

New Learning Spaces for New Learning Styles

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The focus on learning spaces within academic and research libraries has added a new dimension to providing library services that are meaningful and relevant to today's user. Users seek physical spaces that accommodate a paradigm shift where active learning is favored over the traditional teaching and passive knowledge absorption that takes place within the classroom.¹ Increasingly, students' working styles are taking on a more collaborative nature where hands-on experience allows them to be engaged in creating knowledge, not just receiving it. Libraries have traditionally played a vital role in supporting learning, but now they have to accommodate users who see them as not only a resource, but also a place where learning happens.²

In many academic libraries, traditional measurements such as collection use and gate counts are increasing. This contradicts the notion that with greater electronic resource access, the physical library is no longer relevant. Yet, users' needs and expectations of learning spaces often exceed the reality of spaces that are provided for them. To compete with other types of gathering spaces, libraries have followed popular trends by establishing coffee shop/bookstore environments. However, these environments fall short of expectations as they do not address all of users' intellectual and social needs. During the last decade, many libraries have undergone renovations or construction projects to create different versions of the now popular Learning Commons or Information Commons, where the goal is to provide a collaborative, technology-rich environment that can be combined with more traditional library resources and services. In some cases, computing and technology and other support services are offered.

Through a major renovation in 2005, the NCSU Libraries set out to create a Learning Commons at its main library, the D. H. Hill Library. The project goals included increasing seating capacity as well as improving the quality and function of the space. While user input was incorporated into the plans for the Learning Commons, it was through an unexpected change of events that library staff were able to reevaluate the renovation plans. A construction delay, during which temporary, easily movable seating and furnishings were placed in a large, open area, provided a window of time in which staff could observe how students were actually using the space and the patterns that emerged of how they engaged with each other and their work.

This reevaluation and the resulting renovation have created a vibrant, flexible learning environment that is often looked to by other libraries, consultants, and designers, both nationally and internationally, as a successful model for learning spaces. Within the Learning Commons, users find a welcoming, flexible space where they have access to the latest technology and library resources and services. Flexible workstations are available for individuals or small groups, and the array of fixed desktop computers is complemented by a popular laptop lending service. Users also find high-quality furnishings and digital signs that provide current library and university information. This openness and flexibility has created a comfortable space for students to study and socialize. Users are also free to consume food and drink within the space, which they state is a vital time saver while they are working. By providing a mix of comfortable, flexible seating and workstations as well as an environment where students can work, socialize and enjoy food and drink, the Learning Commons very quickly became the most popular place on campus.

While the Learning Commons has been a great success, library staff have learned the importance of continuously providing avenues for user feedback to ensure that spaces and services are responsive to their evolving needs. As stated above, this feedback contributed to the success of the Learning Commons, and has also allowed issues that have proven problematic or have fallen short of users' expectations to be addressed. For example, planning for dedicated space for graduate students and faculty has become a high priority as spaces such as the Learning Commons, where undergraduates fill every seat on a daily basis, do not meet the needs of these groups of users.

The NCSU Libraries now has the rare opportunity to plan for a new research library on its Centennial Campus. The new James B. Hunt, Jr. Library will serve as a technology incubator and provide state-of-the-art collaborative learning spaces. Plans for the library include a Graduate Commons and Faculty Commons to provide these groups of users with dedicated space that will meet their particular needs. Spaces will be provided for recreational gaming and for research and development of new games. Beyond the iconic design of the Hunt Library, leading edge services and technologies will introduce users to a 21st century library.

With the results of data collection, focus group feedback, and direct user feedback, the authors will discuss the dramatic impact of the creation of the Learning Commons on the NCSU Libraries and its plans for learning spaces in the Hunt Library. The successes and lessons learned from the Learning Commons renovation will be discussed to show how this transformation and the library's close ties to its user community have informed the planning for upgrades to the Learning Commons and the new Hunt Library. The data also supports the need for investing in physical library spaces and the

idea that physical spaces are highly valued and are an integral part of new learning styles and the community and social dimensions of a university.

Notes

1. Chism, Nancy Van Note. "Challenging Traditional Assumptions and Rethinking Learning Spaces." In *Learning Spaces*, edited by Diana G. Oblinger, 2.1-2.12. Boulder: EDUCAUSE, 2006.
2. Bennett, Scott. *Libraries Designed for Learning*. Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2003.