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Students make heavy use of the new wireless network access in the second-floor reading room.

Creating an Information Commons

Without Resources to Remodel, Buffalo Law Library Combines Electronic, Paper Resources in Innovative Design

by James Milles

Opened in 1973 during a time of student unrest and anti-war protest, the University at Buffalo Law School building in O'Brian Hall was intentionally designed not to provide open, welcoming spaces where groups of students could gather. However, the law school's Charles B. Sears Law Library has been able to distinguish itself from the rest of the building by gradually and cost-effectively converting its three-story reading room into a lofty, bright and open space without interrupting the law library's operations.

Over time, O'Brian Hall has faced all the problems and limitations expected of a 30-year-old law school building. Because of a variety of concerns ranging from campus politics to the cost of possible asbestos abatement, a major renovation is not possible at this time. However, via careful planning and by exploiting opportunities as they have arisen, both the law school and the law library have been able to conduct a campaign of incremental remodeling projects to create an "information commons." The consolidation of electronic and printed research resources, combined with updated furnishings, has transformed O'Brian Hall into a facility comparable to any law school in the country.

The UB law library occupies the six upper floors of O'Brian Hall, surrounding a central atrium. The two-level main reading room occupies the second and third floors of the building. The third floor is a large mezzanine level. Group conference rooms are available on every floor. Individual study carrels are located on three floors. But the upper floors provide little open study area.

The main reading room has always been the most popular study area in the library. Even that space, however, suffered from years of neglect. The original furniture, an increasingly decrepit holdover of early 1970s design, remained in use long past its functional life.

Bringing Resources Together Seamlessly

Three years ago, the law library moved the law school's computer lab into the law library. After discussing possible configurations and their service implications, the law library settled on the goal of bringing electronic and paper resources together seamlessly. To that end, the law library decided to create an "information commons" by moving most of the law school computer lab into the reading room. Rather than segregating computers into a separate room, the library integrated them directly into the third-floor reading room surrounding the atrium, among the core collection of law journals, regional reporters and state primary materials and within sight of the reference and circulation desks.

Computer workstations and "well" seating on the third floor provide a variety of study environments and integrate access to both online and print resources.

Additional workstations were grouped on the fifth and sixth floors. To maintain the visual appeal and open feel of the reading room space, the law library selected Nova workstations with recessed monitors rather than a bulky desktop-monitor configuration. Each workstation was supplied with a desk lamp to allow users to adjust the lighting to their own needs.

The move into the law library took about two weeks in the fall semester of 2000. Because the new equipment was moved into existing space, library operations were not disrupted except for a small amount of noise as the workstations were assembled. Although the computers were not available for users during that time, students were not seriously inconvenienced because public computer labs in the other university libraries were nearby.

Once the computer labs in the law library were set up, the students forgave the delay in service.

Most faculty and students were very pleased with the addition of student computing to the library's services. One or

two faculty initially complained that the presence of computers would change the atmosphere of the library from a place of quiet study to a boisterous computer lab. However, as students continued to frequent the library for research and study, the change was soon accepted.

Second Stage: Updating Furniture

Last year the law library decided to build on this initial improvement by replacing its outdated reading room furniture. Because the reading room was a relatively small space, the cost to purchase new tables and chairs was affordable. The law library replaced the old Formica and pressboard study tables with elegant, arts and crafts-style tables, chairs and lounge furniture.

Working with Dana Griffith of Wm. P. Curtiss and Company, the library selected a line of Agati chairs and custom oak reading tables. Each table was outfitted with an attractive and sturdy lamp with electrical outlets on the base. In conjunction with the law school and the university libraries, the law library installed wireless ports at the same time, thus greatly increasing network access for the law students and furthering the library's goal of seamless access to research sources. Once again, through close coordination with university facilities services and the vendor, disruption was kept to a minimum. The entire installation was completed in March 2002 during the law

school's spring break. The old tables were disassembled and removed in one day. Delivery and installation of the new furniture took less than two days. Although the lamps did not arrive for a couple of weeks, that did not prevent students from using the new tables in the interim.

Faculty and students were amazed by the difference. Students remarked that the new furniture gave the library a professional yet more inviting look. While many other law libraries report decreasing usage, most seats in the University at Buffalo law library's reading room are occupied from morning to night.

Increased Library Use — Including Noise

The improvements have helped to greatly increase use of the law library — for both good and ill. In keeping with the ideal of an information commons, the library staff successfully created an environment conducive to collaborative work. The second-floor reading room is always full. The third floor, adjacent to the computer workstations, bustles with activity.

The bad news is that the third

hopes to improve the upper floors in the near future, but until then, a subtle campaign of well-placed "Quiet Study Area" signs and occasional interventions by library staff have helped to reduce complaints about noise.

Acknowledged as one of the most aesthetically pleasing yet functional spaces in the law school among faculty and students, the law library is often used for various social gatherings, such as the law library's annual First-Year Welcome Reception, periodic events honoring faculty authors, and the law school's alumni and admissions brunches. An unanticipated benefit of the law library's layout is that the existing book stacks provide effective sound dampening, so that a reception on the far end of the second floor is barely audible in the front of the second floor or on the third floor directly above.

Without undertaking a major remodeling, these incremental renovations have helped the law library maintain its role at the center of the law school even in the midst of rapid changes in technology and legal education.

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In the second-floor reading room, the finish of the new study tables matches the existing bookstack end panels almost perfectly.

floor can get noisy. The library staff encourages students seeking a silent study environment to use the upper floors, but those floors are simply not as attractive as the second and third floors. The library

edu) is the associate dean for legal information services and director of the law library at the University at Buffalo Charles B. Sears Law Library in Buffalo, N.Y.