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Small Spaces, Big Impact: Creating Places with a Purpose in Academic Libraries

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Many libraries, particularly academic libraries, find themselves in an almost constant cycle of renovation. Repurposing spaces to serve new functions and support new modes of teaching and learning have become mainstays of libraries' strategic planning processes. In a 2016 study of academic leaders' thoughts on strategic planning, 43% reported new library spaces, renovation, and building projects as major themes.¹ Often, these efforts support larger institutional goals focusing on student and faculty success.² Such efforts generally require months if not years of planning, gathering user input, and construction. Between renovations, however, other opportunities can arise to contribute to a campus community through inspiring and inventive spaces. Students may communicate space needs that are not expressly tied to academics. Emerging trends at both the discipline and university levels may demonstrate a growing need that libraries are uniquely equipped to address. Increases in demand for certain kinds of spaces may drive need. During the gaps between major space projects exist opportunities to create small spaces that can have a big, and in some cases, immediate impact. This article highlights a variety of projects at the **University of Tennessee (UT) Libraries** that have answered an expressed student need, met increasing demand, served as a campus test bed, or experimented with innovation.

Several factors may contribute to a library's success in developing small spaces. For the **UT Libraries**, creating and maintaining an ongoing facilities grid contributes to our decision-making in determining readiness for smaller projects. The grid denotes major project stages, small-scale projects, and ongoing maintenance. The grid supports the ability to gauge available funds, personnel, competing initiatives, and even the availability of space, particularly if certain workspaces or services are displaced for other projects. The **UT Libraries** maintains a facilities grid with a stated vision of "providing inspiring and useful spaces for innovation, scholarship, and learning." Major project stages are divided into *Vision It, Plan It, Fund It, and Do it*, with project ideas and plans listed in each section. Small-scale projects are listed in their own sections and generally conform to a 1-2 year timeframe. Major infrastructure maintenance is listed, but on a variable timeframe set by the university. Having at-a-glance access to this information allows a more agile response to unexpected requests and emerging opportunities.

Emerging Campus Priorities

Campus relationships and alliances may also contribute to opportunities and favorable outcomes in creating impactful small spaces. Being viewed as a student-centered space or activity hub may increase the opportunity for creating new spaces and influence the amount and type of usage in the environment. In many cases, these partnerships can tie library efforts directly to curricular and student success initiatives. One such project at the **UT Libraries** started with library representation on a campus Classroom Upgrade Committee. The relationships developed by serving on this particular committee have allowed the Libraries to offer their learning commons as a furniture test bed for new campus construction and renovation projects. In one particular case, the Libraries' learning commons hosted a variety of mobile classroom desks to support groupwork in classrooms. The chairs were first presented in a staffed, high-traffic area in front of the research assistance area. The chairs had stickers with QR codes linking to short surveys in which students, staff, and faculty provided feedback. Next, the chairs made an appearance at the Libraries' Dean's Student Advisory Committee meeting, in which the Chair of the Classroom Upgrade Committee solicited feedback from undergraduate and graduate student representatives from across disciplines. The conversation provided additional input, while enabling students to gain firsthand experience of the Libraries' involvement in campus conversations. Finally, the chairs were placed throughout the learning commons. Libraries' staff were able to observe how chairs were

being used and moved throughout the area, adding another layer of input. After a time, the Classroom Upgrade Committee was able to observe durability. Through testing a variety of classroom chairs for size, accessibility, and durability in a high-use library environment, the campus was able to choose a chair to outfit classrooms across campus and support a more active learning environment. (See Figure 1.)

The initial classroom furniture testing resulted in a partnership between the Libraries, the Classroom Upgrade Committee, and the University's Teaching and Learning Center to create a test classroom in the Libraries for instructors across disciplines to learn how to use pedagogies making

the best use of mobile furniture. The space also provided a place to practice and teach using these pedagogies before these types of classrooms were widely available. An unexpected benefit of this role was the development

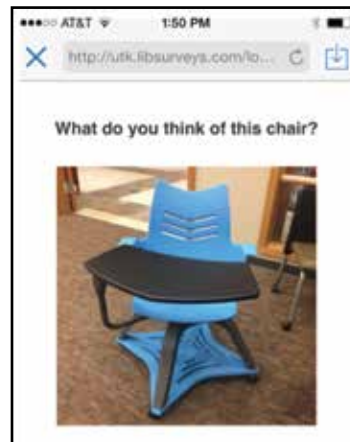


Figure 1: Splash Page From Test Chair Survey



Figure 2: Node Chairs Tested in Learning Commons and Later Used in Test Classroom

of relationships with furniture vendors, which allowed the Libraries to provide product feed-

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back and opened doors to testing other types of furniture, beyond the classroom, that could work in library spaces. From this initial opportunity sprang two types of impactful small space projects that served to directly align Libraries' efforts with those of the university. (See Figure 2.)

The next project arising from the classroom furniture testing was creating temporary, pop-up spaces for testing vendor-provided furniture before purchase or deployment in the learning commons and other Library spaces. One example involved creating a task chair testing space at a graduate student open house to obtain feedback on chairs that fit a variety of studying styles and body types. For high-traffic areas in which there aren't events, affixing a small notebook and pen to or near the furniture can elicit a variety of student reactions and feedback on the furniture in the testing space as well as types of furniture they desire. Pop-up spaces for testing furniture types work particularly well in high-use areas, such as galleries. Taking advantage of events in those spaces provides an opportunity to obtain additional feedback targeting specific student groups. (See Figure 3.)

Just as temporary spaces can provide information about future space needs, sometimes these spaces reveal valuable information about what doesn't fit in a certain environment. One



Figure 3: Pop-Up Furniture Testing at Graduate Student Open House

such temporary space that served a campus need to support experiential learning was the *Idea lab*. As instructors were adopting pedagogies to contribute to the University's commitment to active learning, they turned to the Libraries to provide spaces for long-term transdisciplinary collaboration. Their space need included a lockable area with a variety of workspaces and a wired connection for a project server. The **UT Libraries** was able to quickly re-purpose a newly vacated space slated for renovation the following semester. Part of the Libraries' readiness to support this type of space came from having identified the need for such a space as part of our planning grid.

When professors from Art, Computer Science, and Modern Foreign Languages approached us to outfit the space for this purpose, we were able to connect to user needs, make suggestions for the space, and ultimately provide a small space that served as a proof of concept for classes and University spaces to come after. For the Libraries, being able to provide the space on a temporary basis revealed philosophical issues we had not expected. Being committed to providing equal access to resources to all students and faculty, reserving the *Idea Lab* for long periods of time for a small group was counter to that philosophy and did not mesh well with existing scheduling systems. The project ultimately provided information to inform our future planning and produced valuable feedback for campus spaces to support this type of work.

Student-Centered and Student Suggested Spaces

Just as types of furniture come and go, some small but impactful spaces can be temporary. During finals at the **UT Libraries**, for example, a visible reception room becomes

The Livingroom, a space to support student wellness and relaxation. Games, snacks, therapy dogs, and a casual atmosphere invite students to take health breaks from their studies during a stressful time of the semester. Equipping the room is a matter of rearranging furniture to create conversation and game areas and moving in a soothing scene such as a fireplace or beach. Spaces with flexible furniture arrangements can be transformed into homelike, student-centered spaces with minimal effort and serve as a welcoming, supportive environment for students. Observing how a library's students are already moving flexible furnishings, both in general and at specific points in the semester, may provide insights on what types of set-ups the Libraries could create to support students' needs. (See Figure 4.)

While some spaces, such as the *Livingroom*, arise from a perceived need, other spaces may be directly suggested by students. The *Active Learning Space* in the **UT Libraries** learning commons is outfitted with a combination of posture and balance seating, standing-height desks, and resistance pedaling workstations to provide an alternative to sitting for long periods of time while studying



Figure 4: The Living Room Temporary Space in Hodges Library During Finals

or completing work and assignments. This space represents an intersection between a student request via social media and an innovative approach to space planning. After fielding a question via Twitter from a student frustrated that there was no good place in the library to practice yoga, the **UT Libraries'** Administration and Marketing departments had conversations about responding to student requests about library spaces. Coincidentally, our dean had been reading about institutions that had deployed fitness bike and laptop treadmill desk combinations to support student wellness.³ Our next step was to create a proposal for fitness bike desks, treadmill workstations, standing-height desks, and balance seating to offer students a more active way to study. In addition to giving students a variety of options for spending time in our spaces, the *Active Learning Space* encourages students to think about health and wellness as a vital component of their student experience. In that sense, the space connected to existing initiatives to support stress reduction during finals and allowed the **UT Libraries** to offer students wellness experiences all year long.

The Active Learning Space has also served as a test bed for graduate students in the School of Information Sciences User Experience and Assessment Program⁴ to get hands-on experience in conducting library space assessments.⁵ One benefit of small spaces can be the ability to test new ways of gathering user experience feedback and assessment. In some cases, assessment opportunities may map to initiatives supported by the spaces themselves. In this particular case, the Libraries benefited from having trained graduate students dedicated to assessing the space. Providing experiential learning opportunities to graduate students supported a campus-wide initiative for experiential learning. (See Figure 5.)

When approached by the **Student Government Association (SGA)** to create a space for students to pray, the Libraries met with **SGA** representatives to hear their needs and concerns and to discuss options that could meet the spirit of the students' request while also supporting the Libraries' mission of open-

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ness to all students. The result was the *Silent Room*, a space designed for all members of the **University of Tennessee** community seeking a few moments of quiet in their day. No food or drink is allowed in the room and electronic devices should be set to silent mode. Signage expressly indicates that the *Silent Room* is not a study space and may not be reserved. Those using the space asked to maintain quiet and respect for others using the space for reflection and contemplation. An anonymous suggestion box has led to feedback that has enhanced the space's atmosphere with flexible furniture, window treatments that promote privacy while maintaining safety, and artwork that highlights the Libraries' Digital Collections. (See Figure 6 and Figure 7.)

Demand Driven Spaces

While some small spaces arise from opportunity, collaboration, or student suggestion, other spaces may come from a known need or an eye toward growing populations, which at UT include commuter students and adult

learners. Future directions for the **UT Libraries** include a lactation room and a graduate student commons, which represent ever-increasing demands on our campus.

Creating small spaces with big impact can generate opportunities beyond the utility of the spaces themselves. They can forge valuable campus and external partnerships, facilitate student-initiated activities, encourage students to continue sharing their feedback, and connect libraries directly to campus initiatives to support experiential learning and student success. To have a significant impact, small spaces must be places with a purpose — places clearly articulated and tied to campus needs or goals. When approached in the context of the larger picture, these spaces can be generative and create an environment agile enough to continuously meet campus demands while encouraging innovation. 🐼



Figure 5: The Active Learning Space in Hodges Library

Endnotes

1. **John J. Meier**. "The Future of Academic Libraries: Conversations with Today's Leaders about Tomorrow." *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 16, no. 2 (2016): 263-288. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed May 13, 2018).
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3. **John Gouch**. "Workstations Encourage Students to Pedal While Studying." *The Newsstand* October 8, 2013. <http://newsstand.clemson.edu/mediarelations/workstations-encourage-students-to-pedal-while-studying/> (accessed March 21, 2018)
4. University of Tennessee School of Information Sciences, User Experience and Assessment (UX-A) Program. <http://scholar.cci.ut.edu/ux-a>
5. **Sian Carr, Alexa Carter, Kristina Clement, and Lauren Johnson**. "Library Space: The Final Frontier or the Next Generation? Assessing Active Learning Space in the Academic Library." Presentation at the **Charleston Conference**, Charleston, South Carolina, November 8, 2017. Accessed March 17, 2018. <https://2017charlestonconference.sched.com/event/CHol/42-library-space-the-final-frontier-or-the-next-generation-assessing-active-learning-space-in-the-academic-library>



Figure 6: The Silent Room in Hodges Library



Figure 7: Silent Room Door Sign with Guidelines

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and services on any device, on or off campus. **Macquarie University** is located in Sydney, at the heart of Australia's largest high-tech precinct, a thriving locale that is predicted to double in size in the next 20 years to become the fourth largest CBD (central business district) in Australia. **Macquarie University Library** building is a state of the art facility which opened in 2011 and contains Australia's first Automated Storage and Retrieval System (ASRS). <https://www.mq.edu.au>

Old friend and colleague, **JoAnne Sparks** is the **University Librarian!** She has her own conference in Australia!

Just noticed a heist movie — **American Animals** — about some naïve young gentlemen who decided to steal some rare books from a library. The librarian **Betty Jean Gooch** is threatened but is okay. This movie doesn't hold up to much criticism but the central theme of the **library and books** seems worth a **Rumor**. (*Wall Street Journal*, June 1, "Book Blunders" by **John Anderson**.)

Speaking of books, we have **Regina Gong's** last print book review column in this issue,

p.42. After three glorious years, **Regina** has arranged for 98 book reviews from our colleagues. As we told you earlier, this fall for the 2018 semester, **Regina** will be starting a **Ph.D. in Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education (HALE)** at **Michigan State University**. **Regina** has been thinking about pursuing her doctorate for a long time, and it's now possible. She will keep her full-time job at **LCC** while doing her Ph.D. Plus — **Regina** hopes to be guest editor of an **OER** issue of **ATG** in the fall.

Moving right along, **Bet You Missed It** features a column in **The Field** (May) about

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