

Four Bookshelves and a Microphone: Maximizing Collections in a Minimal Space

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“Oh, wow, this is ... cozy ...”

“This is certainly different than what we saw at the Valley Library!”

“I’m sure it’s fine, students all use electronic resources these days, don’t they?”

These are a few of the comments I overhear during each campus tour when prospective students and their families arrive in the Oregon State University (OSU)-Cascades campus library in Bend, Oregon. With the main library area—containing stacks, seating, and computers—only measuring 830 square feet, it’s easy to understand the initial surprise of walking into the snack-sized space. With a 20-year background in public libraries, I have experience with both collection development and space management, skills which serve me well as I work on the puzzle of maximizing our limited resources.

Historical Context

OSU-Cascades opened a two-building campus in 2016, following several years of co-housing programs and student services (including library services) at Central Oregon Community College. Tykeson Hall was designed to be the first strictly academic building on the new site, with lab space, classrooms, and—tucked away at the end of the second-floor hallway—the library.

Early plans for campus did not include a library at all. Former campus leadership felt confident they would quickly secure funds for an expansion including a Student Success Center that would become the home for the library. It took significant advocacy on the part of then-Library Director Sara Thompson to convince the dean that serving the immediate need for textbook course reserves would increase college affordability and result in retention that would keep tuition money flowing (Williams & Randolph, 2020). Course reserves needed to live somewhere, so the library was sketched into the blueprint.

Unfortunately, the legislature has taken more convincing as to the validity of a new university east of the Cascades and the campus continues to hit barriers for funding at the statewide level. The Student Success Center will open in winter of 2025, many years past its original conception. It will not include a new library space.

The campus currently supports approximately 1,300 students, 200 of whom are residents in the single dormitory (Oregon State University Cascades, n.d.a). A new strategic growth initiative sets the goal of enrolling 2,200 students by 2030 (Oregon State University Cascades, n.d.b). In addition to the new Student Success Center, leadership is advocating for a student recreation and wellness building and additional student housing. No new academic buildings will be built until after 2030, which gives me time to demonstrate the need for a fully resourced library to match these growth plans.

Four Bookshelves ...

On my first day on campus, I experienced a wave of overwhelm. The neglected space hadn't had a director since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and while a valiant technician and student workers kept the wheels turning, it was clear that library services were operating on survival mode. After removing all the dead and languishing houseplants that were not improving the atmosphere, my work turned to the physical collection.

The "stacks" in the main room of the library were comprised of just four bookshelves, each crammed end-to-end. The book display lived on a bedraggled audio/visual cart. Altogether the library had a mere 65 feet of shelf space in the main library room, with approximately 30 feet of print titles available as "overflow" behind closed doors in the library work room. It was immediately clear that a collection of this limited size could not adequately support even a small campus of 1,300 students, so with the support of Anne-Marie Deitering, Dean of OSU Libraries and Press, I started using my background as a public librarian to create and curate meaningful collections that more broadly serve academic and recreational needs.

Increasing Discoverability

Throughout my 20 years in public libraries, approaches towards print collections have evolved. Public librarians no longer assume that visitors are willing to dig around packed shelves for that hidden gem, and libraries have found ways to showcase their many treasures. Library conference sessions and industry publications educate librarians on retail-based approaches to physical collections, such as merchandising with face-out displays and plenty of room on each shelf to allow easy browsing. Libraries have increased their "staff pick" shelves and thematic displays and have found numerous other creative approaches to highlighting individual books in browsable spaces. When I arrived at OSU-Cascades, I knew I wanted to bring elements of these types of merchandising to the collection, and I needed to give priority space to the titles that would be the most usable and interesting to a browsing visitor while keeping additional material in the overflow stacks.

I carefully embarked on my weeding project, not wanting to jettison items before I knew the full landscape of campus needs but also knowing each book would need to earn its space. I found titles that reflected courses or degree programs no longer offered at OSU-Cascades, and some had duplicates in the Valley Library's collection in Corvallis, a building much more suitable to maintaining an academic record. Titles related to teaching, psychology, and counseling were out of date considering current pedagogical and therapeutic approaches. The literature section was representative of an older canon, textbooks in editions no longer current, and other miscellaneous items that were not valuable enough to keep their real estate.

I felt stymied by the overflow stacks. These titles are in the catalog and fill resource-sharing requests, but are overall "out of sight, out of mind." After my initial weeding, I was only able

to move out a handful of titles from the overflow to the main stacks and still maintain the newly merchandised shelves. The only solution that made sense was to add more shelving, but I kept running into the same issues with each imagined scenario: The library's walls are primarily comprised of windows and the room is not wide enough to allow for shelving other than around the periphery. I brought my issue to the facilities team and after some furniture rearrangement we found one open wall for a new shelving unit. Now we have five bookshelves!

Prioritizing Underserved Voices

I excitedly began to order new titles. My goal at this point was for the collection to represent current academic programs offered at OSU-Cascades, include titles to support student health and well-being; bolster our graphic novels and popular reading selections; and ensure that materials on topics such as race and antiracism, sexuality, gender studies, and voices from neurodiverse and disabled communities were up to date. The literature section had little diversity of viewpoint or representation of BIPOC or queer creators and stories. With OSU being a land-grant university, increasing Indigenous perspectives in the collection overall was a priority.

I want to ensure that each student on campus can come to the library, no matter how small it may be, and find something that represents them. Enjoyment of the outdoors is an unofficial campus value, so I look for titles that bring marginalized voices and experiences into natural spaces. The small size of the OSU-Cascades campus is often attractive to neurodiverse students, so I am adding titles to support self-awareness and academic success for this population. I held a "Blind Date with a Book" event on Valentine's Day, and through short snippets of text on each wrapped book I was able to exhibit a newly diversified collection that inspired strong curiosity among the campus community and resulted in the highest number of book checkouts in one day that the library has likely ever seen.

I have also been working on an audit of our course reserves collection, a short-term textbook loan program that supports college affordability. Ordering new editions of textbooks may not be as thrilling in the moment, but student feedback ("I can't look at another screen" or "I can't process information as well on a screen") currently has me ordering print copies of required books while not pursuing ebooks or electronic textbooks at the same level. I have seen an increase in use of course reserves through steady promotion and dedication to ensuring students can access their readings in a format that works best for them.

... and a Microphone

I inherited a respectable equipment collection, otherwise known as our Library of Things. Laptops, graphing calculators, and A/V equipment (like podcasting microphones) are all primary draws to visiting the library. This collection was also outdated due to the onward march of technology. The library had become a catch-all for volumes of equipment that had been loaned out to instructors and students during pandemic-era operations. I began tracking requests for items at the front desk and quickly ordered equipment that we did not have such as updated phone and laptop chargers, noise-canceling headphones, bike locks, and all the adapters and dongles one could need. You want thingamabobs? I've got 20!

Our student wellness team donated two happy lamps to the collection, making these devices more accessible than when they were kept in offices. I am in conversation with the Dungeons & Dragons club on how we can make their gaming items more accessible. I have added board games and will launch hobby kits next fall. I am pondering items that students

could use outdoors on campus like camp chairs, blankets, and reusable picnic ware. We don't have a campus bookstore, so I'm stocking glue sticks, folders, and other small office supplies. Through these small actions I demonstrate a level of care for the community. Let the reputation of the library be that it is here for whatever your needs may be, and even for things you didn't know you needed!

For now, the Library of Things collection lives in the back room. I do not have a display case, slat wall, or other option to bring these out into the library. I currently have a "Cabinet of Curiosities" display to highlight an assortment of equipment instead of featuring a selection of books. This is the essence of my experimentation with collections here: I can't do it all, or have it all, but I can draw from my "try anything once" experiences as I continue to adapt my approaches to library services on a branch university campus.

Library as Laboratory

Now that I have settled into the position and the space, the creative problem-solving has not ended. I would love to see even more browsing of the collection here, but the Library of Congress classification system is daunting at best, traumatic at worst, and can lead to library anxiety even in a small collection (Maluski & Bruce, 2022). I've added shelf labels to sketch out the general topics found in each area, and the face-out displays provide additional clues. While my guiding idea is to have as many books as possible out in the main stacks, this means I am utilizing the uppermost and lowermost shelves, which is a significant accessibility concern. Our literature section lives on a set of shelves below a window, so the area that I'd most like to highlight is one of the most difficult to see and use. I've browsed library catalogs and websites looking for a piece of furniture that might somehow work in the space to hold novels, but the perfect solution eludes me . . . for now.

I continue to test new options for improving discoverability. We have a DVD collection that is shelved in the work room and although we fill a few resource requests, not even a display of interesting titles (and a notice that we also loan external CD/DVD drives) got this collection the circulation I'd like to see to keep it housed here.

The Academic Faculty Council secured grant funding to create a Teaching Excellence collection made up of approximately 75 titles that support pedagogy and praxis. When I arrived, these shelves of books were also in the back room, with no marketing or promotion to encourage use by the intended users. I created a LibGuide, notified faculty, and moved the titles out to the main space where they lived for a few months in a spot of valuable real estate I had created to support more display space.

After experimenting with this placement for a couple of months, I realized that the space could be better used for another collection. I had developed a new collection of early literacy tote bags designed to support the underserved population of student parents and I needed that display real estate to launch this new set of items. The Teaching Excellence collection then earned frequent flier miles by moving back into the work room. Upon further discussion with faculty, we agreed that these books should move out of the library completely and find homes in various points on campus where instructors naturally tend to gather such as in staff lounges. The books will likely find more use when not formally part of the library's collection.

After a year of book ordering, conservative in numbers though it has been, I can see the growth of the collection and will again need to consider which titles stay out in front and which aren't earning their place. I watch holds come in from other libraries in our resource

sharing network and think “I should have that,” but I don’t have the means to purchase and house them. While I don’t mourn the fact that OSU-Cascades does not have a print journal collection, I do wish for one magazine rack that could give students a quick reading hit in between classes.

Lack of anonymity is something I have been thinking about here. So many student experiences with academic libraries are of the “disappear into the stack to study/sleep/hide out” variety, and here that is not the case. There is no privacy to browse the collection in open space, we do not have self-checkout kiosks, and all our holds are in the back room. While this means library staff may interact more with patrons, there may be self-censoring happening when someone looking for sensitive material finds out they can’t do so without someone else knowing. I continue to tinker with the space and I may find room to install self-service holds and a self-checkout station, and I’m investigating new furniture options like modern study carrels or other privacy barriers such as modular walls.

Conclusion

While I see anecdotal and statistical evidence of the library increasing its presence on campus, I still talk with third- and fourth-year students who do not know there is a library. When the Student Success Center opens this winter, I will curiously await potential shifts in traffic. I am planning a pilot project for pop-up library services in both the Student Success Center and the Graduate Research Center, a building located off the main campus. Developing this kind of outreach model is one way forward for campus library services, but my capacity as a solo librarian will impact the extent to which I can pursue new activities. I am curious about what the next year will bring and what ideas may bubble up. I remain dedicated to a proactive, flexible, and relationship-based approach to meeting campus needs to the greatest extent possible while occupying this small physical space.

References

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