



# The Library as a Campus Spiritual Space: Evidence from Student Focus Groups

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**abstract:** Anecdotal evidence implies that students use library spaces for spiritual practices at many colleges and universities. Using focus groups, the authors investigated students' prayer behaviors on four regional campuses of a large research university, asking questions about students' frequency of prayer, campus areas used for devotions, and students' ideal campus prayer space. Students at all four campuses used library spaces for religious or spiritual observances. However, they indicated that a room designated for such activities would be ideal. In selecting a campus location for daily prayer, students reported using whatever space was available and convenient at the time.

## Introduction

**L**ibraries accommodate a spectrum of activities from traditional studying to socializing and gaming; they may even offer spaces for nursing mothers or for prayer and reflection. Even if libraries do not designate specific spaces for these purposes, library users often make the available places work for their needs, including spiritual practices. They may use study rooms, classrooms, enclosed stairwells, and even the stacks to pray, meditate, or read spiritual texts. As these activities often occur without staff knowledge, it is important that library professionals are aware of prayer behaviors and other spiritual practices that they might witness in their libraries. Staff reaction to religious observance in the library, positive or negative, could have a profound impact on students'

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*portal: Libraries and the Academy*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2021), pp. 465–483.

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feelings of welcome or belonging. Cultural competency related to students' spiritual practices can help libraries become more welcoming to students who need a place to pray during their studies.

In 2018, after several years of firsthand observation and secondhand stories of students using academic library spaces for spiritual activities across multiple institutions, the authors sought undergraduate student perspectives. They conducted focus groups at four regional campuses of a large research university to gather the information. The guiding research questions for the authors were:

- Where do students pray on campus?
- What kinds of prayer practices do students conduct?
- Are these practices occurring in the library? If yes, why? If no, why not?
- What can the library and the campus as a whole do to best meet students' spiritual and religious needs in terms of physical accommodation?

Discussion questions in each group asked participants to describe their prayer behavior—where, how, and how frequently, as well as their perception of others' prayer activities on campus. Additionally, students were asked if they prayed in the library, and whether they used a designated library prayer space, if one existed. Students were also asked to describe their level of comfort in practicing their religion on campus and their ideal attributes for a hypothetical campus prayer area. Through these questions, the authors hoped to learn about the spiritual use of library spaces and how the library may already meet or could meet those needs.

Prior to this study, the authors conducted a national study of library professionals and found that library employees have observed students using the library to conduct religious and spiritual practices of all kinds, regardless of academic institution classification, including size, scope, and secular or religious affiliation.<sup>1</sup> There are several assumptions as to why students use the library for spiritual observances. Academic libraries have intrinsic qualities that make them conducive for such purposes, including long hours, private or semiprivate spaces, a quiet atmosphere, and often a convenient or central campus location.

In this study, the authors interrogated those assumptions by using focus groups to investigate undergraduate students' explanations of why they pray in particular locations on campus, including the library. The authors found that, although focus group participants affirmed the assumption that academic libraries have environmental qualities that meet or could meet their needs for spiritual observances, the students would prefer a separate designated location with convenient access that is central and that works for multiple faiths. Ultimately, their ideal space was surprisingly simple. While libraries may offer such facilities, it would be beneficial to collaborate with other campus units and consider individual campus contexts in the development of a spiritual space. Libraries strive to create flexible, user-centered spaces that meet the needs of many. Therefore, libraries are well-suited to contribute to the conversation about campus prayer spaces.



## Literature Review

### Spiritual Spaces in Higher Education

Spiritual spaces in academic libraries, which may include meditation or relaxation areas in addition to prayer rooms or chapels, are reported in the news media.<sup>2</sup> Within the library literature, there is little or no scholarly exploration of these spaces in academic libraries, nor research that features students' perspectives on the use of library facilities for spiritual or religious activities, though there is a great deal of space analysis in general. Examinations of flexible, shared spaces as well as accommodations for distinct populations (for example, graduate students, international students, and students with children) highlight the role of library space as a service and the importance of inclusiveness in library facilities.<sup>3</sup> While libraries are not churches, many older academic libraries were designed to resemble cathedrals.<sup>4</sup> Libraries in general are traditionally designed to evoke a sacred feeling in visitors.<sup>5</sup>

Outside the library discipline, there is some exploration of the commonality of prayer spaces and their attributes. David Gregory conducted a survey of religiously affiliated American Bar Association-accredited law schools to determine the prevalence of prayer rooms on their campuses. He found that most schools provided some type of prayer room, chapel, or similar resource directly within the law school or nearby.<sup>6</sup> The existence of these spaces at a religious institution seems natural, and the author ultimately advocates for more of them, specifically in sectarian settings. At secular institutions, there is a growing body of literature from the student affairs and student life perspective that advocates supporting the spiritual growth of undergraduate students. College students undergo a time of heightened self-exploration and discovery, which may highlight the need for spiritual spaces on campus, such as multi-faith rooms, chapels, and religious centers.<sup>7</sup> Missing from much of this data gathering are students' voices, especially as they relate to the daily logistics of spiritual observance in an academic environment. Are the spaces provided adequate and useful? Do spiritual practices occur in locations beyond what is designated? If so, why, and where?

### Analyzing Spiritual Spaces

Analysis of spiritual spaces in secular environments in the literature is at present largely relegated to observational studies and qualitative data gathering, often captured from those who serve as stewards of these spaces or outside researchers, rather than gathered through interviews or conversations with those who use the spaces on a regular basis. Common secular locations for such rooms include hospitals, airports, and prisons.<sup>8</sup> They have also become more common in schools and universities.<sup>9</sup> It is generally established that spiritual spaces, which are envisioned to be shared by practitioners of many faiths, should be neutral enough to welcome all but designed in a manner that evokes a sacred feeling. In an ideal setting, these attributes might include a

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square room with walls upon which subtle directional markers could be placed for those who must pray in a specific orientation; movable and unobtrusive furniture that can be easily rearranged or put away; comfortable floor coverings that are cleaned regularly; a receptacle for shoes; a source of running water for ablution practices, either within or nearby; storage for items used by practitioners of each faith who will share the space, which could include a screen to separate genders during prayer; and, if possible, sound-proofing and an area large enough to accommodate groups.<sup>10</sup>

Problems might arise if creating a space neutral enough for all worshippers strips such spaces of sacred meaning. Stewards, many of whom are chaplains from a Christian

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tradition, might advertently or inadvertently design rooms or use furnishings to best facilitate traditionally Christian practices, such as chairs in rows with a central aisle and an altar or table at the front that might hold crosses or similar iconography. Such arrangements might make the space unwelcoming to non-Christians, which could be by design, as observed by Sophie Gilliat-Ray.<sup>11</sup> Guides to creating neutral, welcoming spaces exist, and generally establishing one would not require significant expenditures or renovations.<sup>12</sup>

While these guides to space design or renovation are helpful, they still lack the perspective of common users, and specifically, the voices of students who would use such a facility in an academic library or other location on a college or university campus.

#### **Space as a Service**

Providing academic library space for wider use by students and inclusion of potentially marginalized groups is a common theme in current library research, which often sees

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such accommodation as vital to the academic library's mission on campus. Ian Godfrey and his coauthors say, "Space is a service we provide as academic libraries, and our attitude toward space in our libraries has changed over time."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, academic libraries have explored student space use for both traditional library behaviors (such as studying, tutoring, reading, or group work) as well as less traditional library behaviors, such as sleeping and eating. They have

also considered providing areas for students who are parents or primary caregivers to ensure that the library's services are useful and adequate for diverse populations. Further, these studies have found that offering nontraditional services and spaces in the library may increase student retention or enhance the library's image as welcoming.<sup>14</sup>

The shift to digital delivery of library resources provides an impetus to reevaluate library space and restructure it to meet recognized needs in the shift from storage

and studying to social learning. The value of these spaces is evident when reviewing student demand for them, such as study rooms, as Scott Bennett notes: "While it would be hard to find any academic library project in the United States that does not now provide group study space, it would be equally hard to find a library that offers enough of such space."<sup>15</sup> Even though these spaces do not specifically deliver a traditional library service, they allow students to pursue self-directed learning and related activities, and share ownership in the library, demonstrating a learner-first orientation. The library should now be viewed as "a suite of services designed to meet a range of needs" that are flexible and active, not passive and fixed.<sup>16</sup> Such spaces can inspire students to learn and reflect; quiet areas among busier ones provide a wide variety of places for learning actively with peers or independently.<sup>17</sup>

### Spiritual Practices in the Academic Library

Library space assessments, while often centering students and their voices or preferences, do not directly address prayer, meditation, and other spiritual practices—common behaviors that occur with or without our knowledge. Holistic student learning encompasses intellectual growth as well as moral and emotional development. This personal development may drive a spiritual journey in college students as they build their identities, search for purpose, and try to find meaning in the world.<sup>18</sup> The spiritual practices that accompany such inward explorations are not relegated to traditional sacred spaces; students may use many places on campus for reflection, including the library. In a survey conducted by the authors, 50 percent of academic library professionals who responded indicated they had witnessed prayer in their library, and 25 percent of these respondents did not provide any type of spiritual space in the library. When asked to describe what they observed, respondents reported a wide variety of practices from Bible study to quiet reflection throughout the library, including in the stacks, study rooms, bathrooms, stairwells, and classrooms, in addition to designated spiritual areas, such as chapels or meditation rooms.<sup>19</sup>

Increasing the knowledge of library staff about patrons' religious and spiritual practices is an extension of cultural competency. Greater cultural competence in the library requires communication with groups whose culture is different from one's own, and these conversations can eventually lead to more inclusion and better services for that community as their needs are understood.<sup>20</sup> By listening directly to students who use library and other campus spaces for prayer when they speak about their experiences and their needs, librarians can explore what changes might improve the overall experience.

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## Methods

With the intention of capturing in-depth details about students' spiritual practices on campus from diverse religious perspectives, the authors chose focus groups for this study to facilitate conversations with and among students who self-reported praying at least weekly. While surveys include a larger pool of participants, it would be challenging for a survey to capture both the target demographic (students who regularly pray on campus) and their nuanced needs and preferences related to prayer spaces. Focus groups are the preferred method for bringing together participants who may not regularly talk to each other about a topic in which they might share a common need but have disparate customs.<sup>21</sup> The authors were interested in determining whether students of different spiritual backgrounds shared common preferences; therefore, focus groups were the appropriate research method to facilitate conversations among the students.

The authors' institution, Pennsylvania State University or Penn State, is a large land-grant research institution with multiple campuses dispersed across the state, encompassing nearly 70,000 undergraduate residential students.<sup>22</sup> The flagship campus in University Park has a well-known spiritual center across the street from the central library.<sup>23</sup> The authors chose to hold focus groups at campuses that either had no spiritual center or where the spiritual center, chapel, or other religious facility was not near the library. They hoped to recruit not only students who prayed regularly but also those who might have used a space in the library for prayer. The authors selected four of the five largest regional campuses geographically dispersed across the state in a mixture of rural and suburban settings. The four campuses also had high international undergraduate student enrollment in relation to overall campus population to broaden the participant pool to potentially include students from a wide range of religious denominations, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Two of the four campuses have a dedicated religious space on campus: one a freestanding chapel and the other a spiritual center within a student center. Each religious space has a congregational area and an individual prayer area. Although focus group data are not generalizable, the authors nevertheless looked for saturation, the point when adding more participants to the study among diverse campus settings would not result in additional perspectives or information.

In addition to general advertisements to the student body at each campus through fliers in the library and e-mail blasts, the authors also directly contacted advisers and presidents of all officially recognized student religious organizations on each campus, such as the Muslim Student Association, Catholic Student Association, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and Hillel, as well as cultural affinity groups such as multicultural associations and the Punjabi Cultural Association. The authors received Institutional Review Board approval for this research, and participants completed consent forms before taking part in the focus groups. The authors confirmed student participation via e-mail and notified them that they would receive a \$15 gift card and lunch during the focus group session.

Twenty-three students from four campus locations attended the focus groups. All students were full-time undergraduates, though this was not a requirement for participation. The largest focus group had nine students, and the smallest had six. One





**Table 1.**  
Focus group campus demographics

Campus	Total and international enrollment by campus, 2017–2018*			
	Total enrollment	International	Female	Male
Penn State Abington	3,893	378	1,986	1,907
Penn State Behrend	4,502	397	1,500	3,002
Penn State Berks	2,719	108	1,126	1,593
Penn State Harrisburg	5,077	650	2,070	3,007

Source: Penn State Office of Planning and Assessment, "Common Data Set, 2017–2018," <https://factbook.psu.edu/CDS/default.html>.

intended focus group became a key informant interview due to the participation of only one student; this student's perspective was deemed valuable enough to include in the data, though there were not enough students for a true focus group. For the sake of simplicity, the authors will refer to the data gathering as focus groups. Students were asked to complete a demographic intake form at the start of the study. Seventy percent of the participants identified as female, and 30 percent as male. Three (13 percent) of the students described themselves as international students. Students were also asked if they identified with a religion and if so, which. Two students indicated they did not belong to any religion. The remaining students declared that they followed Islam (11), Christianity (5), Catholicism (2), Hinduism (1), or Russian Orthodox Christianity (1), and one student identified with both Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Judaism. Eighty-three percent (19) of the students said they were currently part of a campus religious or spiritual group; 91 percent (21) reported praying daily. The remaining 9 percent (2) did so weekly.

The focus groups were held during the spring semester of 2018 and lasted approximately one hour each. Each focus group took place in the library at each of the four regional campuses. One author acted as a moderator, and the other took notes and summarized the discussions at the end. The notetaker also audio recorded the focus group for later transcription. The authors prepared six questions with follow-up probes to use if necessary to encourage discussion. The questions focused on understanding students' spiritual lives and their use of and preference for campus spaces, including the library, to meet any needs they might have involving prayer or spirituality. Q5, asking if students were aware of a space in the library for prayer or meditation, was included if it was relevant to the campus library. Student responses to these questions are included in the findings and have been lightly edited for clarity and readability. The discussion questions were:



**Table 2.**

Focus group participant classifications

Campus	Participants	Male	Female	International	Christian	Muslim	Jewish	Hindu	No affiliation
Penn State Abington	7*	1	6	1	4*	3	1*	0	0
Penn State Behrend	6	1	5	0	2	1	0	1	2
Penn State Berks	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Penn State Harrisburg	9	5	4	2	2	7	0	0	0

\*One student identified with more than one religion.

This mss. is peer reviewed, copy edited, and accepted for publication, portal 21.3.



- Q1. I'd like each of you to talk about the level of importance prayer has for you.  
P1a. How often do you pray?  
P1b. Describe your practice.
- Q2. In your experience, where do students pray on campus?
- Q3. Do you feel comfortable praying on campus?  
P3a. If yes, where do you feel comfortable praying on campus?  
P3b. Describe what about those spaces makes you feel comfortable.  
P3c. If no, why not? What are the barriers that keep you from being comfortable praying on campus?
- Q4. Have you ever prayed in the library?  
P4a. If yes, describe your experience praying in the library.  
P4b. What about the library made you comfortable to pray there?  
P4c. What spaces did you use? How often?  
P4d. If no, could you share why you haven't prayed in the library?
- Q5. Were you aware there is a space for prayer/meditation in the library? (Where relevant)  
P5a. If yes, have you used it?  
P5b. If yes, what was your experience like?  
P5c. If no, what are some reasons why you haven't used the space?
- Q6. Describe where your ideal prayer space on campus would be and what it would look like.

At the completion of each focus group, once the students had left, the researchers summarized the conversations and made note of themes they had noticed throughout. After all four focus groups, the audio recordings were transcribed and the transcriptions uploaded into NVIVO. Each author coded individually, and then together they compared codes looking for agreement and emerging themes.

## Findings

After examining the demographic intake forms and coding the focus group transcripts for themes, the authors found that the participants reflected a diversity of religions and prayer customs. Even with that diversity, however, the interviewees expressed similar space usage patterns and preferences, mentioned many of the same attributes that made existing campus prayer areas work for them, and envisioned similar ideal prayer spaces. All the themes were analyzed for how frequently they arose and for the saturation of the topic, or how many students addressed that topic across the focus groups. Despite the lack of literature analyzing users' perspectives on campus prayer locations, or even skepticism about the need for such spaces in an academic setting, the findings affirm that students value spiritual spaces that meet their needs. Students especially appreciate areas that are convenient for them and are interfaith, allowing people of various religions to feel comfortable using them. The findings underscore that, for students who pray on campus, providing simple, convenient, and accessible spaces can make the college or university a welcoming place for religiously observant students.

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The library was named as a space in every focus group that some participants used for prayer. However, the findings show that a student's selection of the library as a personal campus prayer space, like that of any other campus building, was mostly based on the library's attributes, campus dynamics, and overall convenience. For these findings to be considered by other academic libraries, broader campus resources (such as the availability of scheduled spaces and support for student spirituality), as well as how the library relates to its campus community, must be examined as part of any decision. Additionally, the findings about specific student prayer practices on campus can help inform staff training and space planning decisions because they provide additional context about user needs and what library staff may encounter if a student uses a library for prayer.

**Where Students Pray on Campus and Why They Use the Spaces They Do**

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The locations identified as places where students pray on campus included classrooms, the library, a spiritual center (where available), and the student union. When talking about their prayer practices, several students discussed the various ways they prayed in groups, including Bible study, religious club meetings, or just getting together to pray with friends. These stories described the campus spaces students used and what was positive and negative about each. At two campuses, Bible study groups regularly met in library study rooms, which they could easily reserve. At Penn State Behrend in Erie, student groups also used a library storage area for their materials. One student, who also talked about praying alone in her car, described the library as a place where she would go to pray with friends. She explained, "There have been occasions where I prayed with a friend or something, where we just, we just liked to share what our prayer was on our heart and we would pray together. Either we took out a study room or wherever we were." One student who has taken courses at two different campuses at Penn State talked about the different campus spaces at each location and why she used the library at her current campus:

There's a place called Student Center [at the other campus], and in there, there is a spiritual room where . . . on Sundays, Christians go pray in this big open area, and then Muslims also got their own spot where they . . . wash their face and then pray. I loved it, but in here there is none, so I just go to the library, get a room, and then pray sometimes.

Students at three of the four campuses expressed frustration with their inability to regularly reserve space for both personal and group prayer and the challenges that posed for them:

For me, the study room is a good place to pray, but the problem is, say it's time to pray at two o'clock, it might not be a room available, so you can't pray at that time, you have to wait—and then another prayer comes, we have to wait again. But the study room is good, but it's just that everybody can't pray together, and then it's not always available for you to pray as well.

Although the room reservation process differed among the campuses, students shared common frustrations with the logistical challenges of making sure that campus spaces were available for prayer. Students reported that at some campuses they could not reserve a room online, but instead had to do it in person. Most had to reserve on a week-by-week basis, which made it hard to plan; at one campus, there was no guarantee the room would be available. "There are some difficulties with our weekly meeting, just because it's in group once every two weeks, a central location . . . so it's a little more competitive, and sometimes we get kicked out because it's a school, necessary meeting." At one of the campuses, however, a student shared that her campus religious group works with a librarian to regularly reserve a large study room for a weekly Bible study group.

### Prayer Practices

The facilitators asked students to describe the importance of prayer in their lives, including how frequently they typically prayed and what their prayer practices were. The majority of the participants described prayer as an important part of their lives, indicating that both ritual and intercessory prayers are important activities that occur frequently throughout the day. All said they prayed at least weekly, and most described prayer as a daily practice. Two students, both of whom identified as Christian, reported weekly but not daily prayer. Students who followed Islam declared conducting ritual prayers at least five times a day, but students who identified as Christian, Catholic, Hindu, or Protestant also said that they prayed multiple times during the day, primarily conducting intercessory prayers, as one student described:

For me, prayer is just, it's my life . . . you pray when you wake up and thank God that you were able to wake up, that you were able to live another day, anything that's good that happens, you pray to God for that. If something's bad, is happening, you pray to God for help and just, for me, I'll pray before a test, I'll pray before I eat. Just any time something good happens, I'm like thank God, or something's struggling with me, I'm like "God, please help me through this time."

Some students described praying at specific times and intervals, but at every campus, students described praying whenever they felt the need. One student noted, "Sometimes I just walk around campus and I'll pray. It doesn't matter, just do it whenever, wherever."

When asked to describe their prayer practices, three students talked about formal religious services, but the majority described personal observances outside an official service, including how they prayed when they were alone and why they preferred to do so. One female student said, "I never prayed in front of people before; only two times on campus, when I found people staring at me . . . nobody needs to know or see me praying. It's a

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relationship between me and God. No one else need[s] to see that. I don't feel comfortable praying in front of people." Another female student talked about how she found it hard to pray in her residence hall room because of the presence of her roommates, so she prayed in her car: "I just feel if I'm gonna talk to God, I wanna just talk to him one-on-one . . . distractions, no, I want undivided, if that makes sense."

Students frequently described their personal prayer as a conversation or means of communicating with God and saw it as part of their relationship with God. Others talked about prayer as meditation, a time for reflection or thankfulness, or a way of seeking both answers and self-improvement. Many students talked about the importance of prayer for helping them deal with challenges and personal struggles, particularly with

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stress and anxiety around exams and studying. As one student put it, "If you're about to take a test, you pray, and that's just—it keeps you sane and just level." Another said, "I communicate, not when I want or when I really need it, but if I know I'm going through a lot of struggle, just say school-wise, that's when I really go and communicate to God."

Although many students talked about prayer as in-their-head experiences, some described the importance of material objects for their prayer practices, including spiritual texts, rugs, and iconography. A student who identified as Hindu reported praying in front of pictures of gods. Another student

who classified herself as Eastern Orthodox described the icons that she carries around with her for prayer; she expressed frustration that campus facilities do not allow the use of incense, another important component of her religious practice. Students who identified as Muslim at two of the campuses

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mentioned the use of prayer rugs, and at one campus, the library makes a prayer rug available for circulation.

### **Students' Vision of Their Ideal Campus Prayer Space**

One of the final discussion questions in the focus groups was to ask students to describe what their ideal campus prayer space would be. Overwhelmingly, students described simple facilities designated for religious observance that had flexibility for both multiple personal prayer spaces as well as areas for larger group prayer. The spaces could accommodate various religions, were conveniently located and easy to reserve and use, and accommodated both privacy and ritual washing. This was true for students at the campuses that had a spiritual center or chapel and at those that did not. One male Muslim student at the Harrisburg campus, which has a spiritual center, described changes that he thought would improve the space for all the students who wanted to pray:

I would say just specifically speaking about on campus, just for there to be recognition that there's a lot of people that wanna pray and even like to pray at times too, just because we have different prayer times, you usually you find a lot of people going to pray at the

same time 'cause we only have that one break between classes that everyone else has. So, if it was more space—and not even more space—just to find a way to accommodate for everyone, with just that area . . . that room that's off, if that was open there would be so much more space and everyone would be able to pray. We'd be able to do so much more.

A female Christian student at Harrisburg also expressed a wish for more personal spaces:

I think there should be more stalls or whatever, 'cause there's only two, and sometimes, if I'm fasting I might be in there for 15 to 30 minutes, depending on what I'm doing. So, I might read the Bible and then pray too. So maybe someone's waiting for me; I have to hurry up; there's no peace 'cause someone is waiting on you to finish and everything.

But ultimately, Harrisburg participants were grateful for the existence of its spiritual center, even without the desired improvements they described:

FEMALE STUDENT 1. For the most part, I think what it is now is all I need. I'm sure for other people it's probably the same thing. It's not like it has to be a super nice, luxurious place. You know, it's simple, it's quiet, and it's used by a lot of people.

FEMALE STUDENT 2. I agree. I like it the way it is. If it was bigger it would be better, but yeah, what we have now is fine.

MALE STUDENT 2. It just needs more space, that's all. Other than that, I usually have nothing else to complain about. The fact that there is a place to pray, that's what really matters.

While some students were specific in their requests for the availability of religious texts and prayer rugs and others expressed a wish for religious symbols, at two campuses students concluded that some type of safe storage in a campus prayer space would be helpful and ultimately make it easier to pray. As one female Christian student said:

It would be nice if we had the option to have our different faiths—'cause it is a nondenominational spiritual center—to be able to have our stuff in there, safely keep it there, and then be able to use those resources right there so I don't have to say, "Oh, I wanna pray right now, let me go back home, get my stuff, come back here." If it was just there, it would be easier access for me to pray.

At one of the campuses that lacked a designated space, a student described the type of community outcomes she could envision from a campus prayer space, rather than listing physical attributes: "We've never had anything even close to just a place to pray; but I really do like that idea because not only that, you can see other religions and meet everyone else and be exposed and learn about it, and I feel that's also a safe place for people who don't feel like talking out loud while praying, that now they have a safe place to do it." At the Abington campus, a student talked about how she would like the space to enable students to share their prayer requests and joys so that they could pray for each other and support their classmates: "We might not know each other, but you still have that support. I don't think that it really mattered what religion or anything, as long as we're all praying for each other, actively thinking of each other, and actually sharing space."



## The Role of the Library

One of the questions in the focus groups asked students to talk about whether they used the library for prayer, and if so, to explain why. On the intake forms, only four students had reported praying in the library, but during this part of the focus group discussion, other students also talked about using the library as an informal prayer space. Some students mentioned that they used the library for prayer because it was “better than other places . . . ‘cause it has a study room; that gives you a little privacy.” Another student at a different campus who was part of a religious group that regularly reserved a room in the library talked about preferring the library group study room because its smaller size made it seem “more inclusive and a little bit more welcoming.” At a third campus, a student preferred the library because it tended to be peaceful, saying, “Maybe I will go to the library here because it’s really quiet, so I have a space to be in a more connection with God.”

A number of students reported praying quickly while studying in the library in whatever space they happened to be using. For one student, though, her use of the library for prayer was connected to a stressful time during college:

I went through a time when I was really stressed out about school, workload was overwhelming, so, instead of starting schoolwork, and just going right into it, I would always pray beforehand to refocus myself rather than feel overwhelmed. So, I would remove a couple minutes to read scripture and maybe pray through that. Normally it was where I tend to sit, which is upstairs at a folding table.

For another student at a different campus, it was precisely because she associated the library with school and stress that she did not use it for prayer:

I don’t like praying because I feel like it’s where I like to study, and I don’t really like mixing both of them together, personally; and there is a lot of students, it gets really rowdy, and the next thing, friends, and it just—it’s a very huge distractor for me. When I pray, I want something to isolate from everything and, when I see a library I think of stress, I’m like, okay, what do I have to do, what do I need to do?

For many students, their decision to use the library for prayer as opposed to other spaces on campus came down to convenience and where they spent the most time or found themselves at their moment of need. A Muslim student’s description of how he chose where and when to pray on a campus that has a spiritual center echoed what

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**For many students, their decision to use the library for prayer as opposed to other spaces on campus came down to convenience and where they spent the most time or found themselves at their moment of need.**

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many other students at all the campuses said: “For just me, I just do it whenever I get the chance; if I have an exam or anything, I don’t wanna walk all the way over there [to the spiritual center], so if I’m in the library or [main classroom building], I just do it right there; I use my jacket [as a prayer rug].”





## Discussion

The authors' initial intent was to capture insights into undergraduate students' use of campus spaces for prayer, especially the library. The focus group discussions yielded rich data about why and when students pray on campuses, about the role of spirituality in their lives, and about why they select the places they do for prayer. Ultimately, despite a wide range of faiths represented, students' needs and wishes were surprisingly simple and similar to one another, and the library was consistently one of many campus locations students used. Although focus group data are not generalizable, replicating the methodology would be useful for informing the creation or repurposing of a room to meet students' spiritual needs at campuses where students have expressed a desire for a prayer space or where students use such places as library study rooms or campus classrooms for prayer.

Holding these types of interreligious focus groups or similar discussion forums is vitally important because they bring to light needs that can be overlooked both between and within religions. At Harrisburg and Abington, female Muslim students talked about how Muslim men used both informal and formal spaces in a way that was not comfortable for the women. At Abington, where students frequently used the library stacks for prayer, a female student described how she found it strange that the men used that open and very public space: "It's funny, but some of the guys, you know, the men, I'd see them praying outside of the study room, in the bookcases. They study—I mean, they pray—in there. People be passing by them but, you know, there is no place." At Harrisburg, where the spiritual center has ablution facilities and where both male and female Muslim students took part in the focus groups, the women shared that they did not use the facilities because there was no curtain to give them privacy while they washed. Their comments led to a realization among the male Muslim students about the importance of this privacy issue. Some of them admitted they had noticed but had not really thought about why the women were still using the bathroom down the hall from the spiritual center despite the presence of the washing facilities within it.

The authors also discovered that the architecture, resources, and overall atmosphere at an individual library might impact student use of library spaces for spiritual practices. At campuses with larger libraries, which have more study rooms or semiprivate areas and greater distinction among noise zones, more students told of using library spaces for individual prayer or religious group meetings. In the smaller libraries, where semiprivate space is scarce and noise control can be an issue, students described difficulty in using library spaces for spiritual practice, or they reported not wanting to do so in the library because it was too loud or did not afford enough privacy.

Further, the size of student religious groups or representation of specific faith groups in the student body may have an impact on students' comfort levels with praying in less private or more public areas. At Penn State Harrisburg, which had the most Muslims participate in a focus group, Muslim students reported feeling comfortable praying on campus because their classmates would understand what they were doing and would not bother them. The Penn State Behrend campus had only one Muslim in the focus group. This student told the authors that the campus Muslim Student Association disbanded due to lack of participants and reported being uncomfortable praying on campus in non-private spaces because people stared and asked questions.





The formality and traditions of individual faiths, as well as the availability of local faith communities on or near campus, may have an impact on students' perception of their ideal spiritual space. The majority of students in the focus groups expressed that

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**The majority of students in the focus groups expressed that a simple space that could accommodate larger groups would be ideal ...**

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a simple space that could accommodate larger groups would be ideal, but it is also important to acknowledge that the majority of focus group participants were Muslims or Protestant Christians. Islam and some Protestant denominations generally reject statues or human images in places of worship because they are considered idolatry. In contrast, one student who identified as Russian Orthodox envisioned a much more elaborate space:

For me, my ideal space would probably mimic more like a church, with icons and images; and I personally don't like the fact that we can't have food and drink in the spiritual center. I know that's a restriction, but for my faith, all our senses are used, our smell, our taste, our hearing; and I feel like when I go with my club to go pray, we're kind of restricted in the fact that we can only say prayers; that we can't really use our senses to the fulfillment of actually saying our prayers and feeling like I'm in a church; (cause the [spiritual center is] just a bland room . . . I think the English word is censers; we'll use smoke—it's a type of incense basically. So just having that smell kind of reminds you of a church and the images you see them, and for taste we have Communion . . . I think it would be great to have my religion have a service on campus, but there's so many restrictions and you can't really have a service on campus; and for me, I'm not from Pennsylvania, and since church is my life, I had to go out into the community and go find a church, basically, and that's something very hard when I came to this school when I was 17 years old—having to be an adult and go find a new community and go interact with people I've never interacted [with] before and go off campus to find a new home for myself.

The nearest Russian Orthodox Church to the student's campus is more than 13 miles away and not accessible from campus by public transportation—a challenging distance if one does not have a vehicle. Accommodating students in denominations better represented on campus or in the surrounding community or whose spiritual practices involve fewer elements may be easier in an institutional environment. Some groups may have to seek off-campus alternatives. Ceremonies that involve open flames, incense burners, or alcohol may be prohibited in campus facilities for safety and legal reasons.

### Limitations

It is important to note that focus group data are not generalizable, but the overall themes were present at each campus where the study was conducted. Any campus considering the addition of a new spiritual space or changes in policies and procedures to provide more flexible options for spiritual practice should conduct its own research with relevant student groups and campus units. The findings here may be useful as conversation starters in gathering this information. Further, constructing a representative sample was a challenge. Participation was self-selected and may have unintentionally excluded students of other faiths. While broad participation announcements were shared at

each campus, more focused recruitment occurred through outreach to campus religious groups; if a religion lacked an on-campus group, it was inadvertently omitted from this outreach.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The aims of this research were to explore undergraduates' needs and preferences regarding the use of campus areas for prayer and to understand how the library may or may not be suited to address these needs and preferences. The focus groups revealed that students prefer a designated spiritual space that is centrally located on campus, convenient to use, and suitable for multiple faiths and the needs of practitioners.

While there are many attributes of a library that may make it well-suited for those purposes, each individual campus that is considering adding or adapting a space to meet students' spiritual needs

would be best served by talking with students and considering all campus units, including the library, in its initial planning before making any changes. It is important to include members of as many faiths or beliefs as possible.

Based on our findings, it is also important to ensure the representation of diverse gender perspectives in these conversations. As we discovered, those of different genders, even within the same religion, may have different experiences and expectations for what is an appropriate space for spiritual practices. Even if the library is ultimately determined not the most appropriate location for a formal spiritual space, librarians' knowledge of flexible, reservable accommodations that meet students' needs would be valuable input to inform the creation of such a space. Additionally, if library staff possess higher cultural competency about student spiritual or religious practices and have greater awareness of student needs and preferences for spiritual activities, the library might easily adapt existing spaces or update policies governing space use to welcome and accommodate student needs for prayer or reflection.

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