Tensions rising in Hekman Library

There’s tension in the library! Is the library for socializing or studying? The space is for both, and that’s one source of the tension. There was a time, not that long ago, when the library was as quiet as a tomb. College students today prefer collaborative study at tables. Yet, there are times when the same students who prefer the group experience, also want a quiet space. How do we satisfy both needs in a space where noise travels easily?

For a number of years, students have voiced their displeasure with the level of noise in the library. Noise was a persistent complaint in two major surveys conducted in 2005 and 2008. In response to this, the library created the “group study area” on fourth floor and later established “study zones” throughout the library. Every table and carrel has a sign describing the appropriate level of conversation in that zone. These measures have helped, but noise is still a problem, especially during the last four or five weeks of each semester.

The “next step” is to have library student employees patrol floors 3, 4, and 5 and issue $5 tickets for violations. These patrols begin April 1. Socializing will still be allowed, even encouraged, but only in certain zones. Only warnings will be given until April 15. We also plan to be generous with warnings after the policy is in full force. Noisy people will be given a warning, but fined if they are warned again that same afternoon or evening. Our goal is to create an atmosphere that is more inviting – a goal shared by most Calvin students.

Here’s another question. Is the library for eating or studying? Again, because eating and studying go hand in hand, it’s for both. The days when all food and beverages were banned from the library are long gone. But, when does food consumption go too far? When students on 5th floor order Hungry Howie pizzas? When five bags of trash are collected from one floor in a seven hour period during exams? Or when students feast on Big Mac meals, complete with a large fry and large drink? The cleaning crew spends an inordinate amount of time removing food waste, cleaning up spills, and vacuuming around tables. As a result, there is limited time left for routine cleaning duties. The library staff is concerned about insect and rodent infestations, the long-term condition of the books, and the general appearance of the library. The problem is not that food is consumed in the library, the problem is that there is an excessive amount of food being consumed in the library. As with most things in life, balance is important.

Our solution is to allow food, with certain restrictions, on second floor and ban it from floors 3, 4, and 5. Beverages in CUPPS-like mugs will be allowed on all floors. The students patrolling the library also will issue $5 fines for food and beverage violations. The details of this policy can be
found on most of the doors of the library and at this web page ____. When you need a break from studying or feel hungry, migrate to the second floor and eat with impunity!

The library is a unique community space that satisfies many needs. People use it for reading, for research, as a refuge, as a social gathering spot, as a collaborative learning space, as a place to sleep, and as a place to eat. We need to ensure that the library is an inviting space for ALL who enter the doors – regardless of their needs. This hospitality is accomplished only when we all respect our neighbors and respect the physical space around us.