



Photo by Tamar M. Thibodeau/Vassar College

FACILITIES AND MAINTENANCE

by David Vinson, PhD

Rethinking Campus-Based Library Spaces with Innovative Designs & Furnishings

My office at home doubles as a personal library. It is my favorite space in the home, a sanctuary of solitude and learning. My books are organized with care, first alphabetized by author and then arranged by genre. When the mood strikes, I rethink and rearrange the genres, since such distinctions are pretty arbitrary, and also because it's great fun to survey my collection through a fresh critical lens. Recently, I combined travel fiction with travel essays, for instance, and this allowed me to reconsider the aesthetic and structural similarities between both sets of texts.

You can imagine, then, that my favorite place on any college campus is the library. If it's a library I know well, I'll seek out a quiet, secluded spot, ideally by a large window, and I'm perfectly happy losing the day to a single book; and on research days, I'll collect a stack of monographs, spread them across the table so each cover remains visible, and my learning process is like a treasure hunt, leading to unexpected discoveries and pleasures.

It makes such a difference when campus libraries are functional and welcoming. When they are not, the learning process is hindered, sometimes severely so.

The chair may be uncomfortable. The acoustics where I'm stationed may carry to the point of distraction. I risk losing focus if there's not enough natural light. If the

lighting is too bright, I have trouble relaxing and settling into my work. If I'm unable to find a secluded space—even if others around me are doing their best to remain quiet—the turning of pages, the buzzing of cell phones, the chomping of snacks, the slurping of an iced frappé, these all take a toll.

As a frequent patron of libraries, I've witnessed students become visibly frustrated by the same fixable issues that also frustrate me: a lack of accessible power outlets; a need for spaces zoned to accommodate different noise levels, where students who want semi-social, quasi-public places to work and socialize can do so without disturbing others; more options for study spaces, whether for individual study, or for small and large groups; a need for more group study rooms, and with access to them 24/7; furniture that's easier to move because sometimes we need to reconfigure learning spaces; the ability to integrate one's technology throughout the library.

Such are the expanding needs of library patrons, myself included, that I could go on and on about how libraries have fallen short in the past.

Across the country, private universities and colleges offer libraries that combine beauty with comfort and functionality, serving as a hub of innovation, knowledge-making, and empowerment. Students and faculty alike have high expectations for their campus-based libraries, not merely because they have high expectations for their own academic growth and success.

The good news, however, is that we're witnessing a massive shift in how campus-based libraries at private universities and colleges are serving their academic communities.

Growing Expectations for Campus-Based Libraries

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their own academic growth and success. It's no longer sufficient to have access to hundreds of thousands of monographs, periodicals, government documents, microforms, maps, as well as archival items and manuscripts.

The dissemination of scholarship has changed drastically over the years, no doubt influenced by advances in technology that have fundamentally altered how we work and how we share our work.

For one, scholarship has become increasingly interdisciplinary and multimodal; and to keep up, campus-based libraries are investing now more than ever in a full range of online databases across disciplines. Moreover, library-based media

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Dartmouth University

Like all excellent campus-based libraries, the Baker-Berry Library at Dartmouth College more than meets the research needs of students and faculty. But what sets it apart from so many others is the variety of spaces made available, those which anticipate the full range of its patrons' needs.

and digital resource labs allow for wide-format scanning and printing, on-site video and audio editing and production, in addition to graphic design, web design, and print design.

The inclusion of individual and group study rooms is likewise instrumental in terms of adapting to the expanding needs of students and faculty, as these allow for the space and seclusion needed to either work alone and without distraction, or to collaborate with classmates or fellow researchers without disrupting others. Workstations with tables short or long

are paired with chairs light enough to move at ease, but also sturdy enough to provide support for long stretches of stationary work. Monitors within such spaces can be linked to personal computers, and these allow for information to be shared visually and audially. The incorporation of dry erase boards satisfies a similar need, in which ideas can be teased out, revised, and revisited as needed. Also, with ready-made access to power outlets and phone charging stations, those hard at work can enjoy a seamless, uninterrupted learning experience.

Informal learning spaces also reflect a rethinking of how libraries can double as spaces for work and relaxation. This is a far cry from the miserably stiff hardwood chairs that my library provided when I was a child, presumably under the misguided precept that the less comfortable we are, the less inclined we are to play and to work instead.

Balancing Comfort with Innovation: Baker-Berry Library at Dartmouth College

The exterior of Baker-Berry Library at Dartmouth College is modeled after Independence Hall in Philadelphia. It functions as a campus center, and its beauty is amplified by a pastoral New Hampshire setting. Like all excellent campus-based libraries, the Baker-Berry Library more than meets the research needs of students and faculty. But what sets it apart from so many others is the variety of spaces made available, those which anticipate the full range of its patrons' needs.

The group study rooms each benefit from tall, wide windows that overlook the campus and also light the room naturally during the day. They seat anywhere between four to eight patrons, are equipped with dry erase or chalk boards, in addition to flat screen monitors to satisfy multimedia needs. The majority of the chairs are what's referred to as "task chairs." Like a standard office chair, they are adjustable, offer flexibility for one's back, and they have rolling wheels at the base, which makes collaboration simple and convenient. The tables vary in size and shape, but I'm especially impressed by the "cluster and collaboration" tables, which can be sectioned off for individual work or combined to form a larger table.

Within the Baker-Berry Library, one can benefit from larger classrooms that allow for lecture-style learning modes, as well as group work that utilizes configurable tables and multiple monitors. The "1902 Room" is one of the library's most popular spaces, not merely because it remains open 24-hours a day. It has the look and feel of an extended coffee house (in fact, coffee can be purchased nearby), with long study tables, individual study tables, as well as soft seating that includes sofas and armchairs. I can imagine myself frequenting such a space, particularly on the days when I'm reading for pleasure.

Hands-on Learning at Vassar College's Thompson Memorial Library

Thompson Memorial Library of Vassar College is constructed of Germantown stone with Indiana limestone trimming. Both inside and out, its appearance is Gothic, with three wings built around a central tower. Located in the West Wing of the structure is the Cornaro Stained-Glass Window, which features Elena Cornaro Piscopia, a young Venetian who is believed to have been the first woman to earn the Doctor of Theology in European history. What a pleasure it must be to study and work in a place of such history and beauty!

Of course, the virtues of Thompson Memorial Library become increasingly obvious as one uses its many facilities, those of which have been modernized to meet the needs of students and faculty alike. The library offers an Archives and Special Collections Room that seats 12 to 18 people, has wireless capability for all, and also projector capability for instructors. What's so special about this space is that it is designated solely for the exploration and careful handling of archival materials. For researchers such as myself, this is a rare treat.



Photo by John Abbott / Vassar College

The Studio

Located in the north area of the Main Library is The Studio, which contains both the Collaboration Studio and the Design Studio. The Collaboration Studio functions as a collaborative space for students and faculty to create and innovate their ideas. It features lightweight technology, a combination of seating types (task chairs, stools paired with a work counter, booth seating, couches, and armchairs), as well as analog materials that help bring projects to life.

Moveable whiteboards allow students to partition off areas, and of course, they can write on them, too. Featured equipment includes smartphone-based virtual reality, microcontrollers, prototyping materials, zine kits, even a button maker. Movable tables are also readily available, encouraging the culture of collaboration promoted therein.

Located next to the Collaboration Studio, the Design Studio is a space that allows for work in graphics, imaging, video, and audio editing. It features powerful computers, scanners, mounted HDMI-ready monitors, and interactive pen displays and tablets. It also includes mobile tables for collaboration as well as charging stations.

Preserving the Best While Updating to Transform

At private universities and colleges across the country, we are witnessing dramatic improvements to our campus-based libraries. Libraries are finding innovative ways to combine the old with the new, so that in addition to hardbound texts, students and faculty can both learn and create with the benefits that technology can provide.

We're also seeing spaces that were formerly uncomfortable, perhaps even unwelcoming, become transformed by versatile, aesthetically pleasing, and comfortable library furnishings.

After all, we want our students to become better writers, better researchers, better thinkers—and we're seeing how simple alterations to our libraries can make this possible.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: PUPN staff writer Dr. David Vinson has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, husband, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.