Renovating for technology: Partnerships produce quick results

How a little team work went a long way

by David J. Nutty

A promise by the president of the university, a strong partnership with the University's Computer Information and Resource Center (CIRC), and a very tight timeline led to an almost instant transformation of an underutilized, basement-level reading area at the Gelman Library at George Washington University (GWU), Washington, D.C., into the attractive, state-of-the-art CIRC Gelman Learning Technology Labs, which include a 24-hour student computer lab and a new Faculty Instructional Technology Lab.

In the spring of 1997, pressure to add additional student computing facilities increased dramatically after the university announced a 6.9 percent tuition increase to fund, among other things, enhanced computer network and technology on campus. Strong negative student reaction to the tuition increase provided the incentive to "fast track" visible and needed improvements for the opening of the fall 1997 term.

In addition, a long-discussed need to promote the use of instructional technology among the faculty had been put on hold for lack of suitable space to build a faculty development center, and the chemistry department delayed the launch of computer-assisted instruction for students, due to the absence of an appropriate computer facility. Money had been allocated for all three

needs, but space at this urban university is always an issue. Where, when, and how were the questions.

The Gelman Library and CIRC (academic computing) have built a strong and positive working relationship. Though administratively separated and reporting to different vice presidents, the library and CIRC, led by University Librarian Jack Siggins and Director of CIRC Brad Reese, had partnered on other initiatives. Interestingly, the library's technical computing support is provided on a contract basis by CIRC employees based in the library. The foundation for moving forward was in place.

Making room

In a series of meetings with the associate vice president for academic affairs, there was consensus that GWU needed to move aggressively in improving its instructional technology resources and, in the longer term, the development of an "information arcade" type of resource center.

The Gelman Library has been a campus leader in introducing technology and automation, providing electronic resources and Internet training for several years. While it may seem extraordinary on a space-starved campus for a library (with its own space concerns) to volunteer 4,600 square feet for

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a non-traditional library project, it was not a difficult decision for Siggins who comments, "What better use of this space could there be than to provide a resource for students which would immediately and directly enhance their learning experience? The facility has proven to be even more popular than expected. Every terminal is in use most of the 24-hours each day it is open."

By early May, the plan was put in motion. The library would provide space, CIRC would operate the new facility, and the planning and construction process would be a partnership. Building permits were issued on June 13, and the first construction meeting occurred on June 25, just eight weeks before the opening of the fall semester. Obviously work had to be intensive and tightly coordinated. The partnership between the university's planning group, the architects, the project manager, and the construction company was essential for taking the project from first design to occupancy in just 15 weeks.

The 58-seat student computer lab. The use of wood and saturated colors helped create an inviting 24-hour space in the Gelman Library basement.

Washington architectural firm Einhorn, Yaffee, Prescott designed the project. Project architects John Baxter and Eric Anderson created an open and inviting space. Anderson noted that, "Our mission was to provide a space students would enjoy being in during the day or at 3 a.m.

. . . We also wanted to convey a subliminal message that the university is committed to staying abreast of technological advances and will provide its students with state-of-the-art equipment and the environment in which to use it."

An airy entrance corridor using a barrel vault ceiling was designed to provide a casual meeting place for students to sit and work in a comfortable and brightly lit environment. Anderson continued, "The use of wood and saturated colors helps to create a calm, warm environment, which helps soften the otherwise cold edge of technology."

The three elements

The end result is a mixed-use technology space designed to meet the needs of both students and faculty. The largest element is a 58-seat public computer lab equipped with Pentium 220 MHZ computers fully networked with fiber cabling to the computer. The lab is open 24 hours a day and complements the library's 24-hour reading room, located one floor above. The existing entrance for the library's 24-hour room was modified and now serves as the access point for both study space and computer labs. The concept of a combined 24/7 student area for both reading and computer use in contiguous spaces within the library is appealing.

A second element is a scheduled computer lab with 13 workstations. The lab can be scheduled by department, such as chemistry, and by faculty for class use or for individual computer-aided instruction for students. When not scheduled, the lab is opened as a supplemental public computing space.

The third component is the Instructional Technology Lab (ITL), where faculty can

work with a staff of three instructional technologists who are members of the CIRC staff. The ITL is committed to a collaborative environment with the Gelman Library and the university's Teaching Center. The area includes modular office areas for the staff, but most of the space was designed as a fully wired, large, open area with flexible-use furniture to accommodate evolving technologies. The objectives of the ITL include:

• *Innovation:* to help prepare faculty to work with innovative technologies and begin to apply evolving technologies to their classes.

• *Instruction:* to provide faculty with instructional opportunities to enhance their skills.

• *Collaboration:* through intensive workshops the lab works collaboratively with faculty and graduate student teams to provide support for prototype multimedia projects. ITL also works collaboratively with other university departments and resources to train and provide support in the use of instructional technologies.

• *Support:* ITL serves as both an informal and formal support mechanism for faculty and coordinates support throughout the university.

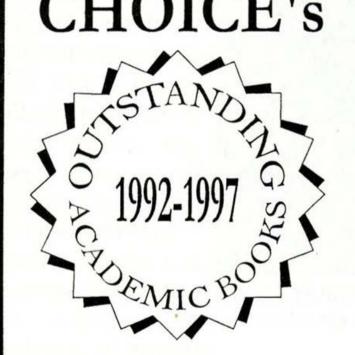• *Resources:* provides hardware and software resources to faculty.

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• *Quality:* the use of instructional design principles and techniques are encouraged and supported.

• *Involvement:* ITL takes a leadership role in fostering synergistic relationships on campus.

The GWU Gelman Learning Technology Labs project proves that in the sometimes slow moving world of academia a technology project can move on a fast track from initial idea to completion when there is administrative support, a strong partnership between the library and academic computing, an institutional will that instructional technology is important, and excellent work by architects and construction and trades people.

The labs have been heavily used from the moment they opened. Discussion has already started for a phase two of the CIRC Gelman Technology Center. ∎