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FGCU library to expand

\$17 million project will make it largest in Lee

By Pedro Morales

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Florida Gulf Coast University's library was its best kept secret. Not anymore.

Construction workers this month will begin clearing a site for the university's \$17 million library expansion, which will quadruple the space of the existing building and make it Lee County's largest public library when it is completed in July 2006.

Although the library is open to all Florida residents, students make up 95 percent of users. Officials hope the addition of the four-story building will attract people from the community who aren't aware it is available to them.

"I would love for more people to come out to the university just to see it, and use our library. They will eventually," FGCU President William Merwin said.

Those who use library said they find material that Lee County public libraries don't have. University libraries generally have more research material, fewer popular novels and just a handful of children's books for the students earning teaching degrees.

"They have more advanced topics ... broader variety," said Fort Myers resident Kristin English, 38, a nonstudent who frequently uses the university's library. "And it's open on Sundays."

The expansion, funded by state money, is driven by FGCU's need to comply with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools reaccreditation demands. When the university was first

accredited in 1999, the association advised FGCU that it would have to provide more housing and library space to earn reaccreditation. The library was built at its present size because the state originally provided money only for a basic structure.

The university is seeking to reaffirm its accreditation in

FGCU LIBRARY FACTS AND FIGURES

- FGCU opened in 1997 after it received funding to build basic infrastructure, including a library at its present size. The library initially had 21,948 usable square feet. Today, it has about 30,000 usable square feet and with the expansion will have 120,000 usable square feet. It currently has 27 on staff, including 10 librarians with a master's degree in library science.
- In 2000, FGCU began to receive state university funds from the Public Education Capital Outlay for the \$17 million project. MCHarry Associates, a Miami-based firm, was contracted to design the four-story building. Ajax Construction will build the facility.
- The library has 156,000 books, magazines and other items. It adds 1,200 print volumes per month, or 14,400 per year. At the current rate, the FGCU library will have 500,000 volumes in 20 years. The new building will increase the library's capacity to 537,000 volumes
- The FGCU library has 42 computer workstations. The expansion will increase it to 125. There is one study room, but after the addition there will be 25.
- The university will add a cafe that will be open 24 hours. This space will have tables, lounge chairs, copiers, vending machines and network hookups.

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2005 and has submitted its self-assessment to the association. Without accreditation, a distinction that recognizes a university's ability to deliver on its educational promises, it is difficult for students to be eligible for financial aid and to transfer to another college or be accepted to graduate school.

The university has 6,151 students and is expected to nearly double that number by 2010. The library is just one of several planned additions to the campus including a new administrative center, an environmentally-friendly education center, parking lot structures and more academic buildings.

A walk through the library during peak hours shows that the growth the association recommended is for the university's own good. The building's 42 computer workstations — which have no time restrictions — are often full, forcing students to wait hours before one is available.

There are no designated quiet areas, a murmur usually hovers above the place. There is only one study room, which is usually reserved. So students gather wherever they can find space.

"Our students really use our library, much to my pleasure," Merwin said. "Which means our professors are assigning projects and the students are hard at work."

FGCU senior Nikki Stewart said she got tired of waiting for an open computer and bought a laptop. Now Stewart, like other students, brings in her computer and sets up her own workstation on a library table.

She said that if the public is expected to come, there needs to be more space.

"If (the library) were larger, I would encourage them to come, but now there is no room," Stewart said.

FGCU's library is a member of the Southwest Florida Library Network, and Lee County's libraries frequently refer their readers to FGCU. But there are differences.

The county libraries offer visitor cards for \$5, while FGCU's is strictly for Florida residents. The county libraries will let any reader of any age check out a maximum of 50 items. At FGCU, the library policy states that only residents 18 and older can check out a book unless a high school-age student can demonstrate that his or her library cannot meet research needs. The most items a nonstudent can check out is 10.

"There are some differences," said Heather O'Connell, spokesperson for the Lee County Library System. "You just need to know which type of library meets those needs."

The expansion will increase the library's usable space from 30,000 square feet to 120,000 square feet. The new building, designed by MCHarry Associates, a Miami-based firm, will have a three-story atrium that will serve as a lobby and a cafe that will be open 24 hours.

During the day, natural sunlight will illuminate much of the building and the university plans to collect historical materials — including artifacts — from early Southwest Florida history.

The library has 156,000 books, magazines and other items, but after the expansion it will have the capacity for 537,000 items. Kathleen Hoeth, library director, said the university sets aside \$1.2 million for new books annually and expects that figure to go up.

"As the university grows and enrollment grows ... it's likely that (library) budget will grow," Hoeth said. "I think people will be surprised by how many books we'll have here, but there will be ample growth space because we planned for 20 years."

library

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