Executive Summary

Planning and Designing Academic Library Learning Spaces: Expert Perspectives of Architects, Librarians, and Library Consultants

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Executive Summary

After surviving widespread threats of obsolescence in the early days of the digital revolution, academic libraries continue to face major challenges.[1] What is at stake for nearly every campus library today is transforming the longstanding model of housing collections into a thriving and open-ended learning hub that brings together information, engagement, and technology. For most librarians, the ideal is meeting the physical and virtual learning, research, and teaching needs of an entire campus today and for years to come.

It is no coincidence that these critical revitalization efforts have aligned with dramatic changes throughout higher education. These drivers range from ubiquitous computing to rising operating costs to declining budgets. Pedagogy is undergoing upheaval, too. On many campuses, teaching is more collaborative, interactive, online or blended, and student learning is becoming deliberately more co-curricular.[2, 3]

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At the same time, from one campus to the next, students are vastly diverse and changing more quickly and more substantially than the generations that preceded them. Together, they vary greatly in terms of age, ethnicity, experiences, and preferences for face-to-face vs. distance education.

In this shifting and complex landscape, the role of academic libraries is not fully known. For many librarians and architects who are creating physical and virtual learning spaces in libraries, the million-dollar design question remains: "Is there a model that can stand the test of time as effectively as a centralized print collection has done for hundreds of years, so that libraries remain useful to students and faculty into the future?"[4]

Findings from our Project Information Literacy (PIL) study and interviews with 49 stakeholders — librarians, architects, and library consultants — yielded important insights for readers wanting to know what these experts say are best practices for planning and designing library learning spaces.[5] In this summary, we offer 10 key takeaways from our interviews. These findings are based on discussions about 22 library projects stakeholders collaborated on at community colleges and four-year public and private colleges and universities in the US and Canada between the years of 2011 and 2016.

Major Findings from the Interviews

1. Architects (77%) and librarians (50%) placed a premium on creating "flexible" spaces in libraries. This meant designing space that was "user-defined," so users could reconfigure a space at a moment's notice based on their needs. Flexibility was usually manifested in movable and customizable, and often casual furnishings and non-permanent whiteboard partitions. In other cases, flexibility involved building spaces that could adapt to users' learning and technological needs 10 or even 20 years into the future.

2. While layouts and design preferences varied from one project to the next, one shared goal was the creation of spaces that supported a full spectrum of students' learning needs. Most stakeholders said they were building spaces to support one or more of these types of academic learning activities: collaboration (82%), individual study (73%), point-of-need services (63%), or "occasional" sessions taught by campus faculty (53%).

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[1] For discussions of threats to the future of libraries, see: B.T. Sullivan, (2011, January 2). Academic library autopsy report, 2050. *Chronicle of Higher Education* and J. Thompson (1983). The end of libraries. *The Electronic Library, 1*(4), 245 – 255.

[2] In a flipped classroom, student class time is spent working collaboratively to solve problems and advance new ideas; watching a professor's videotaped lecture or reviewing course materials is done elsewhere and on a student's own time before class. See: J.L. Bishop & M.A. Verleger (2013, June 23). The flipped classroom: A survey of the research. *ASEE National Conference*, Paper #6219.

[3] B. Sinclair, (2007). Commons 2.0: Library spaces designed for collaborative learning. *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, 4, 4-6.

[4] We have paraphrased the question used in our text, based on what a librarian and an architect both described during interviews.

[5] Project Information Literacy (PIL) is a public benefit nonprofit conducting ongoing, national studies about today's college students and the future of libraries. PIL is directed by Alison J. Head, Ph.D., who is a Research Affiliate at the metaLAB (at) Harvard University and a Visiting Scholar at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's University Libraries. This research was sponsored by a Strategic Research Grant from the University of Washington Information School, where Head was a Research Scientist (2009 – 2016). For more information about PIL, see http://projectinfolit.org.

3. In most projects we studied, librarians and architects defined users as students, rather than the faculty, researchers, librarians, and library staff that also used campus libraries. This finding is troubling since faculty are directly responsible for designing and delivering learning opportunities to students in addition to having their own needs as scholars and researchers. But when budgets required sacrifices, improvements for collection spaces and library staff were the first to be eliminated in favor of protecting student spaces.

4. Librarians and architects placed importance on what students needed in their libraries. Yet, less than a third of the sample (31%) said they used formal methods to systematically collect user data as part of the planning process. Some stakeholders had surveyed students (27%) at the beginning of projects while others held focus groups (23%) for collecting data about library uses.

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5. Once a project was completed, formal evaluation metrics were rarely used, whether project costs were $2 million or $100 million. Instead, librarians, and architects to a lesser degree, used standard assessments of library usage, such as gate counts (34%) and usage statistics about library resources (20%), such as e-resource downloads. Barriers to conducting assessments were logistics, time, energy, or available expertise.

6. From our interviews, the most-cited best practice was the need for good communication. Continuous staff updates, ranging from individual meetings with library units to hosting campus-wide forums were critically important for establishing a sense of ownership for a new space, according to librarians. Taking time to build grassroots support with all constituents helped gain consensus about design choices at top levels later on, architects added.

7. Another frequently discussed best practice by librarians was the library tour. Many librarians said they had visited other campuses to examine recently constructed library spaces. From discussions with their colleagues on other campuses, librarians gathered anecdotal data about ideas to use in their own projects. Equally important, they discovered where projects had fallen short once a building was in use.

8. Even though librarians and architects came to library projects from vastly different professional backgrounds, they often became kindred spirits in the creative process. Ongoing design discussions among steering committee members were, in most cases, fertile ground for sharing ideas. When and if debates arose, they were often between architects' preferences for aesthetics and librarians' concerns about the functionality of spaces.

9. A lack of control over high-level decision-making was a serious challenge for librarians. This was most pervasive during the selection of academic partnerships for learning support services space. In many cases, librarians said provosts and other high-level administrators had made these decisions very early on without librarians' input. The result was occasional clashes related to mission, culture, and the subsequent allocation of learning commons space.

10. Most projects in our sample took far longer to complete than first expected. Sometimes delays occurred when stakeholders left for another job and new stakeholders came in with different design priorities. In other cases, financing difficulties caused project delays.

Taken together, we found the success of library projects is dependent upon a shared knowledge and understanding of the sweeping learning, pedagogical, and research changes facing the academy. Librarians and architects need to work together to apply that knowledge and understanding to the unique environment and learning and teaching needs of their specific institution.

The librarians and architects we interviewed placed a premium on designing user-centered spaces, yet few had systematically collected input from users for making pre-design decisions or conducting post-occupancy evaluations. If user input was collected, it was usually from a sample of students, but not of faculty. Our findings suggest the planning and design of library learning spaces requires librarians and architects to have a deep familiarity with *all end-users* and what they need to be productive as learners. Only then can the novelty of a space design that puts users first be unpacked. The future of academic libraries demands nothing less.❖