



Case Study: Gunn Idea Lab

Henry M. Gunn High School, Palo Alto Unified School District,
Palo Alto, CA

Gunn Library Idea Lab

When students come to the Gunn Library Idea Lab, they are encouraged to produce with pride! Specifically designed to foster creativity, critical thinking and collaboration, this award-winning program gets students involved in the community, ensures they work together, and allows them to learn and interact in a way they love.

Teeming with activity and excitement, the Idea Lab finds students interacting, creating, collaborating, using technology of all kinds (including cell phones) and eating and drinking. It is anything but quiet. This does not describe your average library, or almost any library. However, as teacher librarian Meg Omainsky said, "People come by and see so many kids in our library, and then they ask me, 'Is there a class meeting in here?' and I say 'no, these kids choose to be here.' Students come to the library every day because they want to, not because they have to."

It is this unique library program at Henry M. Gunn High School, in Palo Alto, Calif., that earned it one of two \$60,000 Grand Prizes in the 2013 Follett Challenge. The Follett Challenge rewarded six schools with more than \$200,000 in goods and services in 2013, and winners were chosen for the most innovative use of school design and space for cultivating creativity, collaboration and community. The Gunn Library Idea Lab was a perfect fit.

From quiet and sleepy to busy and exciting

In three short years, the Henry M. Gunn High School library was transformed from a sparsely visited space where students consumed information into a swarming center of ideas and action.

"At Gunn Library, we set aside any preconceived ideas about what we should have and instead listened to our community and thought about how we could use what we have to offer exceptional services beyond what we could have imagined. The whole transformation started with conversations," Omainsky shared. "I talked with students, I set up online surveys, and I created an advisory group made up of kids."



"We plan to use our Follett Challenge winnings to increase access to materials for some of our ELL students and obtain more audio copies of books, test prep books, and high-level interest books.

The Grand Prize will help us build our digital collection of resources that support the Common Core, and we can improve our collection of recreational reading. My goal is to build lifelong learners, and this really helps."

— Meg Omainsky,
Teacher Librarian



The members of the advisory group became her information gatherers, and Omainsky met with them monthly to hear what students wanted in a library. “I also started a parent advisory group, so that I could reach out and connect with the community and also get the important parent perspective.”

Omainsky’s goal was to lose the outdated model of quiet consumption and introduce a stronger focus on customer service, creation and collaboration. It worked!

The next step in the process of moving the old library into the Idea Lab was to do a complete collection assessment and flip. “Instead of using the nonfiction stacks for researching, the kids were using that section for a seating area to do research on their laptops and mobiles,” Omainsky said.

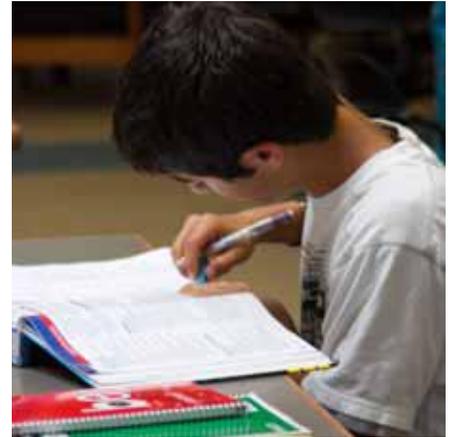
She also barcoded the laptops and let students take them out of the library. “That really started to bring students in, and we were on the path of changing the model to service, creation and collaboration.”

Next came a gradual relocation of the print nonfiction section to retractable shelving in the back staff area. “This opened up the space to make room for a creation-centered Idea Lab,” Omainsky said.

Realizing the school needed additional resources to help the students work more creatively, she began entering educational contests and applying for grants to help outfit the space more appropriately. “When we won the Idea Paint Dream Make Over award, we were able to buy the floor-to-ceiling whiteboards and flex furnishings to set the vision in motion. We are modeling our space after the d.institute at neighboring Stanford University School of Design.”

The newest addition is the Green Zone, a conference room Omainsky converted into a makeshift green screen production space. Now, that 15-foot whiteboard dominates the space and extends the entire length of the lab. Students and teachers write and create here freely throughout the day. “I was able to redesign the space and implement innovative programs with a limited budget and resources.”

Small changes led to bigger advances as Omainsky applied for grants and prizes and won enough to purchase resources, allowing her to continue to improve the space and add to the arsenal of current tools.



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With additional funding, grants and awards, she added portable whiteboards of all shapes and sizes and additional technology tools for checkout—all elements that responded to what students and teachers told her they hoped for in a library.

Today, the Idea Lab gears students (and teachers) with the tools needed to investigate, create and share new knowledge. Students arrange the space to meet their production needs and “reset the space” when finished.

During the transition, Omainsky relied upon Follett’s Titlewave® and boosted the current collection of high-interest offerings to improve the selection of reading materials. “The wide variety of resources from Follett help me quickly and easily get the materials into the library that the students really need and want.”

Learning and sharing outside the library and into the community

In addition to equipping students to create through the use of tools and flexible spaces, the Gunn Idea Lab also inspires creativity through unique library programs such as TEDx and the STEM Slam!, which ask students to take their learning outside of the library and into the community and beyond.

The TEDx Gunn High School event was germinated by Omainsky as a new way to get the community sharing and curating ideas. The day-long event is a speaker series of innovative thinkers from the local community. Omainsky designed the event to be led by students, who manage everything from the research of speakers, web and print marketing, stage production, grant writing, communications, and whatever else they decide to tackle. The speakers have included professors, CEOs, computer scientists and designers, and social entrepreneurs from the local community.

Each year, more than 600 Gunn students, parents and community members attend the day-long TEDx event. Now in its third year, TEDx has become one of the biggest events on an already bustling campus known for innovation and creativity. The real impact of this innovative library program can be captured in the words of one student planner who recalls his work on the event by simply stating, “This is my legacy.”

“As educators, this is the greatest validation for our work,” she said.



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STEMSlam is another student program to launch from the library's Idea Lab. Students work in the lab and around town to create videos depicting how they use STEM skills in their daily lives. The contest culminates when the videos "slam-off" in public voting sessions on the STEM Slam YouTube Channel. "We have competed with other schools, and students and teachers can vote online for their favorite videos," Omainsky explained.

The point of the program is to get more students involved in thinking about and creating with STEM content. "Not every student is naturally inclined in STEM, but this program allows students of all abilities to engage with the STEM content in ways that are fun, meaningful and engaging," Omainsky said. "Every student can create and share a digital STEM artifact for their community and beyond."

Additionally, the library partners with teachers across all disciplines on campus from art to science to help infuse new technologies into their classes. The library has hosted a professional development blog and helps teachers better integrate emerging technologies within their learning.

Today, it's the place kids want to be

The Gunn Library Idea Lab has become the learning space where kids choose to be during free periods, after school, and to work on projects of all kinds. The number of daily visits has skyrocketed to nearly 700, an increase of more than 400 percent. Students love having the services and tools available to help them produce with ease, and study rooms, once used for text book storage are now open and filled with kids discussing, collaborating, and producing.

What does it mean to be a Follett Challenge Grand Prize Winner?

Omainsky explained that being named one of the Grand Prize winners in the 2013 Follett Challenge was an amazing experience.

"To know that we are considered a model is so rewarding. I felt really proud to represent my district this way," she shared. "It's a real validation to know that this work is inspirational, and it's so wonderful to know that I can inspire other libraries around the country through my work."

Omainsky worked for three years to overhaul an underused library into a hub of excitement and activity that gets students involved, enthused, and working every day on 21st-century skills that equip them for college and career.



"It felt amazing to win the 2013 Follett Challenge because it was more validation from my peers that the Gunn Library is moving in the right direction."

— Meg Omainsky,
Teacher Librarian

