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## Re-envisioning Our Future: The Library Master Planning Process at the University of South Carolina Beaufort

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## Re-envisioning Our Future: The Library Master Planning Process at the University of South Carolina Beaufort

### Abstract

The authors relate their experiences with participating in a master planning process for the multi-campus University of South Carolina Beaufort Library.

### Keywords

library, libraries, buildings, renovation, colleges, universities, best practices

## Re-envisioning Our Future: The Library Master Planning Process at the University of South Carolina Beaufort

### Background

The University of South Carolina Beaufort is a small, multi-campus, regional comprehensive university in the Lowcountry of South Carolina. The three campuses include the original Beaufort Campus, located in the historic town of Beaufort, the Bluffton Campus, built in 2004 in the Okatie/Bluffton area, and the Hilton Head Campus, located on Hilton Head Island. USCB features two full-service libraries on the Beaufort and Bluffton campuses. The Hilton Head library space does not house a collection. Instead, it serves as an un-staffed study and meeting space.

The main library is on the Bluffton Campus and features dark wood shelving and grand oversized desks with granite surfaces underneath a two-story atrium. The library takes up almost the entire first floor of the Library Building, except for the IT department and the Center for Teaching and Learning. Faculty offices, classrooms, and Student Development offices are on the library's second floor, which wraps around the atrium. The print book and bound journal collections take up most of the interior space of the library. There are six study rooms and 10 private individual study carrels.

The 5,000-square-foot Beaufort Campus library is housed within a 1960's flat-roofed architectural structure. This library was last renovated in 2013, but still features 1970's dark wood on the information/circulation desk and shelving on the walls. Condensed shelving was added in 2013 and holds the general collection. The art collection, which serves the art program on this campus, is housed in open, browsable shelving. The Beaufort College Collection, which features books that relate to the history and culture of Beaufort and the surrounding areas, is in the Beaufort College Room, which is the only private study/meeting space for more than three people in the library. The only other study/meeting space was a small room that housed the children's literature collection.

In the fall of 2022, the USCB headcount was 2,037, with a full-time enrollment of 1,783 students. USCB experienced a 4.6% growth from the previous year. Approximately half of the students are first-generation college students and women, and around 40% of students are people of color.

### Why Did USCB Library Need Change?

Why did USCB decide that there was a need for the library to undergo change and participate in a library master planning process?

A confluence of waves rippled across several different strategic areas and departments of the university and the library appeared as a place that could solve some of these issues. One of the main influences of change was the effect of the pandemic. First, students were not coming to the library in the numbers that they were before COVID. Student Development, Academic Affairs, and Facilities thought that the libraries might be a place that could undergo change and that the change, centered on student needs, would bring them together into a communal space. Also, there is a need for communal student spaces on each campus and student retention was a concern. Additionally, experiential learning was the focus of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for USCB for its regional accreditor, the Southern Association of Colleges, and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), so there was also an interest in developing the library as a space to support experiential learning. Another area of interest was developing the library spaces to feature scholarship, particularly student work. The library was seen as a space that could embody these diverse needs at both the Beaufort and the Bluffton Campuses. There was also the perception that both library spaces were outdated. They needed to have more technology, more group study rooms and study spaces, updated furniture, and to be more comfortable and welcoming for students. For

example, first-generation students needed to feel at ease entering the spaces, working, and asking for research help. Additionally, USCB has a significant commuter student population, and identifying spaces to meet their needs added to the impetus to remodel the libraries.

### **How Did It Happen?**

The USCB Library was fortunate to receive initial support for change from institutional leadership. The change at the USCB Library was initiated by the Provost/Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs who met Elliot Felix, of brightspot strategies, in 2020 at an American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) conference. Felix spoke about ‘Libraries of the Future.’ The USCB provost began to see that library remodeling could help propel the institution forward and he became an advocate for change.

### **Master Planning Timeline and Process**

The consultants arrived on campus at the end of March 2022. The Interim Director of libraries led them on tours of both libraries and then they began their individual meetings with the members of the library master planning committee. The committee consisted of the Provost/Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, the Vice Chancellor of Student Development, the Vice Chancellor of Development, the Director of Facilities, the Chief Information Officer, the Interim Director

of Libraries, the Chair of the Faculty Senate Library Committee, two consultants, and 1-2 students. The kick-off meeting served as an introductory meeting about the process, a sharing of information gathered through the tours and interviews, and a facilitated discussion of issues and future needs.

Faculty, staff, and student focus groups and email surveys were conducted in April and May. Also occurring in May were library and partner small group interviews. Two of the small group interviews were focused on gathering library data. The collections and circulation group shared collections and circulation data with the consultants. The research and instruction group shared research services and instructional data. The three other small groups were 1) IT Helpdesk, media, and makerspace, 2) academic advising and academic support, and 3) career services. At the end of May, the planning committee met, and the consultants shared the findings from these interviews and surveys. They also led the committee through a vision workshop. At the next meetings, all of which were now being conducted virtually, the consultants shared the vision statements for each library and discussed prototyping ideas.

In June, the consultants shared a draft of the future space program and plan. An updated draft, created in response to feedback

from USCB, was shared in July. A subcommittee, which included the Director of Libraries, the Chief Information Officer, and the Director of Facilities, was formed in July to discuss a new collaborative service point in more depth. USCB received a draft of the final report in August. Faculty, staff, and student focus groups met in August/September to respond to the draft final report. The final, updated report was submitted to USCB in September 2022.

### **Library Leadership Change**

The USCB Library was also experiencing a leadership change. The Interim Director of Libraries stepped down in the spring of 2021. A new Interim Director of Libraries was appointed who had advocated for change at the Beaufort Campus library. The change advocacy included the submission of a proposal for a 'Big Ideas' project created by the Chancellor of USCB in which she recommended philosophical and spatial changes for the library based on biophilic design, student experience, and the academic subjects taught at the Beaufort Campus. She had also advocated for the inclusion of creative scholarship and heightened technology in library spaces, as seen at the Hunt Library at NC State, at USCB. As Interim Director, she shared the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) report *Academic Library Impact on Student Learning and Success: Findings from Assessment in Action Team Projects (2017)* with

the Academic Affairs Council, the Vice Chancellor of Student Development, and others, and used the phrase “library usage = student success and retention” as a marketing phrase to reinforce the importance of the libraries as part of an overall retention strategy. This new Interim Director became a member of the library master planning committee.

Concurrent with the library master planning process was a search for a permanent Director of Libraries. The new Director of Libraries accepted the position at the end of June and joined the master planning committee. USCB Library was fortunate to have someone take leadership of the libraries who had experience leading institutional change and had prior experience with facilities planning and remodeling.

### **Prioritizing Impact**

One of the priorities was aligning library spaces with strategic priorities to make the library a more visible instructional partner through the repurposing of space. Increasing instructional spaces in the library would ensure the libraries would be “vital hubs of connection and connectivity” (ILA Reporter, 2021). In addition, the inclusion of instructional spaces was intended to provide patrons with opportunities for “discovery and delight” (Christoffersen et al, 2021) and bring the classroom into the library to create spaces that

are more like the “playground and less about sanctuary” (Neal, 2011).

### **Key Considerations**

The priorities for the USCB library master plan are closely aligned with current visions for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century academic library. The intent was to move the USCB Library from “primarily serving as a repository of the collective knowledge of a culture, often ancillary to the mission of universities, to an integral component of formal and informal learning and teaching experiences that are an extension of the classroom” (Kocevar-Weidinger, 2007). Creating flexible and open gathering spaces was one of the goals of the master planning process. For example, removing the circulation and research services desk are two prominent changes designed to make spaces more welcoming and flexible. In addition, carrels with individual computers that were at the front of the library are slated for removal. New flexible furniture and seating will be installed to make the spaces more inviting, to increase the openness of the space, and to highlight the availability of spaces to gather. Further, instead of focusing exclusively on quiet study, the space design in both the Bluffton and Beaufort libraries is intended to increase interaction by allowing for spaces that were “loud” rather than solely focusing on quiet study to encourage students

to return to the libraries in greater numbers and foster collaborative opportunities within the newly remodeled space, while still being considerate to students seeking less stimulating sensory environments.

A second key consideration in the USCB Library Bluffton was the integration of formal and informal learning experiences. Instructional spaces figure prominently in the space plan and program. The first addition was a makerspace. Integrating a makerspace in the library is not unique to the University of South Carolina Beaufort (USCB) (American Libraries, 2013; Melo, 2023). These spaces have been implemented, or are in the planning stage, in several college and research libraries (Melo, 2023). The impetus for creating a makerspace in the USCB Library Bluffton was to promote the library as an instructional partner. The intent was to bring students and faculty into the library as part of their formal and informal learning experiences and leverage the library's long hours to create learning spaces that are available before or after formal instruction in the classroom. The makerspace is designed to encourage students and faculty to gather and interact with the technology available in the makerspace. The variety of equipment, the availability of virtual reality capabilities, and the integration of makerspace environments into instruction are compatible with the library's digital presence and expertise. Further, it is an

example of students and faculty being in-person, but working with digital resources, activities that align with the library's resource and teaching missions.

A third instructional space added to the USCB Library Bluffton was the addition of a data visualization laboratory. USCB has expanded its program offerings in the last few years by adding cybersecurity as a program of study and with a graduate degree in computational science. Further, data visualization figures prominently in other disciplines such as business. The data visualization laboratory is designed to provide students and faculty with a state-of-the-art learning laboratory to investigate and interact with data sets. Further, increasing the use of data throughout the curriculum is a goal of the university, and part of its educational goal to increase student fluency in numeracy. Further, the USCB Library Bluffton houses the Information Technology department for the university. Locating the data visualization laboratory in the library is intended to increase student access to data analysis tools and offer them an opportunity to engage with them to foster greater numeric literacy. The data visualization laboratory is an initial foray into the delivery of software applications and supporting instructional uses of data sets. The intent is to expand the availability of data-rich research services in the library to support an expanding curriculum in IT-

related courses of study and also provide a resource for digital humanities work.

The library remodeling projects also included initiating a collaborative service desk with the Information Technology department. The newly remodeled spaces will include a joint service desk staffed with students trained to answer library- and IT-related questions. The use of resources at the university involves both knowledge of the databases and print materials and troubleshooting technical issues that arise when students are using resources either on-campus or virtually. The collaborative service desk is intended to provide students seamless support to address all their issues rather than relying on referral, the current approach. While the collaborative service desk approach will not rise to the level of other projects that have a “genius bar” in the library (Baker Library, 2023; CalPolyPomona, 2017), it will improve the student experience by creating a seamless set of services and assistance to address student needs more holistically and effectively.

### **Lessons Learned**

#### ***Print Collections Are the First to Go***

The Bluffton and Beaufort libraries remodeling projects did not include any change in their footprint. Further, there is no on- or off-site storage for the USCB Library, no University of South Carolina (USC) system storage facility, or a consortium storage facility.

Therefore, to create gathering and instructional spaces, the libraries’ collections had to be reduced. The reduction in the collection was essential and has implications beyond the university. Within the State of South Carolina, academic libraries are facing a space crisis. The space crisis impacts each library’s ability to support state-wide print collection sharing and can lead to the loss of unique items that are important to retain and form the basis of strong statewide academic print collections. The PASCAL (Partnership Among South Carolina Academic Libraries) consortium has an initiative to explore shared collections and identify print storage needs to reduce the space crisis in the individual libraries and to identify methods to ensure a strong statewide collection

(see: <https://pascalsc.libguides.com/programs/s>[hare](#)). However, like many academic libraries (Michalak, R. & M. Rysavy (2023), USCB has low circulation of its on-site print collection and little usage of its print periodicals. Therefore, the print periodicals collection is being heavily weeded to reduce the number of stacks. The stacks need to be removed to allow the creation of the gathering and instructional spaces. Next, the USCB Library, Bluffton, will reduce its book collection to achieve a fifty percent reduction in shelving in the USCB Library Bluffton, and an approximately 15% reduction in the Beaufort Library. The need to make more floor space leads to smaller collections, and the loss of



those resources to the local community, the region, and the state. It is a concern that the libraries will also be more reliant on licensing rather than ownership of their collections. This usually means that a print alternative will no longer be available, which raises equity concerns. Reducing the print collection was a challenge, and the option of alternative storage would have been beneficial to make it possible to be as conservative as possible in the process. However, the need to focus on constituent requests was a driving factor that resulted in reducing the scope and size of the collection at both libraries. Further, the usage statistics for the collection, particularly due to the drop in circulation during the pandemic, did not justify retaining the materials when the space could be used for more strategic goals of the university.

### ***A Remodel Planning Process Will Not Meet Everyone's Needs***

There are many constituents with competing needs who provided feedback while gathering priorities for the remodel project. The focus of USCB's renovation was student success. However, the library in Bluffton provides space for faculty members including the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). Balancing the primary goal while considering the faculty requests for space was challenging. Compromises had to be made

including identifying a new space for the CTL because its current space was inadequate. Also, the USCB Library requested instructional space, something it is lacking. However, that request could not be accommodated due to multiple competing demands and space constraints. The issue of designing spaces for the future, versus addressing current space needs where the space was inadequate, was challenging. Student spaces were improved and in limited instances, faculty need for spaces was also addressed. However, the remodeling project did not meet faculty needs to the extent desired. It was clear through the process that meeting student needs would not sufficiently address faculty concerns about space. Since space is an extremely limited resource, it was necessary to focus on students, and identify another planning process to address the issues raised by faculty during the remodeling project concerning their current needs that were not adequately addressed in the remodeling plan.

In addition, USCB has both a residential and commuter student population. These two student groups have highly differing library needs. It was difficult to identify a plan that would meet both their needs effectively. For example, commuter students wanted more quiet gathering spaces. In contrast, residential students wanted gathering spaces for collaboration because they have privacy in their

residence hall rooms. The residential students thought the library's open spaces should be "loud" spaces. The commuter spaces wanted "loud" spaces to be confined to enclosed study rooms that would not interfere with their need for quiet study. These differing needs were addressed in the planning process. However, it was not possible to provide equal access to quiet study and "loud" gathering spaces for both groups. It remains to be seen if the formal designation of spaces as either quiet study or open gathering spaces will be effective in meeting the needs of both these student groups. It is likely further refinement of designated spaces will be needed to ensure the library is supporting student success and addressing students' needs.

### ***Communication Is Key***

The initial focus groups were managed by the university's consultant, brightspot. The consultants had a specific process and followed that process to obtain student, faculty, staff, and community feedback. However, during the final round of focus groups, when the plan was presented to university constituents, many individuals indicated they had not been consulted sufficiently. This feedback suggests that gathering constituent perspectives should be done at several junctures during the planning process and in a variety of modalities. Further, it suggests that

constituents may not be supportive of the choices made in the planning process if they were unable to provide their feedback individually, a difficult goal to attain. Social media or other asynchronous, web-based avenues were not used to gather feedback. The diversity of opinions, and the preference of the stakeholders to provide their individual feedback, suggests that using multiple avenues for obtaining feedback would be helpful in future remodeling projects. While there were several opportunities to participate in-person or in a synchronous modality, asynchronous opportunities to review and provide feedback would have been beneficial. There were stakeholders unable to attend the focus groups to provide feedback. This is not unusual, but a situation that should be minimized. In addition, asynchronous communication might have made it possible to gather student feedback from a greater diversity of students, particularly commuter students who are not on campus as frequently. These efforts might have improved buy-in, or at least provided evidence of a robust effort to collect everyone's perspective through multiple modalities to demonstrate a commitment to use them to form the final plan.

The Beaufort Campus library has a smaller student and faculty population. In addition, the library facility is significantly smaller than the main library in Bluffton and is

in the center of a historic residential district and small downtown area. Therefore, the remodeling plan was more conservative. At the same time, there were several important improvements including removing the access services desk to increase the sense of openness, creating a collaborative service desk with IT similar to the plan for the USCB Library Bluffton, creating three new wired study rooms for collaborative work and a room for quiet individual study, adding a more accessible exterior entrance, and a unique feature for Beaufort, the creation of spaces to showcase creative and digital scholarship.

The library master process increased partner spaces, student study spaces, and student gathering spaces significantly. In addition, the process also led to a reduction in the collections in both the Bluffton and

Beaufort locations. The most significant change was the increase in study spaces and the reduction in the size of the collections. The library master planning process emphasized welcoming spaces and reducing the prominence of the physical collections. The remodeled libraries are intended to focus on the users, not the physical collection. The remodeled libraries will be co-located with the makerspaces at both locations, IT, and instructional spaces to make the libraries a more vibrant instructional partner. In addition, the increase in gathering spaces will create a “third place” (Fuller-Gregory, 2020) for students to collaborate, and use a variety of learning tools to support their sense of belonging and improve their educational experience.

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