

# Small Change, Big Impact

## Assessment and Creative Repurposing of Underutilized Space at the BU Theology Library

by Sean Smith

The BU School of Theology Library is a small, autonomous library on the campus of the large Boston University in Boston, Massachusetts. The library is primarily committed to serving the School of Theology community of about three hundred graduate students. As a staff, we pride ourselves in creating a welcoming environment for our community and the open public. This small slice of campus was last renovated in 1999. One of our strengths is that we offer many excellent places for individualized, quiet study (e.g., high-walled carrels and a quiet reading room). Unfortunately, the library (and entire School of Theology building) lacks true collaborative study areas. Despite staff knowing this imbalance of study space, there had been no serious conversation about creating these spaces for collaborative study, perhaps due to a perceived lack of demand from students or a sense of resignation that any change would cost more than the budget could bear.

### **ASSESSMENT: BU THEOLOGY LIBRARY TAKING A HARD LOOK AT ITSELF**

In 2016, BU Libraries completed its Library Survey Report, which included faculty and student feedback on the School of Theology Library.<sup>1</sup> Although the staff was happy with the net-positive feedback, the survey identified several areas where the library could improve. The most significant of these was patron demand for better collaborative study options. These survey results served as a wake-up call that suggested the library needed to effect change to better meet the needs of our users by offering more collaborative study spaces. While 76% of graduate student respondents were “very satisfied” with the offering of individual study areas, only 25% felt “very satisfied” about group study spaces. A surprising 40% of respondents answered “not applicable” when asked about group study spaces. It was clear that the library had to begin developing long-term answers to this identified weakness, but do so without forfeiting the relative “strength” of excellent individual study space. The Theology Library had to formulate a response while considering that additional resources were extremely limited. There was proof there was a demand for this space, and for my colleagues and myself, continuing the status quo via resignation was not a tenable option.

The staff decided that intensely local research was needed to determine which underutilized areas within the existing footprint were available for a reimagination to fill the need expressed by our community. Inspired in particular by the work of Given and Leckie and Given and Archibald, we moved forward with a “seating sweeps” project in Spring 2017.<sup>2</sup> Based on this project, the staff had hard data about underutilized spaces in the library’s footprint. Staff hypotheses about space usage were confirmed by the results of this seating sweeps project, a result likely expected in small, academic libraries, where staff may be more familiar with the ebbs and flows of patron usage than in larger academic counterparts. The data collected were invaluable to the library in its assessment: it helped non-librarian stakeholders and decision makers understand the space’s utilization, and it made more convincing the proposal for a larger-scale remedy.

<sup>1</sup> Boston University Libraries Assessment Committee, “Boston University Libraries 2016 Survey Report,” Boston University, February 2017, <https://hdl.handle.net/2144/20332>.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa M. Given and Heather Archibald, “Visual traffic sweeps (VTS): A research method for mapping user activities in the library space,” *Library & Information Science Research* 37 no. 2 (2015): 100-108; Lisa M. Given & Gloria J. Leckie, “Sweeping the library: Mapping the social activity space of the public library,” *Library & Information Science Research* 25 (2003): 365-385.

### **THE IMPERFECT SOLUTION: LIBRARY CONFERENCE ROOM**

The focus of this essay is to highlight the creative use of underutilized, if imperfect, zones within a current library's footprint. The assessment project identified that one major underutilized area was our Library Conference Room. This room constituted over 350 square feet of library space, which was reserved for bi-weekly library staff meetings and very little else. The room is located at the end of a dark administrative hallway that a visitor would understandably mistake as being for staff only. However, the bright, well-lit conference room has a large table that can seat about ten people; it was already set up for collaborative discussion, and it would cost the library no additional money to prepare for patron use. Because of the difficulty of access, this was an imperfect solution to meet patrons' needs, a difficulty complicated by the prospect that increased noise and foot traffic in this hallway could disrupt vital operations in the staff offices. However, the staff's desire to provide the community what they needed led us to put these concerns aside. We opened the space up to patron use, and we advertised it as such. Our strategy to market the Library Conference Room for community use involved the following:

- 1) Advertising the study space on the "Library Basics" Research Guide, marketed to incoming students. This guide includes vital information about basic library services, including printing, which causes it to receive heavy traffic from first-year students in our community.
- 2) Using some of our limited time at first-year orientation to introduce the conference room as collaborative study space.
- 3) Advertising on the library's home page.
- 4) Working with the registrar's office to schedule classes in this new space.

Following this aggressive marketing strategy in the months leading up to the Fall 2018 semester, reservations of the Library Conference Room increased over 60% on an hourly basis in September-October 2018 (as compared to September-October 2017). While this represents a small sample size, this small change is paying dividends for the Theology Library, as overall patron visits increased over 10% during that time. It is the staff's belief that this traffic increase is due to the visits of students who would have otherwise opted for a different place to study. Shedding our instinct of resignation to budget realities and embracing imperfect solutions helped in reaching this increase.

Of course, the story does not end here: after our first-year orientation presentation, one first-year divinity student approached me about conference room availability. This student, in particular, sought a space for active, collaborative, group studying. Soon, a reading group for first-year students was launched, scheduled to meet in the Library Conference Room every Monday morning during the Fall 2018 semester. Already, this group has become an official student-interest group. Lines of communication with this group alerted library staff to a demand for a workshop on effective reading. The workshop was suggested by some first-year divinity students who were overwhelmed as they began their journey. Hosted by a library employee, the workshop was held last month during the group's scheduled time in the conference room. It has been a success with its twelve attendees. In an era where the library's overall budget is spread more and more thin, the onus is on librarians to address creatively the shortcomings of their spaces and collections. Librarians should see all corners of the library as an opportunity to better provide for the community. All that is needed is a little imagination.