

# Don't swing that sledgehammer: Use your library spaces dynamically

**Sarah Arnold and Chad Haefele**

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

**Abstract:** Library users visit our spaces to actively research, but they also need study space, technology access, meeting space, and more. In restricted budget environments that don't allow us to drastically change our spaces, how can we meet the needs of our users in creative and meaningful ways? At UNC Libraries, we've run a number of projects and events that seek to change the use of our spaces in new ways making the library space more welcoming to users.

**Keywords:** *User experience; library spaces; library events; academic libraries*



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## Introduction

Library users visit our spaces for a variety of reasons. There's active research, but also needs for study space, technology access, meeting space, and of course napping. In a restricted budget environment without possibility of renovation, it can be difficult to structure our spaces in ways that respond to changing needs. How many libraries have large square footage formerly occupied by a card catalog? How many librarians curse the long distances between outlets when planning study space arrangements?

Sure, we can't always move a wall or demolish an ill-placed support column. But it is possible to subtly change the way our existing spaces are used without large or ongoing financial commitments. We should all strive to make our spaces more welcoming, flexible, and conducive to the needs of our users. At UNC Libraries, we've run a number of projects to change or market our spaces in creative and new ways. Our thirteen libraries vary in complexity from large buildings like Davis Library and Wilson Library to smaller branches like the Music Library and Kenan Science Library. Each library has their own strengths and challenges.

## The First Week

As students arrive on or return to campus each Fall, UNC organizes a program of events called Week of Welcome. This is an excellent opportunity for the campus libraries to introduce ourselves, our services, and primarily our spaces to students. Our biggest contribution to these events is a Saturday evening Mini-Golf event in the Undergraduate Library. This requires transforming our space in a flexible way – it's a time of year where usage is low, so few users will be displaced by the temporary change. It's also a time of year where we can make a positive first impression on our students.

We contract with an outside company to set up mini-golf holes throughout the library, strategically placed near services and spaces we want to highlight. More than 400 students attend each

year, and feedback is always positive. While Mini-Golf definitely takes more effort than a series of drop-in library tours, the payoff is worth it when we get that many students introduced to the Library at least a little bit.

We've also made efforts to take advantage of unused space to offer new services. In 2016 our Undergraduate Library merged the Reference and Circulation Desks into a single service point. The former Reference Desk sat idle since then, awaiting opportunities for renovation and reinvention. In the summer of 2017, we made use of the idle space and transformed it into campus' first VR service open to all students and staff.

Faculty and students on campus show an increasing interest in VR, but rarely have specifics in mind. Based on campus conversations and requests from faculty, we began to explore the possibilities of running an exploratory VR service in one of our libraries. We hoped that providing an opportunity to try VR services in a neutral, non-departmental location would spark ideas for research and other uses of VR on campus.

After securing a donated gaming PC from Lenovo and allocating some funding for a VR headset and software, we began to look for a space. The ideal dimensions are about 10 feet by 10 feet, which happened to be the exact square footage behind the former Reference Desk. With no renovating at all, we were able to transform it into an entirely new service. The desk itself serves as a barrier to separate participants from walking into other students, and the public placement of the desk helps to market the service, attract new users, and establish the Undergraduate Library as an active workspace.

The mini-golf and VR transformations even helped each other when we were able to offer VR mini-golf at the same time as the real thing.

### **During The Semester**

Throughout the semester there are opportunities to show students that the library is their space. These can be simple or inventive events that bring students in and immerse them in learning without being blatantly obvious. These types of events give students the opportunity to see the library and its staff in a new light.

For the past 5 years, our special collections library has played host to a semesterly, interactive game of Clue. Teams of 3 to 5 students answer questions based on the exhibits and other materials within the library and interview Clue characters (yes, even Miss Scarlet) in order to solve a mystery involving a ghostly presence mishandling the library's special collection materials. The games involve a post-assessment to determine if students' perceptions of Wilson Library have shifted after having participated in the game. Their initial impressions are somewhat negative due to lack of understanding about what the library's purpose is and whether or not they are allowed to use it. After participating in the game, students respond that their impressions of the library have become more positive. One student stated that her impression "Improved so much! The rooms are very interesting and I would love to explore more." This impression is echoed by her fellow students who have played the game.

In 2012 we realized we had a perception problem with Davis Library. It's by far the largest library on campus, and also contains the most study space, subject specialists, and materials. But many undergraduate students were intimidated by Davis Library – survey respondents at the time described it with words like big, intimidating, scary, confusing, and "like a parking garage". Many of them referred to Davis Library as "The Graduate Library", in contrast to our Undergraduate Library, and assumed they weren't even allowed to enter. This was a huge problem!

Staff in the Research & Instructional Services partnered with our First Year Seminar program to introduce students to the spaces and services Davis Library has to offer. We developed a series of interactive scavenger hunts using iPod Touches. These hunts did not replace a standard library

instruction session, but instead focused on getting the students moving around the building and seeing the different spaces. Every fall we run approximately 20 scavenger hunts, and have introduced over 1400 students to the spaces of Davis Library. After the hunt, their descriptions of Davis shift notably toward more positive terms like "awesome lounges", "great study space", "plenty of computers and scanners", and "helpful librarians". By partnering with faculty in a fun event, students get over their intimidation and come away feeling more oriented to our spaces.

### **The Last Week**

The end of each semester sees an influx of students in the libraries who need space more than they need library resources (though those are used in the completion of their projects). Students hunker down for hours on end cramming as much information in their brains as possible and, in many cases, end up burning themselves out on studying. They leave thoughts of self-care and well-being at the door, which opens up an opportunity for libraries to step in. We can help students find the right balance between frantic study binges and stress-reducing breaks by offering events and services within the space they are already occupying.

At UNC Libraries, we offer Week of Balance, a combination of passive programming and active events aimed to help students take a breather and relieve their stress in between studying for their exams. The events give students a chance to socialize, fuel up on coffee or snacks, realize they are not alone in the library, and keep them near their study spaces. It is a lively time in the library that shifts the mood from one of stressful solitude to "we're in this together".

In Davis Library, our main library location on campus, we set aside a small highly trafficked area on the first floor near the restrooms for students to use as a study break space. It's an area that is used throughout the year for studying and napping, but during Week of Balance the space becomes all

about de-stressing and relaxing. Using our provided supplies, students color or fold origami. This lets them step away from the spaces they use to cram for as long as they choose.

In the Undergraduate Library, our most social library on campus, Week of Balance takes over a small room on the main level that used to be a computer lab. It is somewhat closed off from the quieter study space and printing room on either side, and allows us to control the crowds of students who stop by for coffee and bagels each semester. When not in use for one of our Week of Balance activities, students reclaim the space to continue studying. It requires a fine balance between offering events to help students and taking away their existing space, but with clear communication we've managed to set expectations within this space during finals.

Perhaps the simplest way we show students that the library space is theirs to use is our expanded hours and availability of rooms not usually open for student use. We post signs outside of our libraries letting students know about the extra space available and the expanded hours. We see quite an increase in the use of these spaces during finals, especially since we ramped up advertising of the changes we make during finals.

### **Conclusion**

With smaller budgets and the complexity of facilities projects, it can be tempting to decide that a library's physical spaces are fixed in their current form forever. But combining user needs assessments with creative thinking and design skills we can open new options. Our spaces should be iterative and flexible. We can't move the walls on short notice, but we can establish new purposes and priorities without swinging a sledgehammer.