

A Place For Us:

Art Students in the Centralized Academic Library

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VCU Libraries
James Branch Cabell Library

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Introduction

When collections are centralized into the main library, is there a means to offer the same focus and space for browsing and serendipitous discovery that users often find in the academic branch or departmental fine arts library?

At Virginia Commonwealth University, we are examining the possibility of creating a welcoming space for the academic art community within a large and heavily used main library. The space will also serve to highlight selections from our exhibition catalog collection and provide opportunities for browsing.



Existing Space

James Branch Cabell Library, 4th floor

Background

In 1993, the VCU School of the Arts transferred approximately 12,000 exhibition catalogs to James Branch Cabell Library, the main academic library. The library integrated the exhibition catalogs into their main stacks to facilitate access and research. Over the years, faculty from the School of the Arts voiced their desire for the library to distinguish the exhibition catalogs by housing it in a separate area. The faculty also believed that separating the collection to a smaller area would provide a better environment for browsing.

In 2007, the Arts Library Advisory Committee requested VCU Libraries to investigate the possibility of separating the collection. By this time, the exhibition catalog collection had grown to over 30,000 volumes and had an average growth rate of approximately 2,769 volumes per year. The collection was too large for easy browsing and the library could not provide the space. VCU Libraries suggested an alternative: a small and comfortable reading area that would highlight selections from the exhibition collection and encourage browsing.

Research

1. Arts Library Advisory Committee

The Arts Library Advisory Committee, which includes representative members from all departments in the School of the Arts, were asked for their input on a dedicated browsing area that would highlight exhibition catalogs and newly published art titles.

2. Survey to ARLIS-L and COLLIB-L

We sent an information survey to two library listservs requesting feedback on experiences when planning, implementing, and maintaining a specialized browsing area in the library.

3. Literature Review

We focused our review of the available scholarship on searching/browsing behavior, library as place, and arts information needs.

4. Project Planning with Public and Technical Services Divisions

Meetings were held with the heads of Cataloging, Preservation, and Circulation Departments to determine potential problems and to develop a proposed workflow.

Results

1. Arts Library Advisory Committee

Faculty on the committee favored the idea of creating a section for new titles. Many members felt it would be vital to their students' academic growth to have a better opportunity to browse these materials. Faculty suggested displaying some titles face-out for visual appeal. They also expressed that the area should be very welcoming to encourage "spending time" with the materials. Finally, faculty requested that the browsing books circulate for the length of a normal loan.

Results

2. Survey to ARLIS-L and COLLIB-L

We change the display every week by taking the books down on Sunday night. We have about 150 books a week and we allow users to check out any of the items when they want. (Lucie Wall Stylianopoulos, University of Virginia)

We put books here for a time before they are shelved in the regular stacks. Patrons seem to like to be able to browse the new materials and we are able to highlight books with more visual covers on the slanted display shelves on top. (Ann Lindell, University of Florida)

We've got a browsing collection that is wildly popular. We probably have 50 feet of shelving, and have put down a nice rug and some super-comfy chairs...it's a very low-maintenance way to provide a popular service. (David Clendinning, SUNY College at Oswego)

Results

3. Literature Review

“General browsing clearly ranked as these student artists’ search method of choice for finding library resources for their creative needs” (Frank, 1999, p. 450).

“...Students mentioned using various specialized library collections. Browsing oversized book collections and folios appealed to some students. They believed larger books often had more images, larger images, or better reproductions, all of which they generally preferred” (Frank, 1999, p. 450).

“It is significant that the majority of attributes that increase usage were related to quality of space” (Macken, 2006, p.20).

“The door count was down by 8%, making the Humanities circulation increase [by 8%] even more impressive. Outreach efforts and the rearrangement of the leisure reading material around the browsery and our ‘living rooms’ in the Humanities Reading Room are having a significant effect.” (MIT Libraries, Humanities Library Annual Report 2005-2006).

Results

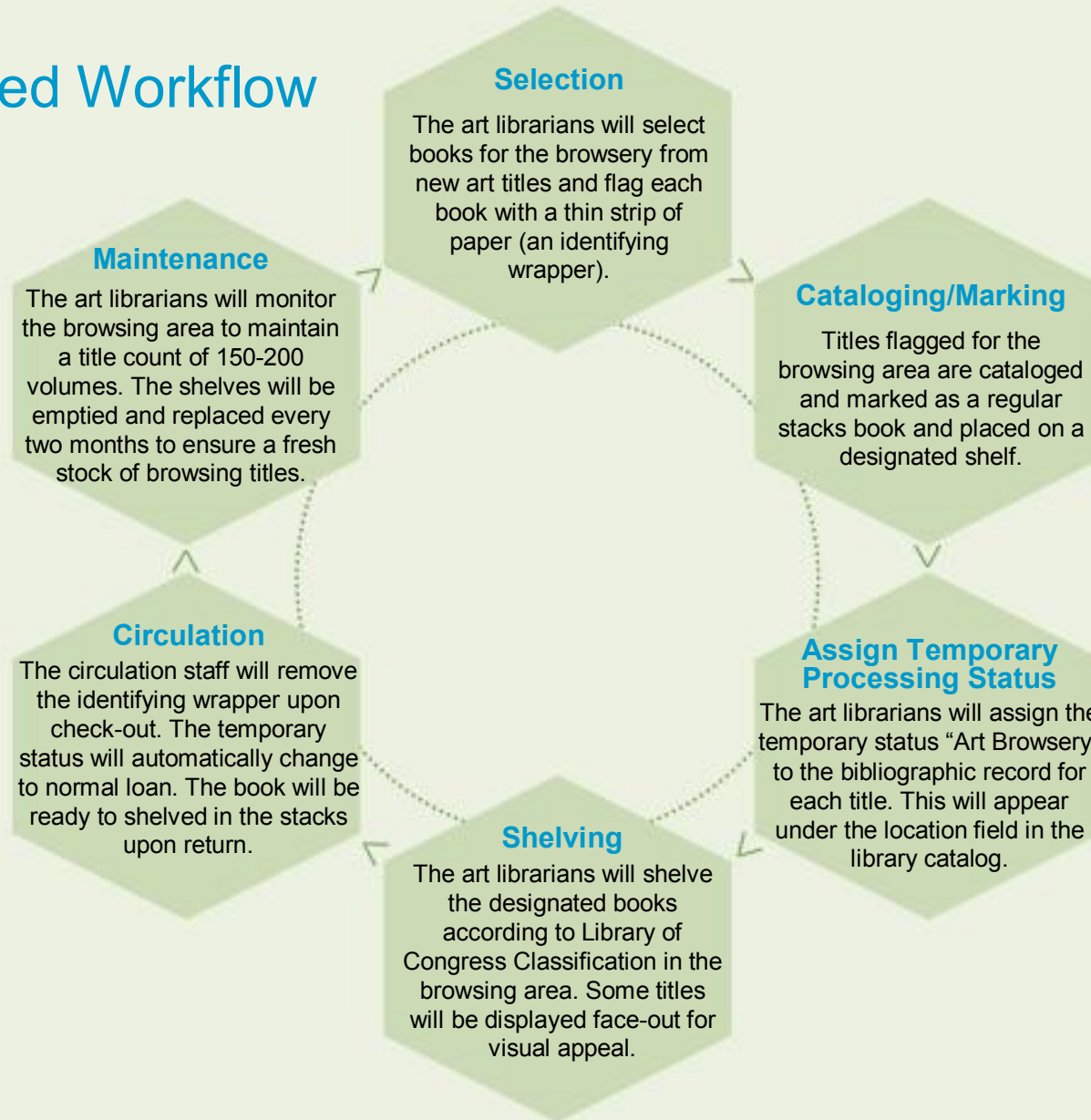
4. Project Planning with Public and Technical Services Divisions

A series of meetings addressed potential problems with the new browsing area:

- Possible user confusion when searching for books in a new location.
- Staff time and the division of responsibilities between departments.
- Space issues in an already crowded library.

A workflow plan was designed to minimize user access problems and to coordinate processing between departments.

Proposed Workflow



Conclusion

Based upon the results of feedback from faculty in the school of the arts, responses from colleagues in the art library and university library community, an analysis of the available scholarship, and project planning with library departments at our own institution, we have decided to implement a browsing area dedicated to the arts on the fourth floor of the library.



Proposed Space
James Branch Cabell Library, 4th floor

Please share your experience with us.

Have you implemented a browsing area in your library?

How many titles do you include in the browsing area?

How long do they remain “browsing” books before they are returned to the stacks?

What problems have you encountered?

What benefits have you incurred?

How has your community reacted to the browsing area?

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