

The New Academic Hub

Reinventing the college library for the 21st century.



GSVU REINVENTS THE LIBRARY FOR LEARNING

“We were trying to escape the gravity of the common library. We wanted this to be a very different place. We wanted it to feel different and look different, so that students could act differently.”

Different indeed. As Lee Van Orsdel, GVSU dean of university libraries suggests, the new Mary Idema Pew Library & Information Commons at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Mich. breaks free of the traditional college library in favor of a learning center for the 21st century. Forget the library as stuffy book warehouse, this is an inspired integration of space, furniture and tools for active learning, one that supports individual and collaborative learning, provides assistance and coaching for students in acquiring new skills, and allows unfettered access to content in every form.

“Up to 90% of learning happens outside the classroom, especially those skills students need to be successful after graduation: the ability to think clearly, to communicate, articulate and persuade, to work in groups and collaborate. This library is an academic hub where the learning that goes on after class reinforces what they learned in the classroom and helps students hone those essential skills,” says Van Orsdel.

The transformation begins with a relatively modest number of books—150,000—in open stacks for browsing. Another 600,000 books are available via an automated storage system beneath the library; order a book online and it shows up in less than a minute. Need more? There’s nearly a million volumes available digitally. This strategy reduces the building’s book footprint from 60,000 sq. ft. to 3,500 sq. ft. and frees up room for students, faculty and staff to work in ways that for a college library are different.

Here the learning spaces range from reflective, contemplative places, what Van Orsdel calls “almost cell-like spaces where a student can find refuge,” to group spaces for active content sharing and creation. “We’ve elevated the concept of noise control to an art,” she says, noting the building’s quieter east side compared to the west side that invites conversation in various collaborative workspaces.

A sound system pipes programmed sound into collaboration zones so students feel comfortable speaking in normal tones of voice. On the east side, white noise helps mask sound and reduce distractions. The library also offers several outdoor spaces, including an amphitheater, an indoor café, outdoor patio, even a third floor reading garden.



How to make a college library relevant for the 21st century

Steelcase researchers and designers developed key design principles for libraries that play a leading role in higher education, principles that were integrated into the design of the new GVSU library:

- Design a range of library spaces that support social learning between students and peers, in pairs and groups
- Support the librarian’s evolving, expanding role as content expert, IT service provider, collaborator and educator

- Optimize the performance of informal spaces through greater flexibility and user control
- Plan for adjacencies that recognize the range of activities that go on in the library
- Include spaces for individual comfort, concentration, and security
- Provide spaces that improve student awareness of, and access to, library resources

“Up to 90% of learning happens outside the classroom.”

BACK IN THE HEART OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

Traditional college libraries designed around print-based resources became less relevant in recent years as access to digital content exploded. When GVSU began planning their new library five years ago, they wanted to rethink the library’s role in learning and how the process of learning itself was changing. The university partnered with Steelcase and its WorkSpace Futures research group, along with SHW Group, an architecture and engineering firm specializing in educational environments, to conduct on-site research at GVSU.

“The college library can be a key location outside the classroom where active learning plays out. In the classroom, students are involved in hands-on learning but the instructor still leads. In the library, students take control of their instruction as they discover, analyze, and share information, and in the process become comfortable working individually and with others. It’s a major shift from being a reading and storage site to a center for active learning,” says Elise Valoe, senior design researcher with Steelcase, and part of a team that studied libraries at private and public colleges and universities across the country.



The researchers developed a comprehensive view of student learning patterns, including “a rhythm to students’ life that was unknown to us,” says Van Orsdel. Not unlike predictable semester patterns, with student activity increasing around mid-term exams and due dates for papers, “we found that there’s a certain rhythm to each day, too. Students work pretty much alone during the daytime. But at night, groups come together, pull apart, reform and regroup constantly. They don’t just go to a table or into a room, they consult all night long.

Even student postures change during the day. While on task and hurrying between classes, they sit upright in a chair at a table. If they’re waiting for a friend they kick back on a stool or in a lounge chair with a phone or tablet and relax. At night, they look for furniture that’s mobile to accommodate team projects. The university also discovered that study groups—unlike most groups, tend to meet between 10AM and 3PM.

The vagaries of student study habits presented a design challenge: plan the space for the daytime when students work on their own, or for the evening when they work in groups? GVSU believes they found the ideal solution: spaces with furniture that's mobile, reconfigurable and in a variety of sizes and shapes, including 29 types of seating, plenty of whiteboards on both walls and wheels, and media:scape collaboration settings in various places around the library.

“Collaboration with digital content usually means six people in a room with laptops, swiveling screens around and a whole lot of straining to see the information. media:scape allows people to focus on the intellectual process of creating and learning together by not being bound by the physicality of everyone having a different device in front of them,” says Van Orsdel.

She believes there's an added bonus to the library's inherent flexibility: “if we're wrong about this, we have so much flexibility that whatever students want to do, we can do it.”



Another signature concept in the library is the knowledge market, an entryway place where trained students help classmates improve specific skills. “Universities typically do not make their services seamless. They’re compartmentalized into pedagogical areas where they’re taught: English, writing, research, technology, speech, etc. The knowledge market puts together in one place the resources to build all of the skills employers tell us are critical in the workplace: writing, speaking, presenting, research. Students manage their own learning, choosing the type of help they need, when they need it.”

Open 6pm to midnight (“when we see the most collaborative behaviors”), the knowledge market is an open area in a can’t-miss path by the main entrance. Kiosks, video monitors and displays encourage walk-ups, questions and quick collaborations.

Mary Idema Pew Library and Information Commons - by the numbers

153k	square feet
1,500	seats
19	group study rooms
10	media:scape collaboration settings
29	types of seating
150k	books in open stacks
600k	books in automated storage and retrieval
1 million	books in digital format
250	computers
50%	less energy used (compared to other buildings of equal size)
\$65	million total cost

STUDY REVEALS CLASSROOM SPACES SIGNIFICANTLY IMPACT STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

New data from a Steelcase Education Solutions study has shown that student engagement is favorably impacted in classrooms intentionally designed for active learning.

The study, completed at four U.S. universities, assessed how different classroom designs affect student engagement, which is widely recognized as a reliable predictor of academic success.

“Improving educational outcomes is a nearly universal goal, but how to achieve it remains a focus of continuing research and debate. Although noteworthy studies have been completed in recent years, a variable that is still often underemphasized is the role of classroom design,” notes Lennie Scott-Webber, Ph.D., Steelcase director of Education Environments. “We developed our study to address this important gap, create a reliable evaluation instrument, and contribute in a significant way to a growing body of knowledge about the relationship between the learning environment and student success.”

Using the evaluation survey instrument developed by the Steelcase Educations Solutions team, participants compared their experiences in a traditional classroom with row-by-column seating to their subsequent experiences in a classroom intentionally designed for active learning. The active learning classrooms were furnished with Steelcase products for active learning settings: Node® seating, Verb® classroom collection, LearnLab™ and media:scape® collaboration settings. Participants answered questions about engagement in learning activities occurring in the classrooms and then evaluated the impact of the classroom furnishings in support of these activities.

The majority of students rated the active learning classroom better than the traditional classroom on each of 12 factors identified in the evaluation, and there were no significant differences in the results from each university. In all, the active learning classrooms generated improvements in active learning practices for both students and faculty.

In total, the study has revealed that classrooms designed to support active learning result in improved student engagement across multiple measures. The study also revealed that students felt that the classroom design contributed to their ability to be creative, motivation to attend class, ability to achieve a higher grade and engagement in class.

“This study yielded major findings, all supporting the highly positive impact of the classroom on student engagement,” says Scott-Weber. “There’s now evidence that Steelcase Education Solutions classrooms encourage and enable educators to practice active learning methods, even without special training. As a result, decision makers at educational institutions, as well as architects and designers, can be more assured that investments in solutions intentionally designed to support active learning can create more effective classrooms and a higher predictability of student engagement.”

9Results from the first phase of the research, a beta study at three institutions, were published in the November 2013 issue of Planning for Higher Education, a peer-reviewed journal published by the Society for College and University Planning. The Steelcase team is continuing this managed research study with a number of universities throughout North America, building data and adding knowledge to this important field of study.

Featured Products

+About Steelcase

+Customer Care

+Legal Notices

+Connect With Us

+Contact Us

Steelcase

© 1996 - 2021 Steelcase Inc. is the global leader in office furniture, interior architecture and space solutions for offices, hospitals and classrooms. Our furniture is inspired by innovative research in workspace design.