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Collaborating Across Academic Units: The Mississippi State University ERLE Project

Lis Pankl

Mississippi State University, lis@library.msstate.edu

Jason M. Keith

Iowa State University, jkeith@iastate.edu

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Mississippi State University (MSU), a public land-grant institution with Very High Research Activity (R1) as classified by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, is developing and implementing a new transformative strategic plan to further emphasize collaborative, experiential learning to prepare students for relevant careers upon graduation. As an institution located in a rural part of the southeastern United States in an underserved state, first-to-second year student retention rates and six-year graduation rates have been lower than those of peer and peer-plus universities. As such, the university administration has challenged its faculty and academic leaders to think creatively for preparing tomorrow's workforce. This charge led to a transformative and unique collaboration between the Bagley College of Engineering dean and the MSU Libraries dean to reimagine library space and services with the ERLE (Exploration, Research and Learning Environment) project. ERLE not only promotes hands-on interactions in science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEM), but also creates and fosters a community hub for First Year Experience (FYE) and Supplemental Instruction (SI) in courses with low persistence rates, academic advising, career counseling, and overall student well-being and socialization. In mapping out this plan, significant challenges include entrenched legacy practices, organizational stagnation and historic limited library engagement with students and faculty. With an eye towards innovation, entrepreneurship and technology, several new faculty and staff positions in MSU Libraries will allow for this advancement to occur. In this article we outline the steps taken, barriers encountered, and successes achieved.

Keywords

Libraries, Engineering, Collaboration, Space, Engagement, Learning, Research, Student Success

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Collaborating Across Academic Units: The Mississippi State University ERLE Project

Lisa Pankl (lis@library.msstate.edu)
Dean of Libraries, Mississippi State University

Jason M. Keith (jkeith@iastate.edu)
Senior Vice President and Provost, Iowa State University

Abstract

Mississippi State University (MSU), a public land-grant institution with Very High Research Activity (R1) as classified by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, is developing and implementing a new transformative strategic plan to further emphasize collaborative, experiential learning to prepare students for relevant careers upon graduation. As an institution located in a rural part of the southeastern United States in an underserved state, first-to-second year student retention rates and six-year graduation rates have been lower than those of peer and peer-plus universities. As such, the university administration has challenged its faculty and academic leaders to think creatively for preparing tomorrow's workforce. This charge led to a transformative and unique collaboration between the Bagley College of Engineering dean and the MSU Libraries dean to reimagine library space and services with the ERLE (Exploration, Research and Learning Environment) project. ERLE not only promotes hands-on interactions in science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEM), but also creates and fosters a community hub for First Year Experience (FYE) and Supplemental Instruction (SI) in courses with low persistence rates, academic advising, career counseling, and overall student well-being and socialization. In mapping out this plan, significant challenges include entrenched legacy practices, organizational stagnation and historic limited library engagement with students and faculty. With an eye towards innovation, entrepreneurship and technology, several new faculty and staff positions in MSU Libraries will allow for this advancement to occur. In this article we outline the steps taken, barriers encountered, and successes achieved.

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Introduction and Background

The reimagining of learning itself and the spaces where learning and research take place has driven many of the changes in higher education over the last two decades. Due to their size and often central location, university libraries are

making tremendous changes with how they facilitate learning and research with innovative spaces and services. In their article, Garoufali and Garoufallou¹ make a bold assertion that these innovations in space design are "signaling that [libraries] are institutions whose mission is to challenge traditional ways of thinking to



break with convention, and to adapt to current needs” of evolving student behaviors and pedagogies.

In an effort to get a jump start on the looming enrollment cliff, universities are competing for students at an unprecedented level. Consequently, paying close attention to the experience of the whole student – social, intellectual, physical – has become paramount for institutions of higher education. The academic library can play a unique role in this emphasis on the student experience. Christoffersen et al.² contend that, “Increasingly, the best use of the twenty-first century library building, typically located in the heart of campus, is primarily as a people's space.” This is a massive shift in twentieth century conceptions of the university library and has had early adopters while others, like Mississippi State University (MSU), are late to the game.

This change in how libraries function as active spaces is not limited to the academic environment. Public libraries are also envisioning a new way to think about space in libraries. Jon Henley quotes a public library employee who passionately states the library is not just for books, but also “[i]t’s a place to learn, connect, develop, collaborate. Or just to be. A meeting place for our minds.”³ This emphasis on connection mirrors how space in the workplace is changing as well with concepts such as “co-working.” Co-working spaces offer collaborative, open environments where professionals from inter-connected industries can innovate.⁴ Similarly, the interdisciplinarity that has come to define scholarly work as well as innovations in new degree programs needs new pathways and new ways of collaborating to flourish.

Due to entrenched practices and traditions, MSU Libraries had not become fully integrated as a partner in offering services and spaces for the service, learning and research activities of the

university. However, in this article we will describe the collaboration between two Deans at Mississippi State University (MSU) and how that collaboration has transformed the role of the library on campus and addressed the weaponized traditions of siloed and insular units that benefited no one. At its core, the ERLE (Exploration, Research and Learning Environment) collaboration is creating what Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden describes as “a safe place for the discussion of ideas.”⁵ As we see the lives and realities of students becoming much more complex and perilous, institutions of higher education need to do more to create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere that directly impacts student success and well-being.

The primary product of this collaboration, the creation of the ERLE at MSU, will provide opportunities for the entire campus community to fully embrace the possibilities of a library that is fully engaged in the research, service and learning mission of the university. The ERLE facilitates solutions for the key issues in higher education today, including student recruitment and retention, student success, faculty research productivity, and community building.

The Role of Public Land Grant Institutions in Higher Education

Mississippi State University (MSU) is a large, comprehensive land grant institution with very high research expenditures (R1) as classified by the Carnegie Foundation. Founded in 1878, MSU is the flagship institution in the state of Mississippi. In fall 2023, the institution had a total enrollment of 22,657 students, with 17,456 undergraduate students and 4,288 graduate students (including professional students and educational specialists). During the 2022-2023 academic year, the university produced a record high graduating class which included 4,541 undergraduate and 1,409 graduate degrees. The enrollment is nearly 52% female and includes 15.4% Black (which leads our peer institutions in



2023 in the Southeastern Conference), 4.3% Hispanic, 3.2% Asian and 2.5% Multiracial students. It is noted that slightly over one third of the undergraduates have self-reported themselves as first-generation students. The institution also established two other records with an excess of \$303MM in research expenditures and over \$259MM in private fundraising.

The timing of the ERLE project was fortuitous, to say the least. The university had just come out of a pandemic, with a relatively new Provost directing an institutionally led strategic planning exercise. He issued a challenge from the administrative level to develop innovative, transformative academic programs with a focus on enhanced student success leading to improved overall persistence, retention and graduation rates. Furthermore, the state of Mississippi had forecasted a drop in high school graduation numbers of over 10% over the next several years. Given these conditions, the institutional direction was to stay on the forefront of being the school of choice for our citizens.

The Exploration, Research and Learning Environment (ERLE) in the Mississippi State University Libraries

Now that we have established “what” sorts of things the institution is looking at doing for the near term, the reader may ask themselves “where” is this work going to occur? From the various meetings between the academic leaders, the Bagley College of Engineering Dean emphasized the role that experiential learning has played in shaping the student experience within his college, and that he wanted to see it grow further. However, space is at a premium. Every student in an Engineering program of study is already engaging in engineering-focused experiential learning in their first-year engineering courses, through laboratories scattered throughout the curriculum, and via senior design / capstone projects. A significant number of students also participate in experiential learning outside

of their coursework, namely through cooperative education and internships (in partnership with the MSU Career Center), through student competition teams, or via undergraduate research (in partnership with the Office of Research and Economic Development and the Shackouls Honors College).

The College of Engineering is currently renovating two buildings. The first building was previously used for storage and will be renovated and revitalized in a new plan for engineering student success as an Engineering Student Center. This facility will include an open collaborative makerspace to be shared by all eight engineering departments as well as the engineering outreach office for day camps and student tours organized jointly with the Office of Admissions & Scholarships. Furthermore, there will be interactive study and videoconference facilities, as well as a recording studio to further the mission of the engineering distance education program. The second renovation that is being undertaken is led by the Department of Mechanical Engineering and consists of several phases. The vision for this space includes a new machine shop, incubator spaces, and socialization hubs for mechanical engineering students. In outlining his needs to the other deans, the Engineering Dean commented that he would need even more space for the Department of Mechanical Engineering, but also that he wanted to identify ways for engineering students from various departments to work together on multidisciplinary projects and be able to have collaborative projects between different academic colleges. A representative example project is cross laminated timber, which at MSU would involve collaboration between Civil Engineering, Sustainable Bioproducts in the College of Forest Resources and with Building & Construction Science in the College of Architecture, Art and Design. Simultaneously, the MSU Libraries hired a new Dean who embraced the new university mission. Student use of the library was lower than desired,



and the Dean recognized the high premium cost for new spaces. Concurrently, she expressed a desire to support student & faculty success by transforming the Mitchell Memorial Library into a centrally located learning, research and social hub for the institution.

Coming into a new leadership position is always difficult, and especially so when someone is from outside the institution. The new MSU Libraries Dean was taking a post that had been occupied by the same individual for thirty-four years. During that time, there was a noticeable decrease in engagement with the university as it changed to meet evolving student needs. Consequently, the Libraries had been left behind in terms of their centrality to the teaching, research and service mission of the university. To address this historic pattern that had built a culture of insularity and toxic inwardness, the Libraries Dean initiated an inclusive approach and established deep dialogues not only between the academic colleges with each other (and in identifying roles that the MSU Libraries can play in supporting those collaborations), but also between the MSU Libraries and other divisions within the institution. Due to the immediate space needs of the Engineering Dean described previously, a natural partnership arose. Although the Engineering Dean's primary interest was space for his own college, he quickly realized the importance of the Libraries as a central hub for campus. Consequently, the two Deans decided to aggressively pursue the idea of the ERLE. As part of a campaign to develop buy-in, the following stakeholders were engaged through formal presentations, small group conversations, and direct one-on-one meetings:

- Provost and Executive Vice President
- Library Faculty and Staff
- Vice President for Student Affairs
- Vice President for Finance and Administration
- Facilities Management
- Academic Deans

- University Library Committee (composed of institutional faculty & staff)
- MSU President
- Mississippi State University Foundation
- Robert Holland Faculty Senate
- MSU Student Association

The identification of these stakeholders occurred as they determined what needed to be done to get the project off the ground and who was going to need to be champions of the idea in order to sell it to campus.

Key aspects arising from engagement with stakeholders include:

- The establishment of an off-site Materials Depository – MSU Facilities Management is working with the MSU Libraries to host 50,000 linear feet of storage space to hold monographs and archival materials.
- Traditional student persistence, retention and graduation rates at MSU are below those of peer and peer-plus institutions. Recognizing that high school graduation numbers have been projected to decline over the next three to five years, there is an institutional push to support student success. Several key MSU programs are being expanded and have no centralized space to host them. A portion or all of each service unit listed below now has unprecedented space access to the Mitchell Memorial Library. Prior to this, the MSU library was seen institutionally as a place to hold books, use institutional computer resources, and provide space for quiet study.
- Supplemental Instruction (SI) sections consist of optional recitation sections that are offered in courses with high DFW rates. The SI sections are led by students who have taken these courses and received an A grade. Initial studies have shown that when students voluntarily participate in SI sections, the DFW rate is



cut in half and student grade point averages are increased by half of a letter grade. As a university with many Pell Grant students, staying on track from one semester to the next and keeping overall GPA at or above a 3.0 to maintain university scholarships (as well as private scholarships managed by the academic colleges), these efforts clearly contribute to improving our persistence, retention and graduation data.

- First Year Experience (FYE) is administered by the Center for Academic Excellence at MSU. In essence, entering students are encouraged (but not required) to enroll in one of over twenty different seminar courses and participate in one of six learning communities. The FYE1003 courses have a maximum enrollment of 19 students and are led by a peer leader (a junior or senior level student who has been successful at MSU). The goal of the FYE program is to instill a sense of both academic as well as social community and belonging among MSU students.
- The MSU Writing Center supports all writing projects occurring on campus. Their staff of writing consultants (undergraduate and graduate students trained in the theory of writing theory, practice and research) are supervised by writing faculty. Through 30- and 60- minute sessions, students can seek assistance with course assignments, term papers, and personal documents such as resumes, cover letters and scholarship essays.
- The MSU Libraries is undergoing renovation to establish a series of STEAM Incubators. Following the model in the Bagley College of Engineering, the goal is to create dedicated spaces for short-term (typically one semester but up to one year in length) spaces to serve as “creation” environments for undergrad/grad students,

amateur inventors, and Mississippi economic industry partners to bring their ideas to reality by developing novel systems with high TRL (Technology Readiness Level). This will provide much needed locations for students to experience hands-on learning and develop the critical thinking skills required for STEAM careers. Given the fact that the MSU Libraries already hosts the MaxxSouth Digital Media Center (which includes studio spaces, a multimedia lab, makerspaces, a virtual reality studio, enhanced printing capabilities and group study / collaboration), this is anticipated to be a highly utilized function among the university / campus community.

- Studies show that students (and faculty) do better at their studies / jobs when engaged in a work-life balance with a focus on well-being. The MSU Libraries contribute to campus-wide well-being by providing spaces and services to help students, staff and faculty incorporate wellness activities into their daily routine, this includes: partnering with the university recreation department (Sanderson Center) to provide walking treadmill desks and dedicating space in the library to a small private gym that is a reservable room, creating a Prayer and Meditation Room that welcomes people of all faiths and those that practice meditation, creating a Sensory Room for neurodivergent people to have a place to escape the often overwhelming environment of a large university campus, and the incorporation of a small food market with healthier food and drink options.

The above discussions for the MSU strategic plan clearly show how MSU is collaborating to remove barriers and combat decades-old weaponized traditions (define), illustrating the role of the library as a next-generation service

unit to enhance the three themes outlined on the university seal: learning, service, and research.

Based upon institutional needs and stakeholder discussions, before & after floor plans for ERLE shown in figures 1-5 below. The MSU Libraries are working with central administration on stagewise implementation of this plan. Areas shown in these figures illustrate planned changes from the floor plan of 2022, and in essence redefine and reprogram nearly 70,000 square feet of space in the Mitchell Memorial Library.

- *First floor (relocation of print collection and addition of a student success area and a digitization lab):* As of January 2023, when this process was being initiated, the Mitchell Memorial Library contained approximately 270,000 bound journals and 500,000 books in the circulating collection (these totals do not include anything contained in branch libraries or off-site storage). Through the collaboration outlined above with MSU Facilities

and a recent contractual agreement with JSTOR, we can now store off site and/or permanently remove the bound journals. This then allows for the circulating collection to be moved to the first floor (which contains compact shelving). An underutilized space has been re-dedicated to serve as a digitization lab. Current digitization tools on inventory comfortably fit in this room which also has additional square footage for further expansion. Given the unique holdings of the MSU Libraries (including hosting the Ulysses S. Grant Presidential Library and The Frank and Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana, The Charles H. Templeton, Sr. Music Museum and special collections including rare books, manuscripts, notes and archives of Mississippi history and civil rights), this lab will open up MSU to researchers worldwide.

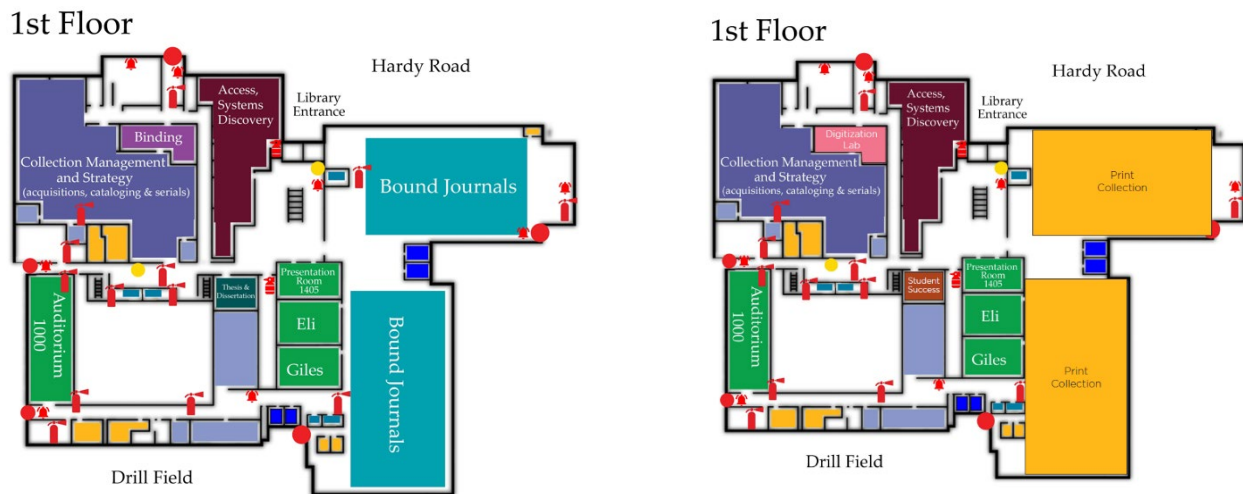


Figure 1. Initial and Planned Floor Plans for the First Floor

- *Second floor (addition of writing center, coffee / food options, computers / collaboration / wellness, and reading rooms):* The second floor of the Mitchell Memorial Library is the main floor of the building as the doorway exits onto MSU’s centrally located Drill Field (a large green space surrounded by academic buildings for engineering, business, the Colvard Student Union and MSU administration). To draw more students and faculty patrons to the library, permission was granted to provide expanded coffee /

food options, provide comfortable seating venues for socialization and collaboration, and debut spaces for wellness and well-being. Academic functions are also part of the renovation plan for this floor, including the new home for the MSU Writing Center. Given the desire to also serve as a central hub for regular and special campus events / public dialogue, additional space is dedicated to host events and programming.

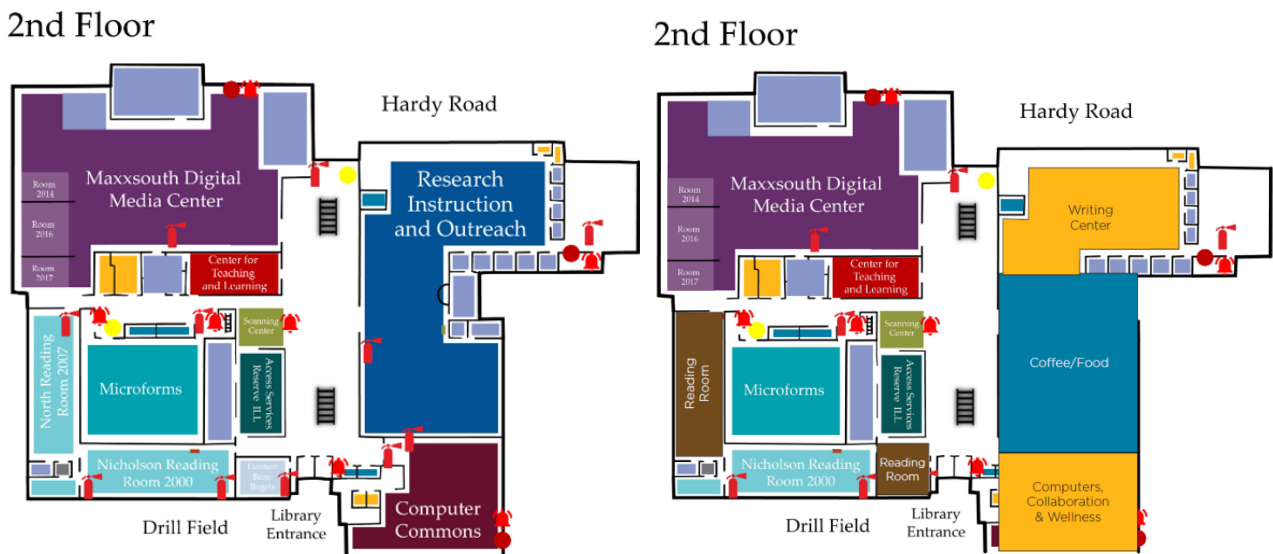


Figure 2. Initial and Planned Floor Plan for the Second Floor

- *Third floor (addition of STEAM incubators, student success, study rooms and a conference room):* Some of the largest changes occur on the third floor, with the relocation of nearly half a million volumes from our circulating collection. Focus groups and discussions that were held

with the MSU Student Association indicated that students want additional study space (rooms for small groups, socialization spaces for larger collaboration and dedicated locations for quiet study). A significant portion of the third floor will include these study rooms (each room would include monitors that

can connect to laptop computers, whiteboards / smartboards and technology for recording presentations or engaging in videoconferencing). These spaces are also important for our institutional goal of expanded collaboration with industry. We anticipate student groups working in the STEAM incubator spaces and then taking their prototypes to the study rooms for regular interactions with industrial project sponsors. The third floor will also house staff from the MSU Center for Student Success, who currently do not have adequate office space nor comfortable advising space to support first-year student persistence, retention and graduation rates.

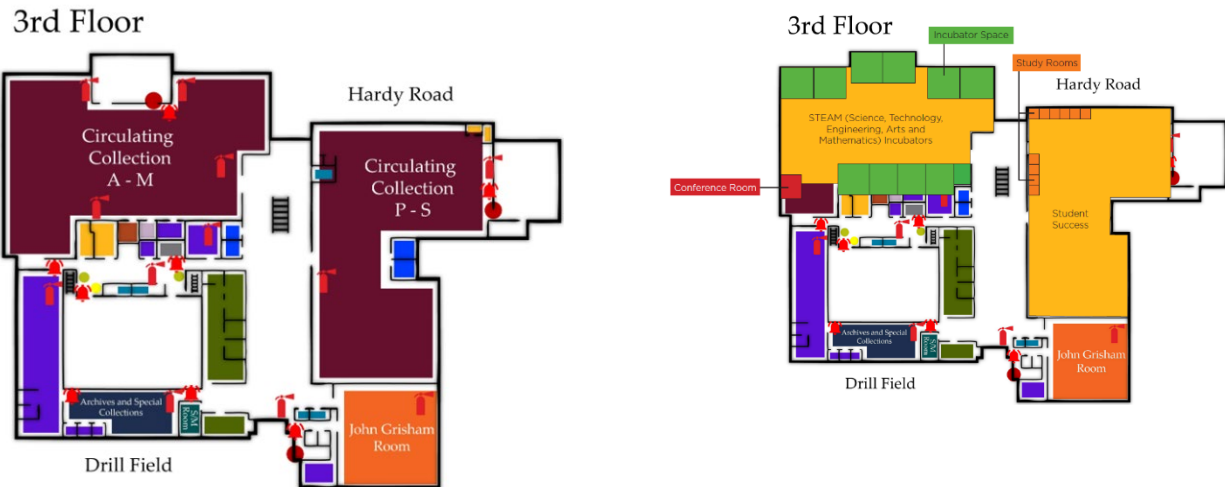


Figure 3. Initial and Planned Floor Plans for the Third Floor

- *Fourth / Fifth floor (addition of first year experience, conference rooms, flex space and study rooms):* The fourth floor will undergo some immediate and longer-term changes. As noted earlier in this article, circulating collection books will be relocated to the moveable storage locations on the first floor, freeing up much

needed space to support First Year Experience programming. Through hosting units such as the Writing Center, Supplemental Instruction and Student Success it is our goal for the library to be a one-stop shop to serve student needs. Students will come to the library for these services, and then be exposed to the other services that are available. This

will disrupt the view of an academic library as a place only for quiet, independent work. Faculty and student focus groups have also requested additional conference room capabilities that are not available across campus. Finally, when the Grant Presidential Library is relocated to a new location off site (ap-

proximately 2028), there will be additional space made available to support the MSU strategic plan. The fifth floor has a smaller footprint, and is intended to be used as a space for quiet study and to have some flex space available for student group events, book readings, etc.

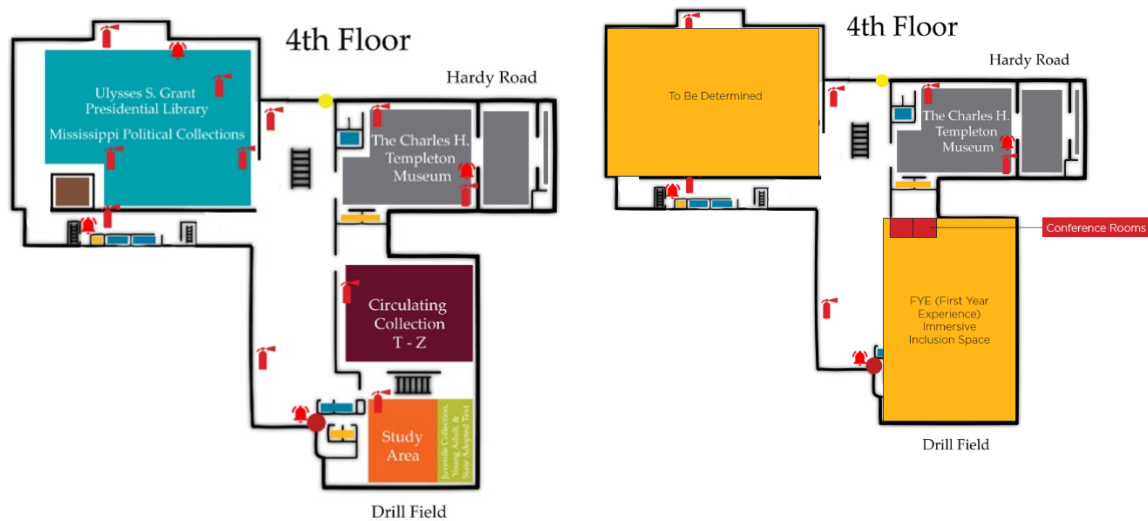


Figure 4. Initial and Planned Floor Plans for the Fourth Floor

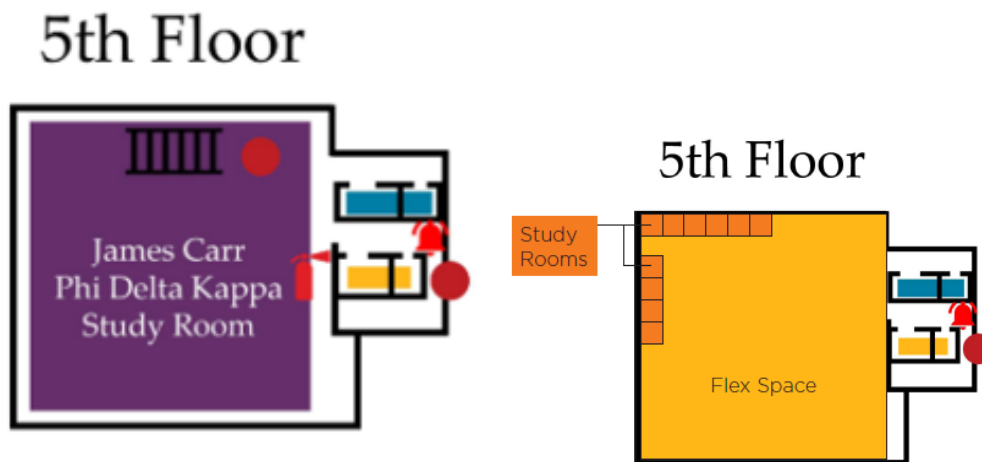


Figure 5. Initial and Planned Floor Plans for the Fifth Floor

Conclusion

To overcome the siloed and insular practices of the past, this collaboration between Engineering and the Libraries provides a pathway forward to combat a longstanding perception that the Libraries are not part of the larger movement on campus to embrace the whole experience of not only students, but the entire campus community. By demonstrating the power of partnerships with academic and service units, the ERLE allows the space and services of the Libraries to be transformed and to become highly functional

and impactful. It is a very visible way of breaking down the weaponized and entrenched perception that the library is not a significant part of the research, service, and learning mission of the university.

¹ Garoufali, Angeliki and Emmanouel Garoufallou. 2022. "Transforming Libraries into Learning Collaborative Hubs: The Current State of Physical Spaces and the Perceptions of Greek Librarians Concerning Implementation of the 'Learning Commons' Model." *Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication* 73, no. 6/7: 828-852. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GKMC-04-2022-0086>

² Christoffersen, Deborah Lynn, Clifton B. Farnsworth, Evan D. Bingham, and James P. Smith. 2021. "Considerations for Creating Library Learning Spaces within a Hierarchy of Learning Space Attributes." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 47, 6: 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2021.102458>

³ Henley, Jon. 2024. "Libraries for the Future: Europe's New Wave of 'Meeting Places for the Mind'." *The Guardian*, January 8, 2024.

⁴ Grinberg, Noga. 2022. "Coworking: How Did it All Start and Where is it Going?" Accessed January 10, 2024. <https://www.mindspace.me/magazine/coworking-how-did-it-all-start-and-where-is-it-going/>.

⁵ Galvin, Molly. 2024. "Libraries are that Safe Space for Discussion of Ideas." *Issues in Science and Technology* 40, no. 2 (Winter): 27-29. <https://doi.org/10.58875/CANH5294>