

Flexibility in Outreach:

Developing a Student Commons Space on an Auxiliary Campus

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When COVID-19 shut down college libraries across the country, Central Oregon Community College (COCC) was no exception. In the ensuing scramble to close all in-person services and spaces during finals week, COCC library staff also were faced with closing the doors on a location that had not yet opened: a space that was almost 10 years in the making on an auxiliary campus.

COVID taught librarians a lot about how flexible we can be and the value of delivering highly accessible remote service options. We also learned the value of our physical spaces and that an open door can literally and figuratively guide students to our services, especially on an outlying community college campus where nontraditional students already experience significant barriers finding, navigating, and using library resources. In this article, I will chronicle the development of the library space on one of COCC's satellite campuses, how that development stalled and evolved in the wake of COVID, and the role this space plays in COCC library's strategic outreach efforts moving forward.

COCC Context

COCC is the oldest two-year college in Oregon, awarding associate and transfer degrees and career and technical education degrees and certificates, as well as providing non-credit offerings like developmental courses, continuing education and community learning classes, industry-specific training programs, GED preparation classes, and business management assistance. The main campus is located in Bend, the sixth largest city in Oregon and the largest city east of the Cascades. But COCC serves a 10,000-square-mile district (an area approximately the size of Maryland) and has opened campuses in the smaller communities of Redmond, Madras, and Prineville to better reach students in the outlying districts.

COCC's 6,763 full-time equivalent (FTE) credit students are able to enroll in classes on any COCC campus or online. However, without a single program fully accessible online and with many student support services offered only in Bend full time, many find it necessary or preferable to attend or contact the Bend campus for a full complement of services and classes.

The Redmond campus is 20 miles from Bend and is COCC's second largest and second most comprehensive campus, with four buildings housing classrooms, computer labs, academic services (e.g., testing and tutoring), and a small bookstore. Prineville and Madras, 35 and 45 miles from Bend, respectively, are currently single-building campuses. Students primarily attending the Redmond campus can piece together a schedule to complete the Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer (AAOT) degree, but the campus specializes in career and technical programs, including the two-year Veterinary Technician program, the Automotive Technology program emphasizing the hybrid electric automotive field, and the Manufacturing and Applied Technology Center (MATC) which trains workers in the manufacturing field with several certificate and degree options.

The Development of a Redmond Library Space

In 2012, I was still in my graduate program at the University of Washington iSchool when I reached out to COCC librarians looking for an internship. It was opportune timing as they already had a project in mind.

The previous year, during a visit from COCC's accrediting body, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), evaluators emphasized the need for the library to serve all COCC campuses equitably, stressing the standard requiring "appropriate instruction and support for [users] to enhance their efficiency and effectiveness in obtaining, evaluating, and using library and information resources ... wherever offered and however delivered" (Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, 2010, p. 6). The COCC librarians wanted to explore the needs of the students and faculty on the auxiliary campuses to better meet the standard and serve our various communities.

My internship scope was surveying students and faculty who primarily attended or taught classes on the Redmond, Prineville, or Madras campuses. The results highlighted the importance of faculty relationships as reflected in the literature (Cunningham & Lanning, 2002; Øvern, 2014; Thi Lan & Tuamsuk, 2018) since many classes on the auxiliary campuses are taught by part-time and adjunct faculty who do not receive the same level of outreach to familiarize them with library resources and services, and because students frequently rely on faculty for guidance on where and how to search for information. Additionally, students reported that getting started with research was one of the most difficult skills and expressed that they would take advantage of a librarian who was available to answer assignment-specific questions (see Hostetler and DeSilva, 2016, for a full report of the survey findings).

The survey confirmed anecdotal reports that in Redmond, Madras, and Prineville, there was a perception among faculty and students there was no library or library services on their campuses. With the data to back us up, the library team began advocating for changes to our team, service, and space structures that would address this perception and make library resources more visible and, thus, more accessible.

Minor changes like offering delivery services and developing marketing material specifically targeting the auxiliary campuses were low-effort adjustments. Larger recommendations, like creating a position that only served auxiliary campus users or opening a new library space, required more effort and creativity.

Starting in 2013, I was hired in a faculty role that was revised as a result of my internship recommendation that focused, though not exclusively, on outreach to the auxiliary campuses. The next step was to focus efforts on increasing the library's presence on campuses so that students felt that the library was not exclusive to Bend students.

Ideally, that presence would have been a physical space on all campuses, but as the Redmond campus was the second most developed behind Bend and a more convenient central location, the library team decided that just one new location was ambitious enough to start.

Three years after the survey, the library secured college strategic planning funds to develop and grow the Redmond campus. A space next to the Veterinary Technician program classrooms was identified as ideal for a library commons area because the program's accreditation standards have high expectations for library services and students are frequently assigned research projects.

However, the college was unable to commit to the space as new needs arose. The strategic planning funds were reassigned to other more pressing initiatives and the library re-assessed the most appropriate location to attract students from all programs.

In fall 2019, after a few more years spent advocating for a Redmond library space and during a period of transition at the Redmond campus in which the campus director retired and the structure of the position was reorganized, the library team received permission to open a library learning commons in the Redmond Technology Education Center, a 34,000-square-foot building that houses technology-centered programs which opened in fall 2014. This new space was bigger than the original vision, was a more central location for students from different programs, and provided a more welcoming footprint that the library could retrofit for our needs. The library budget was not increased to accommodate staffing or resources, but the team was excited for an opportunity to be a larger presence on the Redmond campus seven years after identifying a physical space as a pressing need for students and faculty.

The library team began planning, hoping for a spring 2020 opening. Of course, our plans came to a screeching halt in winter 2020 with COVID.

Like many Oregon colleges and universities, COCC was shut down starting in March 2020 through the end of academic year 2020–21. Once the campus reopened in 2021–22, it was difficult to maintain staffing to keep the Bend campus library open, so the Redmond library space once again took a backseat to the more pressing priority of maintaining day-to-day operations.

However, by spring 2022, the library team was able to advocate for increasing services and resources once again on the auxiliary campuses, and new grant opportunities emerged through the State Library of Oregon. COCC librarians applied for and received Library Services and Technology Act funds to develop a print-based collection of 350 new items supporting coursework and programs taught on the Redmond, Madras, and Prineville campuses, including veterinary technician, early childhood education, manufacturing, welding, and transfer programs.

The newly purchased Redmond collection also expanded the Bend library's children's literature center that highlights indigenous voices, Latinx voices, equity and access for LGBTQIA+ peoples, and books that focus on family, community, and resilience.

In addition, the library wanted the new space to feature print newspapers and journals supporting Redmond campus programs and student interest in current events and lifelong learning. COCC strategic planning funds supported the purchase of an optical character recognition (OCR) scanner and a student print station, and the library expanded its technology lending program to provide laptops and hotspots for checkout on the Redmond campus.

The new space was designated as the Redmond Student Commons and opened in fall 2022.

Strategic Directions Moving Forward with the Redmond Student Commons

In its first year of opening, the library worked with the Redmond campus director to staff the Commons with part-time student workers. Without a dedicated librarian to market the

Commons space and build the necessary relationships with faculty to create Commons supporters, it was underutilized and did not develop the greater library presence we had originally envisioned.

To meet our goals, we began looking creatively at our current services offered on the Bend campus. Even as headcounts increased at the Bend campus library during the 2022–23 academic year, in-person reference transactions maintained a declining trend that started prior to the pandemic. As a result, the library team decided to focus efforts on establishing the relationships with faculty and students that was the original recommendation from my 2012 internship study.

Now that the space and collections have been established, our next direction with the Redmond Student Commons is to commit a dedicated staff member who will be responsible for the space, offering programming, delivering instruction, and marketing directly to faculty and students. Without an increased staffing budget, the library is reorganizing its current reference team. Instead of offering drop-in reference support on the Bend campus staffed by an MLIS-credentialed librarian, we will instead encourage students to utilize scheduled reference appointments through our Book a Librarian program and move our part-time reference librarian to the Redmond Student Commons. By thinking creatively about our long-term goals to expand library use on the auxiliary campuses in the context of declining in-person reference needs, we were able to dedicate library staff to provide greater attention to the needs in Redmond and build the necessary relationships for growing buy-in from stakeholders.

The new responsibilities for this librarian will not focus on point-of-need instruction, but rather on faculty outreach, student programming, and instruction tied to credit classes and programs offered on the Redmond campus. This librarian will begin staffing the Redmond Student Commons in 2023-24 with the goal of playing a larger role in our strategic efforts to support COCC's auxiliary campus communities and create a library presence in Redmond that can truly be felt by our students.

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