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Spotlight On CONSTRUCTION

Library Technology Center Debuts at North Georgia College

by Shawn C. Toner

The Library Technology Center at North Georgia College and State University opened on Aug. 19 to crowds of students, faculty, staff and community members. Since its opening, this new, stand-alone 88,400-square-foot facility has kept the crowds coming back.

North Georgia College and State University is located in the historic gold-rush town of Dahlonega in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains approximately 60 miles north of Atlanta. Established in 1873, it is designated as The Military College of Georgia, one of six senior military colleges in the United States. The university has a total enrollment of 5,500 (including 800 cadets) and offers more than 60 majors and graduate programs.

Project Background

The need for a new or expanded and renovated library was clear by 1999. The Stewart Library, opened in 1971, had served the North Georgia community well but was unable to adapt to the pressures of increased enrollment and the rapidly shifting technology landscape. The library needed more and better seating and public computing, library instruction spaces and collection spaces. These factors, combined with limited Americans with Disabilities Act accessibility and inadequate electrical, lighting and life-safety systems, created a compelling case for a library building project. Additionally, the university recognized an opportunity to address the space and infrastructure needs of the instructional technology and information technology departments. These departments

were housed in cramped spaces at a time of increasing pressure to expand their services. Given the shared academic support and service missions of the three entities — the library, instructional technology and information technology — a new partnership and a preliminary space program was developed.

By June 2000, the Library Technology Center was listed as project 17 on the Georgia Board of Regents Major Capital Outlay Priorities and funded at \$20,440,000. In the next five years, the project moved up the priority list to position 3, with the architect selected and programming

and design funds approved by 2004. Construction funds were approved in 2006 at approximately \$22 million. The project broke ground in winter 2007 and opened in August 2008.



The Library Technology Center of North Georgia College and State University in Dahlonega (Photo courtesy of The Whiting-Turner Contracting Company)

The Program and Design Drivers

The Architecture Group of Atlanta provided programming and architectural design services, and Whiting-Turner Contracting Company provided

construction management services. The university architect with Georgia State Financing and Investment Commission provided financial and construction coordination throughout the project.

The idea of an addition and renovation to the existing Stewart Library was explored, but eventually eliminated in favor of a new, stand-alone facility located at the entrance to the campus and visually focused on the

iconographic drill field at the center of the university.

Compelling design drivers emerged in the early programming stages after interviews with student and faculty groups and building partners. The strongest driver was the desire to create a learning space that was inviting, sustaining and technology-rich. The facility needed to be both comfortable and seamlessly provide access to information and technology services — in effect, to become the third space beyond the classroom and domicile.

Other design drivers included creating collaborative spaces, making a self-orienting design for independent learning, and designing flexible, open space that could respond to change and accommodate new uses. These drivers served the project well during design discussions and especially well during the challenge of value engineering during a period of escalating construction costs. Between 2000 and 2006, organizational changes and construction budget realities impacted the building partners and the program.

The pedagogically focused components of the instructional technology department became the Center of Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE) and the remaining components became part of the instructional and information technology department (IIT).

In 2006, when the project had to be reduced by 20,000 square feet to balance the budget, the group made choices to revise the building program, deciding to accommodate only the customer service portions of the IIT department in the new facility. The network, security, and administrative operations would be housed elsewhere on campus.

Additionally, a decision was made to accommodate existing and future collection space in compact shelving and to restore the student study and collaborative space. The building partners creatively searched for any opportunity to share spaces including classroom and conference rooms and storage spaces. The goal was to preserve quality, make spaces more efficient and where possible dual-purpose, and to retain the building's clear student learning focus. This final round of design review also produced an opportunity to actually add the English department's Writing Center when an attractive and prominent space within the central first floor learning commons became available.

The Writing Center's mission to provide tutoring and writing assistance to students blended well with the design driver of "one-stop, complete customer services," and thus a fourth building partner was added.

The fifth and final building partner was Java City, the coffee shop service provider. Student and faculty groups expressed repeatedly the desire for a full-service coffee shop providing coffee, specialty drinks and snacks. Preserving quality space to accommodate this service was a priority and a renewed commitment to the program design drivers.

The Outcome

The building's entrance lobby features a two-story, glass-enclosed atrium that accommodates both the coffee shop and 40+ seats. The lobby is open 24/7 for study during the semester and can be accessed by ID key card. Stairs and an elevator allow students and faculty to enter and exit the lobby from the building's three levels. The third floor lobby entrance/exit is a convenient cut-through for students living in the residence halls on the upper side of campus. The main entrance to the library on the first floor is dramatic and offers a "wow factor."

The large, open learning commons has more than 90 public computers, easy access to faculty at the information desk, a convenient printing and copying workstation, and staff assistance readily available at the



The library's learning commons area (top) and the group study area. (Photos courtesy of The Whiting-Turner Contracting Company.)

access service desks. The open design and generous pedestrian pathways, coupled with a supportive signage system, encourage first-time visitors to self-orient and explore the service centers and collections. Rolling whiteboards and a mobile projection system announce upcoming events and programs. The self-service compact shelving unobtrusively accommodates the reference, bound periodical, and government documents collections. Also located on the first floor are the well-equipped library classroom, a small distance learning conference room, the library administrative office, the Writing Center and the IIT customer support and Help Desk.

The second floor houses the book collection, the open classroom with adjacent group study breakout spaces, library faculty offices, and quiet study seats, lounge chairs and banquette, or restaurant booth-style, seats. Most of the library's 25 group studies are located on the second floor, with the rest on the third floor. The group studies vary in size from four to 12 seats and also vary in the type of seating from lounge chairs to tablet arm and table seats. Each room is equipped with a whiteboard and computer workstation. The acoustical design of the group studies controls noise from leaking into other areas, and the view glass allows for easy monitoring of these heavily used spaces.

The third floor offers stunning views of the campus, the gold steeple of Price Memorial Hall, and the surrounding mountains. The Center of Teaching and Learning Excellence provides students and faculty with an iMac lab, media-editing facilities, a classroom and a small recording studio. The third floor also accommodates the Appalachian Studies Collection, the juvenile collection, current periodicals reading space and the Special Collection Room that doubles as a large conference room or a 100-seat presentation room. The library's technical services office is also located on the third floor.

The interior design was by Harris Interiors of Atlanta with furniture from Herman Miller, Izzy, Haworth, Gunlocke, Falcon, CBA, and Worden. Audiovisual services were provided by Technical Innovations and signage system by APCO. Compact shelving is by Burroughs.

One measure of the success of any new facility is its use, which is often measured by the gate count. Use of the Library Technology Center has increased significantly since opening. A comparison of the November 2007 and November 2008 entrance gate counts shows a 100+ percent increase over that of the previous year. The last hour exit in the first six weeks routinely exceeded 150 students. On Oct. 1, library hours were extended to 1 a.m. Monday through Thursday to better accommodate



Views from the library's atrium (top) and from its three-story staircase. (Photos courtesy of The Whiting-Turner Contracting Company.)

demand. Review is underway to extend both Friday and Sunday hours. Anecdotal comments about the facility have been positive and complaints rare. Campus and community requests to use the meeting spaces have increased sharply and are welcomed.

For example, in spring 2009, the Library Technology Center will serve as host site for the Smithsonian's Key Ingredient exhibit and a leadership conference. The number of people dropping in to browse the new book display, attend a program or just grab a cup of coffee is rising. The facility has created a new option for students, faculty and community members to gather around information. Every building project is to some extent an experiment in social design. At this point, the Library Technology Center at North Georgia is showing great promise as an ideal learning space ►►

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