

Chapter 8

From Stacks to Collaborative Learning Commons: Transforming Traditional Library Space with a Planned Infusion of Digital Technology

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The University of North Texas Health Science Center (UNTHSC) completed a project to transform traditional, print-centric library space into an open, technology-enabled learning commons. The library's print collection was dramatically reduced to create a new Collaborative Learning Commons in areas formerly occupied by bookshelves. Removal of books, journals, and shelving was carefully planned based on the needs of students, researchers, and clinicians. Following the print collection reduction, the new physical commons development included changing walls, replacing flooring, adding electrical and network connections, installing advanced technology resources, and using innovative furnishings to promote collaboration.

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The major accomplishments of this project include repurposing of library space to serve modern health science student needs through the creation of vibrant meeting and workspaces, expansion of access to educational technologies, and increased access to library scholarly information resources via a significant investment in electronic resources.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The Gibson D. Lewis Health Science Library has been a key part of the research, patient care, and community engagement operations of the University of North Texas Health Science Center at Fort Worth since the school's inception in the early 1970s as the Texas College of Osteopathic Medicine (Stokes, 1990). The school has grown to now comprise five colleges including the Texas College of Osteopathic Medicine, Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, School of Public Health, School of Health Professions, and the College of Pharmacy. All of the campus' students are graduate or professional level with a focus in the health and biomedical sciences.

Lewis Library provided excellent services and access to biomedical literature from a variety of physical venues as it grew along with the school body. The library moved to its current, free standing building in late 1986. It occupies three floors totaling approximately 75,000 square feet of floor space built in the tradition of libraries meant to serve their communities by offering large print collections. After a few decades of growth, Lewis Library's print collection consisted of approximately 170,000 print book and journal volumes in the early to mid-2000s. While the building was quite full of shelving, it still offered approximately 250 seats for students to study or conduct research.

The Lewis Library building was not designed to support today's intensive computer use and was understandably lacking in modern necessities like electrical outlets to power personal computing and communication devices. Because the building was specifically designed to serve as a traditional, "books on shelves" library, its floors are very thick concrete undergirded by even thicker support beams. Large support columns are also located every 30 feet in all directions on each floor of the building. This architectural fact impacted planning and design and added expense to this project.

SETTING THE STAGE

Numerous factors began to change the physical and philosophical landscape for libraries in the 1990s and 2000s. Academic libraries began to move away from being print warehouses and towards the idea of being common space for socializa-

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