

BC3's "forward-thinking" library earns spot in national magazine

Architecture defies description, college's library administrator says

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The Heaton Family Learning Commons on Butler County Community College's main campus in Butler Township is shown Aug. 22, 2016.

(Butler, PA) The nation's oldest magazine devoted to libraries has recognized the architecture of Butler County Community College's new Heaton Family Learning Commons, a \$6.4 million state-of-the-art facility dedicated in August 2016 and one whose visual attraction defies the words within its 40,000 volumes, according to Martin Miller, BC3's interim dean of library services.

The Heaton Family Learning Commons, on BC3's main campus in Butler Township, is among seven academic renovations and the most expensive listed in the Nov. 15 issue of *Library Journal*, a New York City magazine founded in 1876, according to managing editor Bette-Lee Fox.

Funded in part by a \$1 million gift from Robert R. Heaton, a Butler Township real estate developer, and designed by Renaissance 3 Architects, Pittsburgh, the two-story Heaton Family Learning Commons replaced the John A. Beck Jr. Library, which opened in 1973 – seven years after BC3 held its first classes.

The John A. Beck Jr. Library, said Steve Joseph, BC3's dean of library services for 22 years until he became interim dean of humanities and social sciences in July, was “like going into a cave. It was dark.”

“It sort of had a very sad look,” said Deepak Wadhvani, principal, Renaissance 3 Architects, “that cried out for opening it up to a lot more natural daylight.”

Libraries now community hubs, magazine executive says

Where opaque walls once stood are now glass pony-walls, awash in that natural light from a 16-foot by 16-foot pyramid skylight centered atop an open staircase flanked by unexpected landings, each outfitted with turquoise or navy blue beanbag chairs and lime-green ottomans.

“When students who were here before the remodeling come back,” said Miller, “they aren’t even sure where they are sometimes.”

Such is the state of library design in the past decade, said Fox, whose semimonthly magazine includes an annual November edition featuring architecture.



A central, open staircase flanked by landings and awash in natural light from a pyramid skylight is among the interior highlights of the Heaton Family Learning Commons on Butler County Community College's main campus in Butler Township, shown Aug. 30, 2016.

“Space,” she said in describing the goal of contemporary construction or renovations. “Libraries are more open, where people can work collaboratively, especially in colleges and universities, and the whole idea of the library being the hub for the community.”

BC3 president: “The Heaton” changed culture on campus

A community hub is exactly what the Heaton Family Learning Commons represents, said Dr. Nick Neupauer, BC3’s president.



A student uses one of three upper-level restaurant-style booths within the Heaton Family Learning Commons on Butler County Community College’s main campus in Butler Township on Aug. 30, 2016.

“It has been a little over a year since the dedication and opening of The Heaton,” Neupauer said. “I continue to be amazed as to how the facility has changed the culture here on our main campus. The vision for the facility that I shared with Mr. Heaton a few years back has played out better than I could have ever imagined.”

Ruth Purcell, executive director of the BC3 Education Foundation Inc., echoed Neupauer’s sentiments.

“I love walking into The Heaton, past the donor wall and thinking about the hundreds of people and businesses who shared the vision that BC3 students and the community would benefit from a state-of-the art learning commons,” Purcell said, adding her appreciation for Bob Hunter and Nancy Hunter Mycka for serving as co-chairs of a Pioneer Proud Campaign that raised \$6.8 million, which also helped to fund the Heaton Family Learning Commons.

“So many in our community share in the pride of this honor.”

Among them, Heaton.

“It’s exciting,” he said of Library Journal’s recognition. “I can’t say enough about how proud I am of BC3 and particularly the learning commons. It is a source of great pride for me. We are just very, very proud to have been a part of this.”

Whimsical additions “lovely,” nursing student says

David Brooks’ first impression of the Heaton Family Learning Commons was that it was “amazing.”

“I thought it was quite impressive for a community college,” the 18-year-old Saxonburg freshman said. “You would expect this level of architecture only from an esteemed university, in my eyes.”

Through his eyes, and those of others, can be seen a panorama of much of the facility’s 24,000 square feet, of wood-grained casings that border glass doors, of the Logan Café, with its high, pub-style tables aside floor-deep windows, where Lucas Pananu, 22, a psychology major from Butler, ordered a salted caramel cappuccino; where Slippery Rock residents Bekah Holtz, Sam Isacco and Kim Cardello chose to sit in one of three upper-level restaurant-style multi-media booths.



Butler County Community College students work near the floor-length windows inside the Heaton Family Learning Commons’ Logan Cafe on BC3’s main campus in Butler Township on Aug. 22, 2016.

“In one of the focus groups, when students were shown examples of booths, they said, ‘Don’t put them in,’” Joseph said. “They said, ‘Don’t do it.’ For one thing, if you are studying with a group, it is likely the group is of people you know just from class. And you might not know them that well. And the booths feel kind of constraining.

“So, in this case, we actually ignored their advice.”

When he was reviewing the architectural plans, Miller said he too wondered whether students would sit in restaurant-style booths – even with their accompanying flat screens.

“But,” he said, “they are always full.”

As was Pananu’s cup of cappuccino as she walked across soothing, striated dark-blue-gray carpeting whose tones subtly dissolve into bursts of bright yellow or rust, and then back again, and sat near fellow students in eggshell chairs with rust cushions and others in lounge chairs incorporating USB ports, 110-amp outlets and armrest trays suitable for laptops.

The whimsical eggshell chairs and restaurant-style booths also suit the taste of Frances Martin, a 20-year-old registered nursing student from Saxonburg.

“They are lovely,” she said, looking up from notebook of algebraic equations. “They are fun.”

The Heaton Family Learning Commons, she said, “is quiet, a great place where you can just be yourself, sit and study. There are USB ports and places where you can plug in your computer in case you aren’t using the ones here at school.”

His architectural firm's design plugged in to the needs of BC3 and its community, Wadhwani said.

"It is a flexible, forward-thinking library of the future," Wadhwani said, "which hopefully will become the intellectual and social hub for the campus and, to some extent, to the Butler County community."

"How do you talk about this place with words?"

In a report headlined "Welcome Home," the Library Journal features an artist's depiction of the Heaton Family Learning Commons and notes its digital media room, conference room and videoconferencing classroom – all to the periphery of a central staircase illuminated by the new atrium.

It's that warmth that appeals to Heaton Family Learning Commons visitors, Joseph said.

"We want people to feel comfortable, welcomed," said Joseph, who alerted Library Journal to the Heaton Family Learning Commons by responding to the magazine's call for projects. "Students are working. Their job is to produce some sort of presentation, a paper, something for class. We have to give them the right environment in which to do that, and not just technologically.

"We have to give them an environment in which they can create what they are supposed to create."

Other academic renovations featured in the Nov. 15 edition of Library Journal are those at the Pennsylvania State College of Medicine in Hershey, the University of Oklahoma, Norman; Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh; Yeshiva University, New York City; Butler University, Indianapolis; and Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

"This is an honor to be included," Miller said. "The architecture is beautiful. It is kind of beyond description to me. How do you talk about this place with words?"



The lower level of the Heaton Family Learning Commons on Butler County Community College's main campus in Butler Township is shown Aug. 23, 2016.