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# WKU Commons at Helm Library opens to students, public

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Western Kentucky University students and faculty members walk through The WKU Commons at Helm Library on Thursday, April 14, 2022, as the university prepares to open the new library facility on Monday, April 18. Under construction since 2019, the former Helm Library turned into a study and dining venue features food venues such as Moe's Southwest Grill, Rising Roll gourmet café, Spencer's Coffee, Panda Express and other dining options, and two floors of study rooms, open seating, computer labs and rows of book shelves. (Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Grace Ramey

In April 2018, Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni announced a plan to renovate Helm Library and create an innovative, state-of-the-art meeting space. Nearly four years later, that plan is now a reality.

The newly renovated WKU Commons at Helm Library officially opened Monday to the public.

The library originally closed at the end of the 2019 spring semester, and construction saw multiple delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

But years of work are now complete, and students and faculty can enjoy three floors and 85,193 square feet of modern common space.

“We are so excited to finally have the opening of the WKU Commons at Helm Library,” Caboni said. “This project has been a long time coming. We finally get to throw the doors open and let our students have access to this remarkable new facility at the top of the Hill. ... To be in this space, essentially, for the first time in person – I am as overwhelmed as I hope all of our students are. It’s a remarkable space.

“What you have today is a national model for the library of the future,” he continued. “Libraries are no longer book depositories or places where folks come to copy materials – they are gathering spaces. They are intellectual hubs. What we have created at WKU is a place for our faculty and our staff and our students to come and work together.”

The WKU Commons at Helm Library features three floors of meeting space, permanent locations for several restaurants, multiple closed study rooms, classrooms and computer labs.

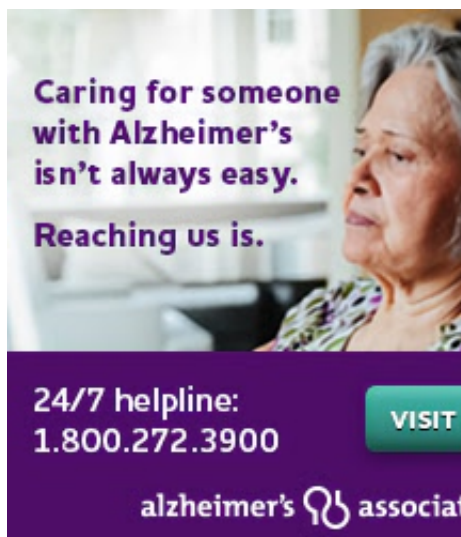
The renovations cost an estimated \$35 million. Caboni said construction was made possible by a partnership between the university and Aramark.

“We are thankful for that partnership,” Caboni said. “When we set the goal of transforming a library into a space that’s multi-purpose – we knew it was going to be a heavy lift. I’m proud of the work the entire community did to make this happen.”

Each floor of the commons is designed to feel different and have its own atmosphere.

The first floor is designed as more of a louder, food court area where most of the restaurants such as Moe’s Southwest Grill, Panda Express and Bene Pizzeria are located.


The second floor will have a more sedated feel and will feature coffee shop restaurants like Spencer’s Coffee and Rising Roll along with study areas.



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Finally, the third floor will look like a library and will feature journals along with more study and classroom space.

There is also a rotating restaurant space for local venues in the commons that will change periodically.

“I’m a fan of Spencer’s, and I’m excited that we have local options in the space,” Caboni said. “What’s good for Western Kentucky University is good for Bowling Green, and what’s good for Bowling Green is good for Western Kentucky University. Creating opportunities for us to incubate and grow local businesses, I think, is fantastic.”

Caboni also credited Dean of University Libraries Susan deVries for her willingness to allow the library be combined into a space with several food options.

Other aspects of the new space include an open-faced glass wall on the west side of the building, a large stairway between the first and second floors featuring seating areas

branching out from the stairway, and a wide opening on the third floor making parts of the second and first floors visible.

To the delight of WKU Chief Facilities Officer Bryan Russell, WKU Commons also blends the past with the future.

The building's 1930s-era steel superstructure and original skylights are exposed inside and the jump circle from the old basketball court that the library was built on top of remains visible.

"It's nice to preserve that history," Russell said. "To be able to save the building and to give us the 'wow' factor, I think, is really important. The reason it was done that way is because you want to preserve the things you want to keep. We did that as part of the design."

Russell said this was the second, full transformation the over 90-year-old building has seen in its history, with the first being in 1963 when it served as the Health and Physical Education Building before becoming a library.

From April 18 until May 5, WKU Commons will be open Mondays through Thursdays from 7:30 a.m. to 10 p.m., Fridays from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and Sundays from 1 to 10 p.m.

Caboni said the university will "immediately" turn its attention next to constructing a new Gordon Ford College of Business building after the semester concludes.

“I want to thank everyone for all their hard work for getting this done even through COVID-19,” Caboni said of WKU Commons. “It created remarkable delays with workforce and getting materials, but we crossed the finish line. I think this building will go a long way to improving retention and graduation rates here on the Hill.”

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