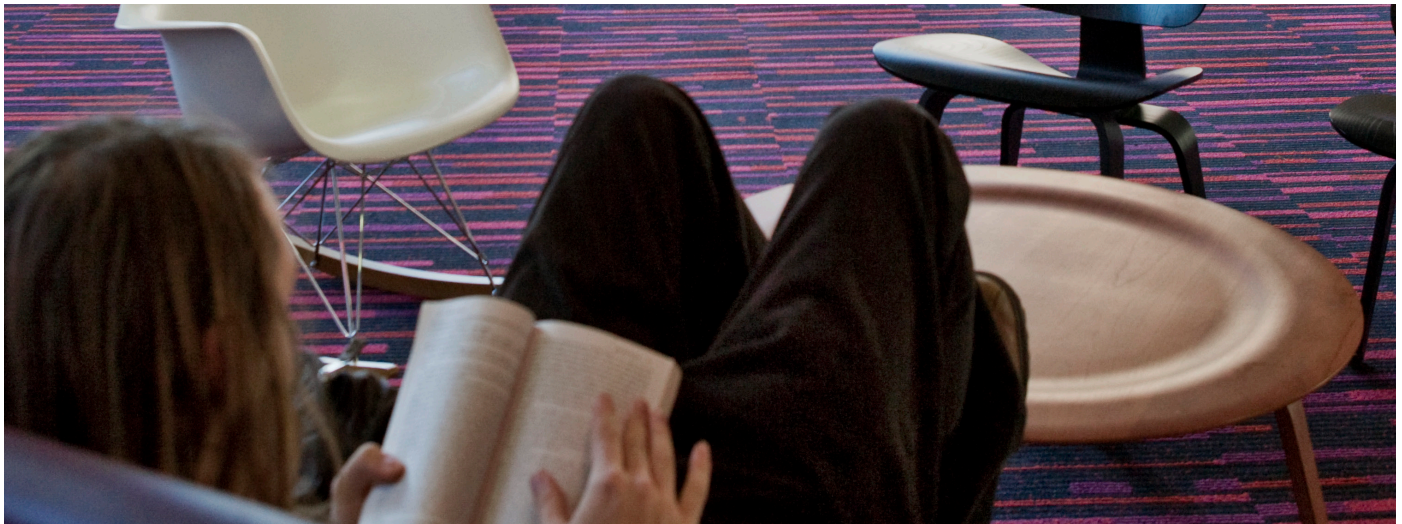




# Library Redefined



## **Definition**

*li·brary*

*1 a: a place in which literary, musical, artistic, or reference materials (as books, manuscripts, recordings, or films) are kept for use but not for sale  
b: a collection of such materials*

## **Redefinition**

*li·brary*

*1 a: a place where information is embedded into functional learning activities (Scott Bennett, 2003) b: a comprehensive destination (Crit Stuart, 2006) c: a marketplace of ideas (Joan Lippincott, 2006)*

Why do students go to a library? One reason is to access printed references and collections. A quiet place to read and study is another. Both examples speak to the relationship that libraries historically provided: a place where students interact with printed information. And both are examples of individual, static study—the sort that lends itself to images of reading rooms with wooden tables and high-back chairs, and only the occasional sound of a chair scraping the floor or a dropped pen.

Hardly the scene in libraries today. Yes, those areas for reflective, solitary study still exist, as do the valuable collections, but more and more libraries are designed for collaborative study, socializing, and access to various technologies and media. These places are dynamic, active, plugged in, even noisy, and they are redefining what a library is.

## What We Know

The library is the technology, social, and research hub of campus. Author Joan Lippincott, who consults with EDUCAUSE and the Association of Research Libraries, calls them information commons, places that bring together technology, content, and services.<sup>1</sup> While libraries have always provided these things to a certain degree, Lippincott writes that the environments of information commons are different than those of a typical library. One reason is an increased emphasis on technology. But a more significant reason, according to Lippincott, is the underlying philosophy that information commons provide users with “a seamless work environment so that they may access, manage, and produce information all at the same workstation.”<sup>2</sup>

The new breed of library is more than a place for information access through technology, however. It is also a far cry from reading rooms. Libraries may house cafés, lounge areas, presentation spaces, and lots and lots of computer and study areas. And, yes, the print collections may be consolidated on the top two floors of the library building, so that more room can be given to the new social and learning hub of the campus.

Humans are social beings, and libraries provide a means for interaction. Take note of people in a coffee shop, for example. Many come to a public place to do individual work. The experience and the need for activity and human connection are meaningful. Libraries provide that need, as well, by offering a venue for intellectual and social engagement with printed books, digital archives, and human beings.

Because technology is such an integral part of libraries, the library's ability to adapt and change is critical. Technology doesn't stand still, and one of the primary reasons students use the library is to access high-performance equipment, specialized software, and proprietary databases. The ability to keep up with current equipment and information is essential to the success of the library. That is no small task: Libraries will need to be agile to respond to infrastructure and interior design changes.

The learning hub also extends beyond the library core. Academic support, counseling offices, faculty offices, project spaces, and presentation areas may all be part of this larger library facility. Authors Marilyn Lombardi and Thomas Wall write of the shift from

the library as “gatekeeper” to the library as “gateway and commons, a gathering place for learners rather than a warehouse for books.”<sup>3</sup> They refer to the Perkins Library at Duke University as the “center for student life as well as intellectual hub and laboratory for learning.”<sup>4</sup>

Libraries communicate a good deal about the institutions of which they are part. Libraries are one of the facilities on campus where change is, or can be, most visible. Is it a forward-looking institution? Is it assimilating the latest technologies? Is it demonstrating new ways of learning? Does it have the resources to support research? Tangibly manifesting these things can make the library a powerful tool for recruiting and retaining students and faculty.

Libraries are changing, but some qualities of the traditional library remain. The libraries at UMass/Amherst and Georgia Institute of Technology provide both quiet and active spaces for individual and collaborative learning. Architect Geoffrey Freeman observes that libraries are a both/and experience, offering places for both contemplation and community. “The library is a place where people come together on many levels and in ways that they might not in the residence hall, classroom, or off-campus location,” Freeman writes. In the library, the student becomes “part of a larger community—a community that endows one with a greater sense of self and higher purpose,” he continues. At the same time, students “want to enjoy the library as a contemplative oasis.”<sup>5</sup>

Libraries, then, enrich the soul and the intellect. But they also need to enrich the body, providing comfort and healthful spaces that keep students refreshed, even as they spend long hours studying.

## Design Problem

How can we design libraries to create, nurture, and support the experiences that happen within them and, at the same time, meet the functional requirements of a high-tech, high-change, high-use facility? How can we design libraries for learning that respond to the habits, expectations, and academic and social needs of students, faculty, and staff?

“The charge to architects is to create libraries that, themselves, learn,” says Freeman.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 1

## Therefore

Library design will need to reflect and support a new paradigm for students, staff, and pedagogy. Libraries will also need to respond to continuous changes, both large and small, and sometimes through construction of new facilities or renovations within existing buildings.

Library spaces, whether they include quiet, individual reading areas or bustling, collaborative areas, need to remain adaptable, social, stimulating, sustainable, healthful, and resourceful in order to remain an essential, vibrant, and necessary component of the campus and learning experience.

## Solutions

The truest description of a successful library may be one that never stops long enough to become obsolete. Easier said than done, perhaps, but there are universities around the country that are partnering with Herman Miller to create these kinds of places.

Perkins Library at Duke University, “is not unlike the ancient marketplace or *agora*,” writes Duke’s Thomas Wall and Marilyn Lombardi. “It serves students and faculty as an inviting ‘third place,’” they continue, and the “center for student life.”<sup>7</sup> Architect Geoffrey Freeman, of Shepley Bullfinch Richardson & Abbott, has designed a number of libraries around the country. His observation: “There is now an expectation that the library is the place to be; it is where the action is.”<sup>8</sup>

How have library facilities adapted to become the *agora* and action spot of the campus? The Learning Commons at the DuBois Library, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, was designed specifically for all the experiences students anticipate when entering the library. A “student-friendly environment” is how Terry Warner, assistant director for administrative services at DuBois Library, describes the facility.

Two floors in the library offer ample quiet space for individual study. But the Learning Commons in the lower level is a place for lively group discussions, interaction, collaboration, teamwork, and synergy—the things that students want. “This is the new student center on our campus,” says Jay Schafer, director of libraries. “It has none of the rules we associate with traditional

libraries. Students wear pajamas here. They eat and drink while studying. And our doors are open 24 hours a day for the majority of the week.”

Flexible furniture and a mix of open, semi-private, and study spaces give UMass/Amherst students options for formal group work and impromptu group study. Warner and Schafer credit Stephanie Mikowski and Jay Brady, from Herman Miller dealership OFI Contract Interiors in Springfield, with helping turn their vision into reality. “We knew what we wanted the furnishings to do. We just didn’t know what was out there and how it could be arranged,” says Warner. “We needed furnishings that would support, not dictate, all the ways that students would be studying and also stand up to constant use. The Commons needed to create a comfortable and welcoming environment. Stephanie and Jay helped guide the solutions.”

The solutions include a mix of Resolve® and Ethospace® systems, Avive® tables, and Caper® chairs configured for group study spaces. Seventeen study rooms are enclosed with Ethospace glass walls. These spaces are intended for groups of three or more. “The students like the glass walls,” says Warner. “They can see and be seen but still work within a semiprivate space.” (Figure 1) Ethospace peninsula surfaces also dot the Learning Commons, providing ample work areas that students can access from all sides. The wire management capabilities of the Ethospace system offered benefits, as well. “We were able to integrate technology in a ‘temporarily permanent way,’” says Warner. She sees two big advantages to this approach over access only through the infrastructure—“less cost, more flexibility.”

Prior to the DuBois renovation at UMass/Amherst, Schafer and Warner elicited the participation of students in the furniture selection. Students were able to “test drive” the products being considered. “Students have a sense of ownership of the new library space,” says Warner. “Their ideas were considered and ultimately reflected in our final decisions.”

The numbers prove the library’s popularity with students. “We knew it was going to be popular,” says Schafer, “but we didn’t realize how popular, especially the late hour/early morning hours.” Warner concurs: “Counts have doubled since the library opened, and they continue to climb every month. Word of mouth



Figure 2

is important. Students love the space, and they tell their friends.” The Learning Commons is also a regular stop on campus tours.

Input from students was an essential ingredient to Associate Director for Public Services Crit Stuart of the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) library system as he began renovation of the East Commons area of the Crossland Library. In focus group sessions, students expressed a desire to have a place where they could feel connected to the entire student body, and not just to peers and faculty within their identified areas of study. They expressed a desire for campus community.

Students also voiced a desire for open environments, places where they could benefit from the stimulation of other voices and other people studying next to them. “If students wanted to be hermits,” says Stuart, “they could go to the upper floors of the library, where there is a more traditional quiet environment. Libraries need to provide both types of environments.”

Atlanta-based dealership CWC and Herman Miller worked with Stuart and a representation of students and library personnel to shape these desires into reality. The East Commons area has taken that idea of community and connection and demonstrated it visibly in the structure of the renovated space. The 8,000 square-foot facility includes study and research areas of varying sizes, presentation areas, and a café—all without fixed interior walls. (Figure 2)

Resolve configurations provide functional support for group and individual study. Ethospace products are used for administrative and reception areas and for printer stations. The mobility of Resolve products and lounge seating has proved beneficial—and interesting. “The space is different every five minutes,” says CWC’s Terry Whitman. “Students create little ‘forts’ by moving the Resolve screens and soft dividers. Students are clearly involved with their environment and are able to make it work for them.” (Figure 3)

The experience of planning and designing the East Commons was a positive one for all involved—and a highly collaborative one. “Georgia Tech had a vision. The space had to support community, and it had to be as dynamic as the students learning within it,” says CWC’s Leigh Webb. “We all took our time to thoroughly explore how these ideas could translate into architecture and

furniture.” It was time well spent. “Students are studying, eating, socializing, and sometimes just hanging out. They are using technology, creating presentations, and connecting with one another. There is a buzz in this place,” says Webb. (Figure 4)

A goal of the East Commons interior, says Stuart, was to provide “refreshment for the mind and body.” In what ways do libraries offer refreshment or simply a break? Some library spaces include pool tables, TV rooms, video game areas, and relaxing lounge areas. But places that refresh the mind and body also provide for physical needs as well. Adequate lighting, natural light, good ventilation and air quality, and ergonomically designed, comfortable furnishings meet physical needs.

In the case of Georgia Tech, refreshment for the mind also includes lighting scenes that change throughout the day, from shifting color washes to scenes that mimic day and night. Comfortable furniture arrangements prompt students to relax and study or find places designated for breaks. The café offers a change of venue and a shift in ambiance from the study areas, without requiring students to leave the library. “Sustaining the physical and emotional well-being of students, who may spend marathon hours in intense study, is essential to the mission of the space,” states Stuart.

Schafer agrees. “The Learning Commons is popular with students because food and drink are permissible in the space. And noise is welcome, expected.” Why does this make such a difference? “We are going against hundreds of years of library tradition,” explains Schafer. “Students today have different ways of socializing and studying, and noise and food and drink are significant parts of that experience. Libraries can’t be hush and ‘shh’ places anymore.”

“We are looking beyond the original purpose of the library,” says Stuart. “We have to consider the life cycle of the student, and how the library fits in with that life cycle.” That is achieved in part by expanding the services that are offered in library facilities. Writing centers have long resided within the central library space. Information technology services are becoming standard in libraries. Staff may help students with anything from navigating academic databases to helping prepare a multimedia presentation. The East Commons at Georgia Tech has an area where students can practice and test their digital presentations.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Other departments are relocating to areas within library facilities, too. DuBois Library houses academic advisor offices, giving the department far more visibility and access, so advisors and students are able to more easily connect with each other. DuBois also includes information technology offices and a writing center. The interweaving of functions and activities will bring new levels of vitality and activity within the library facility.

This new library model is a monumental shift from the old model that put shelving lineal feet requirements and circulation desk specifications first among planning considerations. That design approach accommodated collections, files, and records. Scott Bennett writes that the kind of design planning that supports the changing library is “primarily and inviolably about people, not about ‘stuff.’”<sup>9</sup>

“As we began planning our renovation,” recalls Schafer, “we referred to the new space as the Information Commons. But as we got farther into the process, we shifted the name to Learning Commons. It would become more than a computer lab. It would become a place where students would come to use technology, to collaborate, to learn, and to have fun. Most important, it would become a place where students would feel at home.”

“A campus library is the soul of an academic institution, and we want our students to spend quality time there exploring ideas and sharing insights with one another as they blur the lines between studying and socializing,” says UMass/Amherst Provost Charlena Seymour.<sup>10</sup>

So why do students go to a library? To study alone or together, loudly or quietly. To read printed or digital information. To get something to eat. To feel at home. To be where the action is.

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