March 28, 2014

Memo to: Adrienne Israel, Vice President and Dean of the Faculty
        Suzanne Bartels, Senior Librarian, Director of Library Services & Instructional Technology
        Jeff Favolise, Chief Planning and Senior Management Officer, Office of the President

From: Jeanne L. Narum, Learning Spaces Consultant—Learning Spaces Collaboratory

RE: Reflections on visit to Guilford College, March 11 – 12, 2014

Let me begin with thanks to Suzanne for her arrangements for my visit to Guilford College and to Jeff for his support. I am particularly appreciative for the many scheduled opportunities to meet with different members of the Guilford community and gain a sense of existing physical spaces for learning and a deeper understanding of your planning for the future. I had reviewed all materials shared by Suzanne, and it was helpful to be onsite to understand your past, present, and future context for planning.

Here are some reflections from my visit. I recognize that the challenges and opportunities I put forward below are already well-understood by you and your colleagues, but they establish the context for some recommendations that follow.

The first reflection is that Guilford’s planning for a reimagined library, for a new kind of campus center, is in sync with larger initiatives around the country to repurpose the library toward becoming a true center of campus life within an academic community. From my review of materials, meetings with a diverse set of individuals, and the campus tour, it is clear an investment in creating an academic commons is timely for Guilford. It is timely not only because such a movement is underway on campuses across the country—large and small, and of different missions and contexts—but because such is the vision of the library for the 21st century and it is in sync with the vision of what Guilford is and what it is to become into the future.

The potential of your community to move forward at this time was reflected in responses to the pre-visit survey by faculty, as well as in the discussions during the workshop while I was on campus. There is abundant interest within your faculty about how space matters to learning, based on their personal experiences as Guilford faculty members. From their survey responses and further discussions, you have a significant core of faculty poised to take leadership responsibility for further planning initiatives. This, as you know, is the key to arriving at spaces that are ideal for learners at all levels at Guilford—students and faculty alike.

The aspirations and visions established by the Library Task Force are exemplary. I rarely experience such thoughtful language at this stage in the planning process. A list such as that is a springboard for the next step of planning, meaning you are at an important “next” step. I will return to a discussion of next steps later, but another comment first.

Again, I recognize that what I learned is already well-recognized by the Guilford community, i.e. that this is a time of significant challenge and change: new president, reduced state income, strategic planning underway, etc. In a different context, my reflections and recommendations might be different, but the current context presents some interesting opportunities to explore new kinds of policies, programs, and practices that might set the stage for the future at Guilford in how the physical learning environment is imagined, designed, and assessed into the future.

- My first recommendation is that a formal, campus-wide learning spaces committee be established. This is in sync with emerging practices across the country. There are now many different individuals and offices with responsibility for decisions about different aspects of shaping and sustaining a physical environment for learning, in the most cost effective and creative way. I
had difficulty in sorting out how decisions were made. More important, I sensed a lack of—or competing—visions about how spaces serve learning and learners at Guilford.

- On many campuses (e.g. Duke University), the opportunity to rethink the position of the library in 21st century learning environments has been a catalyst for community-wide stepping back and asking questions about the future. Given what I sense about the current culture at Guilford (and the reality of an emergent strategic plan), the vision of the library as an "academic commons" has just such potential. This is to say that supporting spaces within the library that serve as prototypes for innovative learning environments could further an institutional goal of developing an understanding of how to design exemplary learning spaces campus-wide.

By "how to plan for," I refer back to my first recommendation. Decisions are made at many different levels within the Guilford community and a greater transparency for how decisions are made will be of value into the future. One approach that has been helpful at other institutions is that decisions about spaces (and spatial affordances such as furniture, color, technologies, etc.) should be based on a communal understanding of how learning happens and what kind of learning experiences enable such learning. There may be a greater consensus than I sensed during this first-time visit; if so, then what is important is arriving at a common language about how planning happens and about how spaces serve learning of Guilford students today and into the future.

Coming together to explore the potential of a library as an academic center is a first step in arriving at a common vision and language. Your challenges are formidable (asbestos removal, for one), but it will be important to establish a protocol and venue for asking some "what if" questions about useable spaces within the library that could be a space for sandboxing change—new kinds of furniture, paint, adjacencies, etc. In the long run, this is the most cost-effective approach to achieving a physical learning environment that serves the future, rather than spaces that do not reflect research on how people learn or the language of 21st century learning: engaged, student-owned, social, etc. Such spaces are dysfunctional from the beginning and will need further resources in the future.

Over the past decade, on campuses across the country, attention to the role of the library in the broad ecosystem of learning spaces is driving the transformation of learning spaces (new and repurposed). Guilford College is poised to tackle this opportunity and challenge.