

LIBRARY AS PLACE

by

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It is 1:00 p.m. on a weekday afternoon and Owens Library is coming alive. For the next eleven hours, the floors will hum with the activity of students preparing for classes and tests, working in groups, researching, and studying.

The group workstations and computer terminals on first floor are full, often surrounded by work groups. Students are asking librarians for assistance in locating additional sources to strengthen an argument and for help with source citation. At the study tables and group work stations, students meet to study together and/or plan presentations. The Client Computing lab assistants are fielding requests for guidance in designing report covers and technical questions regarding software and hardware.

On second floor, English Composition students are using the microfiche to find articles in the *New York Times*; General Biology students are perusing the print and online *Missouri Conservationist* for ecology articles; education majors are scanning K-12 textbooks for possible lesson plans and the Juvenile Collection for books to use in a Children's Literature class.

On the third floor, students are reading, reviewing and thinking. It is the *only* designated quiet study area on campus, as requested by the Student Senate and enforced by peers. Students on the third floor are seeking "not to be found" as they prepare for an upcoming test in the quiet that's so rare on a college campus or in the apartment they share with roommates. Education graduate students have laid out several research papers to study the recommended form and style for their own research study. Various sorority, fraternity, and athletic groups are fulfilling required study hours.

This is "Library as Place." Freeman describes the expectation many faculty members have for student use of academic library space, as reflected by individual and group study space usage in Owens Library:

Now that information is available almost instantaneously anywhere on campus, faculty expect their students to use their time in the library thinking analytically, rather than simply searching for information. Faculty also see the library as an extension of the classroom, as a place in which students engage in a collaborative learning process, a place where they will, it is hoped, develop or refine their critical thinking (2005, p. 5).

Freeman cautions, however, that "[w]e must never lose sight of the dedicated, contemplative spaces that will remain an important aspect of any place of scholarship." These spaces are reflected by study areas in Owens Library.

Currently Owens Library is facing a challenge of an administrative plan to redesign much of Owens Library's "dedicated, contemplative spaces" into classrooms, due to the need for additional classroom space on campus. We have been shown several different visions of how this

might be accomplished. While some of the floor plans include interesting features, each of the proposed designs remove a large amount of areas designated for private study, group meetings at tables, and individual study space (on both second and third floors). We have been assured that students can meet or study in empty classrooms at night but aren't convinced that a classroom affords the same ambience as studying in a comfortable area surrounded by library materials. Freeman describes the difference in this way:

One of the fascinating things that we are now observing is the impact of redesigned library space on the so-called “psychosocial” aspects of an academic community. . . . While students are intensely engaged in using new technologies, they also want to enjoy the library as a contemplative oasis. Interestingly, a significant majority of students still considers the traditional reading room their favorite area of the library—the great, vaulted, light-filled space, whose walls are lined with books . . . (2005, p. 6).

An additional tenet of some of the floor plans we have been shown involves splitting the Technical Services Department of the library between two floors. This department maintains all electronic resources/databases and also receives, processes, and catalogs all library materials. If this work team is split between two floors, communication flow will be hampered and work flow will be seriously compromised. For example, if a book is processed on a separate floor from the one on which it is cataloged, all books will need to be loaded on carts and taken by elevator to different floors between processing and cataloging—this will slow down the work flow and the time from order to availability. Because books appear in the Library Catalog on the date of order, any factor that slows the availability of materials impacts the satisfaction of students and faculty who are often waiting for the book to arrive. All of these “behind the scenes” activities contribute to the success of library as place.

Adding six classrooms to Owens Library will not only permanently remove much of the student meeting and study space, it will also impact the ability of the library to increase library instruction classroom space. The library instruction program has expanded 250% since 2001 and we currently have a difficult time scheduling sessions for students. This past academic year, we taught research processes to 5,005 students. The library faculty has also expressed a concern over the past two years that existing library classrooms are not large enough to accommodate expanding class sizes. Each room includes 28 seats and computers for hands-on instruction, yet we often see classes that include 30+ students. When we were first approached about adding classrooms to the library, we discerned that an additional library classroom would be constructed, but none of the floor plans presented to date include such a facility. While there is an additional computer lab on second floor, Information Systems has designated it as an Assessment Lab and Client Computing lab only.

Demas (2005), in a study of why students come to academic libraries, lists the following reasons:

- “Reading and Relaxing in Safety and Quiet”
- “Individual Study”
- “Group Study”
- “Checking E-mail and Using the Web”
- “Finding Information for Class Assignments and Academic Projects”
- “Information Production: Computing, Writing, and Creating Presentations”

- “Classroom-Based Teaching and Learning” (Teachers bring their classes to the library for a special presentation.)
- “Browsing” (pp. 29-31).

Each of these behaviors is reflected in Northwest Missouri State University’s student behaviors at Owens Library. Demas (2005) identifies the social aspect of the library atmosphere we also observe:

Many students spend countless hours in the library and appreciate an environment that places study in a social context. They say that rather than distracting from one’s work, opportunities to meet and socialize make the experience of spending long hours in the library more pleasant and rewarding (p. 33).

Removing open seating areas from Owens Library and replacing them with walled classrooms, even if those rooms have glass walls as in one floor plan, will inhibit the social experience that is an integral part of an academic library. Demas describes libraries as an “intellectual and social” commons and an “academic community center” (2005, p. 33). The library faculty has long seen this phenomenon at play in Owens Library. We know that students consider this library “their place” where academic thought and projects mesh and critical thinking is accomplished.

Demas describes the ways in which today’s college students conduct research. He states that “[s]tudents combine information from a wide range of sources and genres when producing papers and presentations. They need computer workstations for comfortable group work and expansive surfaces to spread out their study materials” (2005, p. 30). Owens Library has embraced changes in the ways in which twenty-first century students interact with information and work groups.

We have designed computer workstations that accommodate groups and allow for multitasking. With the advent of the initiative in which every full time Northwest student is issued a notebook computer, we have noted how groups work with their notebooks in tandem with the personal computers. In order to accommodate their work styles, we have designed new computer workstations (soon to be implemented) that include tables where notebooks can be connected and powered next to each personal computer. These work stations are financed by funds generated by the *Brick and Click Libraries* symposium held annually at Northwest and sponsored by Owens Library.

When resourceful librarians respond to the ways in which students show us they want and need to work, they are able to fulfill the library’s mission of maintaining a “collection that supports undergraduate and graduate research,” “assure[s] equitable information access,” and “teach[es] lifetime information skills” (Leadership Team). Another need students have been communicating to us recently is related to the number of multimedia presentations they are required to make in classes. These assignments help students develop skills that are transferrable to the modern work environment, where presentations are a part of many jobs. Students need spaces equipped with multimedia hardware to practice their presentations. While each full-time student has a notebook computer, they still need a presentation workstation that includes a

projector, document camera, electrical outlets, dependable Internet access, as well as an enclosed area where they can practice speaking.

Owens Library wants to provide these types of rooms and needs to procure funding to create them, as well as to use spaces that others are targeting for classrooms to create these areas. While it could be argued that classrooms could also be scheduled as presentation practice rooms, using an entire classroom for three to five students to practice a presentation commanders much more space than is needed for this activity.

Owens Library currently shares significant square footage with a number of student services which have missions closely aligned with our own library service mission. These include Academic Computing on first floor, second floor, and the basement; the CITE Office on second floor; the Assessment Center on second floor; the Writing Center on second floor; beginning in July 2009; and the Proctoring Center on third floor. We are committed to providing students services in convenient locations, with multiple units with shared visions located in cohesive spaces.

We hope that the academic community at Northwest will support us in our quest to allow B.D. Owens Library to remain the “academic community center” at Northwest Missouri State University. While we understand the need for classroom space on campus, we see daily the students’ need for study space, group work spaces, and research synthesis, and desire the preservation of the academic “Library as Place” for generations of students to come.

References

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