

Chapter 15

A Renovation Is a Terrible Thing to Waste: Engaging the Community to Create a Dynamic Library Space

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the community engagement plan carried out by the Gottesman Libraries at Teachers College, Columbia University to develop a design for “the learning theater,” a flexible space aimed at the educators and students of the future. In order to design a learning space with the potential to inspire innovative use and cutting edge research, library staff conducted outreach and events to involve faculty, students, staff, and other stakeholders in generating use cases and ideas. These activities included immersive full day design events, shorter format design events, lectures, targeted collection development, and multimedia creation.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013 the Gottesman Libraries at Teachers College Columbia University secured funding to design and develop a dynamic learning space to support ambitious teaching, learning, and research. The library building, located on campus in New York City, includes over 50,000 square feet of public space on five public floors. In a prior renovation completed in 2004, three highly trafficked public floors were updated to provide space for collaborative work, quiet study, and group meetings of up to 35 participants. The fourth floor of the library is now the target of a renovation effort. This renovation is slated to transform

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the space into a “learning theater,” an innovative protean collaboration space that will allow the library to serve the shifting needs of educators, students, and researchers in the digital era.

Academic library leaders are increasingly recognizing the benefits of collaboration with library patrons in the development of services and capacities (Somerville and Collins, 2008) and outreach activities more generally to engage members of the academic community (Fabian, D’aniello, Tysick, & Morin, 2003; Boff, Singer & Sterns, 2006; Dennis, 2012). Because the learning theater is intended as a patron-reserved facility that will serve as a venue for patron planned activities, community engagement on the learning theater project is vital. The library team has developed a process to ensure that the space continually evolves to serve the needs of the educator community. Additionally, it has taken steps to make the planning of this project transparent, flexible, and meaningful for the faculty, students, and staff at the college. Moreover, since the requirements of major renovations often distract from continuing goals of service delivery and community engagement, the library has taken additional measures to use the renovation as an opportunity to intensify patron participation in library development and activities.

From the outset, a community engagement plan was deemed essential to the development of the new learning space. The roles that this space will play in the learning trajectories of educators and students are complex and diverse and, in order to ensure that this space is relevant upon completion and remains flexible and innovative many years into the future, the development of the space is being viewed not as a library project, but as a project of the entire college community.

BACKGROUND

The Gottesman Libraries serve a community of over 5,500 graduate students, plus faculty members, staff, and alumni. The academic programs of Teachers College cover graduate study in the areas of education, psychology, health, and leadership with a wide range of masters’ and doctoral level degree options. While large numbers of students live in student housing in close proximity to the college and the library, many students are active professionals in the field of education who commute to campus for classes and study. The students and faculty members of the college are deeply concerned about all aspects of teaching and learning and hence constitute a unique resource for collaborating in the development of a new learning space.

Accessing the talent and resources of the college community and creating the conditions for genuine collaboration present a substantial challenge. Not only are students, faculty, and others incredibly busy with their own jobs both inside the college and often beyond, but also they typically engage with the library and the library staff in the course of trying to get their own work done in the most efficient way possible. Inviting them to engage with the renovation project takes imagination and skill to achieve success. Fortunately, the library was well positioned to take on this challenge as a result of the earlier renovation experience.

Lessons and Capacities from Prior Renovations

The current renovation project builds, in two very different and substantial ways, on earlier work completed in 2004 as part of a plan to renovate the entire library building. One involves capacity and patrons; the other involves library staff configurations.

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