

May 2018

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### Recommended Citation

Price, Cindy and Pierce, Virginia (2018) "The Modern Academic Library: Space to Learn," *South Carolina Libraries*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: [https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/scl\\_journal/vol3/iss2/3](https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/scl_journal/vol3/iss2/3)

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## The Modern Academic Library: Space to Learn

### Abstract

Over the last two decades academic libraries in the United States have experienced a paradigm shift from book-centered spaces to learning-centered spaces as they work to provide services and resources in the new ways that users consume information. This article discusses the results of a survey conducted in early 2017 of South Carolina academic libraries to study this larger trend moving to learning-centered spaces. Forty two academic library administrators responded and shared how they are re-purposing their library spaces as they work to improve student and faculty user experiences.

### Keywords

learning-centered libraries, library space, academic libraries

### Cover Page Footnote

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# PEER REVIEWED ARTICLE

## The Modern Academic Library: Space to Learn

by Virginia Pierce and Cindy Price

Over the last two decades academic libraries in the United States have experienced a paradigm shift from book-centered spaces to learning-centered spaces as they work to provide services and resources in the new ways that users consume information (Bennett, 2009). Most academic work now utilizes course management systems which encourage group-based study and

libraries are redesigning spaces with an emphasis on "collaboration and versatility" (Head 2016; Khoo et al 2016). Print collections are being replaced by public computer areas, collaborative study areas, open space, and multi-purpose spaces. In order to learn if South Carolina academic libraries are following these national trends towards learning-centered library spaces to improve their student and faculty user experiences, we conducted an online survey and invited library deans and directors from every academic library in the state to participate. This article discusses the results of the survey.

In January and February of 2017, we contacted one dean or director of each of the fifty-nine academic libraries in South Carolina by email to request his or her participation in an online survey titled [Survey of South Carolina Academic Libraries on Library Space](#). The ten question survey was designed and implemented using a free version of SurveyMonkey software. We later followed up by telephone with those administrators who



View of open seating and computer space at Santa Clara University Library recognized with a 2017 Excellence in Academics Award for their recent re-designed library space. Photo by Tina Vossugh (2017)

had not yet completed the survey and invited them a second time to participate. Of the fifty-nine South Carolina academic libraries invited to participate, forty-two administrators responded to the survey resulting in a 71% survey response rate. These responses include the feedback from two academic library deans with whom we had conducted a preliminary inquiry on library space which inspired this broader statewide survey.

The survey asked administrators how their library space needs had changed in recent years, what types of changes they have implemented to meet their users' needs, and if changes had occurred during renovations or incrementally. We also inquired if they had deselected print resources to reutilize space in their reference, circulating, print periodicals, or microforms collections or in other areas of the library. Those who had not yet made significant changes to their library spaces were asked if

they have plans to implement changes in the future. Additionally, we asked some broader questions such as what administrators believe are the most valuable aspects of a modern academic library, for what purpose they believe the majority of their students come to use their libraries, and if they had any other comments to share regarding space issues in their libraries. The questions included in this survey are shown in Figure 1.

Of the forty-two academic libraries that participated in the survey, at least fifteen are private college libraries, thirteen are public university and college libraries, and six are public technical college libraries. Eight participants did not share the name of their library to indicate the type of institution with which they are associated. Participants were asked how many Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) students they serve and the size of their libraries. 78% of respondents serve student populations of 5,000 students or fewer and 81% of respondents' library spaces are 75,000 square feet or less.

We asked survey respondents the question **For what purpose(s) do you believe the majority of students and others come to use your library?** Most respondents

(79%) included in their answers that they believed the majority of students use their library to study, whether alone or in groups. Of these, many noted that students seek the library in order to find quiet space and one

Q1: What is the Full Time Equivalent (FTE) student count at your institution?

Q2: What is the physical size of your library (or main library)?

Q3: For what purpose(s) do you believe the majority of students and others come to use your library?

Q4: How have your library space needs changed in recent years?

Q5: Have you deselected from the following print collections to reutilize library space? Check all that apply.

Q6: If you have made changes to your library space did they occur incrementally or during a renovation?

Q7: If your library has not made any changes to address space issues do you have plans to implement changes in the future?

Q8: What do you believe are the most valuable aspects of a modern academic library?

Q9: Please add any comments you would like to make regarding space issues in your library.

Q10: Please share the name of your library if desired. Thank you!

Figure 1. Survey of South Carolina Academic Libraries on Library

technical college director noted that "as a commuter college students need a place away from home and families for uninterrupted study." Other common reasons shared were: to access public computers (19%), to conduct research (15%), and to print (10%). While almost everyone included study as their main belief students use the library, most included multiple reasons for visiting their library in their answers: such as to seek research assistance, attend library instruction, use media services, socialize, attend programs, or attend tutoring sessions.

When asked **How have your library space needs changed in recent years?** 81% recognized the value of collaborative space in their libraries and had either added more collaborative space in recent years or recognized that they need more. Many also noted that they have reduced the sizes of their periodicals, circulating, reference, and/or audiovisual collections in order to create more

open space, collaborative space, and study space, or installed flexible furniture, and comfortable seating. Many noted that they have designated quiet space in certain areas of



Mediascape collaboration units in collaborative group study space at Coastal Carolina University's Kimbel Library. Photo by Coastal Carolina University

their libraries. One library dean shared that his library's space needs had changed "dramatically" in recent years. He elaborated:

"We needed more space for access as opposed to space for what we owned. We also needed to redesign our space to accommodate that new demand. In 2012 we redesigned our first floor to allow for more study space, more collaborative spaces and more public computers. It has been an unprecedented success."

Similarly, one director shared that they have moved away from storage space and towards "people space" and another framed a similar thought: "we've needed less floor space for physical collections as we've shifted to increase digital offerings. However, that 'free space' has been utilized to incorporate new technologies [like] Mediascape collaboration units." Others noted they had added technology such as interactive whiteboards, makerspace labs, presentation practice rooms, and more computers and laptop rentals. Several college and university libraries noted they have had to reallocate space for other campus programs and services such as centers for tutoring, writing, academic success, career guidance, teaching excellence, and information technology services.

For the survey question which asked **Have you de-selected from any of the following print collections to reutilize library space: reference, circulating, print periodicals, microforms, or other areas?** 76% of library administrators who responded to this question said they had deselected from their reference collections more often than other areas in order to reutilize library space. 46% of respondents de-selected from their circulating collections, 35% de-selected from their print periodicals collections, and 16% of respondents have reduced the sizes of their microforms collections (Figure 2).

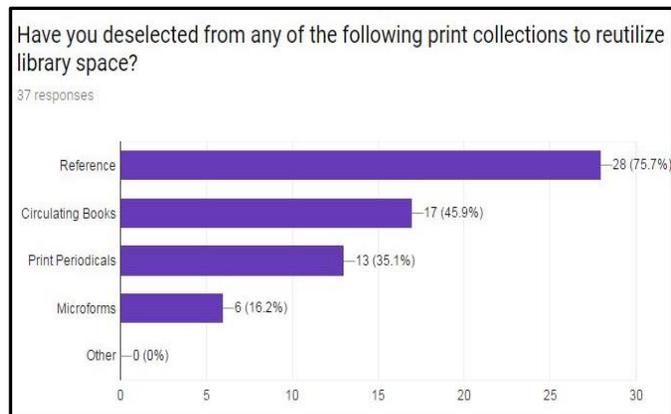


Figure 2. Survey results asking if libraries have de-selected from print collections to reutilize space.

Another area respondents noted they had de-selected materials were audiovisual media. One respondent who has deselected from all four collection areas stated that they "continually look at areas to reduce the collection with an eye towards creating additional collaborative spaces." Other respondents shared that they have re-purposed space formerly occupied by their reference or microforms collections to create group study rooms, more space for study tables, and additional open floor space. One library has merged its reference collection (after robust deselection) with its circulating collection with plans to convert the former reference area to additional open floor space. Another library dean noted that she oversaw the extensive deselection of the library's reference collection (replacing as many titles as

possible in e-book format) in order to provide “significant [space] for seating.” One noted that they de-selected in all areas including circulating, serials, and reference not with the goal of creating space in the library but keeping in mind what was best for the overall collection and their students’ needs. Two respondents shared that they moved collections to storage rather than permanent deselection in order to reutilize the space these collections had occupied.

When asked **If you have made changes to your library space did they occur incrementally or during a renovation?**

78% of respondents who have made library space changes had executed changes incrementally while 22% noted changes were made during a renovation. One respondent noted they “are embracing digital and electronic resources in an effort to repurpose” their library space. Several respondents mentioned utilizing compact shelving in order to save or reuse space. Another survey response noted that they “are looking at the idea of remote storage for a significant portion of their little used print collection to create room for collaborative spaces” in their library. One library shared they had renovated a large portion of one floor in their building to make room for a career center and had implemented incremental changes to spaces including moving a computer lab to create more study and program space and adding more study space that shelving had previously occupied. We also asked **If your library has not made any changes to address space issues do you have plans to implement changes in the future?** and 90% of library administrators who

had not yet made changes indicated that they have future plans to do so.

The question **What do you believe are the most valuable aspects of a modern academic library?** elicited similar feedback to previous answers but provided more food for thought. 54% of library deans and directors responded that collaborative space was the most important asset in an academic library today while many others shared that meeting the changing needs of students is paramount. One dean who responded enthusiastically stated

that space is their most pressing need. “Students need to have specific areas for collaboration, need study rooms, need quiet spaces and need soft seating areas. Libraries need to take a holistic approach to space planning as all our important resources and services are interconnected.” Several employed the same adjectives, prescribing that libraries need to be welcoming, inviting, attractive and spacious environments with knowledgeable professional staff. One private college library director expressed the consensus of other directors when he added:



Student using newly renovated space in Converse College’s Mickel Library. Photo by Converse College

“The modern academic library is a place for people to connect, discover, create, and transform. These are keywords we used in our recent strategic plan and we feel strongly about them. Today’s academic library is as much about our users being information producers as it is about their being information consumers. Toward that, providing spaces and resources for our academic communities to carry out the information life cycle is largely what we are all about.”

We asked library administrators to **please add any comments you would like to make regarding space issues in your library.**

Responses to this final question addressed different concerns administrators presently face. For example, library administrators shared their concerns that other non-library programs might continue to push for space in their libraries and concerns that budget restraints are often an impediment in the execution of library re-design. Several affirmed that many students still do prefer print materials and that they plan to maintain certain parts of their print collections. One public university library dean reflected that the changes in their services have been more dramatic in the last five years than the previous fifteen years. Another public university library dean remarked:

“the entire concept of the library as a physical space is rapidly changing [and] continues to be a very important part of what the library provides for our users—a place to come and find information but even more importantly a space to come and connect with other learners, teachers, and researchers and a place to reflect and re-generate the spirit.”

Our survey results demonstrate that nearly all forty-two participants in this survey provided remarkably similar answers and are carrying out many of the same changes to their spaces regardless of their type of institution, library size, or student population size. They are replacing many print materials with online access to the same content and are adding more computers and the ability to access and research content on personal devices. They are repurposing spaces to create open spaces where students and faculty feel welcome to spend time to reflect, regenerate, and socialize with their peers. They are adding more

comfortable and more versatile seating areas throughout their libraries and are creating more versatility in the spaces and study rooms they have added. In conclusion, this survey provided ample proof that the overwhelming majority of South Carolina academic library deans and directors are unified in moving away from traditional book-centered spaces and toward learning-centered spaces with more focus on open, inviting environments where users can learn, collaborate, and consume and produce information in the multitude of new ways now available to them.

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