

Towards An Enhanced Learning Commons Ideal at Dartmouth College

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Introduction

The Baker-Berry Library complex sits at the center of the Dartmouth College campus, both physically and in spirit. Not only is it the largest facility among the collection of campus libraries, it is, perhaps, the most trafficked location on campus for faculty, staff, students, and guests. In addition, Baker-Berry houses the largest number of employees, working for the library, computing services, the Institute for Writing and Rhetoric (IWR), and the Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning (DCAL). Beginning in 2012, it is also home to members of the Office of the Dean of Students and First-Year Advising. Collectively, it plays a significant role in the academic life of the campus.

In 2008, the Library and the Academic Computing division of computing services undertook the task of evaluating the Baker-Berry complex to identify and recommend changes needed to continue to support teaching and learning at Dartmouth into the future. This effort was informed by the investments that many peer institutions have made to develop learning and information commons, which bring together a range of support services, technology and functional spaces to promote and enable individual and collaborative learning for the 21st century. This presentation is a summary of reports from the Library Learning Spaces Study Group (2010) and the Berry Information-Reference Desk Planning Group (2009), and an overview of changes realized since then.

Background

The Baker-Berry Library complex is comprised of two conjoined buildings that sit at the center of campus, just north of the college green. Baker Memorial Library opened in 1928 with a design inspired by Independence Hall in Philadelphia. It consolidated the library's collection of 240,000 volumes with room for growth, and added a number of spaces for student and faculty study, learning and interaction—the Class of 1913 Reference Room, the Tower reading rooms, the Class of 1902 Room, Hough's Room (the Treasure Room), and the Reserve Corridor containing José Clemente Orozco's mural "The Epic of American Civilization." The main east-west corridor housed the card catalog for a collection that grew to over 2.5 million volumes today. As the collection grew, technology for cataloging changed as well and the role of the physical card catalog diminished to the point of being removed entirely in 2002, with the formal dedication of the Berry Library, which opened in 2000.

The Berry Library was designed to be a library for the 21st century. Along with new classrooms, a café and more study spaces, it expanded the capability and presence of technology in the library with the addition of the Jones Media Center and by bringing in Academic Computing to further increase the resources available for teaching and learning. Berry Library also allowed the collection capacity to grow from one million to two million volumes. The building was designed for flexibility, too, with a more open architecture to allow for evolving library needs.

Today, the Baker-Berry Library has proven to be a successful destination for faculty and students, and has established a healthy environment of cooperation among the organizations occupying the building. During peak periods, our security gates record nearly 10,000 passages, and the library is open on average 114 hours per week during our academic terms. We recognize, however, that how our patrons use both our collections and our facilities has changed over the years, even in just the ten years since the Berry Library was opened.

Technological advances have significantly shifted the role of the physical library from a location of “things” (where things are) to a location of “action” (where things happen). The rise of digitally accessible resources means that not only are we seeing a decreased need to purchase physical volumes, but that patrons do not necessarily need to be physically present in the library to access these resources. The shift from desktop computing to cheaper and more powerful laptops and mobile devices, and pervasive wireless Internet connectivity, means that students no longer need the traditional computer labs and wired connections that our facilities provided in the recent past. For a residential campus such as Dartmouth, the library is the place to study privately and to be seen socially; the place to get personal academic assistance from librarians as well as to collaborate in groups; the place to meet with a faculty member and to meet casually with your friends. It is also the place where faculty come together with librarians, technologists, and instructional designers to improve teaching and learning. This was the learning commons idea that we set out to address.

Learning Spaces Study Group (LSSG)

The Learning Spaces Study Group was formed in 2008 and charged with assessing the current uses of the library facilities, including existing and potential future learning spaces within the libraries, and identifying changes needed to enable the libraries to continue to support teach and learning spaces within the libraries.

Gathering of Information

The LSSG began by developing its own assumptions about library use, but also reviewed literature on learning commons and examined the case studies of peer institutions. The group also looked at a number of library survey documents, including the “Association of

Research Libraries [ARL] LibQUAL+ Survey, 2003 and 2008,” “Provost’s Library Review 2007,” and a walk-in facility survey Fall 2009. To solicit opinions from then-current library users, the group placed a bulletin board on Berry Main Street to elicit responses to the questions, “What do you like on First Floor Berry? What is missing?” and held focus groups with those library staff who work on Berry Level One for their thoughts and opinions.

Needs identified through these activities included:

- greater access to group study space
- more quiet individual workspace
- more opportunity for faculty/student interaction
- more flexible technology-enabled teaching and learning spaces

Opportunities to improve the facility

The conclusion and recommendation of the LSSG was to address several main areas of the Library Facility. These included Baker Main Hall, Berry News Center, Berry Level One, and the Orozco Room. The LSSG also suggested creating a digital presentation studio in the library.

Baker Main Hall

Since the removal of the card catalog cases in the early 2000’s, the main hall served primarily as a “pass-through zone” on the way to other destinations. Glass cases installed in the main hall provided space for a regular program of exhibits highlighting the library’s collections or to support other academic activities at Dartmouth. The large space also served as an indoor location for small conferences, installations from the Hood Museum of Art, or other events. Most of the time, the hall was largely unused, except by a few students who enjoyed sitting on high stools at narrow tables by the windows. The LSSG agreed, however, that the aesthetic design of should be preserved, but with a few changes the Baker Main Hall could become a much more lively indoor commons.

Recommendation

- Create a variety of seating areas: comfortable “soft and low” areas, with rugs and floor lamps that provide a home-like feel; and “high table” areas for informal group work that still preserve the ability to look out upon the beautiful views of the campus green through the large library windows.
- Upgrade the electrical wiring in the hall for expanded use of mobile technology users.

Outcomes

- Renovation of the Baker Main Hall was completed in 2011 with the mixture of seating proposed by the LSSG and with upgraded electrical systems.

Future possibilities

- Mobile charging stations

- Collaborative displays
- Inscrutable surfaces

Berry News Center

The Berry News Center was designed as a destination for students to keep current with news and events from around the world. Around the room were new and recent printed newspapers and periodicals from the U.S. and other international sources. There were also large screen televisions tuned to cable television news programs. Unfortunately, as news sources moved online at a rapid pace, there was a steady decrease in the number of Library subscriptions for print newspapers, and the expectation that patrons would borrow headphones in order to listen to the news on television screens never really materialized. Thus the need for a “news center” diminished considerably. The location, adjacent to the Baker main hall and to the Current Periodical Room (CPR), also made it ideal for repurposing.

Recommendation

- Install a coffee bar and convert the room to a space for new social interaction and to support programming activities that take place in the CPR, such as afternoon readings or research talks by faculty or senior scholars.
- Maintain the television displays for news and provide a few small café tables and chairs.
- Bring a part of the library collection into the space by highlighting new books or displaying the works of faculty authors.

Outcomes

A café and bakery was created, and it run by a local vendor, King Arthur Flour. Faculty authors are highlighted along the wall as customers line up for coffee, tea and baked goods. In addition, one display case in the Baker main hall was removed and an opening was created to provide sales access to the café from the main hall. This has been very successful and popular with all library patrons!

Future possibilities

- The success of King Arthur Flour may eventually require a minor expansion of the café

Berry Level One

An early student report once compared Baker Main Hall to a train station lobby and Berry Level One to an airport lounge. This is a heavily used area for study and research, but also remains a place to “see and be seen.” In addition to some study tables and a number of computer workstations, much of the floor space in Berry Level One was used to house the reference collection. On one side of the main corridor, the Information Desk offered information about library services, directions to building locations, and answered questions about the printing stations that were nearby (though maintained by Computing

Services). The Information Desk was also expected to provide security services for library materials flowing through a nearby exit. Across the corridor sat the Berry Reference Desk, providing in-person ready-reference support and “face-to-face teaching moments” for students and other library patrons. When the LSSG was formed, a separate committee was already working to combine the Information and Reference Desks into a single service point.

With changes in publishing patterns and use of printed materials, the reference collection was being downsized to free up more floor space. In addition, the North Information Desk and the Reference Desk are being combined into one new service desk, making it easier for patrons to identify where to ask questions. These changes provided a number of opportunities to build upon the existing strengths of this central heart of the library.

Recommendation

- Install the new combined Berry Information and Reference Desk adjacent to the stairwell that serves as the primary security point for the north exit of the library.
- Establish a ‘productivity area’ on the floor, bringing together scanners, copiers, and printers in one location for easier use and access by students.
- Expand the number of group study areas by bringing in freestanding glass walls, white boards, and additional power.
- Improve and increase the number of comfortable and attractive seating in the area.

Outcomes

- The combined Berry Information and Reference Desk was completed in 2012. The space freed up by moving the Reference Desk and with the decrease of reference materials now provides additional space for students to work.
- The space freed up by moving the Information Desk has been converted to a “productivity area” combining print stations with copiers, books scanners, and a surface for preparing materials.
- Three group study rooms were created behind the combined desk that feature glass walls, inscribable wall panels, and large LCD screens for collaborative use. The glass walls face the public areas on the floor as well as the main staircase, reinforcing the “see and be seen” nature of Berry Level One.

Future possibilities

- New seating throughout the area
- Freestanding inscribable surfaces for ad hoc group study

Orozco Room

Before the construction of Berry Library, the Orozco Room was one of the most heavily used study areas in the library. It was the “see and be seen” spot for students who wanted a quiet place to work, while at the same time, being located in a regularly traveled hall where they could see friends pass by. With the opening of Berry Library, use of the Orozco Room plummeted. It now serves primarily as overflow study space during midterms/reading

periods/final exams. The area is filled primarily with large, long, wooden tables and the lighting is not ideal, both for study and to observe the murals, and there is a dearth of power outlets. With a decline in use, students are no longer regularly exposed to the powerful images of the Orozco murals and a number of students have mentioned never having been in that space more than once or twice in their time at Dartmouth.

Recommendation

- Remove tables at each end of the room to open up space for two groupings of comfortable lounge seating with floor lamps. These could provide small informal spaces for group work, a comfortable resting spot for visitors viewing the murals, and an attractive element that will bring students into the hall.
- Improve the overall lighting of the room, with better overhead lighting, additional wall lighting to enhance the murals, and reading lamps on the tables.
- Improve the electrical system to accommodate students needing power to work for long periods on their computers.

Outcomes

- Construction is underway to renovate the lighting in the room and to upgrade the wiring to provide more power outlets. Seating will eventually be a mix of long tables and groupings of comfortable seating, not unlike in Baker main hall directly above.

Presentation Practice and Video Conferencing Studios

The Jones Media Center (JMC) is a location in the library that provides access to a large collection of microfilm, VHS videos and over 15,000 DVDs. The JMC also provides computer workstations with high-end multimedia editing software, as well as a wide range of hardware that students, faculty and staff can loan for free. These include digital still cameras, digital video cameras, voice recorders, microphones, lighting and more. In conversations with faculty and other partners, the LSSG determined that there is a need to support the increasing use of audio and video for course projects. However, this need goes beyond the loaner equipment and video editing facilities currently available in the JMC. In addition to video creation projects, which Jones currently supports, students can benefit from facilities that provide audio and video recording of their own presentations as well as the ability to participate in video conferencing sessions with people outside of the College. The Institute for Writing and Rhetoric (IWR) hired two speech lecturers and increased speech course offerings in the curriculum. Meeting with these faculty, the LSSG determined that a digital presentation studio would be an extremely valuable asset to the students and faculty.

Dartmouth foreign language programs and classes now often use video conferencing as a pedagogical tool to facilitate language learning between native speakers and Dartmouth students. Several faculty (in Chinese, Spanish, Russian, and Japanese) have already been involved with projects that connect their students with language partners, tutors, and

lecturers in other parts of the world. These connections have been limited by technology (not always sufficient bandwidth to connect from student rooms), access to technology (locations on campus that are unavailable after 5 p.m.), and facility size issues (a videoconferencing-equipped lecture hall is not appropriate for 1:1 or 1:2 interactions).

Recommendation

The LSSG recommended the creation of a digital presentation studio. The studio would provide equipment for easy video recording and later review of presentations. In addition to those in speech classes, a digital presentation studio would be of use to all students, faculty, and staff who are preparing for presentations or who wish to record a video to post online for instructional purposes. The studio should also be equipped with 1–2 sound booths that would serve as both audio recording booths and be usable by 1–3 people for desktop videoconferencing.

Outcomes

This recommendation is still being worked on to become a reality. In particular, we have been studying the work at Pennsylvania State University in their creation of the One Button Studio (<http://mediacommons.psu.edu/onebutton>). We have identified two rooms in the library where we will soon be building our own. The JMC is also looking at a renovation project in the next 2–4 years. The conclusion of that renovation could result in the construction of spaces for sound recording and videoconferencing.

Conclusion

With the construction of the Berry Library addition in 2000, the Baker-Berry Library complex at Dartmouth College was able to bring together a number of academic support organizations under a single roof. The Dartmouth College Library, Computing Services, the Institute for Writing and Rhetoric (IWR), and the Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning (DCAL) all work closely together to provide resources, services, and programs to enhance the teaching, learning, and research mission of the College. Through our shared experiences and observations, we have come to see that technology has changed not only how students study, learn and socialize, but also how our facilities can contribute to or hinder those pursuits. Baker Library was built for a time when “the College valued itself as a steadfast shaper of its students’ intellects and characters.” (*Revitalizing Baker Corridor*, 8) Shifting to a philosophy of more individual empowerment, Berry Library designers envisioned students working individually on their laptop computers, with considerably less need for group study rooms. Today, we are influenced by constructivist, active learning views of education and recognize that individual study spaces need to be complemented by

spaces designed to support collaboration. Working together with our partners, the Dartmouth College Library strives to remain a central campus location for academic activity by constantly pursuing opportunities to re-evaluate what we do and how we do it, evolving and adapting as to the changing needs of our students and faculty.

Appendix

Berry Information – Reference Desk Planning Group Final Report
John Cocklin, Heather Gere, Laura Graveline, and Kathy Kitowski
April 1, 2009.

Library Learning Spaces Study Group Report
Laura Barrett, Malcolm Brown, Ridie Ghezzi, Anthony Helm, Joshua Kim, and Cynthia Pawlek
February 17, 2010.

Revitalizing Baker Corridor
A Report from the Students in English 96
Dartmouth College. March 2005.