

Library Renovation: From Setbacks to Success

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The journey started at a 2016 meeting of the college's Learning Resources Committee, which I chair as Library Director. A student representative casually commented that our Library looked "dated". In fact, we actually WERE up to date, with electronic resources, 24/7 remote access, printers, scanners, wireless, and a state-of-the-art Library Management System. However, through the eyes of our young student, the Library looked like something from the 1970s, and anyone familiar with that era will know that was not meant as a compliment. The student's criticism prompted the Dean of Academic Affairs, who sat in on the meeting, to ask when the Library had had its last facelift. That was an easy one to answer - as far as I knew...never. And I've been here over 20 years.

Our library staff includes two librarians, two paraprofessionals, and two administrative clerks. The staff member with the longest tenure has been here for 27 years, while our most recent hire has been here for seven years. Given our small size, each staff member has an area of expertise and responsibility as well as deep knowledge and substantial institutional memory. Being intimately acquainted with the library's age-related shortcomings, none of the staff members was surprised at the comments made on the survey or in the focus group, and everyone understood why we needed change.

Just like that, a renovation was born. How hard could this be? I would query the students on what a suitable update might look like, get a budget, buy some new furniture, and go back to the business of being a librarian rather than an interior designer. Spoiler alert: not so fast.

Background: Getting it off the ground with Student Consensus

Our Library serves approximately 400 professional students, as well as graduate students, didactic faculty, clinical faculty, and clinical and administrative staff in a 10,750 square foot, one floor facility. To get the ball rolling, I developed a survey designed to measure satisfaction (or more appropriately, "dissatisfaction") with our facility. We had a response rate of approximately 20%, which exceeded our expectations.

About a month later, we followed up the survey with a focus group. The group was limited to 20 attendees, and the invitation was extended to the entire college community with responses accepted on a first come first served basis. Most responses came from our professional four-year professional students, perhaps motivated by the promise of a free lunch. Although our library serves a varied constituency, our

professional students are the most vested in the facility. They are the ones who make the library their home, spending most of their waking (and some of their sleeping) hours in the library. The online survey and the focus group comments showed remarkable consistency, and below was the “wish list” that emerged from their written and spoken comments:

Areas for quiet study - private study rooms, study carrels, areas of the library designated as “quiet zones”;

Group study areas - large tables, places to think out loud and share ideas, white boards, spaces to spread out;

Better lighting - the simple fluorescent non-LED lights were deemed too “yellow” by the students, and were not conducive to long-term studying;

Comfortable chairs - the chairs we had for so many years were crimes against ergonomic design. They sagged in the middle, provided no back support, and perhaps worst of all, did not roll;

Natural light - our library is fortunate to face one of New York City’s most beautiful parks. However, we had limited windows and large, hulking walls that seemed to block the sun;

Fewer dusty bound volumes - like most bound journal collections, ours had become somewhat idiosyncratic. We had a strong core collection, which I promised the college community would maintain intact; however, we also had donated volumes, limited runs, suspiciously odd titles (The Journal of Soviet Ultrasound? Seriously?) with many bound journals duplicating content that was fully available online through several different aggregators;

More soothing wall colors - the 70s era “salmon” and “turquoise” was no longer cutting it;

Wired study tables - during hours of peak use, our library was an obstacle course with student laptops, phones, and iPads plugged into walls and cords creating tripping hazards.

Getting started:

Following the survey and focus group, the first steps of the renovation were relatively simple. We opened up space by clearing out some ancient equipment, including a microform reader, slide projectors and, yes, a typewriter. We reduced the shelving by significantly cutting our reference collection and moving most of the books (at least those we were keeping) to the main collection, thus reducing the space they took and increasing their availability for use. We replaced as many print volumes as possible with digital resources. We weeded old volumes, and repurposed some furniture donated due to renovations on other floors. The first stage was easy, non-disruptive, and accomplished on a shoestring budget. It seemed that we were on to

something here! We even presented on the topic of the synergistic effect of reducing the print collection and opening up space. [1]

The more progress we made through simple steps, the more we saw the immense opportunities for improvement. When we (and the administration and students) got a taste of change, we decided to take the deep dive. The students' requests were both reasonable and long overdue. Before my eyes, the renovation was morphing from a few cosmetic changes to a total overhaul of the library's physical and intellectual content.

The words "go big or go home" rolled through my brain. I will confess that there were a few times during the renovation process when "go home" seemed vastly preferable to "going big." We were soon to discover that the more ambitious our goals, the bigger the potholes in the road ahead. Our challenges fell into five main categories: visualizing the new space, developing consensus among the library staff, doing the heavy physical and intellectual work of reducing our bound journal collection to accommodate the new shelving configuration, undertaking the physical challenge of de-shelving and re-shelving, and finally, remembering that despite physical chaos, our job is to keep the information flowing.

[1] Reimagining our space:

Since visual arts, interior design, and spatial relations are not part of my skill set, I got permission to hire a design firm with a proven track record in planning beautiful and functional libraries. I advised our consultants at the outset that we wanted our students to be partners in the renovation process, which meant involving the students in every decision we made.

What we did right:

We needed mechanisms for plugging our students into the process, with the goal of creating eye-catching information-gathering tools that even the most sleep-deprived student could not ignore. I created a special "branded" email conference with its own name and logo (a paint roller) and periodically sent out questions, updates, and reminders of what was happening. In return, the students sent back ideas, questions, and thank you notes.

When it came to selecting carpeting and wall colors, we created design boards listing color and pattern options, and also displayed our interior designers' suggestions for fabrics and furniture colors. We placed them at the entrance to the library with a voting sheet so students could select their own preferences. This generated a great deal of enthusiasm and a sense of competition, as students checked in to see if their specific color combinations were "winning." We even invited some students to come along on our furniture buying field trip. However, studying took precedence as it always does, so they trusted us with the decision. The students were a great asset. We

listened to them. They were honest and decisive, and appreciated being “heard.” We were so passionate about their involvement that we explained the process via poster presentation. [1]

Where we went wrong:

The students were amazingly adaptable during the process, even when noisy drilling, demolition of the circulation desk (along with the unexpected discovery of ancient asbestos under the desk), and plastic covers draped over everything radically changed their physical environment.

What they were NOT so crazy about was the fact that the quiet study furniture (the study carrels) took way longer to arrive than the tables. Since parts of the library were inaccessible, and except for a few study rooms all of the space was open, studying tended to be a noisy endeavor. The students were sitting in close proximity to one another and combined with the stress of exams, getting on each other’s’ nerves. They were surprisingly uncomfortable with asking each other politely to quiet down, and urged me to become the infamous “shushing librarian.” My influence in that vein, however, only went so far. I got desperate emails about the noise level, with requests to PLEASE do something about it. Finally, I appealed to the Dean of Student Affairs and asked him to approach it from a “professional ethics” standpoint. It worked to some degree, and there was a collective sigh of relief when the study carrels arrived just in time for exams.

What we learned:

I had no idea how long furniture took to arrive, or how long it would take to assemble. I also did not realize how edgy students get when they feel their studying styles are compromised

The takeaway: Carve out space, even if it’s small, for different studying styles. Know in advance where the quiet zones and the group study zones will be, post signs, and send email reminders. Invest in an earplug dispenser - they’ll love it!

[2] Involve the library staff in all decisions to promote buy-in

What we did right:

No one likes surprises in the workplace, so I shared every piece of information the minute I received it. All floor plans and furniture/color schemes were presented to staff. I announced scheduled work as soon as I knew the timing. Staff selected and approved the floor plan and the decorating scheme with minor disagreements. We took a furniture buying trip and picked out the new furnishings together, sitting in a variety of chairs and couches to see which ones promised to be the most comfortable for hours of

studying. To be sure that I was covering all the bases, the selection committee included a representative from Student Affairs (who knew the students' tastes and could advocate for their comfort) and an employee from facilities familiar with the kind of fabrics that can withstand shoes, food, and sleeping.

Since we were losing six full journal stacks in the bound journal section (almost 50% of what we had) it was clear that substantial recycling needed to be done. The intellectual work behind that decision was intense, but I developed a "decision grid" that evaluated the following with respect to each bound journal title:

- Shelf space occupied
- Importance to our core collection
- Dates of coverage
- Preceding and succeeding titles when relevant
- Frequency of use via interlibrary loan and/or document delivery
- Availability online via aggregators

I was confident about the analysis done and the decisions made, and it was clear that many of our bound journals had overstayed their welcome.

Where we went wrong:

I seriously underestimated how unsettling change, even positive change, would be for a group of people who had inhabited, worked in, and managed the same space for over 20 years. Our old circulation desk had a place for everything and everything was in its place. Staff felt that that the new desk would mean inadequate storage and a slightly modified interpersonal space when interacting with patrons, differences that led to concerns about comfort and circulation errors.

Removal of 50% of our bound journals meant saying goodbye to old friends (albeit dusty ones) that staff had put great effort into binding and organizing. They weren't just books - they represented hard work that now somehow seemed irrelevant. Our journal collection had been scrupulously organized and maintained, even surviving a move to a new building 19 years ago. Having to remove the journals quickly and without a detailed storage plan was extremely disconcerting to staff members who had invested so much of their time to making sure everything was in the proper order. Not having an upfront plan for reshelving them was even more unnerving. In addition, staff was justifiably concerned about a possible lengthy period of unavailability.

What we learned:

It is easy for library staff to think of the library as our own space. We have arranged it in a way that was functional for us and over the last 20 years it had become our extended home. The truth is, however, it is not ours; it is public space. It needs to be responsive not only to what our patrons want now, but as much as possible to what

they will want until the next renovation comes along. Fostering a vision for the process while understanding everyone's deep sense of ownership of the space proved far trickier than I had ever imagined.

The takeaway: Plan openly, work transparently, share information, and involve staff in decisions. Remember, though, that while many voices will be heard, only one will make the decision; making that clear at the outset will prevent conflict and keep the process moving forward. Finally, work through the discomfort of change until you reach your new comfort zone.

[3] Clearing the Shelves for Stack Reconfiguration

Background:

The most substantial reconfiguration of space in the library involved the bound journal stacks, which were eliminated for the purposes of opening up study space and creating a sight line from the south side of the library to the north.

While this article focuses upon the physical work that took place, it is incumbent upon me to give a nod to the intense intellectual work also involved in weeding our collection. Our small staff, lack of redundancy, and other priorities meant that that particular job fell to me, another decision I perhaps should have made differently. Our in-house construction staff scheduled the demolition and reconfiguration of our stacks to be done by outside contractors. Before that could happen, we had to remove the journals from the shelves, a task that ideally required physical strength and sufficient knowledge of the journal section to keep them in order during the move. I quickly discovered that those two skill sets did not intersect among library staff members and that removing heavy volumes is not for the faint of heart...or back.

We were fighting the clock to get the shelves cleared so that the work could begin on time. Students had no desire to do the heavy lifting, even with promises of copious amounts of pizza. Our incredible facilities/housekeeping staff stepped in to clear the shelves - to keep us on schedule and earn a bit of overtime pay. Clearing the bound journals from the shelves went smoothly, thanks to the discipline, reliability, smarts and stamina of our housekeeping staff. The post-removal organization of aforementioned bound journals? Not so much.

What we did right:

We worked closely with our facilities department to schedule noisy work at minimally disruptive times and our housekeeping staff/journal removal crew worked like a well-oiled machine. For individuals who do not work in the library, our crew was remarkably organized and knew the importance of keeping boxes and their contents in

order. Thanks to overtime work from our facilities staff, the shelves were cleared and the work was on schedule.

Where we went wrong:

My intellectual content analysis showed me that at least half of the bound journals would NOT be returning to the stacks, and they should have been removed before the process started. Time was not on our side, however, and that would have meant a preliminary de-shelving project that simply wasn't an option. In addition, there was no way of keeping pace with our facilities helpers who were emptying shelves at record speed. Despite trying to photograph and record what went into each of the more than 2,000 boxes the best we could do was remove the journals in alphabetical order and number the boxes sequentially, a plan that was distinctly inadequate in the eyes of our serials manager.

The library has no onsite storage, another obstacle that we should have thoroughly discussed before creating 2,000 boxes in need of storage. The boxes were temporarily stored in an empty anatomy lab (a feat of moving in and of itself, again carried out by our crack housekeeping crew). However, summer turned to fall and the anatomy lab was about to be pressed into use for teaching so the boxes returned, piled anywhere in the library they could fit - in alcoves, study rooms, around the perimeter, and on top of workspaces.

What we learned:

Make sure construction adheres to your schedule and supports the intellectual content decisions. There are many departments involved in even a small library renovation - Facilities, Student Affairs, Housekeeping, and Administration to name a few. The integrity of the library's collections and services is a priority though; there will be interruptions and detours, but this is about creating a better library, and that goes beyond the cosmetic changes and the physical facility.

We were lucky in that the boxes, despite traveling throughout the building, ended up in reasonably good numerical order. If they hadn't, putting the journal collection back together would have been like assembling a jigsaw puzzle...without the fun.

The takeaway:

Don't let the proverbial tail wag the dog. Assess your resources, interrupt other staff work when you need help with a time-sensitive project, and don't let anyone underestimate what it takes to get the library ready for all this. Oh, and when someone opens a box that has spent time in an anatomy lab and shouts "What is THAT?" well, you might want to think before looking.

[4] The students will supply the physical labor for re-shelving

Background:

Once the stacks were re-configured, we faced the task of getting the journals we were keeping back on the shelves. Those that were leaving us would be going into recycling bins; however, with no time to do the weeding first, all of the journals remained packed away in the boxes, so the weeding would have to happen simultaneously with the re-shelving.

What we did right:

Despite the journals being packed in 2,000 unlabeled boxes, and their migration from the library to the anatomy lab and back again, we did manage to maintain the boxes in pretty good sequential order.

Where we went wrong:

Difficult as it is to comprehend this now, I did not give nearly enough thought to the re-shelving process. First, because I underestimated what a big job it would be, and secondly, because I seriously did not consider the physical strength required. Looking back, I am not quite sure how that escaped me, but it did. We have hale and hearty young students, always hungry for pizza and work/study paychecks, and I thought they would take it on. They seemed to be the perfect candidates. What I failed to consider is that they can make the same amount of money by checking out books at the circulation desk so the number of students volunteering to re-shelve journals was absolutely zero.

Our housekeeping help, so adept at clearing the shelves at a record pace, could not be expected to not only re-shelve the journals in order, but leave out the ones that were being recycled and leave room for others to grow. Many of our journals had similar names and titles that were difficult to read. The risk of re-shelving something we did not want, or worse, recycling something we did want, was significant.

What we learned:

After discussing my conundrum with some colleagues who had recently renovated, I decided to pay a professional to get the bound journals back in order. This expense was not in the original budget, but the cost of living with the boxes, inaccessible journals, and disgruntled staff and patrons was far greater.

Under the guidance of our Serials Manager, we made a simple, color coded list: 1) journals to keep were indicated in black, 2) journals to recycle were indicated in red, 3) journals needing room to grow were indicated in green. The professional team dealt with our 2,000 boxes - and our less than perfect packing scheme - and had the journals back on the shelves in two days.

The takeaway:

Time is money and inaccessibility causes frustration. Admit when you need help, and don't be shy about asking for more money than you planned for.

What comes next?

Phase III of our renovation will start in the late spring of 2019. We will transform one under-utilized computer lab into a quiet study area with carrels and a small computer lab into a conference/meeting room, outfit the six study rooms with monitors and floor to ceiling whiteboards, replace our old office furniture, and build a café. I believe, and hope, that the hardest parts, and most of the decision-making are behind me.

[5] Remember that the Library is more than the renovation

Background:

The renovation seemed all-consuming, especially since I was completely in the dark about how it would go. A renovation is so visible, everyone has questions and opinions; on certain days, I avoided crowded elevators because I know someone (or several people) would ask any of these dreaded questions: So what's going on with the renovation? When will you be done? When are you getting rid of all those boxes? These questions were especially problematic since, as a librarian, I assiduously avoid the "I don't know" answer despite sometimes not really knowing.

What I did right:

I accepted that managing the renovation put me squarely outside my comfort zone; however, I have never been afraid of learning something new. I asked questions, I made mistakes, I talked to colleagues, and I realized what a vast source of expertise is out there if I just looked for it. I trusted my instincts, and when I needed to make an executive decision, even an unpopular one, I made it. And I lived to tell about it all. I also remembered that through it all, we ran a library. We never closed (even when we had to step over carpeting glue and rope off parts of the facility), we never shut down interlibrary loan, even if every single article wasn't available every single day, and no book was ever off limits. Everyone got every piece of information he/she needed. Thanks to the efforts of our Digital and Technical Services Librarian, we are surviving a migration to a new Library Services Platform - a digital change to complement our physical library renovation.

What I did wrong:

Occasionally, I forgot some of the above.

The takeaway:

As challenging as the experience has been, always focus on the outcome. When I look out of my office window and see the beautiful carpeting, the natural light, the students lounging and studying on the comfortable furniture instead of jockeying for limited space, some with earplugs studying quietly and some in groups learning noisily, I know we did something good. My thanks go to the library staff for being so good at their jobs and so dedicated to this place, to the Administration for supporting us every step of the way with funding and encouragement, and to the students, who helped plan a wonderful new library while putting up with some drilling and hammering along the way.

Coming full circle:

As I mentioned, a student representative to the Learning Resources Committee was the catalyst for the renovation. It was my goal to involve the students from start to finish, and to create a library that would not only serve them now but leave space for growth. They were honest and decisive and encouraging and they were grateful, occasionally sending an email my way just to say thanks.

Just this past week, an accreditation team visited our college. They had a private session with the students, who are not known for holding back when they have something to say. Faculty were not allowed at that meeting, but in my own meeting with the accreditors, one of the team members told me that the students had been effusive in their praise of our efforts on their behalf. Their exact words, as noted by our evaluator were: "Our voices are always heard." Despite all the missteps, conflict, and headaches, that was what I had planned all along.

References

[1] Wells E, Locascio J. If you build it they will come: re-imagining our space, re-thinking our collection. Presentation at: Metropolitan Library Council Annual Meeting; January, 2016; New York, NY; Jan, 2017.