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Place Association Leads to Better Productivity and Mental Health

Introduction:

During quarantine, my school switched to 100% online learning, this was from the middle of my freshman year during 2020 until the end of my sophomore year at the end of 2021. Before quarantine, I was one of the few people who enjoyed going to school. I liked seeing my friends, learning new things, but most importantly, I was able to see how my hard work paid off. I would feel proud when I got back a good grade on a project or test. It told me that I was doing the right thing and that I could do anything I set my mind to. Going to school kept me motivated since my peers would always compare grades and discuss ideas we had been working on. However, this all changed when school went online. I could no longer feel the pressure of walking into a classroom to present a project, I couldn't debate ideas easily, and I couldn't easily ask for help if I was struggling. My entire world had been reduced to a computer screen in my dining room. Rather than getting back a grade on paper and feeling the collective anxiety in a classroom, it was just another number on a screen. I realized over time that I needed a place to be productive, or else I would get nothing done and get distracted. That is why having different places to study, work, and relax will lead to better productivity and mental health.

Background:

Computers and the internet let us order something online and have it shipped to our door, rather than needing to drive to the store. They let us play games with friends online and post about ourselves to showcase our best moments and attributes. However, this has decreased the operant conditioning that our brain used to associate with the places involved. Operant conditioning is the study of reversible behavior maintained by reinforcement schedules. By going to a physical location, the brain has associations with the activity performed in that place. When you go to a store, the brain knows it is going to pick out items to buy. The multiple functionalities of computers means that the brain does not have a specific association with it. When you go online shopping, it is possible to get distracted by the news and other websites. With most assignments being online, it is impossible to avoid using a computer, that is why it is important to condition the brain to associate the location with the activity versus the object used to complete it.

Many companies have been incentivizing and mandating the return to the office in order to increase productivity. For example, Amazon and Meta have reportedly mandated employees to return to offices at least three days per week, with managers tracking attendance. Failure to comply could mean termination for that employee. For now, it is hard to gauge whether these tech-giants will start a trend with office mandates. However, even with the recommendations, many employees are still refusing to return to the office, despite their productivity being lower online. Many offices are also opting for a hybrid schedule, by asking employees to come in four days or less. However, this can decrease collaboration since at least one person out of the team will not be there. This requires a zoom meeting in order for the team to discuss ideas and collaborate. This topic remains controversial because many employees still refuse to go to office

the number of the days they were asked, and they do not get reprimanded since they still get their work done and managers fear them impulsively quitting if they enforce the policies.

Operant conditioning associates place with activity, increasing focus:

Operant conditioning is the best way to help focus while studying at a specific place. As stated previously, this is reversible behavior that is reinforced with schedules. One of the main parts of operant condition is chain schedules, this refers to “a stimulus change, rather than primary reinforcement, is scheduled.” (Staddon). Based on the study that was conducted, the participants exhibited the same amount of observable behavior with a schedule, however, over time the behavior increases slowly. This idea can be applied to having different places to associate activities. When the stimulus, or in this case location, is reinforced with the activity, either studying or relaxing, then the behavior will be increased. This idea is relevant because it explains how the behavior will be connected to the place and how it is reinforced. For example, a college student may choose to study in the library, overtime, the student will be less likely to get distracted since they have associations with studying in the library. However, if the student does not have associations with studying at a specific place, then they will be less likely to get distracted since they will have the reinforcement schedule.

College students prefer to study outside of their dorms:

College students prefer to study outside of their dorm since they feel more productive and can focus more. I conducted a survey with 42 college students that described different types of scenarios they would either work or relax in. The scenarios included, “you have a ten page paper due tomorrow”, “you have time between classes to get assignments done”, “it is after class and you want to relax”, and “it is between classes and you want to relax.” With each of these

situations, they were asked where they wanted to get the task done and why they preferred that spot. According to the survey, for the large paper, 50% of the students preferred to do the assignment in their dorm and the other 50% of participants were split between various study spots across campus. For working between classes, 74.7% of students preferred to work around campus rather than in their dorms. The main reasons included lighting, comfortable seating, and proximity to classes (Gardiner). Lastly, survey participants said that they feel more productive when they work outside of their dorm. This helps prove that college students work better when they are outside of their dorms, and they prefer to have a specific place where they repeatedly study. Along with feeling more productive, it also allowed the students to have different places to work that is in a more convenient proximity to either the next class or activity. It also extends that college students prefer to choose the location depending on the type of assignment, approaching deadline, or most convenient spot, college students need a different place to work on assignments and focus so they can be productive.

Soft location factors are important when picking place:

Soft location factors, such as culture, have bigger importance than hard factors, such as access to water, depending on where someone studies. According to a study done by Blaire Weidler, Jay Pratt, and Julie Bugg, businesses and firms choose office locations based on soft factors rather than hard location factors. They say that “our findings support theories positing that LSPC [location-specific proportion compatibility] effects reflect location-specific attentional *control*, and more generally suggest that choosing a definition of location is not a minor methodological decision but critically impacts learning and transfer of location-specific control.” (Weidler). This means that the environment or place a person chooses should match the activity. This is an extremely useful idea since it sheds light on the type of place that should be associated

with an activity. For instance, if a student wants to work on a large research project, a quiet environment with other students working would be better than a dining hall. The quiet environment would offer less distractions even though the dining hall has better proximity to food and water. This can apply to college students because they have the ability to choose where they study between classes and will do so based on the environment and culture of that place. While the dining hall may have better hard location factors, most students will prefer to study in the library due to the soft-location factors. This shows that having a different environment to study in will lead to better productivity since the culture and soft-location factors impact the decision to study at a specific place.

Having boundaries between work and home life will improve mental health:

Working in the same place as resting will dramatically alter one's productivity and mental health. One study by Harvard Business Review says that "Unless you are careful to maintain boundaries, you may start to feel you're always at work and lose a place to come home to" (Harvard Business Review). This is a great point since it illustrates how relaxation can be impacted by work when clear boundaries are not set. One of the best ways to do this is by having separate places to relax than work. The study also talks about how integrating the tools a person uses to work into how a person relaxes will also increase stress levels. The subject in the case study said that "she never uploaded work emails to her phone, so that she wouldn't be tempted to check messages at all hours of the day" (Harvard Business Review). This is also a good point since it also creates a boundary between relaxing and working. This allows a person to take their mind off the stressors, such as homework, work, and upcoming deadlines and allows them to relax better. For college students specifically, it is important for them to have these associations with locations, since they use their phones and laptops to relax and work. This increases the

importance because students will not have the specific associations with the object for the activity, so when they use their laptop or phone they will not be inclined to do any specific activity. This is why having different places to do work and relax will lead to better productivity since the boundaries will be more clear.

The place a person learns will have a big impact on memorization:

Environment plays one of the largest roles when it comes to learning styles and memorization. Learning styles refers to the way a person begins to concentrate, process, absorb, and retain new and difficult information (Pashler). Environment and location play a large role in this because just like how individuals have preferences for their learning styles, they will also have preferences for where they prefer to study and be productive. These processes are influenced by environmental, emotional, sociological, physiological, and global/analytic variables (Pashler). Physiological, global, and physiological elements can be used to describe the place a person chooses to learn and study. While these impacts are different for every person, it can still greatly impact a person's ability to learn and memorize information, which is why location is so important when it comes to studying. For college students, especially since classes offer more freedom and assign more work. The differences in learning styles become more apparent, some function better in quiet environments alone, while others prefer to discuss problems collaboratively in a social atmosphere. This emphasizes that having a different place to learn new subjects in is extremely important since the information will be associated with that place which will make it easier to remember on a test, since it will be associated with more than just the other course material.

Counterargument:

Some may argue that college students prefer a private space to study and relax, rather than different places. While college provides a time of exploration and development, one of the many crucial components to this is a student's sense of belonging. According to University of Richmond, "students spend an inordinate amount of time studying, interacting and sleeping in their dorms, so it is important to provide an environment that is conducive to these activities taking place" (University of Richmond). In order to facilitate this sense of belonging, students need to feel a sense of ownership and privacy to improve their mental health. In a dorm room, this can come from decorations to make the space more connected to each person. However, concentration increases when working in particular spaces, so while having a dorm room that a student is comfortable in is beneficial to mental health, that will not increase productivity since that space will be associated with relaxing or other activities. It is better for a college student to study outside of their dorm room, so they can associate their dorm with relaxing and have a separate space to study in. This will also allow college students to meet people outside of their dorms and get more work done.

Conclusion:

With these discoveries, I have been trying to find better times and places to study and do work. I have started working more between my classes so my bed and chair in my dorm can be specifically reserved for when I am trying to relax. For example, if I am going to Turner Place between classes, I try to only do work and avoid going on my phone. Over time, I began to notice that it became easier to focus on the work I was trying to complete. This was because I could only think about doing my work in that place. I have also tried to decrease the amount of

work I do in my dorm, and trying to relax more when I am in there. This has led me to be able to focus on my other hobbies, rather than constantly thinking about homework after class. So, having different places to work, study, and relax will lead to better productivity and mental health for college students.

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Appendix

Impact of Location on Activity Survey

For this survey, participants were asked about different scenarios and asked where they study, work, and relax, and the key features about this spot.

Scenario 1: You have a 10 page paper assigned weeks ago that is due tomorrow

Question 1: Where is your favorite spot to get this done?

Newman library

Squires Student Center

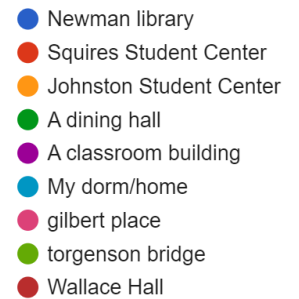
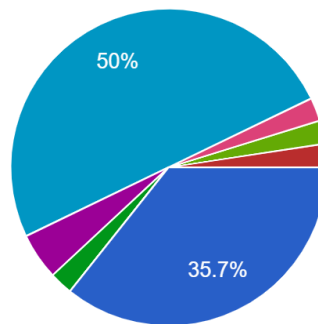
Johnston Student Center

A dining hall

A classroom building

My dorm/home

Other...



Question 2: What are your favorite features of this spot?

Quiet

Space to Spread Out

Private

Network and power

Lighting

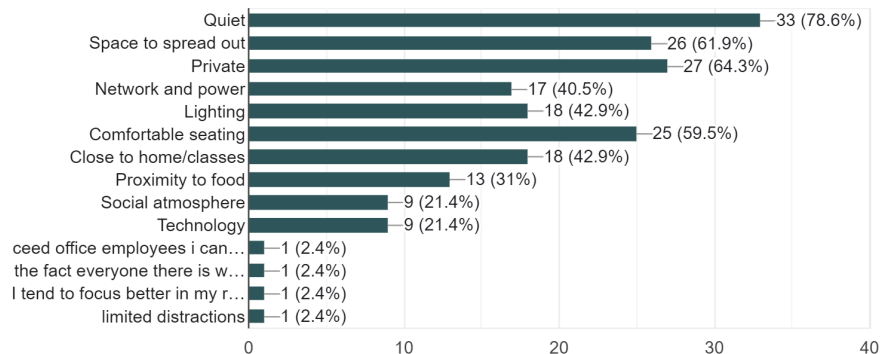
Comfortable seating

Close to home/classes

Proximity to food

Social atmosphere

Technology



Other...

Scenario 2: You are between classes and have some time to do smaller assignments

Question 1: Where is your favorite spot to get this done?

Newman library

Squires Student Center

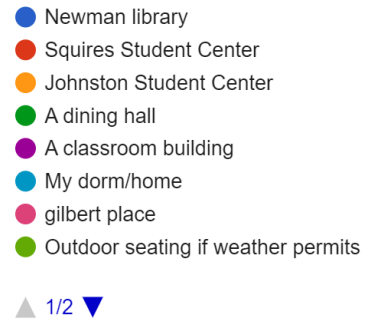
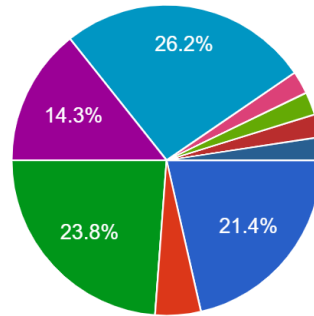
Johnston Student Center

A dining hall

A classroom building

My dorm/home

Other...



Question 2: What are your favorite features of this spot?

Quiet

Space to Spread Out

Private

Network and power

Lighting

Comfortable seating

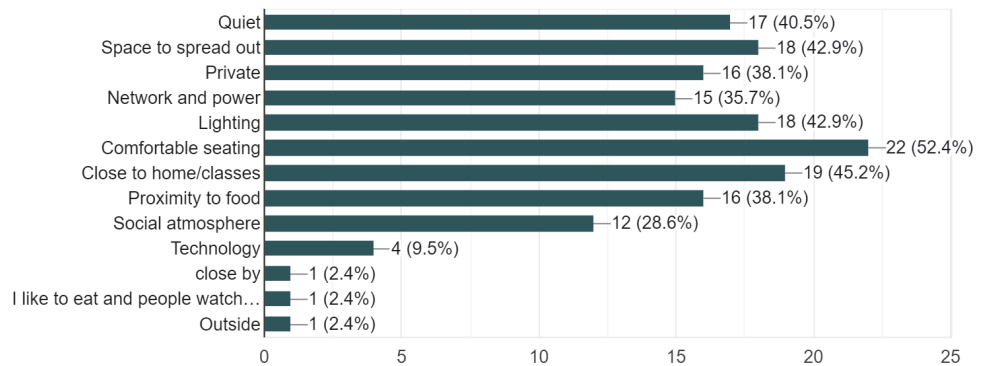
Close to home/classes

Proximity to food

Social atmosphere

Technology

Other...



Scenario 3: It is after classes and you want to relax

Question 1: Where is your favorite spot to get this done?

Newman library

Squires Student Center

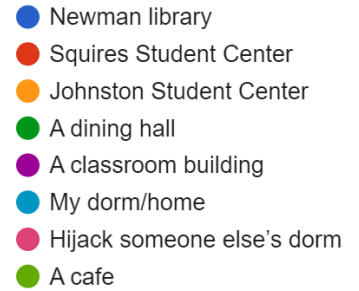
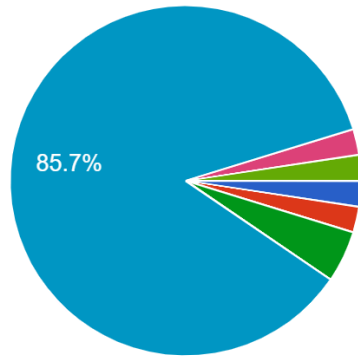
Johnston Student Center

A dining hall

A classroom building

My dorm/home

Other...



Question 2: What are your favorite features of this spot?

Quiet

Space to Spread Out

Private

Network and power

Lighting

Comfortable seating

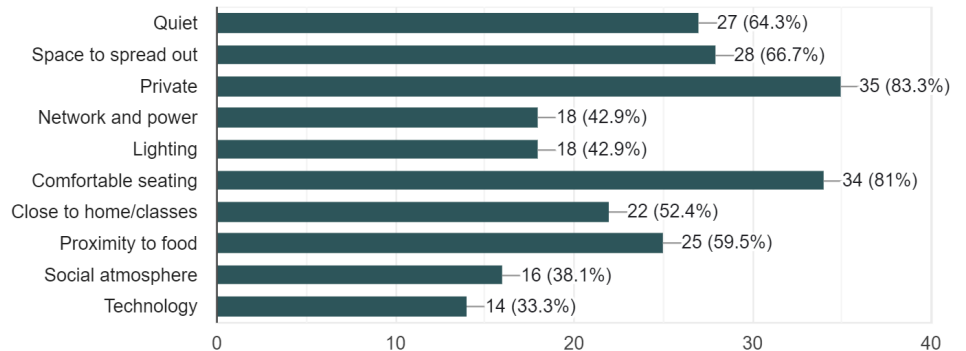
Close to home/classes

Proximity to food

Social atmosphere

Technology

Other...



Scenario 4: It is between classes and you want to relax

Question 1: Where is your favorite spot to get this done?

Newman library

Squires Student Center

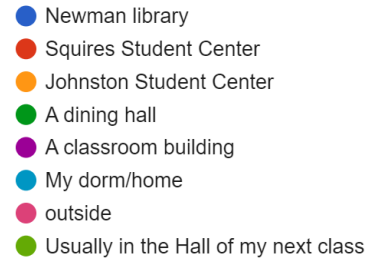
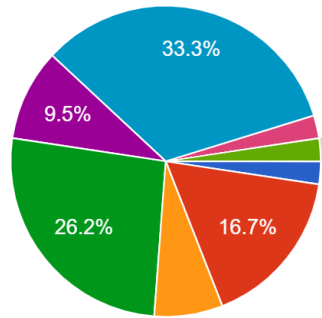
Johnston Student Center

A dining hall

A classroom building

My dorm/home

Other...



Question 2: What are your favorite features of this spot?

Quiet

Space to Spread Out

Private

Network and power

Lighting

Comfortable seating

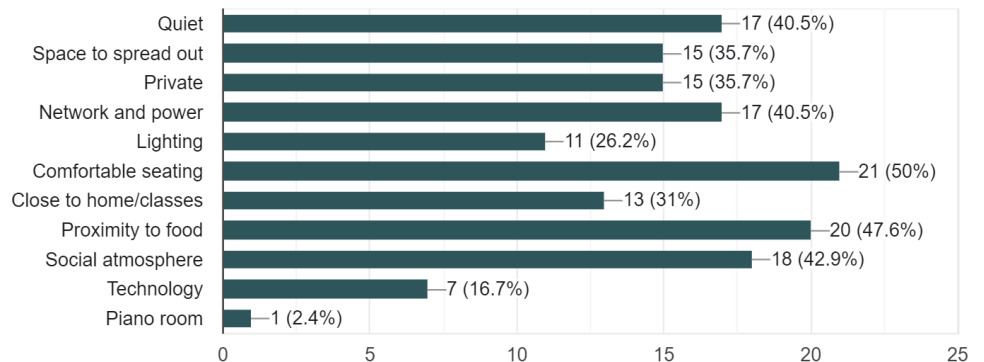
Close to home/classes

Proximity to food

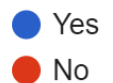
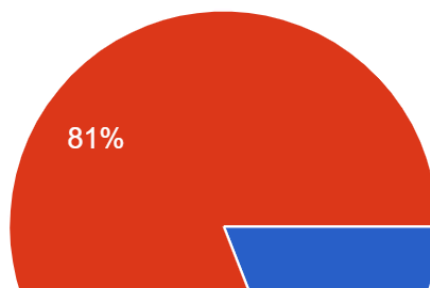
Social atmosphere

Technology

Other...



Do you have a fixed schedule for when you study?



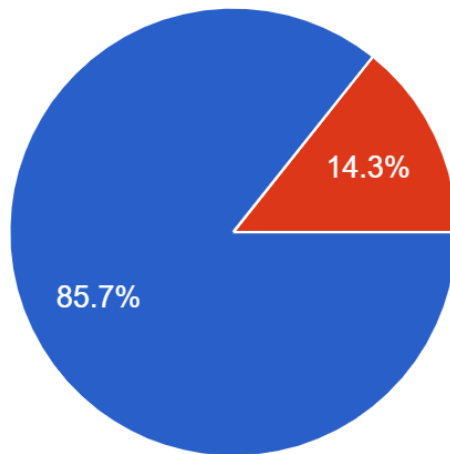
Yes

No

Do you study in the same place repeatedly?

Yes

No



Do you feel more focused when you study outside of your dorm?

Yes

No

