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# Fostering Learning through Library Spaces: The University of Iowa Libraries

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## **Fostering Learning through Library Spaces The University of Iowa Libraries**

Nancy L. Baker, Tom Rocklin, and Steve Fleagle  
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### **Introduction**

Since the rise of universities across Europe during the Age of the Enlightenment, the academic library has always held a central position as the heart of an institution – both symbolically and in terms of its physical placement. Preeminently sited and often heroic in scale and character, the library has served as a visual anchor for the surrounding buildings on campus. Richly embellished with stained glass windows, paneled with ornately carved oak, and appointed with marble statuary commemorating Greek and Roman philosophers, these libraries exuded an almost palpable sense of spiritual and intellectual contemplation (Freeman, 2005, 1)

Although these libraries of the past were always considered centers of learning and places for scholars to gather, university libraries of the past two centuries were designed, for the most part, to collect, access, and preserve print collections. Despite an impressive exterior and magnificent reading room, the interior spaces were often poorly lighted and confining, challenging to navigate, with services and collections largely inaccessible to all but the most determined student and scholar. The space was designed chiefly to preserve and protect print collections with large areas of prime space reserved for processing them.

Given this tradition, it is not surprising that the library building inherited today by most universities, including the University of Iowa, is not well suited for the needs of the present or the future. The modern university is a much more complex institution with a mission and priorities that have changed and expanded over the last two centuries. At the same time, the modern library must accommodate and capitalize on a myriad of new and ever-changing information and learning technologies. An extension of the classroom, the library must embody a new pedagogical reality that fosters collaborative and interactive learning. Even the processing of collections has been changed dramatically through the use of information technologies and the changing nature of e-information sources.

To many, the emergence of new information technologies spelled the obsolescence of libraries. Students and researchers who could access information electronically from anywhere would no longer need a building that warehoused “an outmoded medium for communication and scholarship” (Freeman, 2005, 2). However, while the emergence of e-resources has had a transformative impact on libraries, it has not entirely replaced print nor is it expected to do so in the foreseeable future. Over the past forty years, librarians and staff have embraced expanded roles as teachers, research consultants, and service providers with one foot in the traditional world of print and the other in a fast-paced world of changing technologies. Contrary to the predictions of obsolescence, usage of libraries on many university campuses has increased considerably, especially where library buildings have been constructed or remodeled to embrace these new teaching and learning opportunities and where the space is both inviting and inspiring. “Rather than threatening the traditional concept of the library, the integration of new information technology has actually become the catalyst that has transformed the library into a more vital and critical intellectual center of life at colleges and universities today: (Freeman, 2005, 2). This re-imaged library, as a physical space, has come to play a critical role in the intellectual life of the university as “the only centralized location where new and emerging

information technologies can be combined with traditional knowledge resources in a user-focused, service-rich environment that supports today's social and educational patterns of learning, teaching, and research. Whereas the Internet has tended to isolate people, the library, as a physical place, has done just the opposite." (Freeman, 2005, 3)

### **Library as Learning Laboratory**

This transformation is essential not only because of the emergence of new information technologies, but also because higher education has moved away from a teaching culture toward a culture of learning. While universities never provided instruction for its own sake, there has been a much greater attempt over the last decade to assess what learning actually occurs from instruction.

Similarly, the success of libraries is best measured not by the frequency and ease of library use, nor the number of books it collects, but from the learning that results from them. Various user surveys conducted at other universities have confirmed that learning outside the classroom best happens in spaces that students have shaped as their own. Food often can play a significant role, as it does in so many other realms (Bennett, 2005, 20). The continued success of *Food for Thought* in the Main Library has helped foster student use of the library even though it had to be crowded into an available, less than ideal, space without adjacent seating designed to foster peer-peer and faculty-student interactions, as has been the case at other universities.

Admittedly, students want and need more than food service to create a learning environment. They also seek appropriate spaces and tools that foster collaboration, interactivity, creativity and learning. Students want to work with the latest technologies. In addition to small group rooms with white boards for group study and collaboration, they also need places to collaborate with each other using technology. The traditional configuration of computer labs is, in many ways, predicated on the premise that users always work individually in rows of workstations and in a quiet environment. Our current students want spaces to practice presentations using technology, and places to work collaboratively with fellow students around a computer without disturbing others.

According to Bryan Sinclair in a recent article in *Educause Quarterly*, there are five guiding principles to a successful information commons;

*Open* – The space is unconfined. Glass walls may separate spaces if needed as sound buffers or to set off group study rooms along the periphery, but it is otherwise open.

*Free* – Fixed workstations are downplayed for flexibility and mobility. Wireless laptops given students the ability to group themselves in a configuration that works for them, not has been decided for them. Students can venture out with laptops or portable electronic devices to consult books in the stacks or visit special collections.

*Comfortable* – The space works for many types of learners and learning styles, not just one. Furniture facilitates collaboration, but there are different types of seating that serve this purpose for different students.

*Inspiring* – The furnishings, layout, and design presents a consistent vision of functionality, sophistication, and creativity. The area is dynamic, with artwork that inspires creative impulses. High definition monitors throughout the space features rotating displays.

*Practical* – It is a place where real work can get done and real learning can occur. Layout and design rely on sound pedagogical principles coupled with the value systems and abilities of today’s students, designed to foster human-human interaction among students with peers, mentors, librarians, and faculty. (Sinclair, 2007, 5-6).

## **The Current Main Library**

Although the University of Iowa’s Main Library was built much later than many of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century libraries to which Freeman referred in the opening quotation, it too was designed largely according to the same tradition – to house and preserve collections and foster quiet individual work by scholars. Over the years, as the collections have grown, much of what little remaining space was available for reading and research has gradually been taken over by book stacks. At the same time, new technologies have been embraced to deliver, store, and create scholarly publications. The University of Iowa’s Information Arcade was the first such facility in academic libraries in the United States. Each year, the Libraries spends a greater percentage of its collection budget on electronic resources. While use of some print collections has diminished considerably, usage of electronic resources has skyrocketed across all disciplines. The most heavily used campus ITC occupies part of the second floor of the Main Library. Even after increasing the size of the Main Library ITC a year ago, the facility is still at capacity many evenings and weekends. Furniture, for the most part, still reflects the traditional library, designed for quiet individual use. The Media Center, on the first floor of the Main Library, houses a collection that has grown tremendously over the years as the use of films, in various formats, has become more integrated into the curriculum. The Libraries even reallocated a vacant line to create a new Media Librarian position this year. This area is desperately in need of updating to accommodate the growing importance of these collections and foster their use in an environment that is better suited to viewing and learning.

In light of this changing environment, small adaptations have been made in the Main Library over the last fifty years to accommodate new technologies and needs. More often than not, old furniture that is not well suited for new technologies, has been reconfigured to make do. New departments have been created to meet new needs. Too often, these have been tucked into whatever space was convenient and least expensive to alter rather than placed where service and efficiency would dictate. Departments that order and process collections electronically occupy prime real estate on the first floor because they once needed to service a large public card catalog that no longer exists. The library has the look and feel of a 1950’s building – dreary, uninspiring, and outdated.

## **Student Feedback**

Much of the recent feedback from undergraduate students, confirms this assessment:

- “The library is depressing”
- “Need integrated learning resources and spaces”
- “Need to replace furniture”
- “Needs common spaces – where people can discuss”
- “Need screening rooms”
- “Needs wireless printing”
- “Expand media resources”
- “First two floors need to be open 24 hrs/day”

In all of our surveys and other user feedback mechanisms, students lament the lack of space for small groups to work on collaborative course projects. Graduate students recently requested some small group space in the Libraries for dissertation chapter exchanges to foster feedback from other graduate students. While the Main Library has a couple of group spaces, there are clearly not enough to satisfy the needs. It is not unusual to find small groups of students clustered together on the floor in Main Library hallways, corners, and stairwells often around a laptop computer, working on a collaborative project during the evening. In addition to some small group study and consultation rooms, a few appropriately equipped “mock classrooms” where students could practice giving presentations without disturbing others would be very helpful. (Although the Main Library is open until 2 am on Sunday-Thursday during the two primary semesters, building access is a common concern from students who have grown accustomed to 24/7 businesses. The current configuration for the Main Library has made 24 hour service challenging to support with current financial resources and a building that is impossible to learn only partially open.) Students comment that the current furniture is not well suited for 21<sup>st</sup> century uses. Expanded laptop checkout and additional ITC workstations were also listed as desirable.

Both the students and the library staff have long felt that the presence of the writing centers, speaking centers, and the math lab in the Main Library would be beneficial to make the Main Library a real learning laboratory. The Main Library currently offers the writing center a small room in the library to help students but a stronger presence in the libraries with all these resources would be ideal.

On the plus side, the University of Iowa is currently in the process of constructing an off-site high-density archival facility for lesser used collections, making it possible to free up additional space to accommodate improved user spaces. This past year, based on Sinclair’s five guiding principles and with private funding, the Information Arcade added a second electronic classroom that is wireless with furniture designed for use with technology and easily moved into different configurations to serve the differing needs of classes. This is the model for what the rest of the library needs. To insure the flexibility in current and future libraries, most current library furniture needs to be replaced with similarly flexible furniture that is better suited for a 21<sup>st</sup> century library.

## **Conclusion**

If there is one overall theme that emerges, it is the need for technologically rich, inspiring, collaborative space, specifically designed for this new learning environment, and available during the hours when they normally do their work. There needs to be knowledgeable help available to students who are frequently faced with a confusing wealth of print and electronic sources of varying levels of authority and trustworthiness. At the same time, the students also recognize that they sometimes need quiet study spaces where they can do their “serious studying” and more traditional research in an environment away from others. The library must accommodate all of these needs.

”There is no question that almost all the library functions being planned for today will need to be reconfigured in the not-too-distant future...The majority of space must be capable of adapting to changes in use” (Freeman, 2005, 8). All too often, the libraries of the past were not designed with such flexibility. Whenever possible, open spaces need to be easily “reconstructable,” so that they can be reconfigured easily and less expensively to meet future needs. Enclosed areas for conference rooms, seminar rooms, and group study rooms need to be built in such a way that these spaces could be transformed in some other way as needs change. “Given these challenges, we must constantly explore and reinvent the concept of flexibility but do so in space

of a quality that offers a distinctive, intellectually rich environment for learning, teaching, and research” (Freeman, 2005, 9).

While expanding collections resulted in a reduction of user space in the past, the opposite must now occur as collections become increasingly electronic. Technology has enriched user access and the services for its support are increasing at a much faster pace than ever anticipated. Most research libraries, including the University of Iowa’s, have come to the realization that some lesser used collections can be stored off-site, preferably in less expensive buildings that foster long term preservation of print much more effectively than a building that also serves users.

Iowa is currently planning the construction of such an off-site storage facility for lesser used collection that will free more space in the Main Library for other users. The Main Library should be easier to convert to improved learning spaces than many older libraries. The overall footprint of the building, a big rectangle with multiple floors, offers the potential for real flexibility. In fact, the Main Library was initially designed to be a more flexible building than most campus library buildings of earlier eras. Some of the walls on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor that divide up the current space are non-supporting, temporary walls, which should allow for less expensive changes.

The Main Library is long overdue for a total remodeling from top to bottom. Short of that, however, changes made to the first two floors would improve conditions for the current students considerably and would foster a much improved learning environment for them. While even a partial remodeling of this building will be costly, we cannot afford to do so.

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