

OPENERS

A Place for Everything: Everything in Its Place

by Cy Dillon

Have you ever been tempted, when asked where your library is, to say “Everywhere?” It would be an honest, if not particularly helpful, response. Most libraries now have more information available 24-7 on the Internet than during operating hours on the shelves. The resources of Stanley Library are available anywhere on campus through a robust network and worldwide through our proxy server. Telephone reference help and email interactions are part of our routine, and global reach is now the norm even for small academic libraries.

At the same time, we have more students and faculty using the building than ever. They love the wireless access, the comfortable chairs, the group study areas, the faculty and staff on hand to help with anything from a complex research problem to finding the coffee, the availability of up-to-date computers, and—especially—the printers. Getting to be everywhere and, at the same time, where we have always been has required six or seven years of planning, construction, and reallocation of space, beginning with the addition of a classroom wing in 2002–2003. While we have been fortunate to have more funding than originally expected, our experiences have certainly been similar to those at small private colleges around the country. I offer this description of what we have done not as an example of best practices, but rather as a case study of the changes typical for academic libraries over the past decade.

In the fall semester of 2003 Ferrum opened the Stanley Library Annex, a 10,000-square-foot complex of classrooms with a computer lab, small auditorium, student lounge, and the college boardroom included as well. At the same time we abandoned our one point of entry/exit layout, installed upgraded security gates and cam-

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eras, and opened the main floor to through traffic. This combination of new teaching and learning spaces and dramatically increased student and faculty traffic set the stage for changes to the main floor of the library—and to the academic and social activity there. The ten computers in our central reference area immediately became the most heavily used machines on campus and gave us more access to students than we had expected. Folks stopping to check their email or download documents from the course management system found it easy to ask the nearby librarian for help with assignments. Adding tables for group study and removing individual carrels gave us more seating

capacity and an area that attracted students who took advantage of increased wireless connectivity or simply studied together. At first we were surprised that students were perfectly comfortable studying in an area that was not particularly quiet and had many potential distractions, but we have come to take this comfort with a bustling location for granted. Nevertheless, as we adjusted to the new conditions, we added computer workstations away from the traffic flow and began to explore the possibility of taking out shelving after more than thirty years of adding ranges to accommodate a growing collection. We knew there was unrealized potential for connecting services to students in this open learning environment, but we were not quite sure what services or how to present them.

Our concerns were shared by many academic librarians and administrators, and the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) responded with a national effort to help institutions develop solutions. A pair of travel grants from CIC helped us send teams to two workshops that exposed us to ideas from around the country and gave us the opportunity to collaborate on a strategy for making the most of our opportunity to access students. In 2005 our team of CAO, library director, and instructional technologist attended the Transforming the College Library workshop in Chicago. There we learned what other institutions were doing to develop information literacy as part of their curriculum, and how technological

change was making new demands on libraries and library space. Our success in drafting and implementing an information literacy program for the college made us eager to work with CIC again in 2007 when we had the opportunity to attend the CIC-NITLE Learning Spaces & Technology Workshop in Tacoma, Washington. This conference at the University of Puget Sound was transformative for the participants from Ferrum College—the CAO, CIO, Academic Resources Center (ARC) director, and library director—and we returned to campus with a vision for an integrated, technology-intensive set of learning spaces that has been almost completely realized as we approach 2009.

Before the experience in Tacoma, we had planned to dedicate some available space on the ground floor to a Writing Center and Math Center, but we expanded goals for our next building renovation to include redesigned spaces for the full range of academic support services offered at the college. Our exposure to successful projects, innovative academic administrators, and knowledgeable architects, combined with planning time free of the distractions of campus business, led us to understand that we needed to try to create attractive, accessible learning settings in the prime real estate of our library/academic resources building, and that we should look at the organization of office and other resource space from the point of view of the students we serve. For instance, we learned that Writing and Math centers would be used more if they were in full view of the hundreds of students who pass through the main floor of the library every day. Before the workshop, we assumed that students seeking help from faculty wanted privacy, and that these centers should be out of the sight of the heaviest traffic. The dramatic increase we have recorded in the use of these two centers fully justifies designating a few hundred



The Writing Center now occupies prime space in Stanley Library's reference room.

square feet of the main floor of our library for these uses.

The four Ferrum participants left the workshop with a plan that included creating the two centers discussed above, relocating all the offices and computer labs in our Academic Resources Center, dramatically expanding our peer tutoring program using spaces in the library and ARC, and establishing a computer help desk as part of our academic support facility. Ferrum's president enthusiastically approved the plan and insisted that we compress the timeline to open the Writing and Math centers in their new locations by the beginning of the fall semester of 2007. She also suggested the best location for our Math Center and helped design the space and its furnishings.

During the summer of 2007 the library staff identified thousands of volumes of back issues of journals

that could be replaced by JSTOR access, cancelled these volumes, removed two ranges of shelving, moved another range from the serials area to the reference room, relocated thirteen microfilm storage cabinets, and gathered appropriate tables and chairs to create the Math and Writing Center spaces. This process will undoubtedly sound familiar to many academic librarians at smaller institutions. Faculty members were assigned to both centers for approximately twenty-five hours per week, including some evening hours. With their high visibility and attractive settings, both centers enjoyed good attendance from the start, with the Math Center becoming a popular gathering place for mathematics students even when faculty were not on duty. The comfortable furniture, wireless network access, and ample white board draw stu-

dents during all of the nearly one hundred hours per week that the library is open. One of the most impressive outcomes of our renovation is the more than 400 sessions Writing Center faculty recorded helping students in the fall semester of 2008. In 2006 only four or five students a day used the center.

That same summer the library director, ARC director, CAO, and Development Office worked on a plan to fund a major renovation of the ARC offices and computer labs—all on the ground floor of the library building—in the summer of 2008. With support from the Butz Family Foundation and the Stanley Library endowment, sufficient funds were made available for the renovation. Knowing that this would fund most of the changes planned for the space, the library staff cleared out ground floor space formerly devoted to media equipment during the fall of 2007, and the Computer Help Desk, which had previously been in the basement of the administration building, was installed there in January 2008. It, along with the new Math and Writing centers, experienced increasing student traffic through the spring of 2008.

The ARC director and library director then consulted with the Ferrum College architect to draw up a two-stage plan for the library ground floor renovation. The blueprint for the project was approved by the administration, and in May 2008 renovation began in the ARC, removing offices from the perimeter of the space and consolidating them around a receptionist's office featuring windows visible to students entering the facility. This opened up study areas adjacent to large windows overlooking a patio and the college lake, making the whole floor more attractive while creating easy access to the staff offices. The area that once housed a traditional audiovisual department, eliminated by moving cir-

The Math Center is an ideal spot for small groups of students to interact with faculty.



culating equipment and software to the main floor circulation desk, became the perfect location for our computer services Help Desk, located just down the hall from the ARC offices. At the same time our Disabilities Services office and computer lab were moved and redesigned to gain space, increase privacy, and avoid noise from tutoring sessions. During this period the library staff also consolidated two archives and rearranged book-stack study areas to create more group study tables in areas with wireless network access. We were also able to take advantage of a former projection room that was converted to a storage area for two thousand VHS cassettes, freeing up more space for an expanding DVD collection. With excellent coordination by our physical plant staff, our contractors completed all this plus moving a sixteen-seat computer lab by the end of August. This leaves only permanently relocating that lab to finish our plan for the ground floor.

Looking back at our application to attend the second CIC workshop, composed in October 2006, indicates that we had much lower

expectations for both the workshop and our project than we have realized. Beginning with a few good ideas and an understanding that we needed to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the concentration of student activity in the library, we were able to agree on a plan and complete a complex project in a very short time. Our success is based on learning three things:

(1) Coordination and cooperative planning for all areas of academic support are a must for an institution that needs to act effectively and economically.

(2) All projects in creating learning spaces—and the whole campus should be made up of learning spaces—must be imagined from the students' point of view with the understanding that what succeeds for one generation of students may fail for the next.

(3) Accessibility and visibility drive use of student services—at least for this generation.

So, even though our library is everywhere, it is also right where it has been all along. It's just that now students really find some "there" there. **VI**