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A Revolution in Learning

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Revolutionizing Learning

Gwynedd Mercy Academy High School's new Learning Commons combines technology and thoughtfully designed space to help students become active, lifelong learners eager to take on the challenges ahead

by Sharen Nocella

This October, Gwynedd Mercy Academy High School, the private, all-girls Catholic college-preparatory school in Montgomery County, will realize a strategic vision come true. The school revolutionized its 20-year-old, traditional library space to create a technology-infused collaborative learning center known as the Learning Commons.

The Learning Commons is a natural fit for the school founded by the Sisters of Mercy, who are advocates of personal growth, social responsibility and global awareness.

"Collaborative learning is the priority," says Benjamin Hemsley, network administrator, IT coordinator and a teacher with Gwynedd Mercy. "Our end goal, though, wasn't just the use of new technology. We want our students to be active learners now, and leaders in college and in life."

Hemsley and Patricia Rosenberger, director of technology for Gwynedd Mercy, played key roles in the strategic planning of the Learning Commons.

"We are a college-preparatory school, so it is important that we prepare our students for college and beyond," Rosenberger says. "We can't keep doing the things we used to. We have to change along with the world."

The idea was born first as part of the school strategic plan and then in practical time when Rosenberger and Hemsley's offices were moved next to each other in a space adjacent to the library. At the end of the day, as they walked to their cars together, they shared their ideas about how the library space could be improved to meet the evolving ways in which students learned and interacted.

The idea took root when these two dreamers casually shared their thoughts with Sister Patricia Flynn, Gwynedd Mercy's principal. Sister Flynn liked what she heard and instructed them to come up with a plan and some renderings so she could present them to the Board of Trustees. Hemsley, who never before used CAD software, quickly learned it and created a CAD drawing of his and Rosenberger's vision. Sister Flynn and the ad-



Photography courtesy of Gwynedd Mercy Academy High School

ministrative team then authorized some renderings so the idea could be presented to the Board of Trustees and the plans were unanimously passed.

The school retained architect Bill Gregg of SaylorGregg, which is a studio of JacobsWyper Architects in Philadelphia, as well as designer Ann Wood Gregg, Architect LLC in Bryn Mawr and the Harleysville-based construction firm of Berks Ridge Company Enterprises Inc. to help bring the school's vision to life. Rosenberger and Hemsley wanted the students to be involved, too, and presented them with options and solicited feedback on various aspects of the project.

The result of this collaborative effort is the Learning Commons, a modern space designed to enhance learning from all angles. This includes having furniture that accommodates the ways in which students study, learn and collaborate. Additionally, the students will have access to resources from many high level databases.

Also, by making Gwynedd Mercy students better online citizens, the Learning Commons supports the school's mission of social responsibility and global awareness. Being literate in the use of new technology, and using it respectfully, is just part of the benefit the students will experience. The students will be able to use new technology in their service projects, as it affords them the opportunity to interact online with other students from schools around

the world.

The renovation has been performed at a rapid pace. The Board of Trustees approved Gwynedd Mercy's proposal as part of the school's strategic initiative to renovate the library into the state-of-the-art collaborative learning center in March 2015, and the Learning Commons is on schedule to be completed later this month—just in time for the school's open house on October 11.

At the entrance of the Learning Commons is a video wall with four high-end video screens. The space also houses a small amphitheater where all the school's technology classes will be taught. It is equipped with Apple computers and state-of-the-art flat-panel SMART Boards, along with other sleek features.

Two "Team Rooms," each capable of accommodating eight to 12 people, are outfitted with different types of technology, including a media table and a SMART Kapp board. Billed

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as "the dry-erase board reinvented," the SMART Kapp board permits students and faculty to save, share and view digital content from anywhere in the world, all using a dry-erase marker. For instance, if there is a workshop being conducted at a university across the country, Gwynedd Mercy students can participate using this new technology. Presentations can also be offered to remote locations from the Learning Commons.

Completing the Learning Commons space are lounge areas with comfortable furniture and plenty of places where students can plug in their devices. A "Touch Down" area will provide students who are not going to sit down and study with a place to print out their work without disrupting other students.

The makeover didn't stop at the library. Adjacent to the Learning Commons is a space that once housed the writing lab, which has been converted into the "Quiet Study." Fittingly, this place is ideal for students who simply desire a quiet spot.

The concept and development of Gwynedd Mercy's Learning Commons would not have been possible without the combined efforts of the Board of Directors, school staff, administration and students. In other words, when the new space opens its doors next month, welcoming the next generation eager to take on the challenges ahead, it will be a shining example of the unbridled power of collaboration. ■



Gwynedd Mercy Academy High School

1345 Sumnerytown Pike, Gwynedd Valley, PA 19437 | 215-646-8815 | www.gmahs.org