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# There and Back Again (Almost)

One Library's Staff's Journey through a Major Construction Project

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**ABSTRACT** Library renovation caused the staff of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary to plan a move of library services to a temporary location. The staff selected a subset of books to remain available to users; 90,000 volumes were placed in storage. Records for unavailable volumes were suppressed so that users would only see information about books available to them. The staff chose 6,000 books for a temporary library, based on faculty needs and past usage. Books were moved in January 2020. Staff were continuously involved in refining design and furniture decisions during the construction process, scheduled for completion in September 2021. The new Wright Learning and Information Center will feature a large collaborative space and a digital learning center. Lessons learned include the necessity for constant communication among staff members and keeping in mind that users want normal library services, despite the disruptions of a construction project.

Presenters from Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary shared their experience as a staff in providing library services while the seminary's library building was thoroughly renovated to become the Mary B. and Robert J. Wright Learning and Information Center. Planning for library renovation started with focus groups in 2009 to determine strengths and weaknesses of the current building. Early on the decision was made to design a building with a larger footprint for users and a smaller footprint for print materials. It was also decided to renovate the 1950 historic building but tear down and replace the 1978 addition. In anticipation of construction, staff thoroughly weeded the collection over several years. During construction, some 90,000 volumes were placed in storage; 6,000 volumes were avail-

able to users via paging. Many linear yards of library shelving were dismantled and stored for reuse. A temporary service point was set up in another building on campus. Austin Seminary users also had access to books in the collection of the Booher Library of the Seminary of the Southwest, a few blocks away.

How did construction affect staff work? Access and instruction librarian David Schmersal took the lead in determining which volumes to include in the pageable collection. He chose books based on their past circulation history (five years), course projections, and the availability of the book in the Booher Library. A few classic texts (e.g., *Summa Theologiae*) were also included. Books for the mini-collection were identified and then moved to a separate part of the library until they were moved to their temporary locations. Professional movers moved books to the temporary library and remote storage in January 2020.

Systems and metadata librarian John Vinke suppressed records for books in storage so that users were not tempted by seeing titles that were unavailable to them. He discovered some quirks in the interaction of the online catalog and the discovery layer. The goal was to minimize user frustration. Because of the pandemic, the staff ramped up purchases of e-books.

Learning technologies librarian Mandy Deen was involved in the necessary work of moving materials out of the building before construction. As it happened, the COVID-19 pandemic caused the seminary to move to online learning in the space of a few weeks in March 2020. Ms. Deen was the key staff person in assisting students and faculty in making this jump, which coincided with other major technology upgrades on campus: a new learning management system and a new student information system.

Associate library director and archivist Kristy Sorensen led the work of keeping track of furniture and art that were removed from the library. Staff were surprised at how much artwork had found its way into the building over the years. She found on-campus locations for all archival materials that were removed from their old home in the archives repository. Along with library director Timothy Lincoln, she attended bi-weekly construction calls to monitor progress and make increasingly more detailed plans for library furniture and room layout. Architectural firm PSA Dewberry took input from the staff seriously down to the specifics of ceiling heights in rooms and the position of staff desks in offices. Because the seminary moved

all staff to working from home in March 2020, the director had to learn how to supervise the staff via Teams calls and emails rather than face-to-face meetings.

Staff look forward to moving into the completed Wright Center in the fall. As a result of this experience, the staff learned several lessons. First, begin weeding well in advance of a renovation project that requires removing print materials. It is senseless to store books that are not needed. Second, have a detailed inventory of shelving if you wish to reuse it. Architectural plans include not only stairwells and HVAC chases, but the layout of all furniture and shelves. Third, when choosing a small working collection of books, take seriously faculty needs and preferences as expressed in syllabi and bibliographies. The usefulness of a book depends on its social location. Fourth, make sure that everyone understands the acquisitions workflow for e-books. Fifth, keep a tape measure handy. Shelving, books, and furniture take up space in three dimensions. On many occasions, we were asked the precise dimensions of objects. Sixth, without intentional and continuous communication among staff, none of the pieces of the project would have fit together. Seventh and most importantly: despite construction, library users want library services that support their academic work. In other words, they want things to be normal.

In the time available for discussion, the presenters responded to three questions.

**Question 1:** How much interaction did you have with the architects during high level discussions about the new building?

**Answer:** Lots! We were involved at every point, beginning with focus groups of users at the early stages (2009). After the conceptual stage of planning, design work was on hold until funds were raised. Some decisions about the exterior style of the building were changed at the request of key donors. Once building began in March 2020, we were asked increasingly detailed questions about specific aspects of spaces (e.g., the desk location of the learning technologies librarian). We were able to respond to a request from the library committee in the spring of 2021 for improved display areas because the details of interior walls had not been finalized.

**Question 2:** How did you solve the problem of book storage? What kind of containers did you use? How did you store your mini-collection?

**Answer:** We used professional movers that specialize in moving library books. They have stored 90,000 volumes in cardboard boxes in an environmentally controlled warehouse. Under close supervision of the library staff, movers loaded books in boxes in LC order (we hope). Seven existing ranges of shelving were moved into the racquetball court. We sequestered the 6,000 books chosen for the mini-collection separately so that they could be moved efficiently in plastic bins to the temporary space. The collection in the racquetball court is air conditioned. (During the pandemic, we used the collection for scanning needed pages and eventually started curbside book pickup.) As librarians, we know that library shelving is interchangeable; our architects wanted to match new purchases exactly by manufacturer and color.

**Question 3:** Are there any new spaces that are novel or experimental from the point of view of library services?

**Answer:** While nothing in the Wright Center will be revolutionary, we have implemented some features that meet the needs of users in the 2020s. Wi-Fi will work well throughout the building. We decided to allocate a lot of space for collaborative learning and a relatively smaller proportion to shelving, thus our extensive weeding of the print collection. We want the new building to invite patrons to hang out, so it has a large “commons” on the ground floor with a variety of seating options. The new building also features a digital learning center for recording video lectures for online classes. We hope that professors and students will use the space to create podcasts or class projects using media. During early stages of planning, this space became something like the room of requirement at Hogwarts: everything to everybody. As design work continued, our IT department helped choose functional equipment, such as a lightboard which enables instructors to replicate the experience of writing on a chalkboard during a digital presentation while maintaining eye contact. The digital learning center will also facilitate synchronous hybrid teaching of students both in the classroom and at other locations.