FEATURE: WORTH NOTING

Techniques to Imagine, Fund, and Build the Academic Library of Your Dreams

Janette S. Blackburn

abstract: As part of the annual American Library Association 2019 Annual Conference, George Washington University Library in Washington, D.C., hosted a preconference workshop to inform librarians about the planning process necessary for a successful library renovation or new building. The workshop offered participants practical advice from architects and librarians involved in library building projects from the initial concept, approval process, and funding strategies through implementation. Prior to the workshop, a survey was sent to 53 academic libraries that had completed or implemented a building project over the past seven years. This feature summarizes the survey results presented at the workshop.

Introduction

A 2017 book edited by Marta Mestrovic Deyrup, *Creating the High-Functioning Library Space: Expert Advice from Librarians, Architects, and Designers*,[1] has become a standard reference for both architects and librarians in planning library spaces. In his introduction, under the heading "Evolve to Survive," Henry Myerberg writes, "The first step is to identify and prioritize the activities your community needs. Successful evolution is a response to local conditions."[2] To design the most relevant building possible, know your community and its needs and uses of services, spaces, and products. Not all libraries renovate or create a new library space for the same reasons. One size does not fit all.

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"The key stakeholders," Myerberg writes, "are the librarians leading the process along with trustees, funders, and community participants."[3] These participants are critical in determining the goals of any library building project.

Essential Questions to Address

The inception of the Library Renovation and Construction Survey began at an American Library Association (ALA) annual conference, in a conversation with the buildings and equipment section of the Library Leadership & Management Association (LLAMA). As the group of library and design professionals traded ideas about future conference programs, they considered what would be most helpful to attendees. The answer quickly surfaced. Considering the rapidly evolving role of libraries and the plethora of outdated, deteriorating facilities many of them occupy, librarians need fundamental information on how to get renewal projects started. The group began to plan a preconference workshop that would provide perspective on the steps through which the library building process unfolds, from the initial idea through the ultimate realization.

To inform the planning, which culminated in a preconference session at the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, D.C., in June 2019, the team sought input from those who had recently completed library projects of all sizes. Through the survey, they aimed to understand:

- Who is building?
- What is being built?
- What is the process from the perspective of library professionals?
- How does a project get started?
- What can we learn from other librarians or stakeholders in the building process?
- What do we need to think about during the initial stages of the planning process?

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Minnesota, Claire Stewart, then Minnesota's associate university librarian for research and learning and now dean of libraries at University of Nebraska–Lincoln, and Janette Blackburn, an architect with Shepley Bulfinch, an architecture and design *firm*, crafted the survey. Based on the survey results, they developed a preconference program to address this important topic.

Who Is Building or Renovating Library Spaces?

The survey team contacted 53 United States academic libraries with projects under construction or completed within seven years. The LLAMA Buildings for College & University Libraries Committee (BCUL) developed the list of survey contacts, drawing on member knowledge, recent LLAMA building award winners, and information published in the *Library Journal* and *American Libraries*. While this process did not provide a comprehensive list of all academic library building underway, the sample was large enough to offer a good snapshot of prevailing themes and trends.

The survey had a response rate of 41 percent. Twenty-two of the 53 libraries contacted submitted complete responses to the survey, which included the collection of demographic information and project data as well as open response questions. The data gathered included the size (full-time enrollment) and location of responding institutions, as well as the highest degree granted and the institution type—public, private, or community college. The responses were geographically distributed but weighted toward larger institutions and comprehensive universities. The survey organizers did not interpret this as indicative of any specific library building trend, but rather of who

responded to the poll.

What Is Being Built?

Respondents' projects represented a wide range of costs—from under $4 million to $175 million—as well as a gamut of building sizes—from 4,000 to 250,000 square feet. Excluding outliers at either end of these ranges, the results revealed little or no correlation between project size and the characteristics of the planning process.

Most projects (86 percent) involved some renovation to an existing facility. Only 14 percent were entirely new construction, and 67 percent consisted of only renovation (see Figure 1). This outcome parallels trends seen more broadly on campuses, where mature institutions focus on renewing their existing building stock and reducing their backlogs of deferred maintenance. Within this survey landscape, several consistent patterns and compelling findings emerged.
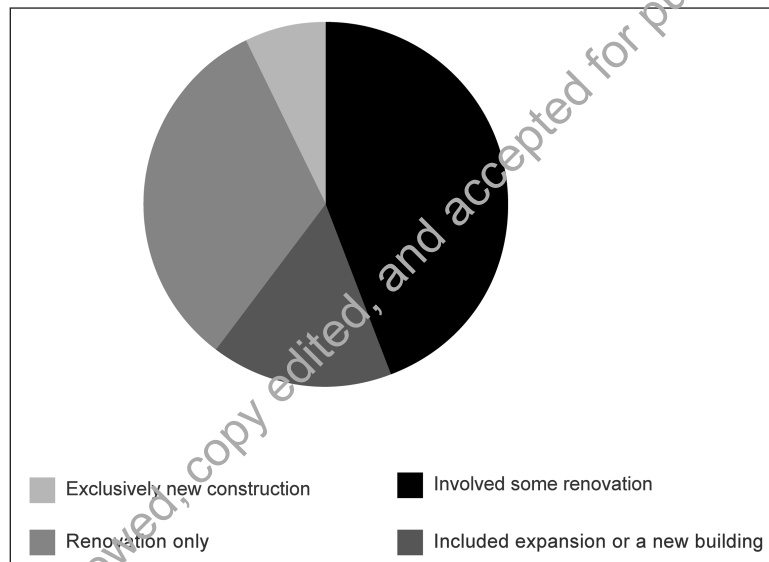

Legend: Exclusively new construction; Involved some renovation; Renovation only; Included expansion or a new building

Figure 1. Types of academic library building projects reported by survey respondents.

How Long Will It Take?

This project—from start to completion—will span in excess of 20 years.

(anonymous)

The survey responses confirmed the experiences of Shepley Bulfinch, as well as those of the librarians and architects on the BCUL Committee: library capital projects typically take a long time, often extending beyond the tenures of the leaders who began them. The average project duration from initial planning through completion of construction was 8.7 years, and the median duration was 7.5 years (see Figure 2). The time required for planning, funding, approvals, and design—averaging six years—was in many cases

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almost triple the time needed to construct the project. Over a prolonged period, the work often evolves to accommodate shifts in institutional dynamics. As one survey respondent observed, "Any project of this (large) scale is inevitably on a timeline that will include leadership transitions and changes of perspective."

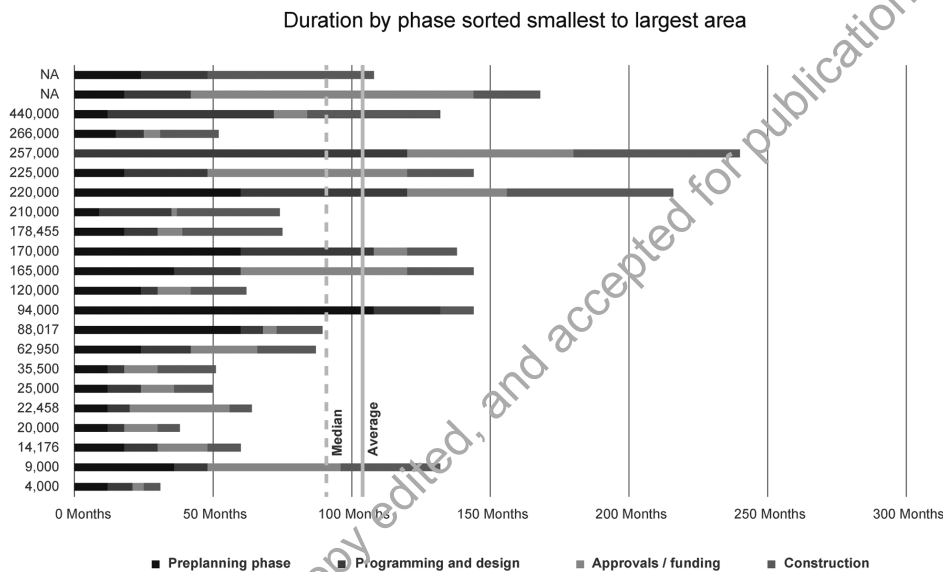Duration by phase sorted smallest to largest area

Figure 2. Duration of library building projects from initial planning through completion of construction reported by survey respondents, by square feet of building area.

Where Does the Funding Come From?

Survey respondents were asked how their projects were funded. The responses indicated an equal split between those funded through private donations and public sources (see Figure 3). In fact, several large public universities indicated that a substantial portion of the money for the project came from private donations. The undertakings that derived more than 50 percent of their funding from private gifts split nearly evenly between those that were entirely renovation and those that included new construction along with some renovation.

How to Make the Case?

Not surprisingly, the overall project goals coincided with trends and priorities cited by the Association of College and Research Libraries and other library and learning organizations. Most proposals sought to improve the student experience and to enhance learning and scholarship by creating better academic library space and services for patrons (see Figure 4). Updates to staff space to support evolving services, although essential to a thriving library, were notably absent.

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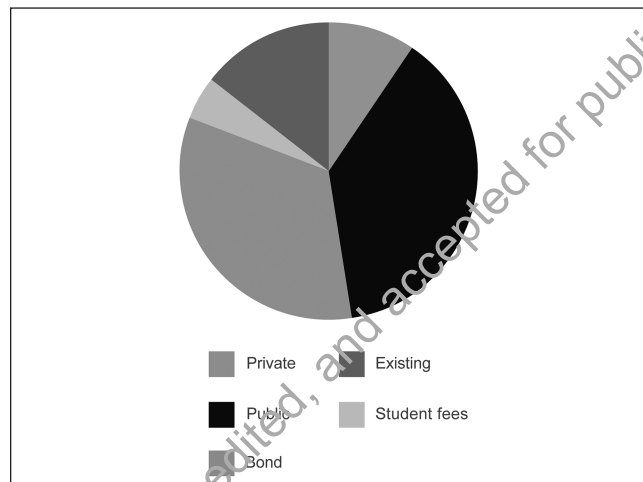

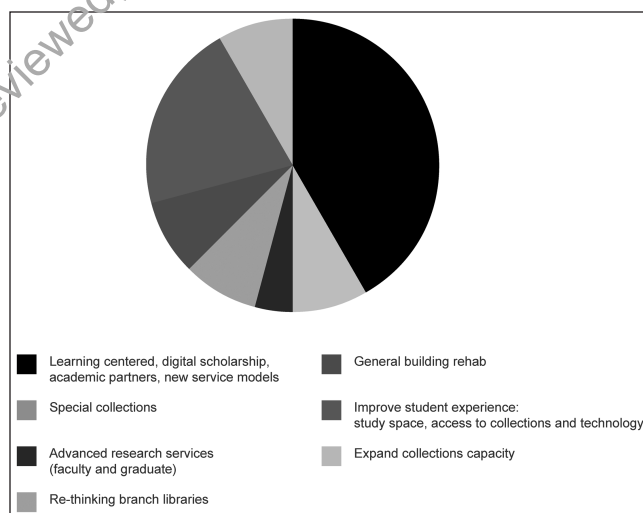Figure 3. Primary funding sources for academic library building projects reported by survey respondents.

Private   Existing

Public   Student fees

Bond

Learning centered, digital scholarship, academic partners, new service models

General building rehab

Special collections

Improve student experience: study space, access to collections and technology

Advanced research services (faculty and graduate)

Expand collections capacity

Re-thinking branch libraries

Figure 4. Leading project goals and priorities for academic library building projects reported by survey respondents.

Who Picks the Designer?

With the project outlook established, the survey asked about the designer selection process. Nearly all the projects employed a competitive designer selection process. Most of the libraries had some say in choosing the architect, and eight reported that they had the final say. However, in most processes (14 out of 22), senior leadership—the provost, the president, or the board of trustees—ultimately picked the designer.

Perspectives on Process

The feedback conveyed a landscape in which collaboration, flexibility, and advocacy comprised essential components of the design and building process. The open response questions reported numerous factors as critical to the ultimate approval of the project, including the vision of senior leadership and the documenting of facility needs, such as building failures and overcrowding. Respondents frequently cited as an essential step in gaining approvals the need for compelling strategic planning studies to demonstrate the project's potential. Only one respondent reported that progress resulted from a major donation, reflecting the long road to funding that accompanies most academic library projects. Some of the many responses included:

> As we entered into the final design process, under the leadership of a new president, the building was reconceived to be more student-centered and the site was relocated to the center of campus as the linchpin in a master plan.

> The enrollment growth of the university was a prime driver . . . Also, as the building is aging . . . it became imperative to replace all major building operating systems. Funding is being done in stages. There is not much choice. The building must be updated.

> [A] master plan was crucial to generating ideas for how we would renovate and phase projects.

> Prior to receiving funding for initial predesign, the most important task was to continually develop and implement multiple strategies for making the case that the project was a crucial and needed investment.

Projects that seemed "stuck" began to move forward with a shift in focus. One respondent reported, "Once we partnered with the Writing Center and the College of Liberal Arts, it became a compelling enough vision for the provost and dean of liberal arts to both support and partially fund."

Vision and Advocacy

The survey asked respondents for advice that could be useful to those embarking on a building project. A few cautioned about setbacks, such as the need to scale back goals due to lack of funding. Many expressed optimism about the potential outcomes and enthusiasm for the planning process. Staying true to the project goals and even, when the opportunity arose, enhancing them emerged as common themes from a broad range of suggestions. One respondent commented, for example, "We now say that what

started as a renovation became the total transformation of the library—all services, jobs, procedures, [and] policies."

Several participants stressed the importance of having a strong vision tied to the institutional mission and capital campaign goals. They emphasized the need to advocate broadly and to demonstrate the project's potential in different ways. Focusing on how the undertaking will advance academic strategy and improve the student experience provided important story lines for gaining support:

> Have a crystal-clear vision for the project that can be encapsulated in a few words. You must have a strong and dynamic leader to advocate for the project.

> Do not start with the building; start with the programs and services.

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> [A successful project requires] lots of behind-the-scenes lobbying. Renovations of parts of the existing library allowed us to show what we could do in a new space with services, technology, and furniture . . . [We worked] with corporate partners to secure in-kind gifts for high-tech spaces.

> [Key steps included] experimenting with service model approaches and ensuring that there was data to show support towards student retention.

Finally, the respondents offered tactical advice on leading a project team and guiding the process:

> Have a small core team that engages others as appropriate, rather than a big group that is involved in every decision. We found this small core team (5) approach to be inclusive but also efficient and effective.

> The original budget . . . was too low once the design began. We would do a more comprehensive cost estimate in the future.

> If I had to do it again, I would concentrate more closely on employees and how difficult major cultural change is for humans and institutions.

From the architects' experience, as designers who have journeyed through the planning and building process with institutions of all types, it is important to manage the process as if it were a team sport. The library, institutional leadership, campus facilities, the academic community, designers, contractors, funding agencies, and donors must work as a team with shared values and goals. It is a marathon, not a race. Learn to love the process.

Feedback from Attendees at the Preconference

The attendees at the preconference had diverse perspectives on library needs, goals, and available resources. Several public and private institutions grappled with how to get

started with a plan, how to raise awareness of library needs, and how to develop support. One group of attendees was challenged to define the space needs and role of the library within a large multiuse building that would establish new ways of working for their institution and require the sharing of common teaching and study spaces. In small groups, participants worked to develop an understanding of how their own institution's legislative and capital funding process works: How are priorities set? What are the steps and milestones? Who are the players in securing funding, and what themes drive capital project funding? Participants left the conference with a clearer understanding of how their own planning process would unfold, of the importance of a clear and compelling vision to secure approvals, and of the essential role of the library as a constant advocate for the undertaking.

As Myerberg writes, "An impactful reconfiguration of library space requires a good collaborative process to envision, program, plan, price, and execute. A successful process that is invariably time-consuming and challenging will lead to success with the right team."[4] When planning a new library building, renovation, or design, librarians should assume a leading role. Myerberg explains, "No library board of trustees, no university president, no city mayor . . . is better positioned to affect the evolution of the library and the accompanying reconfiguration of library space."[5]

Janette S. Blackburn is a principal in the architecture firm of Shepley Bulfinch with 30 years of experience in the planning and design of academic library buildings. She is also a fellow of the American Institute of Architects and an accredited professional of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, a worldwide program of green building certification. She may be reached by e-mail at: JBlackburn@shepleybulfinch.com.

Notes

1. Marta Mestrovic Deyrup, ed., *Creating the High-Functioning Library Space: Expert Advice from Librarians, Architects, and Designers* (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2017).
2. Henry Myerberg, introduction to Deyrup, *Creating the High-Functioning Library Space*, xi.
3. Ibid., xiv.
4. Ibid., xiii.
5. Ibid.