Moving From Reclaiming to Reclaimed: The Big Picture and a Case Study of a Trending Initiative

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Moving From Reclaiming to Reclaimed: The Big Picture and a Case Study of a Trending Initiative

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Abstract

Library space has become more and more valuable over time, especially at universities where gate counts increase 3% to 4% each academic year. With circulation numbers and reference questions trending down over the past 10 years, librarians at Clemson University take solace in the ever increasing number of visitors. With this increase in numbers comes overcrowding and insufficient student space. Decisions must be made to alleviate the cramped and inadequate spaces that go along with a 50-year-old library building, the technology of today, and the demands of a savvy student body that will soon be competing in a tight job market. Cooper Library has transformed five spaces over the past six years by repurposing areas designed to hold print reference collections, stacks of bound journals, former staff work areas, and a low technology meeting room. By partnering with campus information technology (IT) on these projects, Cooper Library has brought cutting-edge technology and spaces that equip students with the tools they will need to succeed.

Background

Academic libraries have gone through tremendous change over the past 10 to 15 years trying to transition from print warehouses to a leaner model that relies more on digital access and online resources. Gone are the days of the quiet, sterile, and uncomfortable library as they have morphed into a much more welcoming atmosphere due to the influence of Barnes & Nobel and the “library as place” movement. National trends point to circulation stats and reference interactions that have fallen, but at some academic libraries, patron counts have risen to staggering heights. Logic would dictate that making collections accessible online would also cause a drop in visits, but just the opposite has happened at libraries such as the main library on the campus of Clemson University. Cooper Library turned 50 years old this fall and looks the part of a mid-1960s library, but a closer look reveals pockets of cutting-edge technology, space revitalization, and areas with the potential to grow gate counts even higher. Six years ago, Cooper Library began a transformation by repurposing five little or improperly used areas into spaces that could challenge students to learn, make, explore, and grow.

Why Repurpose?

The act of changing one area or space into something for a different use or intention is a very basic definition of repurposing. The reason for repurposing was simple: The main library was overflowing with

people and not meeting the needs of students, and a space conversion was the only viable solution after a renovation plan was not an option due to expense after the 2008 recession. Cooper Library gate counts or visitor counts were the main impetus behind the space improvement and repurposing projects. The library was experiencing tremendous growth in yearly gate counts, which made it harder for students to find space to study, conduct research, and collaborate for group projects. This growth has actually risen with each completed project over the past several years, which magnifies the need to repurpose more spaces in the library as university full-time enrollment has also increased. The table below shows the gate count numbers by fiscal year over the past three years.

Table 1. Cooper library yearly gate counts.

Cooper Library Yearly Gate Counts		
FY 2014	FY 2015	FY 2016
1,260,453	1,306,412	1,360,632

Learning Commons

In 2010, the Clemson University Libraries set out to repurpose the fourth floor reference area of Cooper Library, the main library on campus, by converting the space to a learning commons. This conversion had several parts: Relocation of the reference print collection, moving the reference desk to a more central location, removing index tables and other out-of-date furniture, new paint, new carpet, new

furniture, and better signage (see Figure 1, Appendix A). The physical project would start in the spring, with the main thrust happening during the summer. The reference print collection was moved from the east side of the fourth floor to the west side after some weeding. This collection eventually went through an extensive weeding and relocation that reduced 1,620 linear feet of shelving down to two low shelves, now located in the Learning Commons West. This was the first of many collaborative efforts between the library and Clemson Computing and Information Technology (CCIT).

The project was completed in the summer of 2010, just in time for the start of the fall semester. The new furniture arrangement allowed more students to occupy the space of the former reference area. Gone were the 13-high shelves of reference books and the index tables. The new configuration allowed students to physically move furniture to accommodate group projects and group study. This new arrangement also offered nice sight lines from the lobby to the back of the Learning Commons and natural light, something that was missing with the high shelves. The project was a success as students flocked to the new Learning Commons, but limitations were apparent early as student laptop cords plugged into wall outlets blocked walking paths and created trip hazards throughout the area. It was also obvious that there were not enough seats to accommodate the crowds as turnaways became an all too familiar sight during the afternoon and evening hours in the library. During this time, a visit to the Learning Commons at the D.H. Hill Library on the campus of North Carolina State University showed that a denser concentration of seating could be achieved. In 2011, a committee was formed to tackle the issues plaguing the new Learning Commons and come up with suggestions for improvement.

The committee consisted of the Dean of Libraries, one library faculty member, two library staff members, and two undergraduate students. A survey was constructed giving students the opportunity to voice their opinions on what the library should do to improve on the first iteration of the Learning Commons. The survey results confirmed what the committee had already viewed as the major faults of the space that needed attention. Nearly 80% of the survey responses called for more furniture and more power outlets. These were needs that could be met with a Learning Commons phase two implementation.

Phase two of the project started in 2012 with more power and data installed along the walls of the Learning Commons and pushing existing furniture out to the walls. The additional furniture would not only provide more seating for students, but it would also bring power from preexisting columns in the space out to tables and new seating arrangements (see Figure 2, Appendix A). The phase two implementation provided 107 new seats, bringing the seat count in the Learning Commons East to 195 seats. Along with the new furniture, phase two also brought in technological improvements to Cooper Library. Eight iMacs were installed in the Learning Commons, and four dual monitor Mac Pros with Adobe CS6 and Final Cut Pro were set up in the Learning Commons West. This was our first step in the direction for a digital studio in the library. The library also purchased new technology for check out, including 10 digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras, two high-end camcorders, tripods, microphones, and 10 iPads. On the low-tech side, 10 mobile white boards were also purchased and placed in the Commons.

Around the same time, the other side of the fourth floor, now known as the Learning Commons West, was receiving some cosmetic updates with new popular reading shelving, popular magazine shelving, new furniture, and eventually four Dell PCs. This side of the Commons is smaller and for reasons unknown has always been quieter than the east Commons.

Brown Room

A former library staff and university meeting room was renovated in 2013. This space is conveniently located in the lobby to the right just at the main entrance to Cooper Library and was chosen as a repurposed space because of its ability to attract immediate attention to all who enter the library (see Figure 3, Appendix B). A joint collaboration between the library, CCIT, and Dell Computers, this space features three projectors and a visualization wall that is made of a bank of 15 46-inch monitors that span 17 feet wide and 6 feet high of wall space. Just outside the door of the Brown Room is the Hiperwall that displays library and campus events on a continual rotation. This room is designed for faculty to teach in a multimedia setting that offers data visualization in a collaborative environment. This quickly became the best small presentation space on campus, owing large part to the visualization wall and the convenient location (see Figure 4, Appendix B).

Adobe Digital Studio

From humble beginnings, the Adobe Digital Studio has become the go-to place for students looking for help and inspiration for anything dealing with audio and video production. As mentioned earlier, the first attempt at a digital studio consisted of four dual monitor Mac Pros placed in the Learning Commons West during the phase two project. From there, the studio found a one-year temporary home in a repurposed cataloging staff work area while plans were made to construct the Adobe Digital Studio on the fifth floor of Cooper Library in 2015. This project once again involved a collaborative effort from the Library, CCIT, and this time Adobe Systems. From the beginning, this project set out to transform not only the seldom-used corner of the fifth floor (see Figure 5, Appendix C), and engage everyone who entered the library. Two portions of a huge wall that separated the fifth floor from the lobby were removed to showcase the space. If that wasn't enough, the space extended out 5 feet into the large lobby area of the library, beckoning all to engage with the activity and innovation going on upstairs (see Figure 6, Appendix C).

The key attractions of the Adobe Digital Studio are the audio production room and the video production room, the latter equipped with one-button technology to record presentations and a full green screen. Throughout the Adobe Digital Studio there are various types of comfortable seating and collaborative stations. There are seven large screen plug-and-work areas, four dual screen iMacs for post-production work, access to the full Adobe Creative Cloud, and expert staff to assist students with all audio/video projects. The 2,457-square foot space opened in October 2015 and remains one of the most occupied spaces in the library.

GIS

The Geographic Information System (GIS) area opened in the fall of 2015 and consists of two areas,

the 662-square foot classroom (see Figure 8, Appendix D) and the 1,643-square foot work space (see Figure 10, Appendix E). The classroom seats 20, while the work space has 11 dual monitor iMacs/PCs and one plug-and-work station. The work space was the former temporary location of the digital studio before it moved upstairs (see Figure 9, Appendix E), and the classroom was a repurposed cataloging staff work space (see Figure 7, Appendix D). Once again, the project was a library and CCIT dual collaboration. The space is staffed by three full-time and several part-time GIS experts who teach multiple classes, conduct workshops throughout the year, and hold a yearly GIS day each fall consisting of numerous speakers.

What's Next?

There are no definite plans at the moment, but the third floor is already being weeded of the government documents that have resided there for decades. This is an ideal location to repurpose because it is a large space that currently has limited seating, stacks that obscure natural lighting, and unlimited potential. Another full commons could be implemented here, easily adding 200 to 250 seats. At the moment, Starbucks is tearing out a wall on the fifth floor opposite the Adobe Digital Studio to mimic the design of that project.

There are also opportunities to repurpose areas of the fifth floor and reconfigure the second floor to make it more soundproof and user friendly. Moving bound journals to offsite storage, which was mentioned previously, would free countless feet of space throughout the library and would consolidate the collection. This has been done in certain areas in the library, but a full-scale removal of all bound journals would open up so many possibilities across the six floors of the library. It takes time and patience to see these projects through, but the payoff is tremendous once the work is done and the students move into the spaces.

Appendices

Appendix A: Images of Learning Commons Before and After Repurposing

Figure 1. Old reference area with index tables and print reference collection.

Figure 2. Learning Commons East with new furniture and power coming from the columns out to the tables.

Appendix B: Images of Brown Room Before and After Repurposing

Figure 3. Workers taking out the wall of the Brown Room to allow more natural light and also invite visitors into the space.

Figure 4. A student displays her work on the visualization wall in the newly renovated Brown Room.

Appendix C: Images of the Adobe Digital Studio Before and After Repurposing

Figure 5. The corner of the fifth floor after the removal of bound journals and shelving.

Figure 6. The finished Adobe Digital Studio from the sixth floor. Notice the portions of the wall that have been removed and the extension out into the lobby.

Appendix D: Images of the GIS classroom Before and After Repurposing

Figure 7. The former staff cataloging area being stripped down during the transformation.

Figure 8. The GIS classroom equipped with dual presentation capability and 20 student seats.

Appendix E: Images of the GIS Work Space

Figure 9. Staff cataloging area before transformation.

Figure 10. New GIS work space.