

# Learning and Research Spaces in ARL Libraries: Snapshots of Installations and Experiments

Crit Stuart

**L**earning commons and other spaces to support individual and group productivity have emerged in the majority of ARL libraries in the past decade. Respondents to a survey conducted by ARL during the late winter and early spring of 2008 described their work to provide learning and research spaces for their constituents.

The survey invited all ARL libraries to describe innovative and noteworthy experiments in three areas: instructional programs, virtual resource development, and space initiatives. Of the 123 member libraries, 77 participated in the survey, for a response rate of 63%. Responses to the first two elements of the survey (instructional programs and virtual resource development) were summarized in an earlier article with accompanying database.<sup>1</sup>

Innovations and noteworthy experiments were defined in the survey as either “a new service for the library” or “unique in academic librarianship.” Respondents briefly described the initiatives, provided supporting documents and URLs, and offered assessment data where it existed. What is new or innovative for one library may be a standard and long-practiced approach to space development and programming at another institution. Whatever one’s perspective, considerable transformation of physical spaces has occurred, with interest remaining high for ongoing renovations of existing spaces, and for expanding support to constituents not served in the first iterations.

Libraries demonstrate a strong interest in supplying well-articulated spaces and services for undergraduate endeavors, and for faculty and graduate research enterprises. The preponderance of innovative learning spaces in ARL libraries are for undergraduate students. This may be due to the influence of the first learning

commons that arose in the mid-to-late '90s. These early examples focused on the undergraduate, and were characterized by improved furnishings and aesthetics coupled with computer workstations arranged in an open landscape. Service points were tailored to provide information and technology assistance to undergraduates. Many of the learning commons reported in the survey are scarcely different from the first models. The majority reported that they were strongly influenced by pre-existing undergraduate installations found elsewhere. A minority of libraries reported modeling their innovative learning spaces on user-derived data, interviews, and insights.

Assessment of built learning and research spaces is sporadic and often anecdotal.

In the last few years, graduate students and faculty have asked libraries to provide complementary spaces and services for their research, publication, and social needs. Libraries have been challenged to consider what these components should be. The most successful iterations of these research-oriented facilities are predicated on a deep understanding of the client, informed by careful pre-programming assessment that engages the library, partners, faculty, and graduate students in discovery and insight. Some targets for these installations are teaching and technology skills; discipline-focused digital centers; research methodologies and tools; convening grounds for social interactions, lectures, and exhibits; and support for scholarly communication.

Assessment of built learning and research spaces is sporadic and often anecdotal. Many libraries report that the most salient statistics are found in the numbers of individuals who visit and work in these arenas. Formal mission and vision statements are sometimes lacking. Perhaps the most telling omission is the dearth of identified learning outcomes that meet faculty aspirations for students coupled with a nuanced understanding of the principal hurdles faced by students in their major disciplines.

The following summary of the innovative space initiatives described by survey respondents is organized around themes that emerged in the responses:

- Collaborations with Campus Partners
- Multimedia
- Digital centers
- Faculty and Graduate Student Spaces
- Branch and Subject Libraries

- Flexible, User-Influenced Spaces
- Classrooms, Workshops, Instruction
- Galleries, Art, Exhibits, Performances, Events
- Tutoring and Peer Support
- Cafés and Refreshment
- Presentation Practice Facilities

## Collaborations with Campus Partners

*A considerable number of survey respondents alluded to having campus partners in their learning-space enterprises. Library partners are chosen for their capacity to deliver valued services and support within or adjacent to the convening ground. Collaborators come from campus IT units, tutoring services, advisement, writing and multimedia support, academic departments in the case of specialized or subject libraries, and education technologists. Digital centers are staffed with subject and data specialists who may come from other campus units.*

A pair of student and faculty commons sharing a large space in **Ohio University's** Alden Library rely on support from the Center for Academic Technology, the undergraduate college, Dining Services, the Center for Teaching Excellence, the Center for Writing Excellence, and the Office of the Provost. These spaces and the services they contain continue to evolve as the partners gain insight and experience over time.

<http://www.library.ohiou.edu/serv/lc/index.html>

<http://www.library.ohiou.edu/fc/>

**University of Pennsylvania Libraries'** Weigle Commons is sponsored jointly by the libraries, the School of Arts and Sciences, and the Office of the Provost.

"Central to the Commons' mission are support services provided by the Program Partners, a group of administratively disparate services that have joined forces to collaboratively support undergraduate education. Here students and faculty benefit from various campus specialists and units that provide support for writing, presentations and public speaking, multimedia creations, project management, research methodologies, and technology training for faculty to support new forms of pedagogy." An ambitious and richly varied training series separately targeting students and faculty is synched to their needs for upcoming projects and improved instruction.

<http://wic.library.upenn.edu/>

**University of British Columbia's** Irving K. Barber Learning Centre capitalizes on the confluence of several campus units to supplement library staffing. Services include writing and research, study skills, multimedia creation, and course tutoring, as well as labs and offices for the Centre for Teaching and Academic Group and the School of Library, Archival, and Information Studies.  
<http://www.ikebarberlearningcentre.ubc.ca/>

## Multimedia

*The focus on providing facilities for multimedia production is a recent phenomenon in ARL libraries, paralleling the rapidly increasing use of these media in faculty instruction and in student responses to classroom assignments. Specialized facilities in libraries tend to offer a vast array of equipment and software to use in-house. The software and equipment platforms supporting multimedia creation often impose a considerable learning curve that neither faculty nor students can easily master. The most robust, and therefore successful, multimedia centers are infused with skilled staff, excellent equipment, and well-considered training and user-support models.*

The Weigle Commons multimedia center at the **University of Pennsylvania's** Van Pelt-Dietrich Library Center is probably the most influential model among ARL libraries for multimedia programming. The center is run as both production facility and training space, and it attempts to train both students and faculty in new forms of multimedia. Center staff have learned that student multimedia production gets a boost when faculty have insight into technical capacities and limitations, storyboarding, editing, continuity, logic, etc., so that faculty are better equipped to assess and grade these new and important forms of expression.

The Digital Media Lab at the **University of North Carolina** "offers an array of audio and video editing software and hardware to assist faculty and students with projects ranging from the integration of bird calls into an online course to the development of a documentary short film." Assistance is available via trained staff.

<http://www.lib.unc.edu/house/mrc/pages/mediaLab/>

The Faculty Exploratory at the **University of Miami** exposes faculty to options for incorporating new media into their course instruction. As an incentive to encourage faculty to use the program, the library funds new media teaching fellowships.

<http://merrick.library.miami.edu/digitalprojects/digitalprojects.html>

## Digital Centers

*Digital data centers in libraries provide a particularly useful service to scholars and students. The strongest examples go beyond collecting and providing access to data and digital content by bringing together subject specialists, statisticians, and digital media experts to support a spectrum of services and expertise. This centralized service helps to accelerate the use of content and discovery, and the creation of new forms of scholarship.*

The **Johns Hopkins** Center for Educational Resources, of which the libraries are a partner, provides impetus “away from print-based repositories to electronic collaboratories that enable application of digital collections and networked services to new approaches in instructional and scholarly communication.”

<http://www.cer.jhu.edu/>

The Alderman and Clemons Libraries at the **University of Virginia** support a scholars’ lab catering to the digital research and scholarly analysis needs of faculty and advanced students in social sciences and humanities. The lab combines software applications for data analysis, geographic information systems, visual presentations, scanning, and text encoding.

<http://www.lib.virginia.edu/scholarslab/about/index.html>

And **Columbia University** has launched two digital centers: one for social sciences and a second for humanities that will open in 2010. The Digital Social Science Center (DSSC), located in Lehman Library and operated jointly by the Libraries & Columbia University Information Technology, provides a wide range of information and technology assistance for students and faculty.

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/dssc/index.html>

## Faculty and Graduate Student Spaces

*Faculty and graduate students have begun to look to their libraries to provide customized spaces for scholarship, training, quiet concentration, and socializing. A growing number of libraries are working with these constituents to define and deliver targeted responses.*

The **University of Washington’s** Health Sciences Library has partnered with dentistry, nursing, medicine, pharmacy, and public health to provide a learning commons for graduate and professional students. Among the amenities are specialized classrooms, a drop-in computer lab providing specialized software and expert assistance with presentations and special projects, and liberalized food and drink policies.

<http://healthlinks.washington.edu/hsl/commons/>

The new library commons at the **University of California, Berkeley's** Institute for Research on Labor and Employment is a comprehensive renovation with new areas for student and faculty engagement, presentations, group meetings, and accommodations for visiting scholars.

<http://www.irl.berkeley.edu/library/index.php?page=7>

## Branch and Subject Libraries

*These satellite, specialized entities are undergoing change in one of two ways—either to be absorbed by a larger campus library or to be invigorated in new ways. Libraries choosing to invigorate branch or subject libraries usually do so with partners who share a vision of enhanced services and support for study and research.*

The Research Computing Lab at **University of Virginia's** Brown Science and Engineering Library “provides a convenient space for faculty and students to work on innovative projects with specialists from the library and the campus IT group. Here they get support for instruction and research in the science and engineering disciplines.” Consultation services are offered for high-performance and research computing, complemented by training sessions and “boot camps.”

<http://www2.lib.virginia.edu/science/rescomp/index.html>

The new and privately funded C. V. Starr East Asian Library at the **University of California, Berkeley** features a rare-book facility; consolidated print collections of 400,000 volumes; various flavors of group and individual spaces; faculty support for digitization and course development; and a multi-purpose media center with advanced imaging, satellite, and media equipment.

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/EAL/>

The newly renovated Fine Arts Library Reading Room at the **University of Texas**, a funding and staffing collaboration with the College of Fine Arts, features multimedia workstations, an array of specialty production equipment, and with capacity to host donor receptions and other functions.

<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/fal/index.html>

## Flexible, User-influenced Spaces

*A handful of libraries have turned to their constituents to influence space and programming outcomes. As a result of these informative engagements, libraries report the outcomes exceed what they might have created working in isolation.*

**Cornell University** librarians worked with students and faculty from the departments of communication and design & experimental analysis to develop

the Bissett Collaborative Space and the Graduate Study Area in the Mann Library. Constituents were engaged from initial research and design ideas to ongoing post-occupancy evaluation. Mobility and malleability are key ingredients that contribute to students creating “customized learning moments.” <http://mannlib.cornell.edu/equipmentandrooms/bissett.cfm>

For the renovation of the first floor of **Florida State University’s** Strozier Library, staff applied many of the user-centered assessment techniques championed by the University of Rochester and the University of Minnesota.<sup>2</sup> “Our space, services, staffing will all be shaped by what users tell us—not by what we assume or by what we want to give users. In this way, we will never be finished building this space; it will be a dynamic, (r)evolutionary space.”

The learning spaces in **University of Rochester’s** Gleason Library are designed for undergraduate collaborative learning. All aspects of the space programming were influenced by student users through various anthropologist-overseen discovery techniques and assessment.

[http://docushare.lib.rochester.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-27280/chapter\\_four.pdf](http://docushare.lib.rochester.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-27280/chapter_four.pdf)

## **Classrooms, Workshops, Instruction**

*Increasingly, campus pedagogy is shifting to actively engage students in the learning process. Rows of forward-facing desks in lecture hall arrangement are being replaced by technology and furnishings that allow for a range of configurations to support the particular learning moment. As noted in the companion report to this one published in the ARL Bimonthly Report, no. 261 (December 2008), many libraries are pursuing agendas to develop students’ information fluencies beyond the needs of a single assignment or course. The programming of new and renovated learning spaces frequently features literacy instruction.*

The **University of Chicago’s** Zar Reading Room is glassed-in, and with custom shades to reduce glare during presentations. Tables and chairs are easily reconfigurable, screens and whiteboards are added to peripheral walls, and mobile projector carts with flat-panel displays provide multiple viewing options. The room carries several functions: instruction, training, speaker series, and informal group study for students in the evening.

The **University of Western Ontario Libraries**, in collaboration with the Centre for Faculty and Graduate Student Development, have created two teaching support centers on campus that feature exemplary classrooms.

These spaces showcase instructional innovations like SMART Board and Sympodium technology, and are used for faculty and graduate development programs and initiatives, as well as for literacy instruction.

<http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/>

The library instruction room at **Arizona State University** has been renovated with new projectors on either end of the room; mobile and reconfigurable furniture; “nest” or pod arrangements of desks; and new computers. Students now have “equal access to their instructional materials and their instructors.”

**McGill University’s** Cyberthèque facility sports an “e-classroom” for information literacy instruction.

<http://www.mcgill.ca/hssl/facilities/computers/cybertheque/>

## **Galleries, Art, Exhibits, Performances, Events**

*Many responding libraries mention art, lectures, displays, and performances as being important assets to the spaces they are creating. These properties showcase the intellectual outpouring of the university and celebrate the creative mind. Many of these spaces serve other purposes, and “transform” into their special properties as needed.*

The Mann Library’s new Mann Gallery is a highly visible “community display space” showcasing artwork and multimedia creations by **Cornell University** students that arise from coursework across the curricula. The gallery is easily adapted to a wide range of media, suffused with natural light, and heavily booked by the Cornell University community. It was the brainchild of “two forward-thinking undergraduates as part of their collaborative senior-year project.” Campus faculty “show high enthusiasm,” in part because the gallery has as its mission to showcase some of the “outside-the-box thinking that Cornell students and researchers are known for.”

<http://gallery.mannlib.cornell.edu/>

The new gallery in the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library at the **University of Michigan** “improves access to the unique and remarkable treasures held in the library.” The gallery was formerly home to a portion of the library’s technical services operation. It mounts local and traveling exhibits, hosts lectures and presentations, and will soon feature displays from special collections. As the gallery becomes known across campus, other units approach the library for use of the space, often in collaboration with the library.

<http://www.lib.umich.edu/gallery/>



## Tutoring and Peer Support

*Students benefit from the availability of tutors in their preferred productivity spaces. Learning commons frequently feature student tutors, or staff tutors, or a mix of the two. Hours of service are gradually lengthening into the evening when students are most in need of assistance. Key skills required in writing, math, computing, and foundation courses are supported.*

The **University of Massachusetts Amherst** Learning Commons features peer tutors who are available over extended hours.

<http://www.umass.edu/learningcommons/>

Full-time staff and peer tutors have offices in the Weigle Commons at the **University of Pennsylvania's** Van Pelt-Dietrich Library.

<http://wic.library.upenn.edu/>

The Learning Commons at **University of Guelph's** McLaughlin Library “offers a wide range of peer helper programs, with students helping students through writing assistance, study workshops, supported learning group sessions, and one-on-one teaching of IT skills.”

[http://www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/contact\\_us.html](http://www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/contact_us.html)

## Cafés and Refreshment

*Libraries have been inspired by the refreshment centers in commercial bookstores. Today most libraries have relaxed food-and-drink rules to permit refreshment throughout all or most areas of library space. Ready access to good food and drink serves to keep constituents in libraries for long stretches of time, and forms a cornerstone of most new learning spaces.*

The café at **Georgia Tech** Library has helped to double library attendance. At certain times of the day, the café bristles with laptops and flipcharts that are dragged in from nearby study areas, and serves as a communing ground for students and faculty.

<http://librarycommons.gatech.edu/lec/jazzmans.php>

Bookends Café in the Parks Library of **Iowa State University** is an anchor for the Learning Connections Center, and “immensely popular” with students.

The extensive Friedman Café occupies a substantial footprint of the **Brown University** Friedman Study Center, offering a mix of standard and relaxed seating, and with vending machines available to customers when the café closes.

[http://www.brown.edu/Student\\_Services/Food\\_Services/eateries/friedman.php](http://www.brown.edu/Student_Services/Food_Services/eateries/friedman.php)

## Presentation Practice Facilities

*Practice spaces for individual and group rehearsal of presentations are a logical asset to embed in comprehensive learning spaces. They have emerged in the past five years as an important complement to commons, outfitted with projectors and large-screen monitors, recording devices, playback options for critiquing personal performance, and occasionally with experts at hand who can provide useful feedback.*

A varied selection can be found at the following libraries:

- **University of Georgia's** Student Learning Center  
<http://slc.uga.edu/facility.html>
- **University of Tennessee's** The Commons  
<http://commons.utk.edu/>
- **Georgia Tech's** Presentation Rehearsal Studio  
<http://www.library.gatech.edu/news/rehearsal.php>
- **University of Washington's** Odegaard Library Digital Presentation Studio  
[http://catalyst.washington.edu/learning\\_spaces/digital\\_presentation\\_studio.html](http://catalyst.washington.edu/learning_spaces/digital_presentation_studio.html)
- **University of Pennsylvania's** Van Pelt-Dietrich Library Weigle Commons practice venues (with expert assistance)  
<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/cwic/faq.html>

## In Summary

Exceptional progress has been made to transform research libraries into popular destinations for productivity and learning. Surveys suggest that libraries are seen as the logical providers of primary learning spaces on campus. Today the undergraduate learning commons is a celebrated success on most ARL campuses.

Many of these enterprises are virtually identical in the assets and assistance they provide. This is due in large part to the influence of early pioneers in the learning-commons arena. Today some libraries are demonstrating new models of programming and support that suggest the next wave of enhancements. The best of these facilities are informed by user-centered studies that tap into the genuine needs of undergraduates and the faculty who teach them. These leading-edge spaces also provide opportunities to showcase student art and projects, hear intriguing lectures from local and visiting personalities, and find ample opportunities for social engagement.

Exemplary library-space programming is attuned to student learning cycles, timed to deliver skills and assistance when students most need them, and continually informed by student and faculty feedback.

Exemplary library-space programming is attuned to student learning cycles, timed to deliver skills and assistance when students most need them, and continually informed by student and faculty feedback. The library's information literacy and fluency agendas should be tied to faculty expectations for student learning outcomes, and to complementary skills like research methodologies, information synthesis, and multimedia production. The trend to embed information literacy into foundation courses and across curricula will increase, in turn creating new opportunities for libraries to contribute to curriculum development, support research methodologies, and promote library resources and services.

Faculty and graduate students are becoming more outspoken in their expectations that libraries should address their research and contemplative needs via physical space solutions. There is no consensus on what these responses should be. New forms of support and accommodation are being offered to graduate and professional students in branch and subject libraries. Subject-based digital centers offer a supporting cast of experts to assist faculty and graduate students with new forms of research and scholarship in appealing settings. And contemplative spaces with attractive amenities are being designed for scholars who require a quiet setting, sometimes with print and digital materials close at hand. These constituents also have a need for technology exposure and training, practice with new pedagogies, and the opportunity to mix and socialize with peers from across campus. Experiments in providing space for faculty and graduate students typically bring in campus partners to embellish and complete their offerings.

Some lingering or unresolved questions are:

- How might more libraries benefit from user-centered assessment applied to the design and programming phases of new learning spaces?
- How will critical student learning outcomes be identified and realized in these learning spaces?
- What new staff roles provided by both the library and campus partners are required to support and deliver the agenda of these spaces?
- How will libraries create and improve learning spaces to address the specific needs of local constituents without falling into the trap of simply emulating

what others have done, thus missing an opportunity for the library to engage the larger learning and research agendas of the institution?

- How will the information mission of the library be complemented and informed by these learning spaces?

We can expect to see libraries sustain the transformation of spaces afforded by shrinking on-site collections. The learning and research agendas of students and faculty may become more influential in these spaces. Pioneering libraries will continue to suggest the most promising responses.

*Note: This article was written prior to Crit Stuart's spring 2009 retirement as Director of the ARL Research, Teaching & Learning Program. He may continue to be reached at [crit@arl.org](mailto:crit@arl.org).*

<sup>1</sup> Crit Stuart, "Virtual Resources and Instructional Initiatives: Snapshots of Library Experiments," *ARL: A Bimonthly Report*, no. 261 (December 2008): 5-8, <http://www.arl.org/bm~doc/arl-br-261-vrii.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons, eds., *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2007), <http://docushare.lib.rochester.edu/docushare/dsweb/View/Collection-4436>; and University of Minnesota Libraries, "A Multi-Dimensional Framework for Academic Support: A Final Report," June 2006, <http://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/5540>.

### Comprehensive Survey Results

In early 2008, all ARL libraries were invited to describe innovative and noteworthy experiments in physical space programming and design. Responses are summarized in the accompanying article and, in order to encourage wide sharing of experiences, all survey responses are available on the ARL Web site. See <http://www.arl.org/rtl/space/2008study/>.

**To cite this article:** 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/>.