. Addressing this is no small undertaking—it involves shifting people, desks, equipment, and storage space around—but a plan to reconfigure the layout of the Lower Level and consolidate even more services into one service desk is moving ahead this summer.

“As the research project has evolved, it has probed more deeply into users’ perceptions, sometimes with unsettling results. Some students of color said they experienced areas of the Learning Commons as ‘white spaces’—unwelcoming to non-white students.”

Ashley Carpenter, a PhD student in the College of Education, looked at interactions between staff and students, interviewing about 40 librarians and staff, and 25 students, all men of color. She noted “nuanced cases,” where a student might have asked for help and been told curtly he’d come to the wrong department, or had similar interactions that made him feel he didn’t belong. Were the slights intended, the dismissiveness real? Whether or not they were real, such experiences still discourage a student from asking for help again anytime soon.

Not every issue can be so quickly and easily resolved. Resources are finite, and some solutions call for trade-offs. Carol Will acknowledges that creating the microclimates—a big hit with students—meant sacrificing a few group study rooms. During her last sabbatical, Will visited about 75 libraries. “Newly built and newly renovated libraries emphasize flexibility,” she notes. “The furniture is movable.” Libraries, she believes, have to be versatile in a lot of other ways as well. “What happens when students come in with a new device that we need to support? It’s hard to anticipate needs, but we’ve got to be ready to experiment, to try new things. And we can never lose sight of our audience.”

Some UMass students see the Library as a place to avoid distractions and focus: “When I’m in the Library, my mental state of mind is that ‘I am studying,’” was how one student put it. To others, it may represent a source of community, of friends. An international student reports she feels at home just seeing a shelf of books in her native language in the stacks.