

## Redesign with inclusion in mind: creating a checklist for inclusive spaces

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### Abstract:

*At Vassar College, we are fortunate to work in an architecturally stunning building. Completed in 1905, the Thompson Memorial Library is an example of the perpendicular gothic style, complete with buttresses, towers, and gargoyles. The entryway features the friezes of Harvard, Yale, Oxford, and Cambridge; our main reading room is dominated by the stained glass Cornaro Window, depicting the Lady Elena Lucretia Cornaro-Piscopio receiving her doctorate from the University of Padua in 1678.*

*At Vassar College, we are hampered by an architecturally intimidating space. Completed in 1905, the library was designed as an impressive showpiece to house collections, and it has proven difficult to adapt the space to the needs of today's researchers. The overt displays of Western European privilege encoded in its walls can be alienating and exclusionary to our ever-changing student population. As our campus focuses more attention (and rightly so) on creating an inclusive and equitable environment for all, we are left to wonder how our space can catch up.*

*The library's Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice Working Group, together with members of the Digital Scholarship Services Collaboration, are using the planned renovation of a former Reserves Room space as an experimental lab for inclusive design. Using research on inclusive and accessible technologies, design in higher education, inclusive design in public spaces, and feedback from our students, we are creating an "Inclusive design checklist." This checklist informs not only the design process, but will help us to set community norms and expectations around equitable use of the resulting*

*space. We anticipate that this work will be used and reused to guide future projects within the library. Using the PechaKucha format, we would like to share our checklist with the audience, and demonstrate what inclusive library design can look like in a liberal arts college setting.*

**Keywords:** buildings; space; inclusion; accessibility; design

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### Slide 1

At Vassar College, we are fortunate to work in an architecturally stunning building. Completed in 1905, the Thompson Memorial Library is an example of the perpendicular gothic style, complete with buttresses, towers, and gargoyles. It is the jewel of our campus.

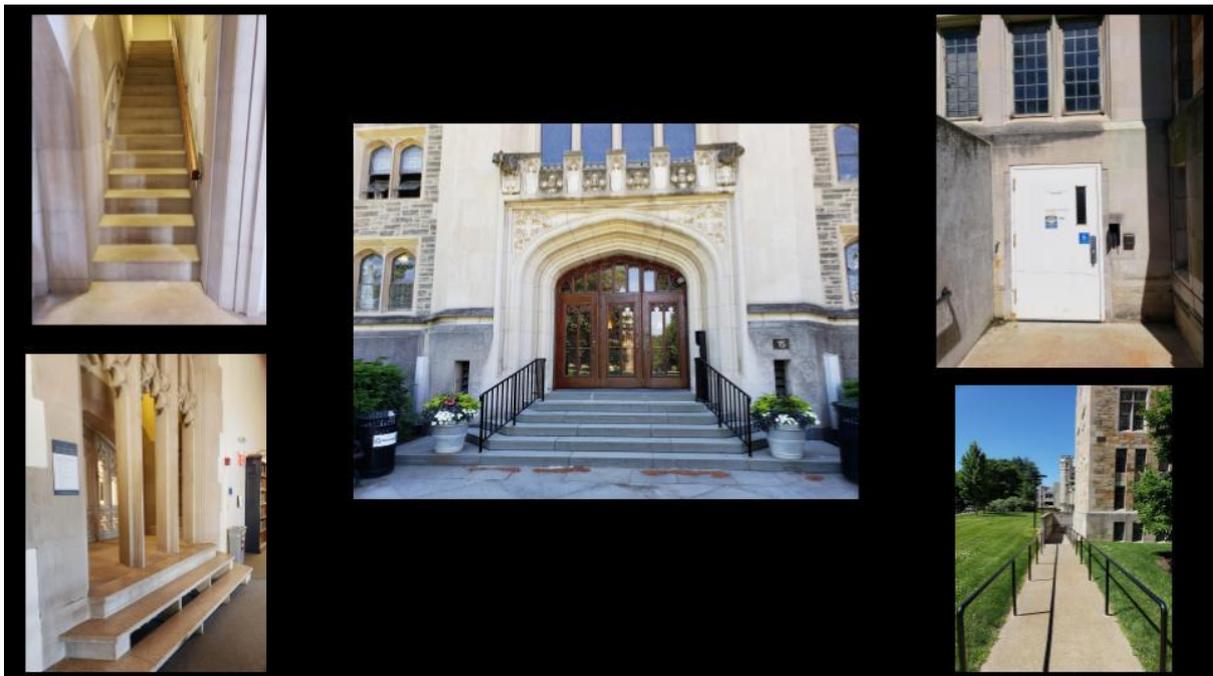
(Slide: Exterior view of the Thompson Memorial Library at sunset. Vassar College is located in Poughkeepsie, New York, United States. It was founded in 1861, and opened in 1865, by Matthew Vassar as a four-year, private, liberal arts institution for women; in 1969, the college became coeducational. Today, Vassar College has approximately 2400 students living on our primarily residential campus.)



**Slide 2**

The exterior features the friezes of Harvard, Yale, Oxford, and Cambridge; our main reading room is dominated by the stained glass Cornaro Window, depicting the Lady Elena Lucretia Cornaro-Piscopio, receiving her doctorate from the University of Padua in 1678, the first female to do so.

(Slide: Views of the Cornaro Window, overlooking the library's main reading room, and close-up views of various friezes found outside the building.)



**Slide 3**

At Vassar College, we are hampered by a space that is only architecturally inspiring to some. Others find it intimidating, or downright inaccessible. The library was designed prior to any regulations providing for patrons with physical disabilities, and it has proven difficult to adapt the space to the needs of today's researchers.

(Slide: Our building is a maze of stairs. There are only two accessible entries, and both are difficult to find. Some areas of the building, like the front towers rooms, are inaccessible to patrons in wheelchairs or with other mobility issues.)



#### Slide 4

Vassar's original students were primarily wealthy, white, women, and the overt displays of Western European privilege encoded in its traditions can be alienating and exclusionary to our ever-changing student population. As our campus focuses more attention on creating an inclusive and equitable environment for all, we are left to wonder how our space can catch up.

(Slide: This image depicts one of Vassar's oldest traditions, the Daisy Chain. The Daisy Chain is paraded by members of the sophomore [second year] class during commencement ceremonies. This tradition is still practiced at Vassar today. For more information about the Daisy Chain, please see the entry in the Vassar Encyclopedia: <http://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/traditions/daisy-chain.html>)



### Slide 5/6

The library's Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice Working Group, together with members of the Digital Scholarship Services Collaboration, are using the renovation of a former Reserves Room space as an experimental lab for inclusive design. Using research on inclusive and accessible technologies, design in higher education, inclusive design in public spaces, and feedback from our students, we are creating an "Inclusive design checklist."

As you can see from the "before" state of our space, shown here in the upper left-hand images, we had a number of barriers to overcome in designing the location we've come to call "The Studio."

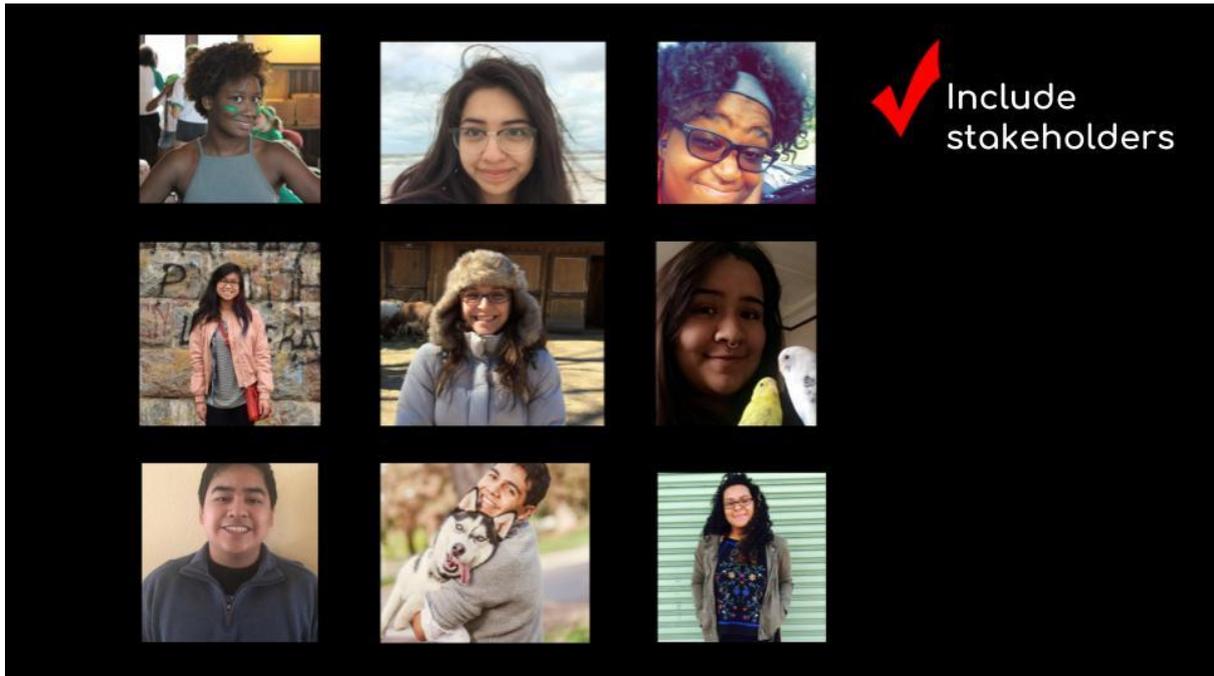
(Slide: The top two images depict the space as our old reserve room area; the large bottom image shows the gutted space with new glass partition, ready to become the Studio. Architectural drawings and renderings are shown on the right.)



### Slide 7

Our end goal, as articulated in the American Library Association’s parameters for Universal Library Design, is to “ensure physical access, comfort, and safety within an environment that is inclusive of people with a variety of abilities, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, genders, and ages.”

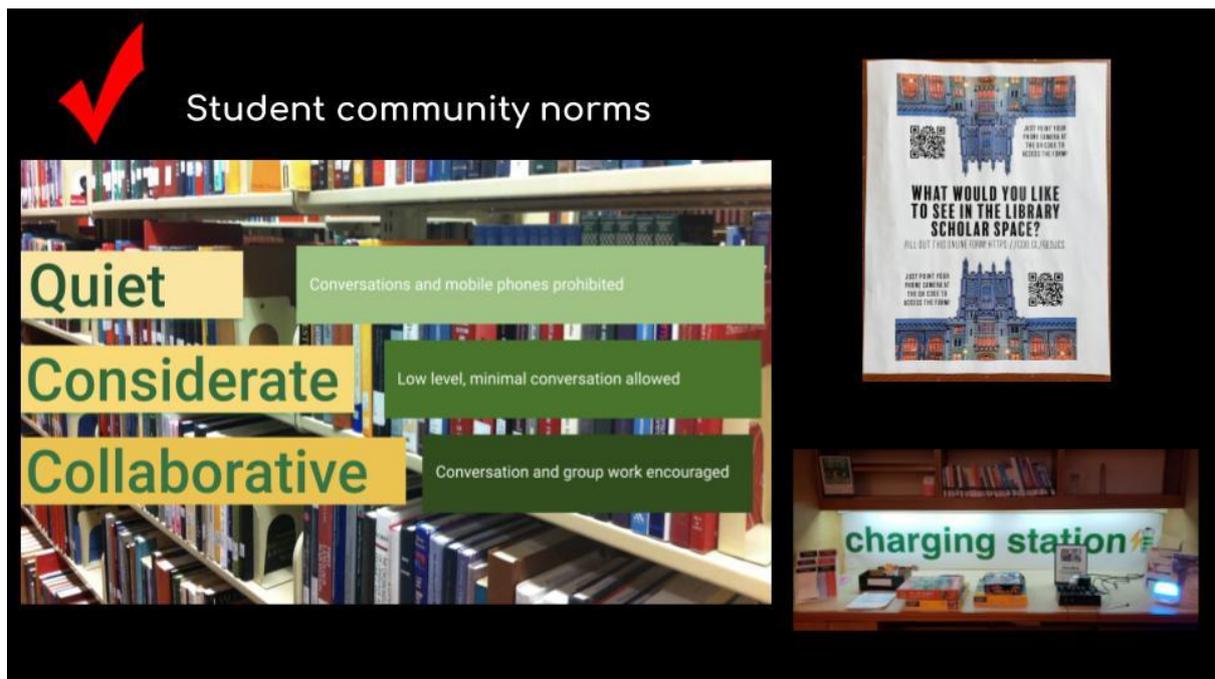
(Slide: Two students studying in the main library. See ALA’s document “Equal access: universal design of libraries” at <http://www.ala.org/alsc/sites/ala.org.alsc/files/content/NI14Handouts/Universal%20Design%20Checklist.pdf>)



**Slide 8**

To achieve this at Vassar, we need to involve stakeholders in the process from the start. This includes speaking with students from Transitions, who represent first generation or low-income students; the student Academic Chair from Vassar’s Student Association; and representatives from the student committee on Equity and Inclusion.

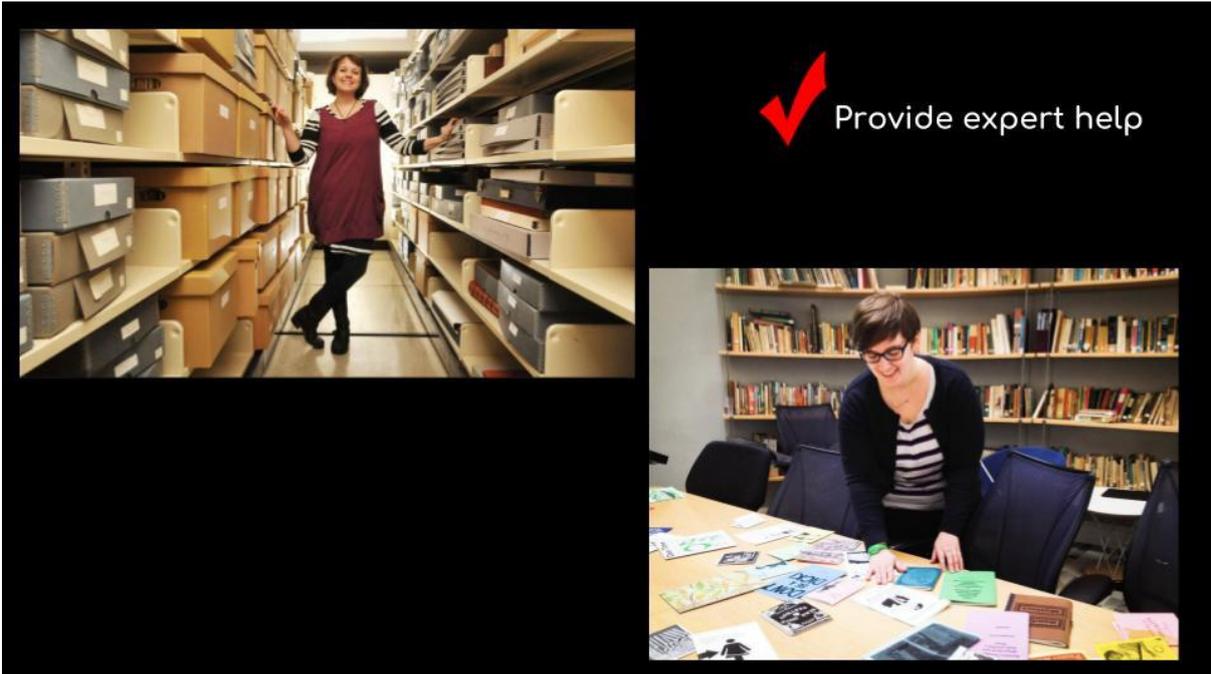
(Slide: The students and faculty member of the Transitions Research Team, who in August 2017 released “In search of belonging: first generation, low-income students navigating financial, bureaucratic, and academic experiences at Vassar.” Top row, left to right: Kiki Walker, Class of 2019; Lisset Magdaleno, Class of 2019; Tamar Ballard, Class of 2019; middle row, left to right: Jasmine Martinez, Class of 2018; Eréndira Rueda, Associate Professor of Sociology; Juanita Herrera, Class of 2018; bottom row, left to right: Alan Gutierrez, Class of 2018; Henry Molina, Class of 2019; Kayla Gonzalez, Class of 2019. The student Academic Chair and the student committee on Equity and Inclusion are part of the Vassar Student Association (VSA), the student body government.)



## Slide 9/10

Our students are accustomed to setting norms around inclusive community behaviors, such as using preferred pronouns, and making sure there are equal opportunities to contribute to discussions. Students will guide us in establishing these norms around respectful interaction, and we will, in turn, provide clear and concise signage detailing expectations for the space. Student feedback shows that having these guidelines provide more confidence in navigating the campus environment, and signage is an area where we are looking to make significant improvements.

(Slide: On the left: We are hoping that student norms will set expectations around volume levels in the space, which will serve as an exemplar for expanding this to the rest of our building. On the right: Some of the signs in our library. The top right sign, “What would you like to see in the library scholar space?”, allows students to scan a QR code which links them to a Google form to give input on designing services.)

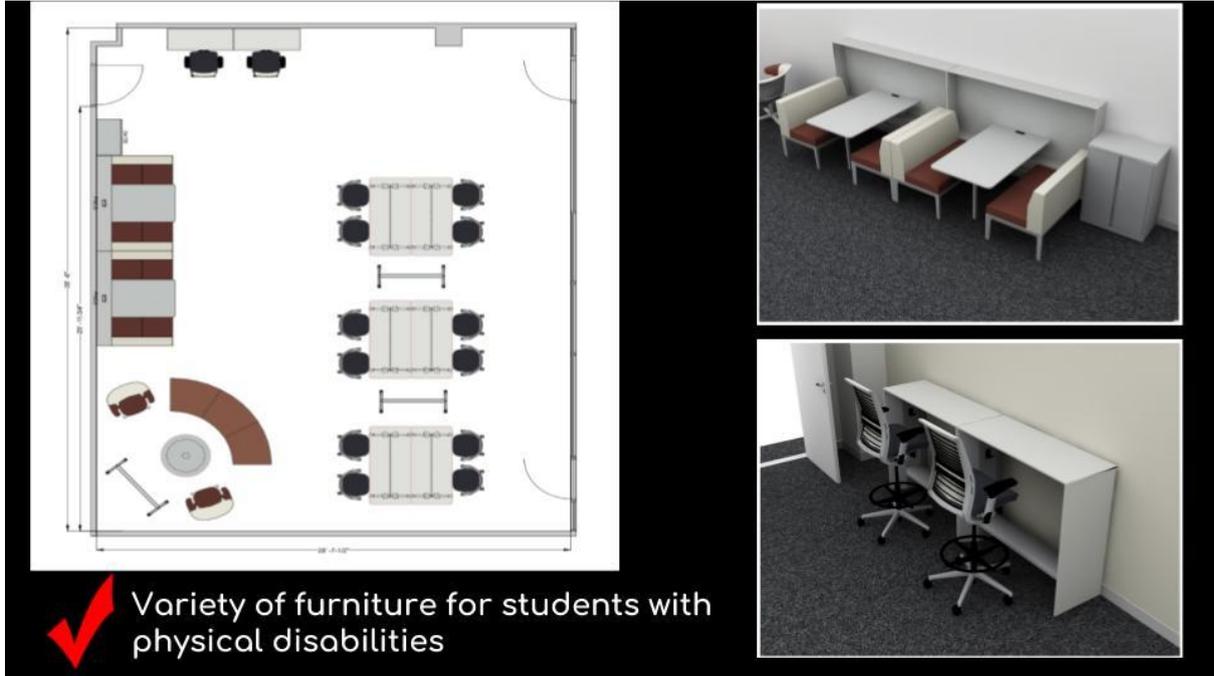


✓ Provide expert help

**Slide 11**

Having expert help available to anticipate questions is another way to build confidence and inclusion, especially for our first generation college students. Having this assistance within the space relieves the burden of the questioner, and normalizes the idea that questions are welcome.

(Slide: Two of our librarians, ready to assist classes. Left: College Archivist, Laura Streett, in our Special Collections Research Center stacks; right: Heidy Berthoud, preparing to start a zines class.)

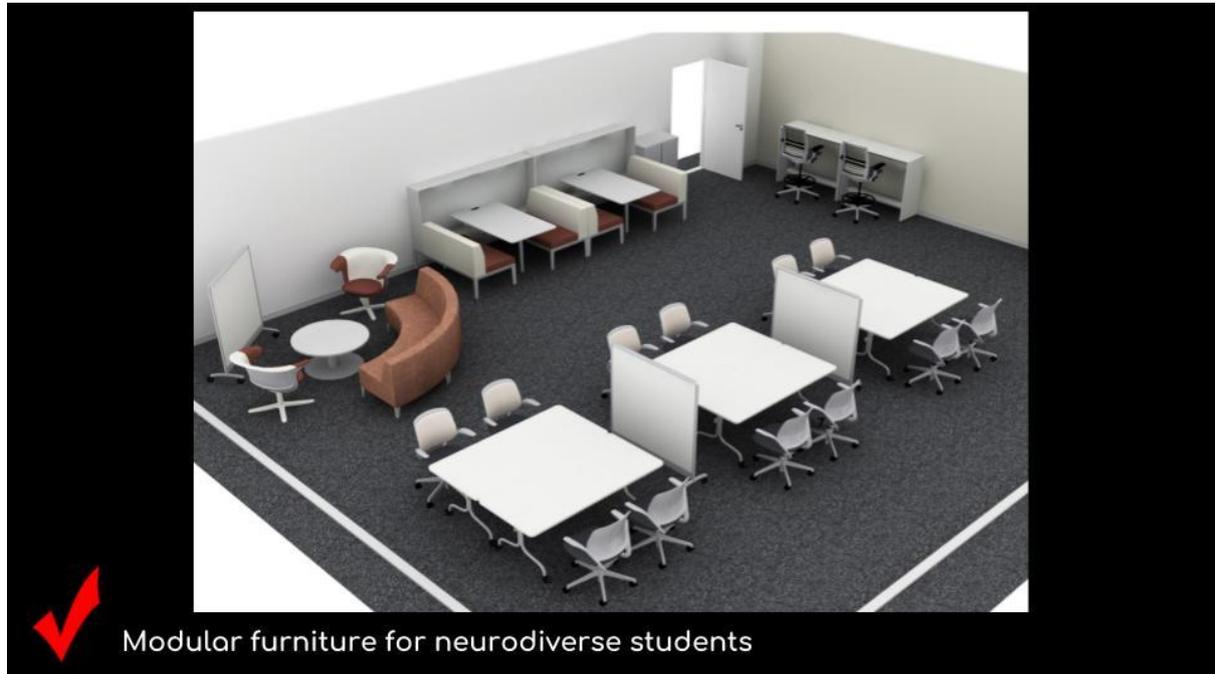


✓ Variety of furniture for students with physical disabilities

**Slide 12**

The architecture of our spaces is unforgiving, but we can try to mitigate existing problems with a diversity of furniture. The space will have a variety of seating and workspaces at different heights. This will promote accessibility for our students with physical disabilities.

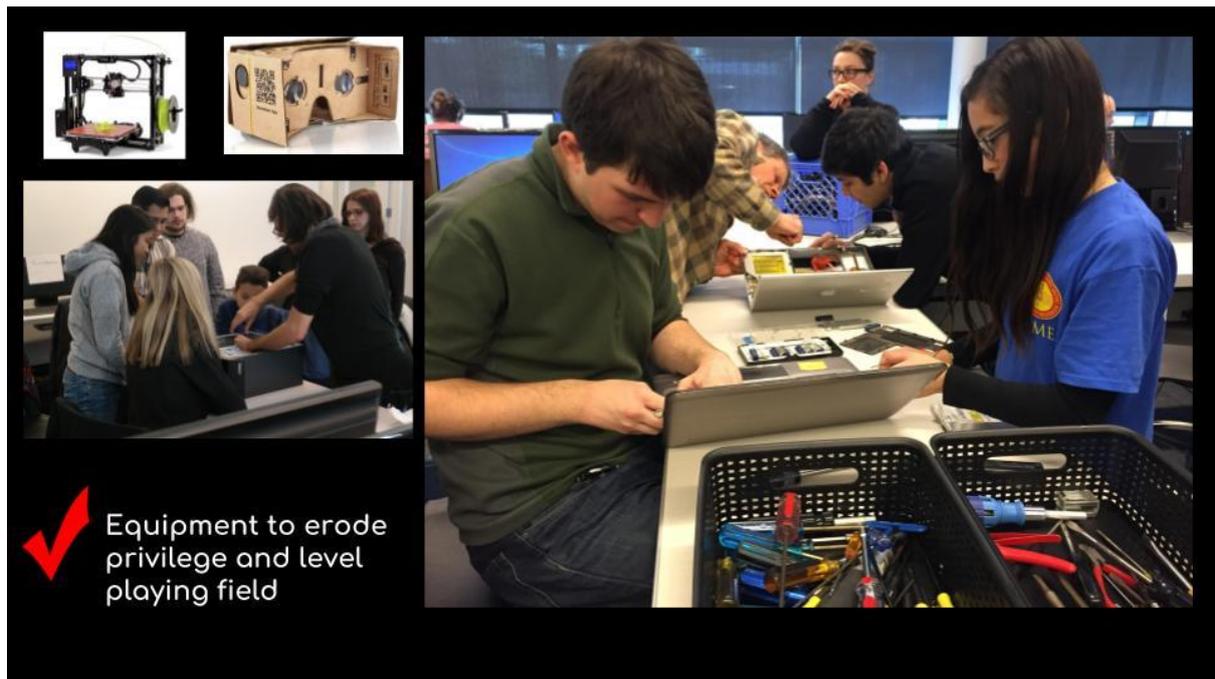
(Slide: Architect's renderings of furniture within the space, including work surfaces of different heights and various types of seating.)



### Slide 13

Seating will also be modular, enabling students to cluster it for smaller groups, or to arrange it in such a way to create more private work areas. We have a number of neurodiverse students; giving ways to create private spaces will provide a sense of comfort and security, and make them feel less “on display.”

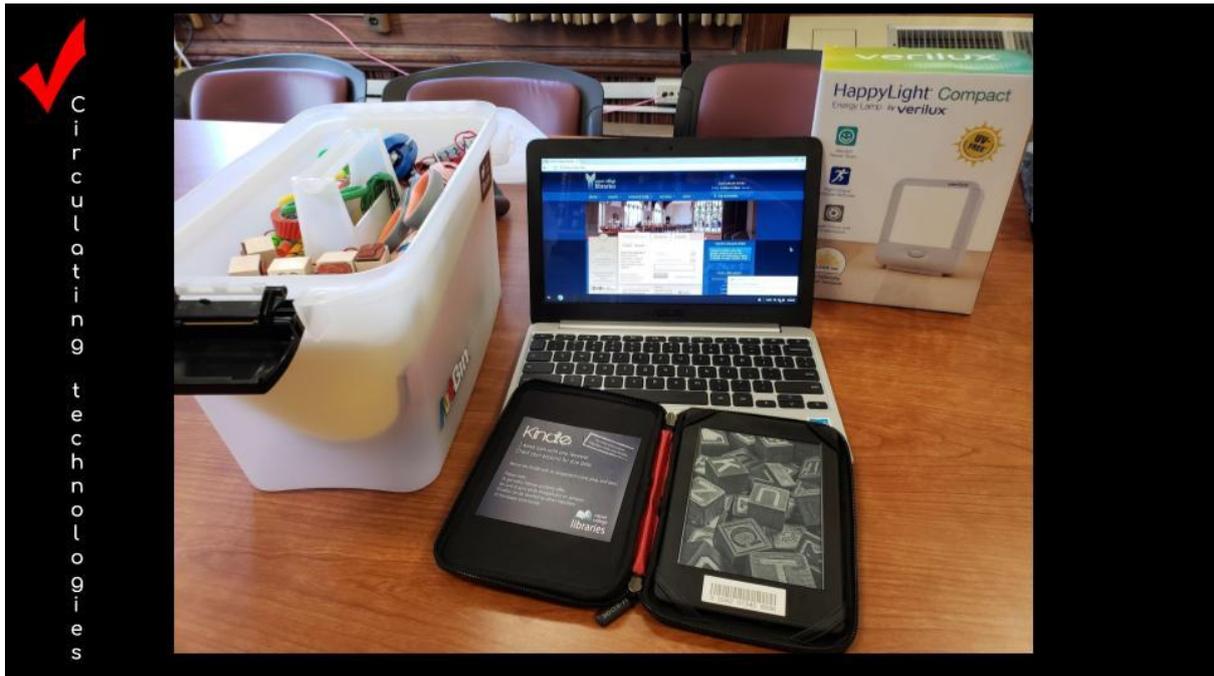
(Slide: Architect's rendering of furniture within the space. Nearly all furniture will be modular. Modular whiteboards will allow students to create partitions between group study areas if desired. Booths near the back of the space will give greater privacy.)



#### Slide 14

The Studio will be a space where your ideas can take shape. By providing an array of equipment, ranging from 3D printers, to flat screen displays, to Google cardboard, we hope to erase boundaries between different economic levels, erode economic privilege, and make new technology accessible to anyone who wants to learn.

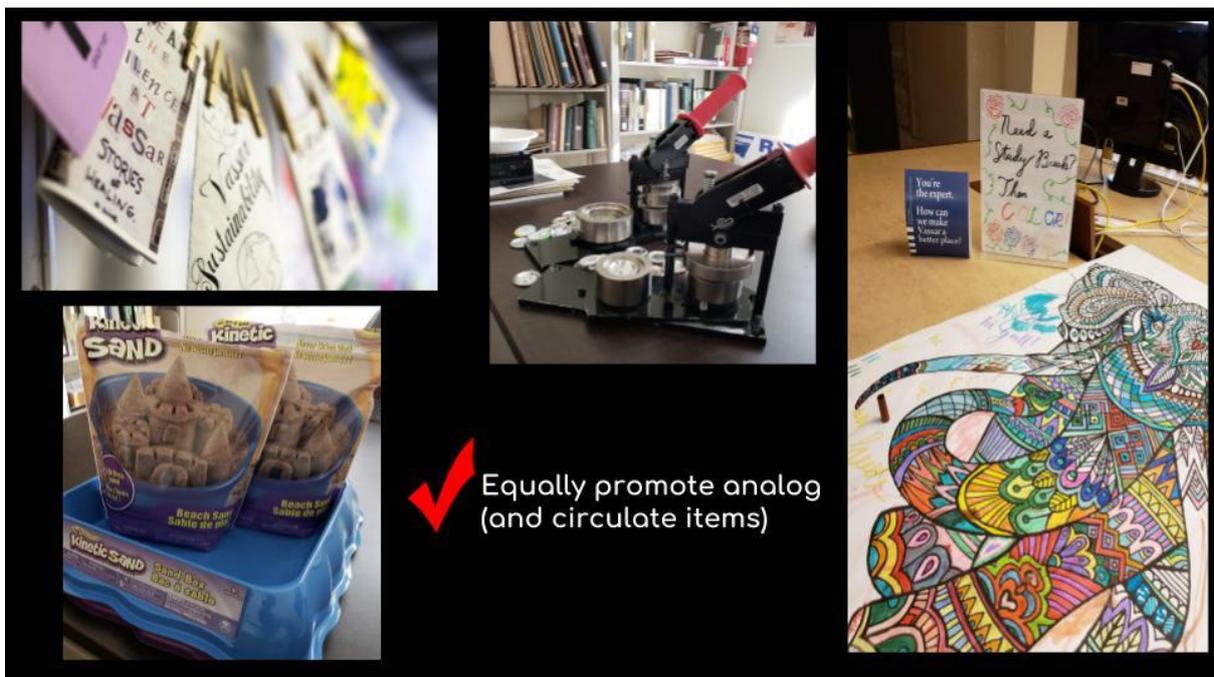
(Slide: Technologies that will be found in the space. Our library, along with Academic Computing Services, already hosts hands-on technology sessions for students and community members; some of these will relocate to The Studio space when it is complete.)



**Slide 15**

Some of these materials will also be available to check-out and circulate. Students can come to The Studio to collaborate and ask questions, and then feel free to continue their work in other spaces. The learning should extend beyond the walls of our building.

(Slide: Materials available to check-out at our circulation desk, including crafting kits, laptops, Kindle e-readers, and HappyLights.)



**Slide 16**

But we know that not all students will require high-tech equipment. Some may want to use button makers, crafting or zine kits, or other analog technologies. The Studio will be a space for those students as well. No project is excluded.

(Slide: Some of the analog materials in our library, clockwise from top left: zines, button makers, coloring stations, and Kinetic Sand.)



### Slide 17/18

Community building and belonging is an important aspect of our residential campus. The Studio walls will provide a backdrop for student art projects and exhibits, something that is, sadly, in short supply on our campus. The Studio has not even opened yet--in truth, we haven't even had our furniture delivered--and it has already served that purpose for the We Belong Here series, a photography exhibition featuring black womyn students. This project was the senior thesis work of Alaina Toatley and Kate Spence, seen here at the opening reception.

(Slide: The opening reception of the We Belong Here series, held in the unfinished Studio space. This project was the senior thesis of Vassar students Alaina Toatley and Kate Spence.)



## Connections across campus



### Slide 19

Apart from bringing students together, we also want to direct students outward to other experts, including, but not limited to, our STEM faculty, campus theater productions, campus computing, and our local public library. The Studio will serve to liaise between our library and the broader community.

(Slide: Logos of campus and community partners that The Studio will connect with.)



### Checklist:

- Include stakeholders
- Student community norms
- Provide expert help
- Variety of furniture for students with physical disabilities
- Modular furniture for neurodiverse students
- Equipment to erode privilege and level playing field
- Circulating technologies
- Equally promote analog (and circulate items)
- Community building and belonging
- Connections across campus
- Continue to get feedback and revise list



### Thank you!

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<http://library.vassar.edu/>

### Slide 20

We are eager to put our checklist into practice, and, if successful, we anticipate that this work will be used and reused to guide future projects within the library.

Thank you to my co-collaborators Joanna DiPasquale and Sharyn Cadogan, and thanks to all of you for your time and attention.

### **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to the Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice Work Group; the Digital Scholarship and Library Technology team; and all Vassar students who have contributed thoughts and feedback to The Studio's design process. We also thank Vassar College and the Vassar College Libraries for their support.