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A New Story to Tell: The East Commons at the Georgia Tech Library

by *Charlie Bennett*

The Georgia Tech Library is transforming, one section at a time, to keep up with changes in library use and perception that have accompanied the digital revolution. Four years ago, we renovated a study area and created a computer lab dedicated to student productivity. Our attendance numbers jumped, and we started staying open overnight during the school week. As we kept the library open longer, we realized that the students needed better study spaces if they were going to stay in the library for hours

on end. With “Library as Place” and “Libraries Designed for Learning” (recent CLIR publications) and student focus groups as our guides, we explored what would make a great study space in a modern research library, as well as what kind of space would help us test our own ideas on how to support student productivity, creativity, and success. We asked the students what they wanted and needed, and they had a lot to tell us. While they were glad to get the essential computer terminals, they needed more — resources to help

them through long days of studying and to keep their minds and bodies refreshed. Students were working more and more in groups as class styles changed, and our group-study areas were old and unappealing. The narrative the students described for us was simple: “I spend more time in the library than anywhere else. I want to be as comfortable and productive as possible.”

The result of all that information is our most recent renovation: the East Commons (EC), a mixed-use space full of collaborative computer stations, study tables on wheels, rolling chairs, easy chairs, couches, coffee tables, freestanding “fabric” walls, and a sophisticated, modular lighting system. Hundreds of students flow through the EC a day, alone or in groups, modifying the space in any way they can. We rearrange the furniture once or twice a week, in almost whimsical patterns, and the students still surprise us with their own arrangements (especially the changes that happen overnight); each time I see a set of tables jammed together in a sloppy Frankenstein’s monster of a study group, I smile at the thought of the students owning the place, building their study spaces as they see fit. My office is in the middle of everything,



Mario Montalvo, Jie Chai, Tom Aho, and Travis Rogers work at a collaborative computer station in the East Commons.

with a window looking onto one of the computer clusters, and the students stick their head in the door to ask me everything from where they can pick up print-outs to whether I can help them move a light, from the definition of “caveat” to what music I’m listening to as I work. I’ve moved furniture to accommodate a meeting between a PhD candidate and her advisor, changed the positions of the lights to reduce the glare on a student’s laptop (which took me three minutes on a stepladder — flexibility in lighting means more than just a dimmer switch), and spent 45 minutes with a student explaining the relationship between servers, personal terminals, and web browsers.

Workdays in the EC are never the same because the students don’t expect the EC to be the same each day. Not one of them has ever said “Why aren’t the tables arranged like they were before?” or “Why are the couches in different places?” They seem unfazed by anything and will often take a seat at a table or in a couch the moment it’s been moved. This article may seem overly concerned with furniture, but the student’s joy in the EC is tied to the abundance of comfortable, informal places to sit, eat, study, and sleep. The computer clusters are quite important too — without them, the EC is just a cool new lounge — but there are other computer clusters in the library and on campus. The lighting and the furniture are what make this space unique on campus and what draws the students here.

The students spend long hours in the EC, working hard and wearing themselves out. In expectation of these long hours, we have a completely open food and drink policy, and part of our renovation was a sandwich and coffee shop. Its sales have exceeded expectations by 50 percent and the students are still

asking for longer hours. They need more than coffee and smoothies, however; the students want something to break the monotony and to give them the head-clearing they need to study all day and into the night without burning out.

We have art (and are careful to make the art connect with the students in some way; right now, we have 16 gorgeous perspective exercises done by Georgia Tech architecture students), color-wash fluorescents for the walls, and the fabric walls mentioned above (which are bendable, movable, and textured), which break up the visual field of the space — a student who leans back from her work and tries to clear her mind for a moment isn’t faced with a blank wall or the sides of a study cubicle.

Our most ambitious mental refreshment is in one section of the EC where there are group-study tables. In 20 minutes, we can turn the group-study area into a small theater or presentation space that can seat up to 100 people. A rear-projection screen in one corner and a movable podium have allowed us to host lectures, film viewings, panel discussions, and a couple of musical performances, all without losing the

study space for the rest of the day. The section isn’t closed off; we make it clear to students that they can drift in or out of presentations. The students know that there’s always something going on in the EC. A gratifying email from a student, who calls himself a “resident of the new East Commons,” tells us that “the EC has helped me improve my grades while still maintaining a social life.”

A few weeks after we opened the EC, I was preparing to move one of the freestanding fabric walls — on top of a stepladder, a crescent wrench in my back pocket — when a student stopped and said “What are you doing?” I told him I was about to move the wall, and he said “How are you going to move the wall?” I showed him the threaded rods, explained how I’d be sliding the brackets along the lighting system’s rail, and the student was intrigued. He went away smiling, surprised at what could happen in the EC. It’s all about the students finding a reason to come to the library and having a story about it to tell. ►►

Charlie Bennett is East Commons Coordinator at the Georgia Tech Library in Atlanta. His email address is cb129@mail.gatech.edu. All Georgia Tech Library photographs by Katie Gentilello.



Stephanie Harrell and Callie Duggan (foreground) study in the convertible group study section of the East Commons.