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Thriving in a Challenging Environment: Creating Technology-Rich, Collaborative Learning Spaces on a Shoestring

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Introduction

Over the past few years, despite low funding and significant space constraints, the Portland State University Library has created and renovated new technology-rich learning spaces for students. Although the state budget included the library on a list for possible new construction and a replacement building, we finally decided that the budget crisis meant that our small, outdated building was going to be our home for many more years, and we went ahead with updates. Even with declining funding, we were able to find money in some creative places, especially through salary savings and collaborative funding partners.

The Library's group study rooms were small but popular spaces where we recognized an opportunity to make significant improvements without spending a great deal of money. We transformed one storage space and several no-tech study rooms, with old wood tables and basic chairs, into technology-rich learning spaces. A new practice presentation room includes the same set-up found in campus classrooms: students now can practice their presentations in the Library with the same equipment they'll have during class. The updated furniture and new technology were funded through salary savings from open positions.

Presentation Room

BEFORE

AFTER

Student government gave money to the library to transform our old media room with one small TV into a more comfortable, living-room style room.

BEFORE

AFTER

The Library collaborated with the Helen Gordon Child Development Center on the PSU campus to create a family-friendly study room. This room, which can be used by two family groups at a time, includes two computers for student-parents and child-sized furniture, toys, and books for their children. This room is available for use only to students who have children with them, and it has a small but loyal fan base amongst PSU's many non-traditional students. The Gordon Center regularly refreshes the toys and books in this room.

FAMILY STUDY ROOM

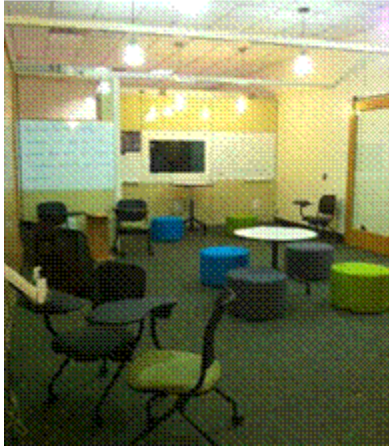Collaborative partner: Helen Gordon Child Development Center

Not all of our new spaces are student-focused. The university faculty union negotiated for some funding for the library in a contract renegotiation; most funds were used towards materials and collections, but we allocated some to the creation of a faculty-focused reading space. The new faculty reading room includes two computers with scanners and a few comfortable armchairs. This room has been especially popular with adjuncts and other faculty without private offices and those looking for a quiet escaped for focused writing.

FACULTY READING ROOM

THE SANDBOX: BEFORE

AFTER

Our recent updates also include a large renovation on the first floor of the library building, which formerly housed an outdated computer lab managed by the campus Office of Information Technology (OIT). When student government was looking for an opportunity to disperse student fees, we proposed using those funds, along with some from the Library and OIT, to renovate and expand the lab. The transformed lab now includes two distinct spaces: an updated lab with more computers, scanners, and printers; and an experimental area we call the Sandbox. The Sandbox features new technology and moveable furniture, and our plan is to regularly refresh the space with new software and hardware that might later be used on the rest of campus. The most popular feature may be the floor-to-ceiling whiteboards, which students use for everything from equations to poetry . The new Learning Ground was a $700,000 project, with $500,000 from student government, $120,000 from the Library, and $80,000 from OIT.

BEFORE: FIRST-FLOOR COMPUTER LAB

AFTER: THE LEARNING GROUND

Beyond PSU

In deciding what spaces to update, what user needs to prioritize, and what potential funders to approach, it may be helpful to consider the following questions:

- What do your users want to be different or better in your library?
- If money and staffing were unlimited, what would your library look like?
- Given that we don't live in a perfect world, what from the above lists is most important (regardless of what your library looks like right now)?
- Do your current library planning efforts reflect these priorities? If not, why not? What are you and your library doing now that you could stop doing or perhaps approach differently?
- What departments or groups on campus might share some of these priorities? And what relationship do you currently have with those groups? What would you need to do or have in order to develop relationships with those groups and implement your top priorities?
- What spaces in your library are currently allocated to lower-priority needs? How could you use those spaces differently or better?

Our experience at Portland State University Library demonstrates that it is possible to improve library spaces even during difficult budget times, especially if the Library is aggressive about identifying potential collaborative funding partners.

To learn more about recent space updates at Portland State University Library, please see our forthcoming case study:

Petit, Joan and Thomas Bielavitz. "Innovation on a Shoe String: High Impact Space and Technology Updates in a Low Funding Environment." *Cases on Higher Education Spaces: Innovation, Collaboration, and Technology*, Ed. by Russell Carpenter. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2012. *In press.*