

**Street Talk: A Survey of Community Opinion**

Benjamin Horn | Alexander Muir

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## **INTRODUCTION**

It is often interesting to consider how small town mentality plays an active role in the development of major cities. Though technically a sprawling metropolis, the inner workings of many cities are dependent upon the interactions of neighboring communities and interest groups, otherwise known as stakeholders. These interactions are vital to the planning and building of a city that effectively serves as many people as possible. In Cincinnati, one of the most prominent manifestations of this dynamic is seen when analyzing Burnet Woods.

The park is, as noted in class, a “hairball” of a problem. In order to create a truly comprehensive and integrative plan of action for the park, one must weigh the opinions of numerous community stakeholders. If stakeholders are considered to be based solely on size and breadth of influence, one would expect UC students to be one of the primary contributors. However, despite the proximity of the park to campus, the voice of students has never been significantly catalogued and summarized, nor has it been significantly included in discussions focused on Burnet Woods. University President Santa J. Ono has worked with the Cincinnati Mayor in order to insert his vision into plans for Burnet Woods. However, it is unclear as to whether his plan is based directly on student input, or if it is simply Ono’s perceived student vision for the park. The challenge of this class was to extend the influence of students in discussions about Burnet Woods. In order to do so, the class set out to make students stakeholders in Burnet Woods. After analyzing this problem, a variety of methods emerged that would accomplish the goal. Some methods focused on collecting student opinions about Burnet Woods, with the goal of effectively characterizing the opinions of the student body. Other methods, and the track that will be emphasized in this paper, began with the idea of characterizing students without directly contacting them.

## **CONJECTURE**

The original project proposal focused on surveying the community members and organizations directly surrounding Burnet Woods. Each entity would be asked what they had noticed about student interactions with Burnet. However, as implementation began, an obvious problem arose. None of the individuals spoken to were able to provide substantial observations about student interactions with the park. Community organizations did not actively observe student activities in the park.

Faced with this roadblock, the original motives of the project were brought into question. We asked, “Why are outside observations of students necessary? Can a third party gauge the needs of students better than the students themselves?” While considering these questions, we realized that there were other groups who were, in essence, pursuing the same goal. Others were attempting to characterize students without directly contacting them (for example, observing student activities in campus green spaces). We wondered why their efforts were bearing out more successfully than ours. We concluded that the difference was in how closely each method was connected

to students. Other groups were not directly contacting students, but their observations were directly of students – a direct tie to the overall goal. In our case, we were not directly contacting students, and we were also trying to use *indirect* observations of students. Our methods had no direct ties to the student population, and as a result, we had difficulty obtaining usable data. It was decided that using community opinions as that third party would therefore be an ineffective means of characterizing students. The prior plan was abandoned.

Upon further analysis of the initial stakeholder responses, however, we noted that many of the groups surveyed had included their opinions about student interactions with Burnet Woods in addition to their answers to our questions. We wondered, “What if community opinions on student activities are more important than direct observations of the students?” In order to say that these opinions would be of value at all, we first had to show that these opinions would have merit in the context of the class. We theorized that obtaining community opinions about students would allow us to see students from an *external* perspective. While some groups were obtaining an internal view of students (characterizing student needs through direct or indirect survey), we now wished to look at students from the other side of the window. In other words, we wished to know how the community views the student body, and we wished to obtain that viewpoint directly from the community itself. This would allow the class to create a holistic view of students as stakeholders. By extension, we reasoned that to fully characterize any stakeholder, both internal *and* external viewpoints must be considered. This led to our final conjecture, which appears as follows:

*“Students will be more fully characterized as stakeholders if community opinions of student interactions with Burnet Woods are known. Therefore, we propose surveying other stakeholders and community businesses in order to gauge these opinions.”*

## **SUPPORTING CASE STUDIES**

This methodology, however, directly conflicted with the ground rules of the class, which emphasized ignoring the opinions of stakeholders in order to focus solely on students. Given our radical departure from this requirement, it became necessary to gather research that supported the formation of a comprehensive, rather than solely internal, view of students.

One study has shown that a better understanding of the stakeholders with which one interacts can benefit negotiations. The article, from Forbes Magazine, emphasizes building relationships with the community in order to gain a comprehensive view of a situation or project. While discussing the importance of corporate engagement, it says that, “[...] profound relationships with stakeholders are vital to business success” (Hack). Although geared towards businesses, this article can be extended to the Burnet Woods project. The business world is centered on negotiation, and this is what the class project will ultimately end with – the negotiation between community stakeholders, with

students included. This article supports the idea that reaching out to stakeholders, and therefore engaging them in the project, will benefit negotiations. Because the conjecture proposes reaching out to the community (and by extension building relationships with the community), the case study supports the conclusion that the proposed methods will increase student presence as a stakeholder.

Another resource comes from the organization Artscape, “a not-for-profit urban development organization that makes space for creativity and transforms communities” (Artscape). In an article discussing the importance of involving the community in projects designed to serve the community, it is emphasized that, “The success of your project depends largely on how well you are able to engage your community. Community/stakeholder input can help you shape your project vision” (Artscape). Multiple parts of this statement are important. First, it again emphasizes that it is important to engage the community in any project, and that this is especially important when the project takes place within the community it serves. The support of the community will allow for the development of fair and long-lasting solutions. Second, the quote also recognizes that community input can shape the ultimate trajectory of the project. With regards to Burnet Woods, we argue that obtaining community input will allow us to more effectively shape our vision of students as stakeholders. Also, this shows that the input gathered throughout the project will influence the methods used to ultimately make students stakeholders in the park.

A third resource highlights the importance of understanding not only how students view themselves as stakeholders (internally), but also the importance of understanding how students will interact with other stakeholders (externally). In the article “Perceived Relative Power and its Influence on Negotiations”, Rebecca Wolfe and Kathleen McGinn study the effect of perceived power in negotiations. They argue:

[...] the effects of perceived power are found in the integrativeness of the outcome. [...] How people view their relationship, whether as one between relatively equal-or unequal-power parties, affects their motivation for negotiating with one another and subsequently, their behavior. (Wolfe)

Even though this is a behavioral study, it strongly supports both the conjecture and the critical path taken during the course of this project. It suggests that a disparity between the way a party perceives itself and the way it sees the person with whom they are negotiating can affect the outcome of a negotiation. By surveying community opinions in order to find how other parties view students as stakeholders, we will effectively characterize where students stand in Burnet Woods negotiations. By extension, if there should be a disparity in the interaction between parties, our research will bring that disparity to light. By then working to bridge the gap (should we find one at all), we will be able to increase the effectiveness and intergrativeness of any plan of action for Burnet Woods. Students are therefore highly likely to have their opinions represented if they are part of a level negotiation surrounding Burnet Woods, and this effectively makes students stakeholders in Burnet Woods.

## **INNOVATION**

Given the supporting research, it stands firm that addressing the conjecture will significantly contribute to the goals of the class, despite its departure from the set ground rules. The first step of implementation was to propose a method of data collection. Namely, a decision was made as to how interactions with community organizations would take place. Possible options were to send surveys to all of the organizations (much like other class groups), to contact stakeholders via email, to schedule in-person meetings with representatives from each entity, or to contact the stakeholders via telephone. The final mode of contact was decided to be that which was the most personal and direct. These methods, such as direct meetings and phone conversations, would allow for stakeholders to share honest and direct opinions. This assertion is supported by the results of our research, which mainly consist of in-person meetings. In one case, a group of 20 alumni were contacted via email (an easily ignored, impersonal means of communication) and zero responses were collected.

Once a method of contact was decided upon, the next part of the proposal was to choose which organizations to contact. Originally (before restructuring the project), organizations were selected based upon the likelihood of their knowing of student-park interactions. After shifting the conjecture, the list of stakeholders required editing. Instead of contacting only those in close proximity to the park, we branched out and began to consider those who were not geographically close, but who would be able to provide meaningful and impactful *opinions* as to student interactions with the park. Included in this edited list were organizations such as the Uptown Consortium. This organization did not align with the first set of criteria, but once the goal changed, we recognized the importance of surveying the opinion of this politically significant Cincinnati organization.

The final element of our innovation proposal addressed why our findings would be important to the broad scope of the class. Any opinions gathered would be able to support a comprehensive view of UC students as stakeholders. Significantly, we recognized that our findings would be of most use when compared to the findings of other groups. Together, the class would be able to show where, if anywhere, there is a disconnect between community opinions of students needs and between the actual needs of students. For example, if we found that many community organizations believe that students will wish for illogical additions to the park (the addition of a roller coaster, for example), we would be able to compare that to the actual student needs as expressed by the direct survey. By connecting these two ideas, the class gains a powerful tool capable of informing future student-stakeholder interactions.

## **METHODOLOGY AND CRITICAL PATH**

In implementing the proposal above, the first action taken was to reach out to the initial group of stakeholders. In doing so, we first had to understand what we wished to

ask. We created a list of basic questions that could be extended to any stakeholder based on the Innovation Proposal. The questions were as follows.

1. What are the primary ways you see students using Burnet Woods?
2. What are the primary concerns that students have expressed in the past regarding Burnet Woods?
3. In what ways can UC students contribute to Burnet Woods?
4. What are your opinions on student interactions / potential student interactions with Burnet Woods?

We next followed the methods outlined in the Innovation Proposal to select which stakeholders to contact. The first organizations that came to mind were the Park Board and the local hospitals (with emphasis on Good Samaritan Hospital). These organizations are involved with Burnet Woods on a primarily political basis. Because of the politics involved, it was important to carefully monitor the questions we asked these groups. We did not want it to appear that the University of Cincinnati was creating its own plans for Burnet Woods, and that it was trying to take control of the park. To avoid these concerns we approached people in an optimistic and open manner. Instead of asking, "what do you want students to do with the park," we reworded the question to ask how students *and* the community can benefit from an increase in student use of Burnet Woods.

To assure that we were professional in contacting groups stakeholders like the Park Board, Good Samaritan Hospital, The Uptown Consortium, and President Ono, we directed our contact through one source. At the same time that our class was looking into Burnet Woods, a class of graduate students was also looking into the problem, but from a different perspective. Many of these students were planning to contact the same groups that we were. With the help of the graduate students and our professors, we were able to reach out to community members and representatives tactfully, and assure that we were not over-contacting or unintentionally influencing the stakeholder views of students. Because of this we were able to get relevant information from these high priority sources, and also gain input as to what they had in mind for Burnet Woods.

Other sources we felt were valuable to our research were businesses adjacent to Burnet Woods. When contacting these entities we adopted a more casual approach. We went in person to the establishments and asked to have a brief conversation with the shift leader or supervisor. We hoped that a confident and experienced worker could allow us to get valuable information about Brunet Woods. We were, unfortunately, turned down by a handful of restaurants and businesses. We concluded that either they did not wish to communicate with us, or they had no observations about Burnet Woods. The businesses that we did speak to, however, were able to give us information that allowed us to see their viewpoint of Burnet Woods.

When we went about contacting the police, needed to find a contact who would be able to give us information about Burnet Woods and who has experience in and around

the park. We contacted the Central Division of Police, and found that contacting the Neighborhood Liaison Sergeant of Cincinnati District 5 would be the best choice. The responses we collected (as well as the responses from all of the previously mentioned stakeholders) are listed in the appendix.

Another integral part of our project involved working collaboratively with the other class group focused on observing student activities. In an effort to gain data that would be useful for both groups, we contacted the Campus Recreation Center in order to collect data showing the volume of student use of the Rec Center (this was prompted by one piece of research that showed that 20% of Purdue University students were using their rec center daily (Neubert) ). This would allow us to gather information about student use of green spaces by looking for a trend showing an increase in Rec Center use in the winter months and a decrease in the spring. We could then approximate the number of students that were moving their exercise outside in the nicer weather. Not only would this help characterize students as stakeholders by indirectly characterizing the volume of park use, but it would also indirectly show what kinds of activities students are using the park for. For example, we may infer that the influx of students seen from the rec data represents those who are doing outdoor exercise activities in the park, like running or biking. We were not able to calculate a finite number of students who moved their exercise outside, but the number is not what was important. Seeing the trend in the data, however, is significant. The plotted data is shown in the appendix.

In the final weeks of the project we theorized that an excellent way to characterize student activities and opinions would be to survey the opinions of students who were no longer students. We contacted the UC Alumni Center, and were able to contact the Student Body Presidents and Vice Presidents from the last ten years. Unfortunately, despite the fact that the Alumni Center sent the email twice, we did not receive any responses to our inquiries.

## **CONCLUSION & REFLECTIONS**

*ALEX*

From the opinions gathered during the implementation of the project, later named project Street Talk, we conclude that vested interest in student interactions with Burnet Woods is low for many community stakeholders. It was not uncommon for students to be viewed as transient entities, moving in and out of Cincinnati every four years. Thus, many organizations do not see the value in including opinions from a 'temporary' stakeholder in Burnet Woods discussions. However, as data gathered from other groups shows, the student body is better viewed a culture rather than as a transient body. In many ways, it is similar to any other permanent community stakeholder.

This realization is the headline accomplishment of project Street Talk. In general terms, our goal was to fully characterize students as stakeholders, and this goal we have achieved and thoroughly addressed. By combining the internal poll of student needs with the community opinions of the students, we were able to find a disconnect

between how the community views students (transient) and the true condition of students as stakeholders (culture). Thus, in future discussions, it will be important to address this disparity immediately and swiftly in order to level the playing field for negotiations that will create integrated solutions.

The interdisciplinary aspect this project adds another dimension to the solution. As a class, the different methods of making students stakeholders of Burnet Woods were taken on by groups with a wide variety of skill sets. Due to the different discipline-specific ways of thinking, there was therefore a large amount of data from a wide variety of sources available for us to compare our observations with. As previously stated, our solution is not complete without being connected to the internal observations of students. Because of the wide variety of disciplines (and therefore the wide variety of problem-solving approaches), we are able to obtain a more universal conclusion. If all data had been gathered through a survey, we would have a conclusion based on only our data and a survey. However, because of the interdisciplinary nature of the class, a variety of methods were employed, and most support our conclusion. Our conclusion stands on firm ground because of the nature of the course.

That said, our methods were always out of range of the conventional way of characterizing stakeholders, which made formulating a conjecture difficult. Our first goal was completely scrapped due to limitations in community observations, and we faced a myriad of dead-end contacts. We contacted 20 alums and received no responses, and we were unable to receive any response from Good Samaritan Hospital, despite working closely with the graduate student responsible for this contact (the problem was that the hospital was slow to respond). In addition to these dead ends, it was difficult to find community opinions of students without directly contacting organizations. Meeting minutes from the Cincinnati City Counsel bore no fruit, and data from the University was difficult to obtain in any precise increments. Finally, it was difficult to find research that directly supported the conjecture. Many articles are available that support interactions with the community, but not many emphasize the impact of understanding these relations. We were specifically searching for articles that proved that understanding how one party views another in a negotiation is vital to creating more comprehensive solutions, and these were difficult to track down.

In all, the largest success of the project was seeing a trend in the collected stakeholder opinions. The trend remained elusive for most of the class, and it was not until the last weeks that the correlation between data points was drawn. Therefore, the biggest success was that we were able to combine the opinions of a large number of stakeholders into a comprehensive message and plan of action. As an unexpected success, we had more luck with contacting high-profile community organizations than originally expected. The opportunities to speak with the Police Sergeant, the Uptown Consortium, and President Ono, were not originally expected to be successful. When each contact window came into view, it was fulfilling to think that the list of community contacts was slowly being checked off. Finally, the experience gained in community and



stakeholder interactions during the course of the project will continue to be useful. It opened our eyes to the sensitivity and interconnectedness of city matters, and helped us learn how to obtain the information we need by asking concise and representative questions. This experience, truly, is interdisciplinary learning. Should we change our majors and change our university, our newfound knowledge will be always available to help us build bridges within communities.

*BEN*

When we first began our project, Alex and I didn't exactly jump at the idea of indirect student observations. When students began to volunteer for our sub categories we volunteered to take what no one else wanted. Fortunately, I enjoyed my portion of the project very much and working with Alex went very well. Although we are of different disciplines, our interdisciplinary work didn't show as it would have in other groups. We both stepped outside of our area of study and the project took us down a different road. We were faced with the challenge of talking to various organizations, doesn't sound very chemically or computationally related.

Starting the work seemed as if it would be easy at first. I figured we go talk to all of the groups we can, they give us some perfect information about students and we sum it up in an awesome poster report combo. (Only the poster and report part turned out to be true). We ran into quite a few problems as we went through our work. Our first limitation was not being able to talk to current stakeholders as we would with other organizations due to political reasons. We instead had to be cautious in our approach and make sure we weren't asking questions incorrectly. This of course made me nervous. I would hate to doom the Burnet Woods project by angering a stakeholder before we even began talking to more people. Fortunately we were able to collaborate with the graduate students and properly communicate with the stakeholders. Another dead end that kept on coming to us was why are we doing this project? What is the purpose of all of this communicating? Shockingly we were able to come up with this from a Which Wich sandwich box. I won't elaborate too much because it was Alex who went down that road and used the box to discover our why. We concluded that as student stakeholders it is important to us to know what the community and supporting groups think of the student body and Burnet Woods. With this direction and supporting research we were able to push through and finish our project. That sums up our difficulties almost wholly. There were of course a few organizations that refused to talk to us or had no idea what was going on.

From my portion of the project, I feel our greatest success came from when I spoke with the Uptown Consortium. It was then that I realized that no one is truly vested in students with respect to Burnet Woods. The main point that she pushed was that Burnet Woods just isn't the place for community gathering, maybe it is somewhere else. Gathering this information made me realize that with the disinterest from many of

these supporting organizations, Burnet Woods should be more focused around and used by students. This opportunity of course cannot affect the process that we worked on for just one semester. For years down the road the students will hopefully move into Burnet Woods and make it a bigger part of their life at the University of Cincinnati.

## APPENDIX

### WORKS CITED

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## COMMUNITY CONTACTS

**The Park Board:** Does not see students using park as their source of activity due to the four year cycle. They have had little interaction with the student body.

**The Uptown Consortium (Zoo and Hospitals):** Burnet Woods might not be the ideal place for community gathering. Maybe the place for to students and the community is somewhere else.

**Dewey's Pizza:** Student use of burnet Woods in some way benefits business but is not at all viewed as a necessity.

**Skyline Chili:** Business will be successful regardless of whether or not students are visiting Burnet Woods.

**Sitwell's Cafe:** Crime affects the use of the park in the past, but it is improving. Very skeptical about how student interactions can impact Burnet Woods.

**UC Campus Recreation Center:** Attendance trends that students will discontinue there use of the rec center during the spring. We can theorize that they will move their activities outside to place such as campus green spaces or Burnet Woods.

**Library:** A large group of people, such as students, can change a place like Burnet Woods. Adding a new library branch could possibly change the culture of Burnet Woods.

**Pr. Santa Ono:** Safety is the primary concern for Burnet Woods and students. In order to draw more students into the park we can hold more attractions such as food, entertainment, etc.

**District Police:** Auto theft is the primary problem in Burnet Woods. More foot traffic from students will decrease these numbers. Students are temporary or short term stake holders. Only a permanent stake holder can make a lasting impact in a place like Burnet Woods.

**The Civic Garden Center:** They have no observations about how students are using Burnet Woods. They do, however, notice a large amount of student involvement with environmental initiatives at the center.

Groups who were unable to return information: Alumni Association, The Florist, Good Samaritan Hospital, Local Churches.

# CAMPUS RECREATION CENTER DATA

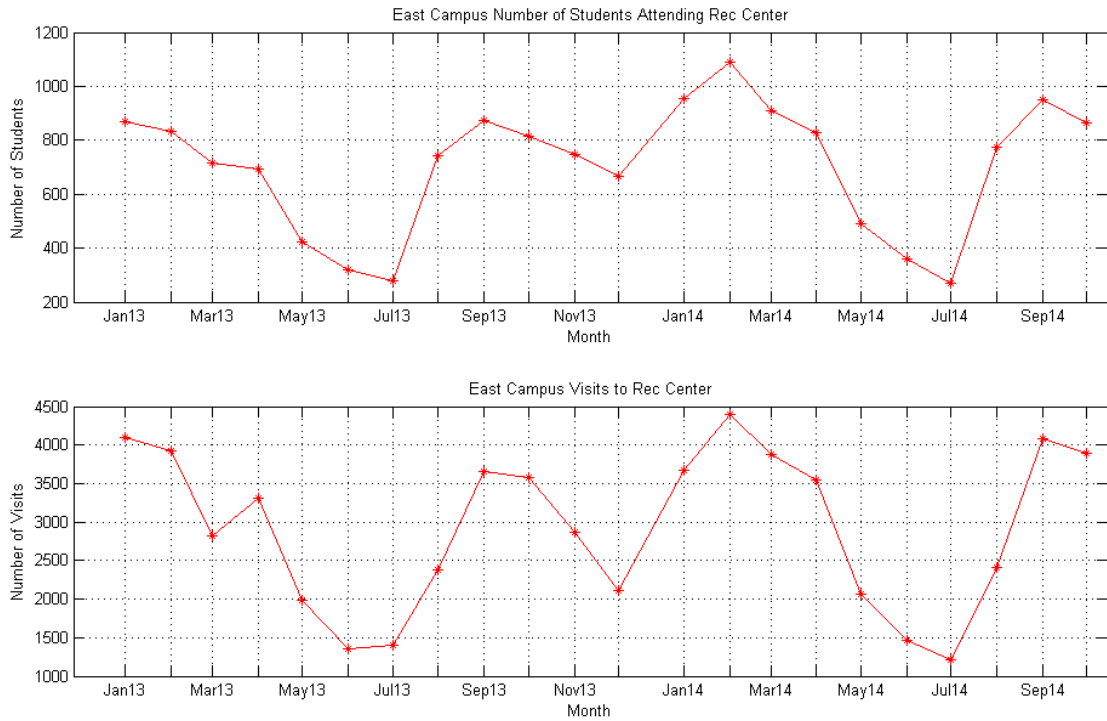


Figure 1 | Shown above is a plot of the number of students attending both the East and West Campus Recreation Centers. If one student visits the rec center 10 times in one month, they are counted as one student on the plot above.

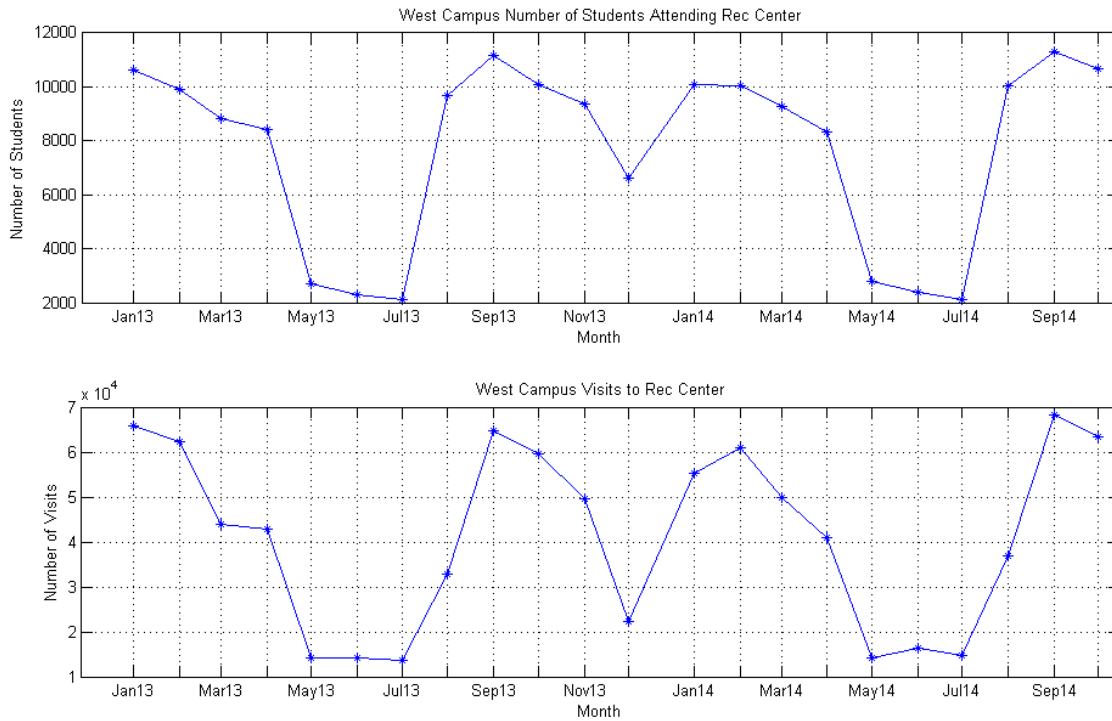


Figure 2 | Shown above is a plot of the number of visits to both the East and West Campus Recreation Centers. If one student visits the rec center 10 times in one month, it is counted as 10 visits in the above plot.