

Uncommon Learning Space



STEVE BUTMAN

Innovation and collaboration were partners in re-making the idea of a library at Abilene Christian

BY SARAH CARLSON

Dr. Mark Tucker came to ACU in September 2003 seeking a quiet life as dean of a small college's library.

He'd retired at age 57 as the humanities, social science and education librarian at Purdue University to come to Abilene Christian, having almost given up on finding a new job. In the back of his mind, he'd always had the desire to work at a small liberal arts college, but just couldn't find the right fit.

"I was at a point in my life where I was having a conversation with the Lord," Tucker said. "I said, 'I'm through looking. If you want me to go somewhere else, then somewhere else needs to call me. I'm not going to call them.'"

Soon afterward, as if on cue, ACU provost

Dr. Dwayne VanRheenen called Tucker, who had served on ACU's Library Visiting Committee, asking him to apply to be dean of library information and resources and fill the shoes of outgoing librarian Marsha Harper.

Little did he know that by accepting the job, he would eventually take on the role of leading ACU's library into the 21st century.

In April, nearly three years after Tucker arrived, Brown Library's Learning Commons opened to the public – a forward-thinking fusion of an academic setting with a coffee-shop atmosphere designed to engage students in the learning process.

About a year of committee meetings and research, and six months of construction, went into the making of the Commons, which is one of

only a few of its kind in the nation. With the help of George Saltsman ('90), director of educational technology and part-time director of the Learning Commons, Tucker was able to implement the information commons style of library that meets the needs of the latest generation of students. Dr. Laura Baker, government documents librarian, is also a part-time director, representing the library as a Learning Commons partner.

The Commons has more than 50 computers, a full-service copy desk, furniture modules configured for group work, student artwork, track lighting, leather chairs and – the main selling point for students – a Starbucks coffee shop. Students of any major, undergraduate or graduate, can visit the Writing Center for assistance with all steps of the writing process, or stop by the Team 55 desk, which assists students with computer problems. Reference librarians are at the students' disposal to help in every part of the academic process.

"When you walk in here," Saltsman said, "you know this isn't a typical library."

A New Century

In April 2004, Tucker learned from

Tucker approached the faculty library committee about the project and the group set out to determine what a modern library should look like. They visited several universities with innovative libraries, including Texas Christian, Trinity, Texas Wesleyan, Colorado State and Indiana. The committee took what they learned and wrote a brief paper summarizing their position on the need for a change in Brown Library that was submitted to the president's cabinet for consideration.

Dr. Mark Hamilton, assistant professor of theology, was chair of the committee that year and wrote most of the paper, titled "A Library for the Twenty-first Century: A Learning Commons Approach."

"We tried to conceive what would happen if we did this," Hamilton said. "How do we bring the library into the 21st century? This should be a place where people can do the kinds of assignments that faculty would like to assign."

Robert Seal, dean of the TCU library, served as a consultant and shared his experiences with Tucker and the committee. Seal had been at TCU for 12 years and was noticing, along with librarians across the country, a decrease

For students, by students

After the committee's initial research, Tucker turned to his primary source: students.

Students were involved in the decision-making process of the Commons down to the last detail, including the type of group workspaces they want and what colors and designs they prefer.

Alexandra Foster, senior marketing and management major from Ulysses, Kan., worked with three other students in Dr. Ed Timmerman's Marketing Research class in Spring 2005. They surveyed students; another group surveyed faculty. Foster's group surveyed 4,200 students, asking about their library use and study habits and the usefulness of potential library components. They also met with a 16-student focus group in which members described their ideal library and suggested how ACU's could be more effective and student-friendly.

The top request from students, Foster said, was for group study modules, with a desire for a more comfortable atmosphere a close second.

"The library was set up for silent, individual study, and that's not the way students are studying anymore," Foster said. "They all



VanRheenen that a computer lab in the Hardin Administration Building would close, which meant the lab's 40 computers needed to be relocated. Installing them in the library was the best option, but where was the main question.

A team began to look at options for renovating the space, thinking of what would be most beneficial to students. They had to rethink the entire structure of the library's main floor, and the planning process soon evolved beyond adding computers to the library into a complete overhaul of what a library is and should be.

"A lot of time was spent with faculty members talking about how students learn in the 21st century," VanRheenen said, "and talking about how a facility like this can engage students in that learning."

in the number of students going to the library, those asking for help, and the number of books circulated.

One Friday night, he went to the TCU library to observe students. No one was there. He got in his car and drove to the local Barnes & Noble bookstore. It was full. In 2001, Seal put a coffee shop in the TCU library and watched as the changed atmosphere brought students back.

Trinity had similar results. Its gate count increased by about 40 percent the first year after it created a coffee shop and information commons, and 60 percent over that the next year.

"By following that model, we believed we could get people back into the library," Tucker said. "When library use is going down, you're forced to rethink the way you do things."

wanted a more laid-back, less-structured atmosphere. They wanted to hang out, eat, talk with their friends."

The top request from faculty was for more computers and technology, along with a proactive customer service focus featuring roaming helpers, workshops on technology and information, and self-help seminars for students.

Ninety-six percent of faculty said they assign group work to students.

"Nowhere on campus did we have a place for them to do that," Saltsman said. "We needed to build a facility where students could work together."

For the atmosphere, Tucker and Saltsman turned to Ronnie Rama's architecture class, where students were asked to create a floor plan of their ideal library. Their designs represented a broad

spectrum of ideas, Saltsman said, with one student including a large fireplace in his plan. One component all the students did include, however, was a coffee shop.

Saltsman and Tucker then drew up a mock floor plan and gave it to Kitty Wasemiller's interior design class where, again, students were given free rein to design their ideal library.

Based on those designs, Tucker and Saltsman set to work to implement the students' ideas. Parts of the final product are strikingly similar to what students imagined, down to the colors of the furniture and track lighting, comfortable chairs, hardwood floors in the coffee shop, signage, and a less imposing look for the circulation desk.

"We want it to be an extension of someone's living room," Tucker said. I think we're on target in terms of creating a study environment for students outside of the classroom. That's where a lot of the learning takes place."

Shooting Sacred Cows

The ideas behind the Library Commons are intuitive, Tucker said. Everyone he talks to outside of the library system immediately thinks

We tried to provide a place for them to do that."

Some are worried about protecting the in-house library materials and the 60,000 volumes circulated each year, and wondering what will happen if food and drinks are allowed.

"What happens to those books when they leave the library?" Tucker said. "They go to residence halls, they sit in the back of a car and bake at maybe 120 degrees, they may go home and the dog may chew off a corner, a little sister may throw one of them in the toilet, they could wind up at the beach. The books we circulate can go anywhere, but we continue to circulate them. We're not protecting the working part of the collection – we want people to use it."

Based on the survey results of students, 68 percent said they already sneak food and drinks into the library, and 58 percent said they'd be more inclined to visit if those comforts were allowed.

Forty large receptacles have been placed in the library, and students are asked to dispose of their trash before they leave.

"If the experience of other schools tells us that students treat books as well as trash responsibly," Tucker said, "then we believe them."

coaching assistance in a little more relaxed, inviting space. We think we've created a space where the faculty-student relationship takes on a little different flavor."

The focus on the student goes beyond meeting their personal needs for comfort, but also a shift in how they view their academic studies and conduct research.

Workshops on technology and information skills and seminars will be conducted throughout the school year, with certain seminar topics coinciding with core class assignments, Saltsman said. For example, a seminar on "How to Write a Research Paper" could be conducted about the time most English 111 courses will have a research paper assigned or due.

Saltsman calls this approach "just-in-time learning," saying it has a Home Depot-style concept of a student walking in with a need, and helpers waiting with the right resources to assist.

"We wanted a place for students to go where they have access to a whole lot of different resources that are part of the academic process," VanRheenen said. "They'll need to learn how to access that information and analyze it for accuracy, and we can help them learn



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the Commons is a compelling idea.

Inside the library system, however, the concepts are challenging. Incorporating a coffee shop and information commons in a library is a hard sell for librarians.

"We've had to shoot some sacred cows," Tucker said. "We know what the stereotype of the library is: It's a place where you should be quiet, and it's a place where you don't bring food or drink. Well, you can't communicate effectively in silence. That's certainly not the model for this generation of students."

Saltsman described old-style libraries as being like a church – temples of knowledge where you can't talk or eat a snack.

"Students are changing," he said. "Students are studying a lot differently than when I was in school. They multi-task like nobody's business.

Student-centered

The student is the center of focus in the Learning Commons.

Saltsman said the design aims to make the student more comfortable in his or her surroundings.

By implementing a proactive service model, he said, the university is putting the student and the librarian or help desk employee on a peer-to-peer level. Saltsman's and Tucker's goal is for the professional and student staff to seek out students, working alongside them at their desk or computer.

"We have created not only a collaborative workspace but also a place where faculty can meet students," Tucker said. "A faculty member can have office hours in the Commons and provide

how to sift the wheat from the chaff."

VanRheenen said he'd like to see students place a greater importance on writing, researching and critical thinking skills. A more accessible Writing Center will help achieve part of this goal. Hamilton said too many students are typing a word into the Google search bar and using whatever link comes up first as a source, a habit he says they need to break.

"People sit in their rooms and write papers without ever coming to the library, and as a teacher grading that, it shows," he said. "A lot of what is online is crud. Part of the education process is learning how to be an editor, so you know what's crud and what's not. There's obviously good stuff there, but you have to learn how to sift through it."

A New Library

On April 11, the day before the official opening of the Commons, the university was accidentally given a sneak peek at Brown Library's new ground floor.

The front entrance has moved to face the McGlothlin Campus Center, and when staff moved the door sensors from the previous entrance in the atrium to the new one, people already in the library had to exit through the Commons. The only problem was that once they had entered the Commons, they didn't want to leave.

Word of mouth spread the news about the space and, between 1 p.m. and midnight, 1,200 people went through the library, admiring the new area.

"There are just some places that are attractive and pleasant to be in, and we'd like to think we created one of those," Tucker said. "We're really pumped, and I think students are, too."

The new entrance to the library features a foyer decorated with student artwork and plasma screen TVs, with the Adams Center for Teaching Excellence on the right and the Help Desk and

They also can work at a multimedia station of iMac computers with DVD editing and VHS conversion capabilities.

Because so many classes require multimedia presentations, Saltsman said, a student now has on-campus access to technology previously only available to journalism and mass communication majors. Once they've designed a project or are ready to print their report, they can walk over to the copy center for help.

Damien Lawrie, sophomore biblical text and English literature major from Gosford, Australia, worked in the Commons for a group project in his Christianity and Culture class, using the multimedia center along with his group members to select scenes from a DVD to show in class for a presentation. He said he probably would have been able to make the same presentation outside of the Commons, but the multimedia center's set up was more conducive for group work and helped make the process easier.

Lawrie admits he frequents the Learning Commons about once a day, whether it's to study, check his email or grab a latte. He said that though he likes the Commons, he's having trouble adjusting to the noise level.

subject of study. She likes not having to drive to Java City or Starbucks' freestanding shop, which are out of the way and usually crowded, to find a sociable atmosphere in which to study.

"This has been a great enhancement and convenience for students," she said, "especially for students who are living off-campus to have a place to hang out between classes."

The Road Ahead

Throughout the two-year process of planning, designing and building the Learning Commons, Tucker couldn't help but notice a certain level of collegiality among all involved. Various departments and offices collaborated on the Commons, talking out the details and making sure everyone's opinion was heard.

"We have common goals," Tucker said, "but we have different things to contribute to [the Commons]. It requires all of us to work together in ways we haven't in the past. The kind of cooperation we get because we're at ACU and we work with the kind of people that we do is not the way that things normally are elsewhere."

Hamilton agreed. "One thing that amazes



Technology Support Services offices on the left.

The Adams Center was completely remodeled and now boasts a food and beverage bar and a conference room filled with computers to be used by faculty during the day and by students during the evening for technology workshops. A component of the Commons design considers faculty enrichment and continued education, which the Adams Center oversees.

In the Commons, students can relax in a comfy leather chair next to a corner of windows, sit at a round table or computer desk module, or find comfort in the coffee bar area, complete with tables, booths and additional computers.

If students want to move away from a computer desk or move to another floor of the library, they can check out a laptop computer from the Team 55 desk for up to four hours.

"I'm finding it difficult to get used to the atmosphere," he said. "It's a bit louder than what I'm used to. I like that there are more people, but sometimes the noise gets to be too much." When that happens though, Lawrie just changes his location, seeking solace on the more quiet first or third floors.

Brandi Taylor ('06), senior biology major from Richardson, said she comes to the Learning Commons a couple of times a week and enjoys the coffee shop-style atmosphere.

"I like that there's more of a social atmosphere," Taylor said. "I think it's really a good addition; it was a good investment. The construction was a mess, but it's been worth it."

Taylor said she likes to both study in a quiet, individual area and in a more crowded and talkative area, depending on her mood or her

me about this process is that everyone almost immediately said, 'This is a good idea. Let's work out the details.' No one was claiming their turf."

Hamilton described the university's hiring Tucker three years ago as hitting a home run, saying his leadership helped make the implementation of the Learning Commons a success.

"ACU's an amazing place," Tucker said. "There's not a place like it."

"I'm just really blessed to be at this place at this time. It's a wonderful experience. It's not anything I ever anticipated. I was just moving down here to work in a small college and have a good time. I didn't realize I was going to have a chance to make a difference."▲