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# Designed to Meet Our Institutional Mission: A case study from Grand Valley State University Libraries

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*Designed to Meet Our Institutional Mission:  
A case study from Grand Valley State University Libraries*

Kristin Meyer and Erin Silva Fisher

Introduction

Academic libraries exist to fulfill the missions of the institutions they serve. Historically, this included maintaining collections in support of courses and curriculum, providing instructional and reference services, and offering space for student study. Decisions about library space design were based on these priorities. However, technological advancements have changed how libraries store and provide access to collections and, as Anne M. Houston (2015) notes, “...the balance of space is moving away from collection storage and toward space enabled to meet other user needs” (84). Library spaces can now meet institutional missions in ways that go beyond traditional expectations, especially in terms of supporting student learning.

Diana Oblinger (2006) affirms “Space—whether physical or virtual—can have an impact on learning. It can bring people together; it can encourage exploration, collaboration, and discussion. Or, space can carry an unspoken message of silence and disconnectedness” (1.1). Designing library spaces that encourage the connection Oblinger describes is prudent for academic libraries because “learning spaces convey an image of the institution's philosophy about teaching and learning” (Somerville and Harlan 2008, 17). Library spaces can enhance the academic experience of students and revitalize the library's institutional relevancy when design decisions are made through the lens of student learning.

Grand Valley State University's Mary Idema Pew Library Learning and Information Commons is designed to meet the institution's student-centered focus and liberal education

tradition. Opened in 2013, the library has been described as a model of twenty-first century learning (Daly 2012, 16). An open, flexible, user-centered design allows students to manage their own learning, engage with others, find support through a variety of services, and discover serendipitous learning opportunities. Reflecting our institutional mission, student learning was at the core of every design decision and continues to be at the center of ongoing assessment.

### Background

Grand Valley State University (Grand Valley) is a liberal arts, Carnegie classification “Master’s Large” university. Located in western Michigan, Grand Valley attracts more than 25,000 students, 85% of whom are undergraduate students. Over a decade ago, the university recognized that the existing library was no longer meeting student needs. The Zumberge Library was built in 1969 and was designed to support a student population of 5,000 students; the university had experienced tremendous growth since then. Frequently referred to as “the dungeon,” the facility did not support modern student preferences—it was dark, uninspiring, and did not include convenient access to electrical outlets. University administration tried unsuccessfully for thirteen years to secure state funding for new library construction.

When Lee Van Orsdel, Dean of University Libraries, was hired in 2005, she brought with her a powerful vision for creating a new kind of library and used the analogy of a shopping mall to conceptualize this vision. In a shopping mall, there is palpable energy, and young adults are highly engaged, self-directed, and self-motivated. Dean Van Orsdel believed that a comparable atmosphere was lacking in academic libraries, and her goal was to create a lively learning environment. Like Oblinger’s (2006) statements about space, Dean Van Orsdel wanted the new library to encourage discussion, collaboration, and connectedness and for learning to be visible

(1.1). This vision resonated with University officials, donors, and library employees and was the narrative that ultimately resulted in securing the private funding needed to build the new library.

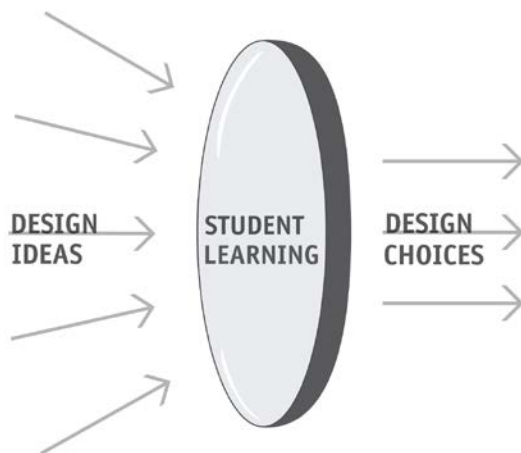
In addition to Dean Van Orsdel, there were several key figures involved in making this vision a reality including: the architectural firm Stantec; the Head of Facilities Planning at Grand Valley; and the library administrative team. The group started with a strong vision, but the design took years to develop. Their approach was consistent with Scott Bennett's (2008) well-known suggestion of starting with what you want to happen in a library space before knowing what will be in the space (183). The group visited libraries, museums, and other public spaces in search of the vibrancy they wanted to replicate, but they never encountered another space that perfectly fit their vision. Instead, the architects led the team in giving form to Dean Van Orsdel's vision. The process took time, trust, and the development of a common language between the architects and the rest of the group.

Grand Valley's mission is "to educate students to shape their lives, their professions, and their societies," and the University's strategic plan from 2010-2015 highlights that "Grand Valley State University is characterized by and known for its superior student-centered teaching and learning" (Grand Valley State University 2016). The University's mission and values—especially the concept of student-centeredness—are imbued in the physical and operational infrastructure of the library.

### Student-Centered Focus

Throughout the design process, existing notions of academic libraries were set aside. Dean Van Orsdel stated in an interview with the authors, "We started with the student, not the library, and every design decision was based on the student. Our first goal was to get students

into the building; once they were here, we could offer support and experiences aimed at impacting their learning.”



The building location and several early architectural decisions were aimed at encouraging students to come to the library. The library is conveniently located near a heavily trafficked bus stop and along a popular pathway through campus. The building also includes multiple entrances and exits—a decision that prioritizes student convenience over operational convenience and reduces barriers to entry. Furthermore, the building is stunning. The striking façade and beautiful interiors naturally entice students.

Incorporating an automated storage and retrieval system (ASRS) was another early design choice that gave us the ability to maximize student-centered space. A portion of the collection is available for browsing on open stacks, but more than half of the collection is housed in the ASRS. This decision opened up additional space in the library for other kinds of student learning while still providing fast, convenient access to materials on-site.

When filtering design decisions through the lens of student experience, flexibility emerged as a critical theme. The design team collaborated with the furniture corporation Steelcase to study student behavior in the old library. The research confirmed that students have varying needs and preferences that change depending on the time of day and the time of the

semester. The library was designed to accommodate this rhythm. Spaces support collaborative work as well as quiet, individual study. A variety of technical tools—including power sources spaced approximately every six feet, mobile screens, recording software, and a cloud-based printing system—are available for students to use as needed. The library contains over thirty different kinds of seating; most furniture is mobile and can be shifted and rearranged to meet diverse needs. Mobile whiteboards serve a dual purpose: they can be used for studying and for creating privacy within a public space.

The mobile furniture contributes to what we refer to as a permissions culture within the library. Students have permission to, within reason, do whatever they need to accomplish their educational endeavors. There are few rules or directives within the library, and signs that prescribe behavior are generally avoided. Creating this kind of culture was intentional. Students are not guests here—this is truly their space.

This permissions culture is reinforced by the library's food policy: food is not only allowed, but encouraged. A café located in the building sells specialty teas and coffee as well as snacks and sandwiches, and an underground walkway provides convenient access to additional campus dining options. Once students settle in to study, we do not want them to have to leave for basic human comforts.

Several user research projects indicate that flexibility was perhaps our greatest design success. Students regularly move furniture and modify their environment to meet their own needs, and the mobile whiteboards are used heavily. Data also confirm that the library is used differently in the evening: conversation levels increase and more groups actively collaborate in the evenings than during the daytime. This same data also suggest that we may have overestimated the amount of collaboration space needed. Two-thirds of the library was designed

to be collaborative, and one-third was meant for individual, quiet study. In actuality, individuals use the library slightly more than groups. However, students were easily able to adapt the furniture to meet their needs, despite this discrepancy. We expect that flexibility will also accommodate preferential changes over time.

The theme of flexibility extends to library services, which were reimagined in conjunction with the building design process. In particular, students who are looking for research assistance have three service options: getting help from student workers at our service desk, meeting with a student research consultant in our Knowledge Market, or meeting with a liaison librarian. Students can select assistance based on level of expertise needed, timeframe, and comfort level.

- **Service desk:** Students can ask any question, including research questions, at the highly visible single service desk that is primarily staffed by User Experience (UX) student workers. The service desk is essentially an entry point: while UX students can answer basic searching questions and help students get started, they also frequently refer students to library research consultants and liaison librarians.
- **Research consultants** are highly trained peers who provide in-depth consultations in our Knowledge Market. Student patrons can also receive convenient assistance with speech preparation and/or writing from similar peer services in the Knowledge Market area.
- **Liaison librarians** do not work shifts at the service desk or in the Knowledge Market. They focus on providing instructional support in the classroom, working with faculty in their respective areas, and providing expert level assistance to students during one-on-one consultations.

These services are designed with a sense of fluidity: students cannot make the wrong choice. They can ask for assistance at any point, and library employees will either answer their question or connect them with someone who can. UX students and research consultants serve as the front face of library services and are the most visible library employees, which reinforces the concept of student-centeredness. This service model is designed to put student patrons at ease when asking for support and to visually confirm that the library is student space (Meyer and Torreano, 2017).

The very existence of the UX team operationalizes the notion of student-centeredness. The UX team exists under the umbrella of the library's Operations and User Services department—the area traditionally known as Access Services. The team provides frontline customer service at the service desk and focuses on understanding and improving user experience within the physical library space. The UX Librarian leads the group, which is composed of twenty-five UX student workers and four full-time support staff members. The team is intentionally structured to understand, respond to, and anticipate student needs. Their primary goal is to ensure that students—as well as faculty and staff—have the best possible experience each time that they come to the library. The team directly improves the academic experience of students through exceptional customer service and rigorous assessment.

The UX team seeks to better understand how students use library space and, by extension, improve student experiences within those spaces. The team collects space usage data daily and has implemented various other forms of user research, including service blueprinting, surveys, observations, focus groups, a photo diary, and cognitive mapping. The primary goal of these projects is to discover how the library can better support the academic needs of students. We contend that assessment of academic library spaces should be viewed within this framework.



### Visible Learning

The library boasts an open design with high ceilings, open sightlines, and impressive views of other library spaces and the campus beyond. A student once remarked that the open design was his favorite feature of the library because it gave him “space to think big thoughts.” The team intentionally created open spaces so that students could be seen modeling the academic process for each other. Learning is immediately visible upon entering the library: there are individuals engaged in their studies; groups actively collaborating or simply sitting next to each other studying on their own; students writing on whiteboards; peers engaged in consultations in the Knowledge Market; and students attending events and exhibits. All of this makes an impression on current and prospective students; a visit to the library provides a glimpse of Grand Valley students deeply engaged in their work.

The open design also encourages a sense of community. Renowned urban planner, Kevin Lynch, believed that open space within cities encourages the development of social connections, especially between diverse social groups (Banerje and Southworth 1990, 405). Oblinger (2006) similarly states: “There is value from bumping into someone and having a casual conversation. There is value from hands-on, active learning as well as from discussion and reflection” (1.2). The open concept increases the likelihood that these connections can occur, which is important in an era when personal interactions are often mediated by technology. Offering spaces that allow for the organic development of community is also an essential component of a liberal education.

### Serendipitous Learning

Dedicated spaces for events and exhibits were incorporated into the building design to provide students with opportunities to grow intellectually outside of the classroom. Throughout the academic year, a robust calendar of activities enhances the learning culture already thriving in the building. By hosting a wide array of intellectual events and exhibits—often collectively referred to as serendipitous learning moments—the library provides students with convenient opportunities to encounter new ideas and develop as lifelong learners. Furthermore, Grand Valley is “dedicated to incorporating multiple voices and experiences into every aspect of its operations” (Grand Valley State University 2016). These learning opportunities also extend the campus value of inclusion.

The Library Program Manager is responsible for coordinating events and exhibits. The position is also responsible for establishing and maintaining partnerships across campus to bring new and innovative programs into the library. Additional scheduling and logistical support is provided by staff throughout the organization.

## Events

The library’s event space is located on the lowest level of the library. The room includes dual projectors, a podium, floor-to-ceiling whiteboards along one wall, an attached catering kitchen, and seating for up to 125 in various configurations. Guidelines for using the space were established in advance of the library opening. The guidelines state that events must be intellectual in scope and attendance must be open to the entire campus community. Meetings or other exclusive or administrative activities are not permitted during the academic year. These guidelines ensure that all activity in the building is student-centered, including events. When

events are not taking place, the room is used as overflow student study space, further reflecting the student-centered nature of the building.

Academic departments, student organizations, student support services, and others have used the event space to host guest lectures, film screenings, poster sessions, performances, and other programs. The venue is used for events several times per week with around 100 events taking place in the building each academic year. The library has been the chosen location for the Classics department's biennial Homerathon—a collaborative, day-long reading of one of the works of Homer; Student Senate uses the space for its popular, annual Last Lecture event; and a campus-wide Teach-In focused on social justice was held in the library for two consecutive years.

Following each event, the library sends a post-event survey to the event sponsor. The survey asks for approximate attendance and anecdotes about the impact of the event. Feedback confirms that the library is a sought-after location because of its convenience and ambiance and that events have a significant impact on the campus community. One event coordinator who hosted an international guest lecture wrote, “The library is a gorgeous building full of natural light and a focal point of the campus, so hosting the event here was in part showcasing this facility to our speaker, but it furthermore reflected the multidisciplinary reach of our information commons and the value of archives...” Indeed, the multidisciplinary reach is significant; in the 2015-2016 academic year, events in the library reached over thirty disciplines.

## Exhibits

A small gallery is adjacent to the event space. Like events, exhibits come from a wide range of disciplines and are always didactic in nature. Exhibits run for two to four weeks on

average, and availability is first-come, first-serve. The Library Program Manager oversees the coordination of the gallery, which includes soliciting and scheduling exhibits, providing both curatorial and logistical support, and supervising the installation and removal of exhibits. Most often, the exhibits are sponsored by multidisciplinary teams, which may include academic departments, other academic units, and student organizations.

Many exhibits present and promote a variety of experiences, values, and worldviews. Topics of past exhibits include religious tolerance, LGBT persecution during the Holocaust, human trafficking, and the marginalization of local Native populations. The nearby event space allows for complementary programs to be hosted in conjunction with these exhibits. Guest lectures, film screenings, and campus dialogues have occurred in an effort to expand the impact of exhibits.

#### Media Alcove

As mentioned previously, the library is situated along a popular thoroughfare on campus. As a result, the first floor of the library is heavily trafficked. Along the route is a strategically placed media display that consists of four monitors that combine to create one 110” display. The display plays media content intended to pique students’ curiosity and foster inclusivity.

Custom-created applications for the display include worldwide weather, literary quotations, and top news stories of the day. Short YouTube videos that are both educational and entertaining are curated by the Library Program Manager. Videos explore a range of topics in an effort to appeal to students from all disciplines. A significant subset of the videos shown aim to introduce students to new ideas and diverse perspectives related to race, ethnicity, gender, LGBT status, religion, and ability. The library occasionally produces original, short-form documentaries

highlighting campus stories. The media display is also sometimes used for informal, educational events. Live video conversations with students studying abroad and an all-day gaming session hosted by students using video games to learn a second language are two such examples. The content screened in the media alcove reinforces the University's commitment to creating an inclusive environment and developing lifelong learners.

## Art

The library is filled with more than 300 works of art, curated and installed by the University Art Gallery. Grand Valley alumni created many of the works. Showcasing works by past students reinforces the student-centered focus of the building. Most importantly, the artwork supports the university's liberal education tradition. The work is not merely decorative; it exists to encourage students to be inquisitive and to grow as lifelong learners through "direct engagement with original works of art" (Grand Valley State University Art Gallery 2014). Overall, an audible buzz of activity fills the building every day as students from many different disciplines engage in both planned and serendipitous learning. Through events, exhibits, digital media and fine art, students have an elevated library experience and grow as lifelong learners.

## Conclusion

Since opening its doors, the Mary Idema Pew Library has truly become the intellectual heart of campus. Every element of the building was designed to impact and improve student learning; the spaces, services, and serendipitous learning opportunities available coalesce into a transformative academic experience for students. When students enter the library, they enter an environment that was designed to suit their behaviors and preferences, and they can customize spaces to meet their exact needs. They can sip a latte, explore an exhibit, and have a discussion

with a friend or classmate. This is much more than *going to* a library; this is *experiencing* a library.

Students love the experience, and it is clear that the library has made a positive impact on campus. The building has been open for three years and has welcomed approximately 3.2 million visitors. The constant activity in the building creates an atmosphere of excitement and intense productivity. Students have collective pride for their library and have shared on social media that “My library is better than your library” and “I wish I could make the library my permanent address.” The library has become a significant recruiting feature for the university; even the athletic teams consider it to be the pinnacle of their recruiting tours.

Overall, the building has allowed us to demonstrate our institutional relevancy in many new ways, but our model is not without challenge. A student-centered philosophy can increase operational costs. We continue to identify successes and shortcomings within our space, but student learning—rather than operational convenience—is still the first priority when considering improvements.

As methods of accessing information continue to change, academic libraries have a tremendous opportunity to reconsider their physical spaces. The design of the Mary Idema Pew Library reflects the mission of Grand Valley, and our model may not fit every institution. When assessing and designing library space, libraries should examine their unique missions to reimagine spaces and services and ultimately strengthen their institutional relevancy.

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