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Beyond books: Slover Library expands Maker Studio with 3D printers, laser cutter and more

By Ryan Murphy
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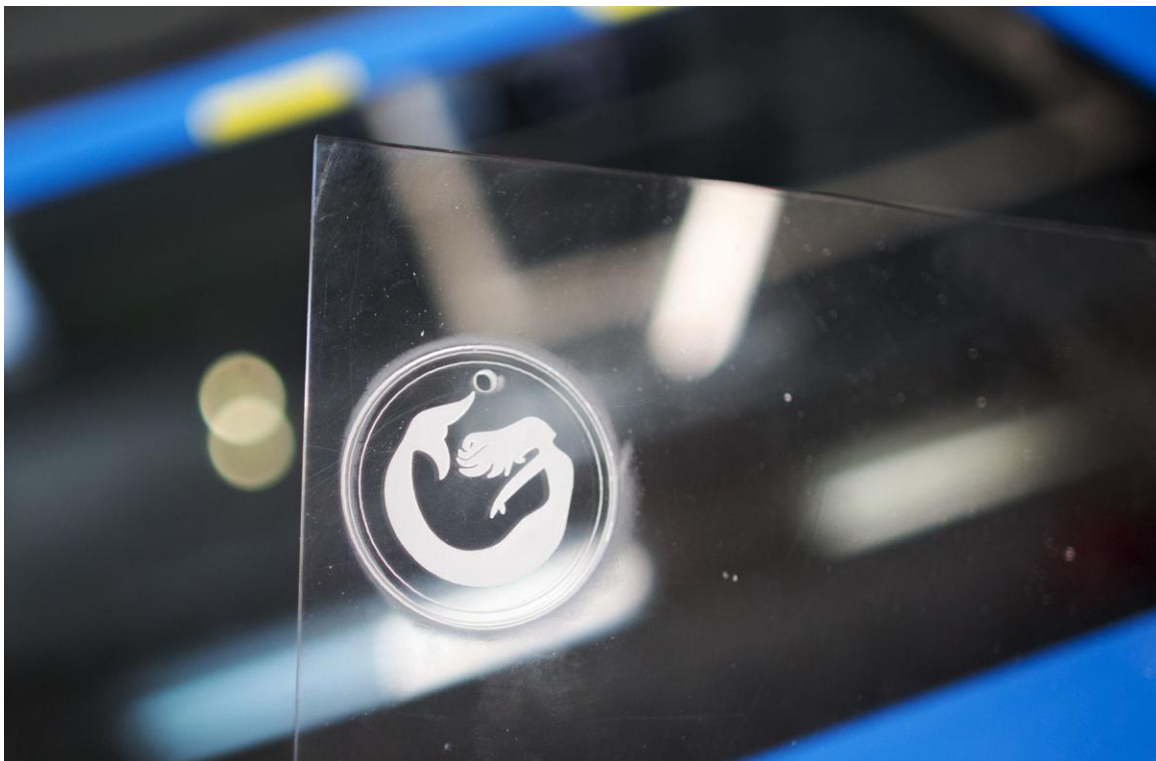
The new Maker Studio, part of the Slover library is located at Selden Arcade. The Maker Studio has 3D printers, 3D scanning equipment, universal laser systems, high end sewing machines, sound studio and more, photo taken July 11, 2018.



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Michael Willits, creative studios supervisor at the Slover library in Norfolk, Virginia, talks about the sound proof studio installed inside the new Maker Studio, located at Selden Arcade, July 11, 2018. The Maker Studio has 3D printers, 3D scanning equipment, universal laser systems, high end sewing machines, sound studio and more.



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Michael Willits, creative studios supervisor at the Slover library in Norfolk, Virginia, shows a small sample of

what the universal laser system can do at the new Maker Studio, located at Selden Arcade, July 11, 2018. The Maker Studio also has 3D printers, 3D scanning equipment, high end sewing machines, sound studio and more.

NORFOLK

In a corner of Selden Arcade, next door to the Slover Library, glass walls give way to a futuristic workshop.

Eight 3D printers, a 75-watt laser cutter, 17 Singer sewing machines and soldering stations for connecting circuitry have been installed recently – and they're all available to anyone with a Norfolk Public Libraries card.

The new 1,500-square-foot space for the Slover Maker Studio represents a major expansion of the library's creative studios, a suite of resources and facilities that the library has offered since it opened in 2015. That includes audio-visual production studio space and equipment on the fourth floor of the library.

Creative Studios supervisor Michael Willits said the expansion was driven by a seemingly insatiable demand from patrons, student groups and small businesses. He said the two 3D printers have been spitting out projects eight to 10 hours a day, six days a week.

Grants from The Virginian-Pilot Fund via the Hampton Roads Community Foundation and the Slover Foundation provided the money for the expansion, to the tune of \$250,000.

"We spent a lot of time figuring out what are the gaps in the city that aren't being served," Willits said

The new Slover Maker Studio, located in the adjoining Selden Arcade, is 1,500 square feet of working space with equipment and technology most people could never imagine having at home.

Willits said the studios previously offered classes on things like Photoshop, but the expansion has given them a chance to rethink the educational element of their efforts.

"We used to have classes every day for an hour or so. But to do the class, we had to kick people out who were working," he said.

Instead, they will focus on allowing people to learn at their own pace, with their own hands.

When those two 3D printers were being run at capacity, it was all staff doing that work, Willits said. In the new space, library employees will help occasional and

first-time users by running their projects during morning hours, before the studio opens.

But Willits said many users will be expected to learn and use the machinery on their own. For the eight 3D printers, that means a couple of hours to learn to use the modeling software and another few hours of hands-on learning.

“We don’t do your homework, but we’ll show you how to use the camera and edit the video,” Willits said.

Once patrons are certified, the staff will help when asked and keep an eye on the machines, but the patrons will largely be on their own. They’ll only be limited by availability and cost – most print jobs cost about \$5 in materials, which you can purchase through the library or bring yourself.

With hardly a book in sight, the 3D printers and sewing machines may not scream “library,” but Willits said the studios fall into Slover’s mission.

“If it involves learning and creation and coming together, whether you’re an entrepreneur or a teen, this is what the library is for.”

So what are people doing with this equipment? Just about anything you can imagine, Willits said.

From prototyping patent ideas to printing tabletop game pieces to assembling elaborate costumes and clothing, the space already has been used by all kinds of folks.

Photographers have staged fashion shoots in the production studio while musicians and voice-over artists who can’t afford studio time have booked the recording booths.

Derek Shaw runs Werther Leather Goods a few stalls down in Selden Arcade. He has run up to Slover’s fourth floor a few times to use the 3D printers for his business. to help him create custom logos for leather goods, like wallets.

In the past, he would send the company’s logo to a specialty business in California. “They’ll make a brass brand of (the logo) for me and I can put that on any products they order,” he said.

Now, Shaw uses the 3D printers to create a plastic version of the logo that results in the same effect.

The new space is operating under a kind of soft-opening but is still weeks from being completed. Crews were in there running network cables this week, and Willits is waiting on the delivery of 10 high-powered laptop computers. It will be

several weeks before the ribbon is cut.

Still, Willits said the interest and use of the studio has been consistent – a half-dozen Star Wars costume enthusiasts were in the space recently with Storm Trooper armor spread across the countertops – and he is already looking ahead to further expansion.

“We need more room already.”

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