A Place For Us: Art Students in the Centralized Academic Library

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April 2008

Introduction

When collections are centralized into the main library, there is a means to offer the same focus and space for browsing and serendipitous discovery that users often find in the academic branch or departmental fine arts library. At Virginia Commonwealth University, we are examining the possibility of creating a welcoming space for the academic art community within a large and heavily used main library. The space will also serve to highlight selections from our exhibition catalog and provide opportunities for browsing.

Background

In 1993, the VCU School of the Arts transferred approximately 2,769 volumes per year. The collection was too large for easy maintenance a specialized browsing area in the library. Faculty from the School of the Arts voiced their desire for the library to distinguish the exhibition catalogs by housing it in a separate area. The faculty also believed that separating the collection to a smaller area would provide a better environment for browsing.

In 2007, the Arts Library Advisory Committee requested VCU Libraries to investigate the possibility of separating the collection. By this time, the exhibition catalog collection had grown to over 30,000 volumes and had an average growth rate of approximately 2,769 volumes per year. The collection was too large for easy browsing and the library could not provide the space. VCU Libraries suggested an alternative: a small and comfortable reading area that would highlight selections from the exhibition collection and encourage browsing.

Research

Arts Library Advisory Committee

The Arts Library Advisory Committee, which includes representatives from all departments in the School of the Arts, was asked for their input on a dedicated browsing area that would highlight exhibition catalogs and newly published art titles.

Survey to ARLEIS-L and COOLES-L

We sent an information survey to two library listservs requesting feedback on experiences when planning, implementing, and maintaining a specialized browsing area in the library.

Literature Review

We focused our review on the available scholarship on searching/ browsing behavior, library as place, and arts information needs.

Project Planning withPublic and Technical Services Divisions

Meetings were held with the heads of Cataloging, Preservation, and Circulation Departments to determine potential problems and to develop a proposed workflow.

Results

Arts Library Advisory Committee

Faculty on the committee favored the idea of creating a section for new titles. Many members felt it would be vital to the students’ academic growth to have a better opportunity to browse these materials. Faculty suggested displaying some titles face-out for visual appeal. They also expressed that the area should be very welcoming to encourage “spending time” with the materials. Finally, faculty requested that the browsing books circulate for the length of a normal loan.

Survey to ARLEIS-L and COOLES-L

We changed the display every week by taking the books down on Sunday night. We have about 250 books a week and we allow users to check out any of the items when they want.

“Lacie Wall Stylomades, University of Virginia"

We put books here for a time before they are shelved in the regular stacks. Patrons seem to like to be able to browse the new materials and we are able to highlight books with more visual appeal on the slanted display before they go.

“Arens Lindell, University of Florida"

“We’ve got a browsing collection that is solely popular. We probably have 50 feet of shelving and have put down a nice rug and some comfortable chairs. It is a very low-maintenance way to provide a popular service.”

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[Frank, 1999, p. 420]

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“‘The door count was down by 8%, making the Humanities circulation increase by 8% even more impressive. Outreach efforts and the rearrangement of the leisure reading material around the browsing and our ‘living rooms’ in the Humanities Reading Room are having a significant effect.’”


Project Planning with Public and Technical Services Divisions

The meetings addressed potential problems with the new browsing area. These include: user confusion when searching for books in a new location, staff time and division of responsibilities, and space issues in an already crowded library. A workflow plan was designed to minimize user access problems and to coordinate processing between departments.

Conclusion

Based upon the results of feedback from faculty in the School of the Arts, responses from colleagues in the art library and university library community, an analysis of the available scholarship, and project planning with library departments at our own institution, we have decided to implement a browsing area dedicated to the arts on the fourth floor of the library.

Share your experience with us.

– Have you implemented a browsing section in your library?
– How many titles do you include in the browsing area?
– How long do they remain “browsing” books before they are returned to the stacks?