

Jenna Freedman and Shannon O'Neill

Library beautification

Decorating a denuded library that has only three months left to live (in its current location)

The Barnard College Library recently moved into a swing space from its former home in Lehman Hall. For the next 2.5 years, we will be in what was formerly the college gymnasium while a new building is constructed. Over the summer we emptied the book stacks of their nearly 200,000 volumes, sending the majority of our holdings into dark storage for the duration of construction. The desolate stacks did not invoke the Barnard Library that our community knows and values: energetic, warm, accessible, a space for critical thinking, and—both literally and metaphorically—the heart of our campus.

So we got rid of the stacks, too. That left the two floors that had formerly held most of our circulating collection open and light but not appearing to be the best place for research, study, and discovery. There were tracks on the floor serving as ghosts of the old stacks. Electrical outlet pockets jutted from the ground, along with ancient papers that had fused to the gritty floors. With just one semester left before the move to the swing space, and poised to spend millions of dollars on renovating the gym and erecting a new building, the college understandably wasn't eager to plunk

down a lot of cash to install carpet or buy additional furniture that would be used for only three months.

However, we pride ourselves on being a welcoming space, we didn't want to alienate our students, and we know how much even just one semester at Barnard costs. We wanted

our user population to know how much we care about their educational environment. We decided on a two-part approach to making Lehman Hall home for its last semester as the Barnard Library. We wanted to clean it up, provide comfortable seating, and include additional study space. We also wanted students to have a role in beautifying the space.



Barnard Library Commemorative Patch designed by student Rowanne Dean and IMATS Administrative Assistant Abby Lee.

Part I: DIY makeover staff edition

One of the benefits of having a small staff is our agility. We're able to mobilize, suggest a course of action, and

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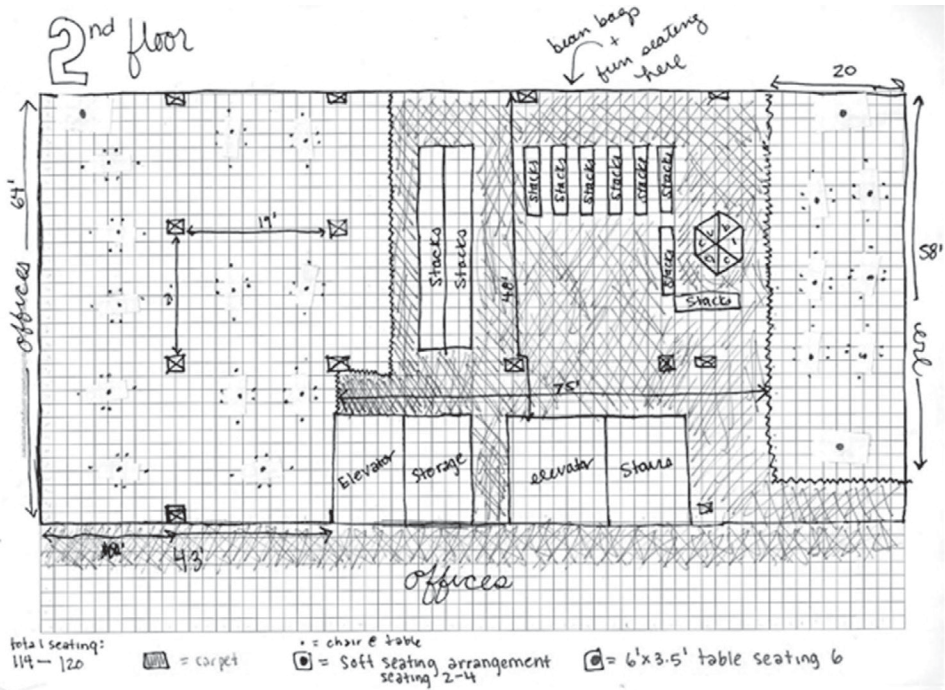
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make it happen within a short turnaround time. With a looming midterm season, we needed to move quickly in order to refashion our library from a space that was “ready for demolition” to one that cemented in the minds of the students and faculty that we prioritize our partnership with them and the scholarship they produce at Barnard Library.

Interim Director Alexis Seeley charged College Archivist Shannon O’Neill to convene a group of library stakeholders to devise an efficient and cost-effective plan for the second

whether the library was still a viable location for research, the budget for improvements was limited, and the team needed to enact the plan within an aggressive timeline of merely three weeks.

With the ultimate goal of generating a welcoming environment that is conducive to study and research, and operating with limited human and fiscal resources, the team made the decision to work first with what was available and then fill in any gaps. It was identified that, in lieu of having a budget for



Hand-drawn floorplan by Shannon O’Neill for the makeover of the library second floor.

and third floors where the stacks formerly stood. The group ultimately consisted of O’Neill, representing the archives; Charlotte Price, representing the librarians; Garrett Sumner, representing the circulation staff; and Suze Myers, representing the students.

The newfound, wide open spaces of the library offered lots of opportunity, but there were still a number of challenges for the renovation team to address: the uneven flooring presented accessibility concerns, students (post-stacks removal) frequently questioned

carpeting or the capacity to install new flooring, the uneven floors could be somewhat mitigated if they were covered with furniture. With the desire to increase study space for the remaining semester of the building’s lifespan, the team decided to cover as much square footage of the library with seating and spaces appropriate for research.

Split across the two floors were a number of tables, seating types, and study carrels. The team determined that they could create a designated quiet(er) study area, and

maximize the remaining space for group or individual study, if they centralized all of the study carrels to the third floor.

The second floor now had additional floor space, which could be covered with large tables for group/individual study. Larger tables were repurposed from the library and from the facilities department's used furniture garage, and folding tables were purchased in order to fill the remaining space.

The facilities department also graciously provided the library with folding chairs that were not in active use

by the campus. Soft seating, which was disparately placed throughout the library, was reconfigured into living room-style seating arrangements, positioned at the corners of the library.

Finally, in order to encourage some levity and to bring more comfort into the space, the team brought in bean bag chairs, soft lighting (including strings of twinkling lights), plants, and brightly colored table top covers (which were originally intended to be fabric shower curtains, but were cheaper—and had more vibrant patterns—than the tablecover options available at a local store).

For less than \$1,500, the team increased seating by more than 50 percent, and turned the second and third floors from spaces students questioned were available for use into spaces that are now filled with students gearing up for their final papers and exams.

Part II: DIY makeover student edition

Once most of the staff-powered renovation

was complete, it was time to turn things over to the students. We organized a library "Paint Night," where we provided acrylic paint, snacks, and library walls, and students brought their considerable creativity and enthusiasm. The idea for painting was put forth by Abby G. Lee of our Instructional Media and Technology Services department, replac-



Students getting snacks and paint at Paint Night.

ing a graffiti theme, on which another department had a prior claim. Other library staff conceiving and executing the event were Myers and Price, who also served on O'Neill's beautification com-

mittee, along with the event's coordinator, Jenna Freedman.

Supplies and considerations

Our department assistant, Arun Bryson, acquired acrylic paint (large bottles are economical, but awkward to pour from), brushes in a range of sizes from fine to wide, paper plates to serve as palettes, cups for water, and snacks and hot beverages (coffee, tea, and cocoa).

We developed a list of "Community Agreements" to provide guidance for what would and wouldn't be appropriate content and behavior. As a women's college in a culture that is attentive to safer spaces, codes of conduct, and trigger warnings, we thought it was important to create some ground rules.

The set-up was a few tables pushed together with paint at one end and refreshments at the other. Library staff loaded up paper plate palettes with a dollop of each

color and handed them to students. We had a hard time keeping up with demand, so we recommend implementing an assembly line routine of some sort, rather than the chaos that reigned at our event.

The chaos wasn't a bad thing. It was a signifier of how popular the event turned out to be. We had initially intended to give students three walls to paint, but within a few minutes, it was clear that the allotted space would not be enough. We expanded the "canvas" to the entire second floor of the library. Students painted not only the walls, but also doors, windows, and in a few spots, the ceiling. Our staff was so busy dolloping paint on plates, we couldn't provide as much supervision as we might have liked. We recommend making sure you have plenty of staff and/or student workers on hand, dressed to get dirty.

The event was scheduled for 90 minutes. We encouraged participants to assist in the clean up efforts by offering them additional swag (a commemorative library building patch), and we let students take home the remaining supplies. The paint and brushes were messy, and we didn't expect to use them again.

Expectations

While the event was well-attended, and students and (most) staff have enjoyed seeing the art on the walls every day, routinely noticing new elements and flourishes, there were a few challenges.

The artists mostly adhered to our community agreements, though there was one contribution that strayed and was jarring to

some male staff members who saw it as they exited the staff elevator the next day. It said "Majoring in I Hate Men '17." We covered that piece up with photos from the archives, and that seemed to satisfy everyone. No one has complained, or even asked what was covered.

There were a few things we didn't anticipate, and therefore didn't include in the com-

munity agreements. A cheeky group of first years took their pants off while painting. Someone painted a number of "Feel the Bern" slogans. (Having posts advocating for a candidate isn't ideal for a nonprofit institution.) Members of a campus organization painted its Twitter handle all over the place.

The student worker who helped organize the paint night took the first pass at letting students know when their behavior and creations weren't acceptable. The stu-

dent worker was raring to tell people off, but we thought that they might take "no" better from an older peer than from library professional staff. The first years eventually put their pants back on. Most of them also stayed until the very end and helped clean up.

We painted new designs over most of the Twitter handles and some of the "Feel the Berns." After discussing the matter at a staff meeting, we decided to let "Feel the Bern" stand as protected speech.

Recommendations

We wish we'd designated an event-specific hashtag and had done a better job of collecting the hundreds, if not thousands of photos
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Barnard student Megnot Mulugeta at the library Paint Night.

2. Alan G. Barnard, Robyn E. Nash, and Michael O'Brien, "Information literacy: Developing lifelong skills through nursing education," *Journal of Nursing Education* 44 no. 11 (2005): 505-10.

3. Bev Turnbull, Bernadette Royal, and Margaret Purnell, "Using an interdisciplinary partnership to develop nursing students' information literacy skills: an evaluation," *Contemporary Nurse* 38 no. 1-2 (2011):122-9. doi: 10.5172/conu.2011.38.1-2.122.

4. "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Nursing," last modified Oc-

tober 2013, www.ala.org/acrl/standards/nursing.

5. Amy Henson, "The Success of Nontraditional College Students in an IT World," *Research in Higher Education Journal* 25 Sep (2014): 1-19.

6. Maria Anna Jankowska and James W. Marcum, "Sustainability challenge for academic libraries: Planning for the future," *College & Research Libraries* 71 no. 2 (2010):160-170, doi:10.5860/0710160, <http://crl.acrl.org/content/71/2/160>. short. *z*

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taken during and after Paint Night. One of the librarians, Jennie Correia, created a folder on our shared drive, so we do have a small collection of photographs.¹

Regarding photographs, we wish we'd shared a photography policy, stating that Paint Night was a public event and that by participating, students were agreeing to have their participation and their work documented. We would have provided an opt-out option and instructed photographers to ask permission before taking close-up shots of artists or their work.

It would have been great to have determined a way to track individual artists so that we could credit their work when sharing photographs of it (if they wanted us to), and it also would have been smart to coordinate better with other campus units, including Communications.

Conclusion

Without spending a lot of time or money, Barnard librarians made their library a warm and welcoming space, over which its regular denizens felt an increased ownership. Sentiments like "I Love This Library," "Rest in Power Barnard Library," and "I Cried Here," show students deep attachments to the library-as-space. Allowing them to express these sentiments in a tangible form was a powerful and poignant act—for the painter, but also

for library staff, researchers, and people who study in the space.

Campus sentiment is a delicate thing. People from all constituencies—faculty, students, staff, alums, affiliates, and others—are nervous about what will happen with our library moving to a swing space for a few years. They worry about the books, the people, the study space, and, for some of them, the feel is the biggest concern.

The spruce up was designed to make our largest user base, our students, feel like our physical space was still a space that could see to their emotional needs, as well as provide them with a full suite of library resources. They were left still feeling sad that a building they've become attached to is going away, but they also got to take some ownership of it before it did. The takeaway is the library is comfortable, and a place for creativity. We've retained and increased our loyal constituency: people who follow the library on social media and come to all of our events, and we also have a lot of people studying quietly here, as we write this from the last finals week that will happen in the Barnard Library in Lehman Hall.

Note

1. A slideshow of images from the Paint Night event is available at <https://library.barnard.edu/news/Paint-Night-Slideshow>. *z*