Chapter 13
Innovation on a Shoe String:
High Impact Space and Technology Updates in a Low-Funding Environment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Even in a low-funding and space-constrained environment, Portland State University (PSU) Library has created and renovated new technology-rich learning spaces for students. Collaboration with other campus departments and an entrepreneurial spirit were essential for many of these efforts. First, the library developed a list of desired improvements and space use ideas. Then, the library used a phased approach, taking advantage of opportunities and planning for others as possible, resulting in a series of high-impact space updates. PSU Library offers a space-planning model that allows academic libraries to be agile, entrepreneurial, and collaborative, and to improve learning spaces in a difficult economic environment.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2010-11, PSU became Oregon's largest university, with more than 29,000 enrolled students. In the same year, Oregon ranked 43rd in the nation for state fiscal support for higher education (Palmer, 2011), a situation exacerbated by the economic downturn, which reduced our already limited funding for capital improvements. Also, the university's urban location in downtown Portland means available real estate is scarce and expensive. The net result is that the library serves more students than ever, but with fewer funds and reduced optimism for an expansion or large-scale renovation.

Yet even in this challenging environment, PSU Library has, over the past several years, updated group study rooms and created new technology-rich learning spaces for students. Collaboration was essential for many of these efforts, as was searching for funding in all sorts of places.

This case study illustrates how PSU Library has created several emergent collaborative and technologically enhanced learning spaces in a low-funding environment. From these experiences, we have implemented a planning model that enables academic libraries to be agile, entrepreneurial, and collaborative in improving learning spaces. This chapter includes strategies for developing a long-term vision; examples of small, achievable, high-impact projects that can fit into the larger vision; suggestions for identifying collaborative funding partners; and a model of planning for renovation in an entrepreneurial way.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A recent trend in higher education has been to build or renovate academic library spaces to incorporate new technologies and collaborative study and work environments. These spaces reflect the ways in which modern scholars and researchers learn and communicate. In the 1990s, many libraries began to adopt the information commons model. Beagle, Bailey, and Tierney (2006) provided a historical perspective as well as a definition: "Information Commons is used to denote a new type of physical facility or section of a library specifically designed to organize workspace and service delivery around an integrated digital environment and the technology that supports it" (p. 3).

In the 2000s, the information commons movement continued as many leaders called for greater collaboration between the library and other academic units. Wilson (2002) outlined a clear rationale for this: "Collaboration is key if librarians are to educate their clientele to be critical and self-sufficient users of information. No one alone has the expertise to address the full range of information literacies…" (p. 1).