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The Scholars Commons: Spaces and Services for Faculty and Graduate Students

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By Gloria Colvin

Since the first learning commons began appearing in academic libraries more than ten years ago, the concept has been widely embraced. Initially, many of these spaces shared a few basic features: they were technology-rich, provided collaborative space for groups, and offered user support, as well as traditional reference support. As their popularity and usage have increased, learning commons have continued to evolve to include new spaces, such as cafes, practice presentation rooms, and areas for performances and exhibits, and new services, including tutoring, data centers, and programming. Most learning commons primarily serve undergraduate users, and now libraries are hearing from their faculty and graduate students who are looking for different types of spaces that better meet their needs.¹

The University Libraries at Florida State University (FSU) have taken a holistic approach in restructuring public services by researching and assessing the needs of different user groups, designing distinct spaces and services for faculty and graduate students and for undergraduates, and reorganizing staff to support this structural change. While research and services for all constituencies moved forward, the Libraries focused first on renovation of a physical space for graduate students and faculty.

Several assessments made it clear that faculty and graduate students perceived that the Libraries were not meeting their research needs adequately. A 2004 LibQual survey indicated gaps between the desires and expectations of these user groups and the library's performance, particularly in terms of the collection. Comments emphasized the need for additional resources, subject specialists, and both quiet space and group study space. A Quality Enhancement Review of the libraries completed in 2005 revealed dissatisfaction, primarily among humanities faculty, in regard to the collection and among faculty and graduate students who desired quieter study areas rather than social spaces. Ongoing surveys of doctoral students completing their dissertations supported these findings.

Organizational Restructuring

In 2006, recognizing that various constituencies had different needs and used libraries in different ways, the libraries' administration decided on an organizational restructuring that phased out the Reference Department and created two separate units, one focusing on services to undergraduates and one focusing on services to faculty and graduate students. For awhile, both units staffed a shared service desk, but eventually the main service desk evolved into a service point primarily for undergraduates.

The Faculty and Graduate Research Services unit initially consisted of several reference librarians who focused on developing a research consultation service, providing instruction for graduate level courses, developing research guides, and providing outreach to faculty. As part of this restructuring, the Libraries' administration envisioned a plan to renovate the main library to create distinct spaces for the constituencies served by these two departments.

Research

In spring 2007, four FSU librarians, including one from Undergraduate Services and one from Faculty and Graduate Research Services, took a trip to visit a number of libraries that had recently renovated facilities and created learning commons. The itinerary included University of Tennessee, Ohio University, University of Indiana, University of Kentucky, Georgia Tech, University of Georgia, and Emory University. Later, a group of librarians also visited the newly renovated Library West at the University of Florida. Most of these renovations focused on creating spaces for undergraduates, but there were many ideas that could be adapted for faculty and graduate student spaces, as well.

Later that spring, FSU librarians conducted several focus groups with faculty from diverse departments in order to learn more about ways in which faculty used the libraries and to gather ideas about other things the libraries might provide or do in order to support faculty teaching and research. Several interviews with graduate students were also conducted. The following year, library liaisons conducted interviews with faculty from almost all academic departments on campus using a standard set of questions that was modeled in part on interviews of faculty conducted by the University of Minnesota Libraries in 2005-6.² From these interviews, librarians learned about faculty members' research projects, the methodologies they use, ways in which they communicate with colleagues, conditions in which they prefer to study or write, ways in which they used library resources, and needs that they felt were currently not being met.

There was not much in the literature about faculty spaces in libraries, but several articles on services for faculty were helpful in thinking about what a library could offer this constituency. A number of the ideas garnered from visits to other libraries, research with FSU faculty, and from journal literature were pivotal in forming the basis for a new space in the main library for faculty and graduate students. At the same time, a committee was tasked with researching and benchmarking services that academic libraries provide to faculty and graduate students. Much of this information was gathered from library Web sites.

Creating the Scholars Commons

Planning

The space that was identified for the renovation was the ground floor of the main library, which was home to government documents, microform, maps, and the Digital Media Center. The Provost agreed to provide funding for the renovation and an architect was hired to work on the project. Planning started with identifying types of spaces to include—group study rooms, research consultation rooms, a graduate student computer lab, conference rooms, instruction space, a reading room, media production facilities, and office space for librarians—and then looking at the available space to see where the different areas would best fit.

Construction

Construction began in December 2007 at the close of the fall semester and continued for most of the following year. Except for the Digital Media Center and staff office space, the floor was closed during construction. Materials located on the floor were retrieved by staff as needed. In the initial stages, compact shelving was installed to accommodate all of the documents, microform, and maps that were housed on this floor. During this time, the Reference collection was weeded, reduced by about 50 percent, and eventually relocated from the main floor to the compact shelving so that many of the library's research materials would be located in this area. Once the collections were moved, fixed shelving was removed, and construction of the new rooms began.

Furnishings

During construction, furniture and equipment were selected and services planned. All furniture was selected with flexibility in mind so that it could be moved easily and spaces reconfigured as needed. Most of the selected tables and chairs have casters, with the exception of more formal seating for the conference rooms and reading room. Tables in those rooms can be collapsed and stacked and chairs stacked so that the rooms can be used for multiple purposes. The reading room is furnished with both comfortable upholstered chairs and sofas and study tables and chairs. All of the furniture can be moved, and the room is easily reconfigurable to lecture-style seating for programs. One of the most popular features is the wall in each group study room and conference room that is painted with a special paint to transform it into a floor-to-ceiling writing surface for dry-erase markers. A small, mobile desk functions as the service point for the Scholars Commons, since it is used primarily for circulation and informational questions and very little for reference questions. Its mobility allows for it to be moved if a different location proves to be better.

Computers

Interviews and feedback from faculty and graduate students indicated that many of them wanted study space over technology space and preferred to use their own laptops, so there are only twelve computer workstations in the open area of the floor and the same number in the graduate computer room. Plugs for electrical outlets are located in floors and in columns throughout the floor and there is wireless access for the entire floor. Laptops are used in the instruction room rather than having fixed computer workstations. Images from the instructor's computer can be projected on to two walls in the room and the furniture can be set up in many different ways depending on the size of the class or group meeting there.

Staffing

Just prior to the beginning of the fall 2008 semester, subject specialists from the Collection Development Department and the head of the Digital Media Center joined the Faculty & Graduate Research Services librarians to form the Scholars Commons Department. All eight librarians are responsible for collection development, outreach to faculty and graduate students, research support, and instruction. Organizationally, the department is team managed, with each librarian having primary responsibility for certain functions or services.

Usage

The Scholars Commons officially opened in November 2008. Graduate students have been the primary users of the space, and they have been enthusiastic in their appreciation of it. The floor is maintained as a quiet study area, except for the group study rooms and conference rooms. While the floor itself is open to anyone, the reading room, group study rooms, conference rooms, and computer lab are restricted to graduate students and faculty, and they are almost always in use. Keys may be checked out to access the rooms and graduate students and faculty ID cards can be authenticated to allow them swipe-card access to the reading room. In the first year of operation, more than one thousand graduate students registered for access to this room.

Services

Ideas from the faculty interviews and from visits to other libraries inspired a number of services and programs for faculty and graduate students that are based in the Scholars Commons. Research librarians hold office hours when they are available for research consultations by appointment or on a drop-in basis. Students and faculty wanting to create or embed multimedia in projects can get expert help from the Digital Media staff. The library liaison program is based in the Scholars Commons, and much of the collection development work takes place in this department.

A faculty delivery service dubbed FedS (for Faculty Express Delivery Service) was established and began delivering books to faculty offices and e-mailing journal articles from the print collection to faculty desktops in October 2007. Faculty members have enthusiastically embraced this service, and in the two years since its inception, numbers of deliveries have steadily increased. In two years, the average monthly total for book deliveries has grown from 263 to 421. Article deliveries have increased from an average 110 per month to 160.

Partnerships with other units on campus have resulted in new services offered in the library. A statistics consulting service operated by the Statistics Department holds regular office hours and assists faculty and students with designing experiments or studies, using statistical software, and analyzing and interpreting data. The Graduate School offers workshops on topics from grant writing to the human subjects process to electronic theses and dissertations production. Graduate students can meet with a staff member from the Office of Graduate Fellowship and Awards for help in obtaining funding for their research. Staff from other departments, including the Office of Faculty Recognition and the Center for Teaching and Learning, will arrange to meet with faculty in the Scholars Commons by appointment.

Programs

One of the visions for the Scholars Commons is to bring together faculty and students from a variety of disciplines to share and discuss ideas and to foster collaboration by connecting people with related interests. A graduate student research and creativity showcase in spring 2009 brought together graduate students from a wide range of departments to hear and see presentations on their studies or creative endeavors. A program on folklore earlier that semester featured a number of

faculty speakers, and a program on genius involving faculty in classics, history, English, modern languages, music, and psychology is planned for spring 2010.

Ongoing Assessment and Development

A walk through the Scholars Commons testifies to the success of the concept. Most of the tables are occupied, all of the computers are in use, and the media studios are humming. Several students confer in a group study room while one writes complex formulas on the wall. In other rooms, students collaborate on a presentation, get help from a statistics specialist, revise the draft of a dissertation chapter, consult with a librarian on a database search, edit a video, or meet with an instructor. Faculty members come by to meet with a liaison librarian, use a print resource, or work on an article.

Building on these successes, the Scholars Commons team continues to envision new initiatives that will expand services for its constituencies. Many of the features of undergraduate learning commons have been incorporated in the Scholars Commons, but they have been customized for a different audience. Understanding this audience and responding to its changing needs are critical to the commons' continued success, and the staff tries to keep a finger on the pulse of users. An extensive assessment to better understand the research practices and needs of graduate students is now in the planning stages. Results of this assessment and continuing conversations with faculty will inform decisions about new ventures and new uses of space.

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¹ Crit Stuart. "Learning and Research Spaces in ARL Libraries: Snapshots of Installations and Experiments." *Research Library Issues: A Bimonthly Report from ARL, CNI, and SPARC*, no. 264 (June 2009): 7–18.
<http://www.arl.org/resources/pubs/rli/>.

² University of Minnesota Libraries. "A Multidimensional Framework for Academic Support," 2006,
<http://www1.lib.umn.edu/about/mellon/docs.phtml>