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Working within the system while thinking out of the box: faculty and students define library space and service needs

Abstract

The redesign of the first floor of the Evansdale Library at West Virginia University is now on track. An interior designer from the university has been assigned and completion is expected by fall 2009. However, we wanted to know what our students and faculty had in mind for our space. We will have wasted much time and energy if we do not know what the users want and will use. We collected data from an online survey and conducted a series of focus groups in the fall with undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty. This was the first time we had the time, expertise, and administrator support to collect and use data from students and faculty to recreate space in the library. The redesign of the space should be more functional and pleasing to the users since their needs were considered and will be incorporated where possible.

Background

There are three floors in the Evansdale Library. The second and lower levels are designated, with signs, as “Quiet Study Area”. Since the first floor has the majority of the computers and both service desks with telephones, we allow for group discussion and consultation on this floor and expect it to be a more active floor. The carpet on the first floor is the most worn and in need of replacement. This is where this process began. Since the Provost was responsible for the choice of carpet in 1999, we needed his support and approval to have the carpet replaced. With his consent, all was on target for replacement over Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks in 2006. Enter the concept of an information commons with flexible learning spaces and the opportunity to reclaim space in our building from Academic Information Services (AIS), and the process was suspended. Carpet replacement had not required an approved plan. The anticipated changes in the project required that we submit a plan to the campus Capital Projects Committee (CPC) that included new carpet, flexible learning space, new furniture, and specific ideas on how we would use the AIS space. Just as we moved forward with the approved plan in the fall of 2007, the Provost’s Office put everything on hold once more.

Now our intent is to replace the carpet in all public areas of the first floor and reconfigure the space for more collaborative learning areas for our students and faculty. The plan also calls for as much flexible furniture and equipment as we can afford. If we can recover the space from AIS, we can add an additional electronic classroom, more study rooms, and a multipurpose area that would be perfect should we ever need to provide 24/7 access all the time instead of during the last week of classes and finals week. This is an opportunity to combine service points on the first floor, giving library users one-stop-access to reference, tech support and access services. We will also define space that can be configured for meetings, tutoring, or group study.

While going through the beginning stages of negotiating and planning with personnel in the Provost’s Office and Facilities Management, we needed to get familiar with the possibilities. Hence, all the readings on redesigned educational and library spaces. The articles gave us ideas about options, what students and faculty from other institutions cared about, questions to ask, and efficient and effective ways to change space. We also made several trips to Ohio University...
in Athens to see their learning commons. Although we cannot match their configuration because of space, we all came away with some excellent ideas. These included: the importance of multimedia workstations to develop presentations, what types of flexible furniture arrangement are most popular, and that we cannot anticipate how users will configure an area.

Planning Process

The dean, associate dean, library business officer manager, the Evansdale Library director (the author), and the Evansdale Library access services manager met with an interior designer from Facilities Management in July 2008. She had some good ideas about the inclusion of a coffee shop and outdoor patio, along with flexible furniture to promote options for collaborative learning. By November, we were disappointed to learn that we would not have a coffee shop since another building on campus will be expanded in the next few years and will move its current food service area to a more prime location. So our building is promised “serious vending” as a replacement. We are not certain what that means but are interested in the possibilities.

The library business office manager and the Evansdale Library director met with the interior design supervisor in November 2008 and January 2009. We are anxious to get started since the monies must be spent or encumbered by June 30, 2009. We asked the designer to consider flexible furniture for collaborative learning, an additional meeting/conference space, new carpet, and a combined service point for reference, technology support, and access services. She had concerns about the walls and window treatments and added that to her list. We also need to convert the current microform room into a copier/vending area. The supervisor for the interior design area submitted a preliminary report to us in January 2009. We reviewed the plan, asking for some minor changes which were made. The interior designer will work on the design, select furniture, fabrics, wall and window treatment, carpet, and come back in March with a design board for our comments.

Information-Gathering Phase

We are doing our best to respond to students’ needs and keep the space as flexible as possible. In addition to the engineering college, this library also supports creative arts, sports sciences, agriculture, forestry, and education. The author focuses on engineering since she manages the resources for this area. We know that engineering students and faculty are less likely to come into the library since they have computer labs where the additional layer of authentication that is needed to access computers in the libraries and in OIT-controlled computer labs is not required. Faculty and students are also very happy with the number of electronic resources available in their areas so they access them from the offices or from home. One thing we know that graduate students and faculty want is document delivery of papers we own to their desktop and book delivery to offices. The aforementioned items are services; we needed additional information on the library atmosphere. The survey and focus groups questions were designed to responses to the library environment as well as services.

We needed a way to get input from the users to support the changes. In spring 2008, A. David Roth, Evansdale Library Associate for Technology, created a short survey with questions
designed by Dr. Cindy Beacham, the Chair of the Interior Design division. We made the survey available to students in our library, giving them an opportunity to tell us what they wanted and how they would redo the space. A shortcut icon with the survey appeared when students logged into our computers. In October, Dr. Beacham came to the library to run three focus groups for us. We did not ask for any personal data in the electronic survey. We do have general data from the focus groups: class year, major, student or faculty. The students were undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty from the colleges of engineering, sports sciences, agriculture/forestry, education, and creative arts. The incentive to participate was food (pizza, cookies, soda, and fruit) and the chance to win one of three Barnes & Noble gift certificates. The author was able to sit in the room to serve as scribe and was amazed at the insight both undergraduates and graduate students have about the library space. We did not think students cared all that much but are happy to see that we were wrong. The students really cared about the library environment as a whole and saw it as a place to gather with others to study, share ideas, or display their work. The data compiled were a combination of expected requests and surprising insight. Students from all disciplines, including engineering, had comments about the ambiance in the building. Dr. Beacham is experienced in facilitating focus groups, so we are grateful for her assistance in this area. The sessions lasted about 2 hours each. The participants were given a little time to eat and socialize. Then, Dr. Beacham distributed three 4” x 5” index cards to each person, one color for each question. The questions were on paper for each person to read but were given to the group orally as well. They were given a few minutes to write down the responses to each question. Then, Dr. Beacham gathered the cards and had the group put similar answers together, based on their own interpretation. Dr. Beacham took the cards and put the answers on a board so all could see the sorted results. Discussion followed, giving each participant an opportunity to give more information.

Survey and Focus Groups Questions

The survey questions were:

1) What would you like to change in the Evansdale Library to make it a more inviting learning and research environment? What kind of collaborative learning/study space do you need in this library?

2) Are there any types of software or technologies not currently offered that you need to do your academic work?

3) Do you have any further comments or suggestions about how we can improve our Library’s environment?

The questions for the focus groups, taken from Dr. Beacham report were:

1) How do you currently use the library?

2) What would you suggest to improve the current library and make it more usable and enticing for you?
3) What characteristics would you like to see in a facility that would become the “heart” of the campus?

This paper is concentrating on the first two questions. The goal was to get our users to tell us what they want and need in the library, both form and function. The number of responses was not an issue. We have three years of LibQUAL+(TM) to supplement the data.

Results

59 people responded to the survey which is a reasonable number based on the number of people who come in to use the library. We had 27 students and faculty in the focus groups that represented a good cross-section of the disciplines taught on this campus. The survey and the focus groups gave us useful data on what students want. Data compilation was done Evansdale Library Associate A. David Roth, Dr. Beacham, and the author. Below are lists with responses from the online survey.

List 1. Survey. Available space/interior suggestions

- Need coffee shop (like Downtown Campus and Health Sciences Libraries).
- More individual space.
- More circular tables w/five chairs for study groups. More group space and study rooms. Computers in the study rooms.
- More comfortable seating. Informal reading areas.
- More social areas.
- Better cubical spacing for privacy.
- Change the carpets.
- More areas with sound dampening materials.
- Use the renovation money to allow free printing.
- Too open and too much talking.
- Likes it as is, dreary and boring.
- Likes the computers that have large surface to spread out.
- Chalk board or dry erase board in each room.

List 2. Survey. Software/Technology suggestions

- More headphones on desktops.
- CADD installed for fashion majors since it is nowhere else on campus.
- More desktop and laptop computers.
- Ipods, MP3 players.
- Matlab, Autocad, Java Compiler, ProEngineer.
- Photoshop.
- Modern audio visual set.
- Projectors in study rooms.
- Wireless connection just outside the library.
List 3. Survey. Other comments and suggestions

- Study tables outside during nice weather
- Better interior
- Café or cafeteria
- Move items from Microforms room and put in more computers
- ID card reader in vending area
- Small study room with comfortable seating, table and white board
- Better colors
- Better ventilation; library smells musty.
- Less noisy doors for stairwell.
- Printer stations on all floors.
- More study rooms.
- Less noise.

The focus groups responses were similar to the survey; but more in-depth because of the facilitation done by Dr. Beecham. Selected responses to the focus groups questions are included below.

Examples of the technology comments from the focus groups:
- Add more computers
- Clearly label the computers that are for catalog-use only
- Self-paced, online tutorials
- Printers for larger jobs
- Plotters; more in-depth technical support
- Offer software training.

Physical resources comments from the focus groups:
- More, current books on disciplines
- Showcase new resources
- Display are for student and faculty research or projects
- Specific learning areas for different disciplines.

Comments from the focus groups on the actual physical space:
- Coffee shop/healthy food
- Combination of seating options, both for study and for lounging
- Place for readings or musical performances; spaces to encourage student and faculty interaction
- Higher quality lighting; bringing nature in with plants and the exterior views
- Use color to differentiate the areas
- Deal with the acoustic issues
- Artwork and displays on the walls
- Place for each college to congregate and communicate
The responses from the survey and the focus groups were the same in many ways. However, some answers given by the focus groups were different. This may be because they had the opportunity to explain their thoughts and were able to build on the groups’ responses. Another reason for the differences is that the survey users were actually using the library resources at the time so their focus was more practical. The people taking the survey may have answered “boring” or “likes as is” because they were busy and did not want to take the time to give more thoughtful answers. Plus we know that people who use the libraries may not really care about the environment they are in. They want to come in to library, search or print, then leave.

Faculty members have been asked what is important to them and their students. The author has had informal discussions about the first floor space and how we could make it more useful to them and their students. In many cases, their observations match those of their students. However, most faculty concerns seem to focus on resources, policies and services.

As mentioned earlier, one reason the engineering students tend to come into the library less often, in addition to the fact that much of what we offer them is available electronically, is the authentication issue. The libraries and information technology office introduced authentication on public computers several years ago. The Engineering College chose to maintain labs that did not use the same type of authentication. However, since we have greatly expanded our student body, the labs in the engineering buildings are crowded and noisy. The students who were in the focus groups or answered the survey would prefer to come to the library where the atmosphere contributes to study. But they need access to certain software, such as MATLAB, which is not available on library computers. Licensing costs and lack of support is the reason we have not been able to put this and other specialized software on the library workstations. Other software mentioned: Pro Engineer, AutoCAD, and PSpice. This just shows that if you do not ask questions, you cannot be sure what someone wants. As for the software requests, we would be willing to negotiate with Library Systems personnel to make the software available on our computers.

The designer will look into ways to dampen the sound on the first floor. But we need to do a better job of sending them to the electronic classroom or to the other floors if they want quieter areas. We plan to keep the first floor as collaborative and allow talking and limited cell phone use.

**Plans**

As mentioned earlier, Facilities Management personnel provided a preliminary plan in January 2009. The focus group analysis was received in February 2009. Below is part of the project description (unedited) from *Program of Requirements, Aesthetic Improvement, Evansdale Library Renovation*:

“The Evansdale Library administration’s goal from this renovation is to create an aesthetically pleasing environment for students to enjoy flexible study space on the Evansdale Campus. In addition increase foot traffic and encourage student collaborative interaction in the Evansdale Library environment. The renovation will create an atmosphere much like the Evansdale
Library. The minor renovation will incorporate new furniture, flooring, decorative paint and additional technology on the main floor of the library.”

This is a rather simple group of statements but can mean great changes for the building which will affect the students, faculty, and those of us who work here. We are looking forward to working with other campus units to meet these goals.

Preliminary Preparation

While we await the actual process of replacing the carpet and redesigning the space, there are many steps to take in preparation. Since we knew we wanted as open a floor plan as possible, we needed to arrange to process and move resources and furniture to other parts of the building or out of the building completely. We are moving film and fiche to the depository or to the lower level. One copier will be moved to the second floor and one will be moved to the lower level. We have reduced the reference shelving on the first floor from five ranges to three. The index area has been eliminated. Since many of the reference sources and indexes are electronic, no one will miss the paper. The current journal collection is also shrinking. The first floor is designated as a consultation floor and is not enforced quiet. Removal of the shelving has provided space for more group discussions/study areas. Other preparations are on hold until we meet with the interior design group.

What Happens Next

The Provost’s Office set aside money for this project that must be used or encumbered by June 30, 2009. The Dean of University Libraries will supplement if necessary. We cannot wait another year or the money will no longer be available. Since WVU’s Downtown Campus Library went through a similar reconfiguration in the summer of 2008, we have the plan for that project to pull from. Follow-up meetings with the dean, associate dean, library business office manager, the Evansdale Library director and access services manager, and both interior designers will be held throughout the spring. The lead designer tells us that we are still on track to start the actual project after finals and graduation in May 2009. We will agree on a timeline, move everything off the floor that needs to go away permanently, and arrange for temporary relocation of items that will return. Since the entrance to the building is on the same floor we need to reconfigure, it may be necessary to close the library, but we hope this will be brief. We would like the project to come to completion as close as possible to the start of the fall semester in August.

As to which suggestions may be used for the project, we already know that the café is out. We may succeed in getting healthier food choices, but that will be determined by what is available from the vendor. Additional display areas for projects and 2-3 new flexible study rooms will be added. New carpet, wall treatments (paint, panels, and wallpaper), window treatments, more computers, a comfortable lounge area, café-type seating, round tables, and movable furniture will round out the project. We will go back to the negotiation table to get an outdoor study area. We will also work with Library Systems and the Dean’s Office to determine which software we can add and support.
What We Learned

Be prepared for anything. Focus on what you need and how to get there. Don’t get discouraged if things don’t work out as planned.

Small steps can get you to the larger project.

Cultivate relationships before you need them. It is much easier to get people on board if they know you and are familiar with your situation.

Proposed space changes can be excellent opportunities to collaborate with non-library units.

Readings are great for background information and ideas. However, one must find out what the user groups on campus want. We are not trying to make all users happy, just the ones on our campus.

Work with strengths of people. The author cares about function; the access services manager cares about how it looks. We end up being an excellent team and compliment each other very well. Also, the chair of Interior design was a great help to us in this endeavor. Her experience in interior design and with focus groups was invaluable to us.

Students and faculty are very willing to tell you what they think, especially when treated with respect.

Bibliography


