Great institutions of higher education have exceptional libraries. The hallmark of these notable colleges and universities has been defined not only by their quality of education but also by their libraries and the exclusive collections they house. Traditionally, libraries are chosen as important venues because these majestic buildings represent knowledge. On occasion, libraries have also served as community gathering locales where individuals converge and, in the face of injustice, make their voices heard. Even today, students rank libraries in the top quartile of what they are looking for when choosing an institution of higher education, according to a study by the Association of Higher Education Facilities Officers.

**The Challenge**

When I first came to Collin County Community College District (Collin College) in Plano, TX, the college was divided into disparate silos of knowledge or specialty campuses. We had a campus for occupational programs, one for arts and sciences/transfer, and one for technology/engineering/electronics. In addition, our libraries, classrooms, and faculty were somewhat isolated from one another. The Collin College Board of Trustees and I met and decided to transform our campuses and ensure there was a comprehensive curriculum offered at each site. More importantly, we decided that the libraries, the physical representation of knowledge, would be the focal point on each of our campuses.

After analyzing our nationally, award-winning Learning Communities program, I contemplated the effect of designing an architectural structure to reflect an integrated functional approach of students, faculty, and facilities much like
Facilities

the combining of disciplines in a learning community. Could we build a physical representation of the pedagogical, interdisciplinary collaborative model? Could we capitalize on proven modes of in-depth learning and further facilitate communication between professors and students by designing a learning community — within a learning community — within a learning community? The lynchpin would be the libraries, our designated new focal points of the campuses. We could construct one grand facility in which students could learn in classrooms, in hallways, in professors’ offices, in study rooms — alone or with peers. We could make it commonplace for students to walk a few steps to their professors’ offices, toting library-loaned laptops displaying their latest discoveries, allowing professors to share in the excitement and further students’ quests for knowledge. Our “old” existing libraries could be renovated into much needed classrooms, while we redefined our concept of libraries by building new structures.

The Solution

Today, Collin College’s libraries are literally the showcases of our campuses. We positioned iconic monuments at the entrances of our new libraries. We built a traditional clock tower in front of our Central Park Campus library, and a light tower illuminates the entrance of our Preston Ridge Campus library. In our most recent construction, the clock tower beckons students towards a brick, Jeffersonian-style 103,000-sq.-ft. library with a cast-stone entryway featuring tall columns and arched windows. Inside, wood paneling, stainless steel, and marble draw students into a grand common area. Upstairs, a lighted dome illuminates a marble floor surrounded by stone columns. Students can look down onto rows of tables and lift their gazes toward a wall of windows framing cottonwood trees along a winding stream. Nearby, a lush, green quadrangle and outdoor amphitheater entice students to relax while studying. We intentionally designed an open second floor with classrooms and faculty offices encircling the grand reading room below.

Students can attend classes upstairs, walk down into the grand reading room that houses thousands of books in traditional stacks, or they can access the college’s numerous databases, or view 30,000 electronic books to reinforce concepts they heard moments ago. If they have questions, they can look above and see their professors' lights blazing in their offices. Assistance is literally a few steps away. Likewise, professors can look down into the library or along the hallways and see their students studying and easily engage them in conversation.

Why It Works

Our libraries are modeled after the way things operate in everyday life. We walk around with our cell phones, accessing our e-mail, sending and receiving instantaneous information. Our students have the same freedom. They can carry their electronic projects around the library, design and project PowerPoint presentations on oversized flat-screen monitors in group study rooms or conference rooms, research in quiet alcoves, and show their first drafts to their professors, all in a matter of minutes. In between, they can take a break and have a quick snack at our cyber café, the Central Perks Café. Learning is now a free-flowing process, and ideas can be recorded and further researched immediately. Likewise, our professors can continue their scholarly pursuits and/or develop new skills for online classes in our teaching/learning centers, staffed with instructional design experts in our libraries. Indeed, our libraries have become a holistic learning/teaching nucleus.

The Future

Many higher-education institutions have expressed concern about what they will do with their libraries if everything is online. If that is the wave of the future, at Collin College our plan is to do nothing because the issue is not pertinent. Our libraries have been transformed back to their original status of grandeur. They are buildings housing a blizzard of engaged learners. Our professors, books, databases, wireless laptops, classrooms, teaching/learning centers, café, and students are already there. Perhaps in the future, our libraries will be twice the size, or perhaps we will have multiple “new” libraries on each campus for student, faculty, and community gatherings. We do not know how the future will unfold, but we do know that

On pg. 45: Unveiled June 8, 2009, Collin College’s Central Park Campus library was designed by PBK architects Fred Montez and Jorge Serrano and built under the direction of Kevin Cain of Hunt Construction.

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