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One size does not fit all

Maintaining relevancy in the modern makerspace movement

As academic libraries have reimagined their facilities to meet the needs of 21st-century learning, makerspaces have been championed as a means to support contemporary learning, innovation, and collaboration on campus. Makerspaces in libraries are considered particularly fruitful for enabling cross-disciplinary collaboration, a hallmark of the library tradition.[1] Thus library makerspaces often attempt to serve all campus constituents, even catering to campus-wide initiatives to improve student performance outcomes and bolster academic notoriety.[2]

Library makerspaces also commonly focus on the physical act of making, thus treating the space simply as a collection of tools and equipment. These attempts, however, can lead to a one-size-fits-all approach that considers the library as a lender or provider of equipment instead of a collaborator in the multidisciplinary and dynamic making process.[3]

While inclusive service is woven into the very fabric of libraries, such a broad approach may render library makerspace design too general for academic library patrons who, in reality, are studying within specialized fields of scholarship and dynamic creative processes. In fact, many fields have long-used the maker approach as a key element in their disciplinary cultures and already provide spaces for making within their own departments on campus. When designing library makerspaces, then, it is essential to engage with campus makers and collaborators to understand the practical and pedagogical needs of the multitude of disciplines to ensure the library fills a true needs gap on campus. In order to do this, libraries must understand the evolution of the maker movement in the cross-disciplinary and academic library settings.

Makerspaces have evolved from their discipline-specific origins to include sites of interdisciplinary collaboration, making, and sharing. Contemporary making vis-à-vis the makerspace, recognizes the value of informal sharing of knowledge and a belief in multidisciplinary learning supported by a maker community. The movement proposes to break down the often-critiqued, siloed experience of contemporary higher education. Academic libraries, as the common thread among all campus disciplines, are a natural fit for the maker movement.

Historically viewed as the heart of knowledge, research, and resources, academic libraries have fine-tuned their ability to serve as not only the keepers of knowledge, but also act as the key to create that knowledge.

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Librarians often collaborate with students and faculty as research is formed and explored, connecting the user with resources that help move new ideas to fruition. Because of this, libraries and librarians are practiced in bringing together researchers and resources in ways that benefit the makerspace initiative.

As a discipline-neutral informal learning space, libraries have the potential to serve as the hub for intellectual curiosity inspired by making. All too often, however, the decision to locate a makerspace in the library centers on the idea of repurposing space to house making equipment instead of aligning the makerspace mission with the strengths of libraries. The real value of colocating lies not just in the reallocation of square footage for the latest equipment, but rather in a much deeper recognition of the assets that are present in a library beyond square footage.

This approach suggests that, while the popularity of 3-D printers and other prototyping technology are relevant and central to contemporary making culture, additional needs that support other ways of making across disciplines should be investigated and honored. Everything from computer labs and large format printers to sewing machines and performance stages could certainly be considered as part of the making environment. However, the real value of the library makerspace lies in the creative and collaborative activity that grows and subsequently shares knowledge creation and innovation. Thus, the development of makerspaces should not focus solely on technology and the physical act of making, but must also consider the precursor to making, which includes collaboration and ideation along with post-making activities of presentation and critique. To this end, an intentional planning process with a clear mission are essential for success.[4]

The idea of the library as the hub for pre-making activities and post-making discourse seems to most successfully align with the best of what the library has to offer while connecting makers to specialized spaces in academic departments across campus for the physical act of making. In this way, the library's strengths of research and collaboration act as a foundation to entrepreneurial thinking, while hands-on making with specialized, and often expensive, equipment reside in areas where individuals experienced in using specialized equipment can support making activities.

Envisioning the library as a partner in the ideation and post-making phases of making facilitates more relevant spaces in academic libraries. Thinking of making as a dynamic, multi-stage process can help libraries maintain relevancy to a wide audience. No longer focused on amassing the latest trendy equipment that may not be useful to a broad audience, the library can focus on what it has historically proven to do best—provide space for intellectual curiosity, discourse, and ideation while serving as a repository to collect, preserve, and make accessible the fruit of the truly exciting modern makerspace movement.

Notes

1. Laura Costello, Meredith Powers, and Dana Haugh, "Pedagogy and Prototyping in Library Makerspaces," in *#themakerspace _librarian's sourcebook,* ed. Ellyssa Kroski (Chicago: ALA), 2017.

2. Vincent Wilczynski, Aubrey Wigner, Micah Lande, and Shawn Jordan, "The Value of Higher Education Academic Makerspaces for Accreditation and Beyond," P*lanning for Higher Education Journal,* 46, no. 1 (October-December 2017): 1-9.

3. Tod Colgrove, "Editorial Board Thoughts: Libraries as Makerspace?" *Information Technology and Libraries* (March 2013): 2–5.

4. Candice Benjes-Small, Liz McGlynn Bellamy, Jennifer Resor-Whicker, and Lisa Vassady, "Makerspace or Waste of Space: Charting a Course for Successful Academic Library Makerspaces," paper presented at the ACRL Virtual Conference, March 2017, www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2017/MakerspaceorWasteofSpace.pdf.