Making Noise in the Library
If the classroom is the heart of higher education, the library is its soul.

Students can put their hands on digital books and information from virtually anywhere, but the library is the main place on campus where traditional and new knowledge resources, the latest information technology, and skilled instructors converge in an ongoing process of learning, teaching, and research.

Like every space on campus, the library now is being rethought and reorganized. “The changes going on in the classroom are beginning to migrate into the rest of campus. The classroom experience is moving out to other spaces so collaborative teaching and learning can happen, and the library is the paradigm,” says Tod Stevens, partner of SHW Group, an architecture and engineering firm specializing in educational environments.

Librarians are rethinking how libraries function and what people need from them. Bruce Miller, librarian at the University of California’s newest campus, in Merced, says, “I was on the Britannica project. When Wikipedia started, we spent a lot time carefully explaining why Wikipedia sucked. I mean, Britannica was edited by 400 scholars! Well, once Wikipedia reached a certain critical mass and developed some self-correcting processes, it started to work. You can find junk science in there, you can find mistakes, sure. But when you look at the whole mass of what’s available there, it’s absolutely useful. We have to look at our information in the library in the same way and rethink the ways we provide it to people.”

“Libraries need to break out of the atmosphere of tradition, to escape gravity, as I call it. We need to rethink our whole attitude about the relationship between students and space, furniture, and information, and redefine what a library should be,” says Lee Van Orsdel, dean of university libraries at Grand Valley State University, Allendale, Mich.

Innovative library administrators, designers, and educators are reshaping the 21st century college library into something quite different from a traditional book warehouse. To better understand the trends, Steelcase WorkSpace futures last year initiated a major study of libraries at private and public colleges and universities across the U.S. What the Steelcase researchers discovered were major shifts in how the library is being used and a number of opportunities to better leverage space, new technologies, and pedagogies for a new generation of students.

**MEET YOU AT THE LIBRARY**

In an age of iPads, Kindles, and other wireless devices, it’s somewhat surprising that students today love libraries. But it’s not because of all the books. For earlier generations, the college library had an aura of scholarship and learning, and a hold on students’ long, quiet hours hunched over...
big projects in study carrels – students had to go there. Today, information is digital, downloadable, and available anytime, so why go to the library? Steelcase research shows that students say the library rocks because it’s:
• a convenient spot between classes
• a place to socialize with others and to be motivated by them
• where to collaborate on group work
• close to many resources
• a safe, non-distracting place to study
• where collections are on reserve
• the place for computing software, copying, printing, scanning
• a great atmosphere

“The library is becoming a key location outside the classroom where the constructivist pedagogy plays out as students learn to analyze information and create new information, often as working in a group,” notes Elise Valoe, principal researcher with Steelcase. “This represents a great shift for the library from a reading and storage site to a center of interactive learning.”

“When students work in groups in the library, they can work for hours at a time, and it can be one of the noisiest, busiest places you can think of,” says Miller. “But the library as a collaborative place is a very good thing. Colleges and universities have tried different approaches to meeting the new demands placed on the library, often with mixed results. For example, growing computer use led many libraries to install computer stations into any available space. But people dislike having their back to hallways and their screen open to anyone who walks by. Moreover, students don’t need hardware: 95% of them own at least one computer, according to research firm Student Monitor.

Group work areas in libraries are often located near individual spaces for quiet study. This frustrates quiet-seeking students working alone while student teams lack the right space and tools for effective collaboration. A better approach is providing dedicated spaces for both individual and team work in a range of settings spread across different floors of the library that progress from free-ranging team spaces to private study spaces.

**LEARNING, NOT JUST READING**
The Steelcase higher education research unveiled six core findings about college library space:
• adjacencies are ineffective
• libraries are considered extensions of the classroom, but don’t support changing pedagogies
• the librarian’s greatly expanded role as an instructor is not supported
• traditional lounge spaces do not live up to their real purpose: supporting informal learning
• individual learning spaces lack ergonomic and privacy solutions
• students are often unaware of the library’s many offerings, and struggle to understand and access them

“Our findings demonstrate how the library is becoming a place where students are engaged in the business of becoming learners, and how library space planning has often failed to keep up,” notes Valoe. The issues are related but different from those in the classroom, where students are involved in hands-on learning but the instructor still leads. In the library, students
take control of their instruction as they discover, analyze, and share information, and in the process become comfortable working individually and with others. This work mirrors the knowledge work of business today and reflects the increased demands of businesses, parents, and students themselves for better preparation for real-world careers.

Grand Valley State University (GVSU) broke ground this fall on a new campus library, the Mary Idema Pew Library Learning and Information Commons, which is designed to meet those needs. “We’re planning the library to be an enriched environment where students can continue the work started in the classroom and add a dimension to learning that a classroom doesn’t always offer,” says Van Orsdel.

Most libraries today were designed and built for getting books and checking them out. Library adjacencies, space utilization, and new learning processes need to be carefully evaluated. The library should support student collaboration and group work, the dominant instruction and learning style today. Students need study space, support for computing equipment, access to reserved material, content-creation tools, and a flexible environment that supports working in pairs and teams.

At GVSU, Steelcase prototyped this type of study space as part of planning the new library. Researchers observed how students used the two spaces: one with group work tools (portable whiteboards, mobile tables and chairs, wall-mounted storage shelves, access to power, and defined team areas), another with a media:space® setting, where people can plug in laptops and simply press a puck to show information on two integrated flat screens (pg. 20), and similar group work tools.

By studying the use of these spaces in person and through time-lapse video images, the Steelcase team noted a variety of results, including:

- portable whiteboards were heavily used by students in hands-on learning activities
- providing a framework that helped define the space created a sense of enclosure, enough for the team to feel in control of the space
- storage shelves weren’t used much; perhaps because the teams didn’t own the space
- power outlets were used often by tech-savvy students

Similarly, a team space prototype with mobile tables, mobile chairs, and other tools was popular for individual and team work by students using laptops and an array of digital and analog materials. Lead designer Tod Stevens, says, “When the library put work spaces near the windows and in other attractive spaces that used to be taken up by shelves of books, the gate count went way up.” He notes that team spaces are a key reason students come to libraries: “It’s where they can find resources, get help, and work together on projects.”

THE LIBRARIAN’S EXPANDED ROLE

Marian the librarian couldn’t cut it today. The librarian job description includes content expert, IT service provider, collaborator with students, and educator. Yet the reference desk inside the front door of most libraries, intended to be the triage point for students, is confusing at best and often intimidating.

Library planners should eliminate barriers, real and perceived, to information and resources. Shared screens and worksurfaces, classroom space, and a welcoming environment contribute to
a more productive relationship between students and staff. When librarians and students work closely together, such as at a shared monitor and worksurface, collaboration is more natural, and each encounter has the potential to become a teachable moment.

GVSU’s new library exemplifies this strategy. “Universities have not made their services seamless. We’ve compartmentalized them into pedagogical areas where they’re taught: English, writing, research, technology, speech, etc.,” says Van Orsdel. “The defining or central construct of the new library is a knowledge market that puts together in one place, right in the path of the students, the resources to build all of the skills employers tell us are critical in the workplace: writing, speaking, presenting, research. Students manage their own learning, choosing the type of help they need, when they need it.”

GVSU benchmarked innovative library design at the University of California, Merced (opened in 2004) in their planning. Van Orsdel calls that library “a whole new attitude about the library’s relationship between students, furniture, and books.”

The Merced library (photo on pg. 17) is a campus center for social and educational activity. It brings people together in ways that might not happen in the classroom, residence hall, or coffee shop. When they enter the library, students become part of a larger community. Informal spaces that support interactions between students, faculty, and staff help nurture both learning and socializing. When the university held its first classes six years ago, the library also was used as a site for many classes since few buildings were complete on the rural campus. “We designed this building to be a modern, large university library, focused on the library as a place as opposed to a warehouse,” says librarian Bruce Miller.

New libraries are rare on campus. Nevertheless, the entire library floor plan should be considered when retrofitting even a single setting. Adjacencies are critical, including planning for technology use in practically every setting, from team collaborative spaces to social zones to individual study spaces. Visual and acoustical privacy require careful planning. Visual cues are important in college libraries, too, especially for young students who aren’t clear about how library spaces can be used. “One place doesn’t fit all purposes,” says Miller. “We have collaborative areas, quiet areas, large spaces, and other kinds of spaces. Students naturally migrate to the physical area that suits their needs.”

Students tend to work in the library in groups in the evenings (outside of class and work time) and individually or with one other person during mornings and afternoons. Spaces that work for solo work early in the day have to be flexible enough for teams later on.

For example, the Steelcase researchers prototyped a 120-degree workstation that worked for varying numbers of people throughout the day. In fact, individuals often shared the work setting with pairs, as in the photo above of two students working together on one corner while individuals work alone at other places in the same setting.

One approach is to provide private enclaves, study carrels, and other individual workspaces on upper floors, away from the typically busier, noisier first floor, so it’s easier for users to manage their privacy. “Environment matters to students. Many don’t have a place to study so they come to the library. In the past, life was more formal, society wasn’t as noisy. Now there are so many distractions that the library is often the only place where you can find a distraction-free environment,” says GVSU’s Van Orsdel.

As college libraries offer more services and spaces for students, it’s essential they clearly communicate those resources. Visual displays, clear paths to customer services, and welcoming spaces help students understand and use library services. “A library is often intimidating to first- and second-year students,” says SHW’s Stevens. “Finding ways to lower the threshold for approaching library personnel and resources is the key.”

Design principles for college libraries

Steelcase WorkSpace Futures researchers and designers have developed key design principles for planning 21st century libraries. Like the classroom design principles, they’re based on primary user-centered research. The library design principles reflect the changed nature of a library in higher education today:

› Design library spaces that support social learning
› Support the librarian’s evolving role
› Optimize the performance of informal spaces
› Plan for adjacencies
› Provide for individual comfort, concentration, and security
› Provide spaces that improve awareness of, and access to, library resources

These photos are video frame captures from research studies of various settings prototyped for the new Grand Valley State University library. Student study patterns and workstyles informed the design and furnishings selections for the new library, scheduled to open in 2013.