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US Academic Libraries: Today's Learning Commons Model

By Susan McMullen, Roger Williams University, United States

In 2007, the author examined existing academic libraries in the United States to determine best practices for the design, implementation and service of learning commons facilities. A primary objective of this study was to discover how to create a higher education learning environment that sustains scholarship, encourages collaboration and empowers student learning. This article explains how to plan for a modern learning commons and presents the various components that comprise the space.

The continual evolution of digital technologies and, more importantly, the ways in which these tools are being used to access, select, manipulate and produce scholarship has caused many librarians to rethink their roles, facilities and organisational structures. By focusing on the larger social and spatial context in which technologies are used to enhance the learning process, academic libraries are beginning to realise the possibilities of what a library can be. Whether they call themselves a learning commons, information commons, knowledge commons or simply library, they are envisioning new spaces and new partnerships that support the integrated service needs of the digital generation.

The learning commons model functionally and spatially integrates library, information technology and other academic support services to provide a continuum of services to the user, a blending of staff knowledge and skills, and referral to appropriate areas of expertise. It is a dynamic place that encourages learning through inquiry, collaboration, discussion and consultation.

PLANNING

Before embarking on a learning commons project, librarians and their partners must first engage in planning initiatives that can help them conceptualise new environments and define an underlying rationale for the facilities. Identifying and working with partners early in the planning process helps to move away from a library-centric approach and think more holistically about the spaces and the services that support the university's mission and vision. To be both far-reaching and transformative, the learning commons must be strategically aligned with the university's core values and learning-centred goals. A clearly articulated vision, a philosophy of service, and a charter plan that incorporates cross-campus constituencies and puts student learning at its focus are essential to the success of the learning commons model.

In designing the dynamic and interactive spaces proposed by the learning commons model, librarians must ask the right questions. Instead of focusing on floor plans and furniture, it is better to ask questions about the types of activities that users will be engaged in and what services will be needed to support

those activities. With this understanding, one can engage and plan for campus partners, the location of service areas and the types of support staff needed to achieve one's goals.¹ In strategically aligning new library spaces with the nature of the educational experience, the planning focus has shifted – it has become less about library operations and collections and more about student learning.

COMPONENTS

Although every learning commons facility studied during this project was uniquely different, they all supported the characteristics of a generation of students who crave social, technologically infused spaces that are flexible and comfortable enough to accomplish a variety of learning-centred tasks.

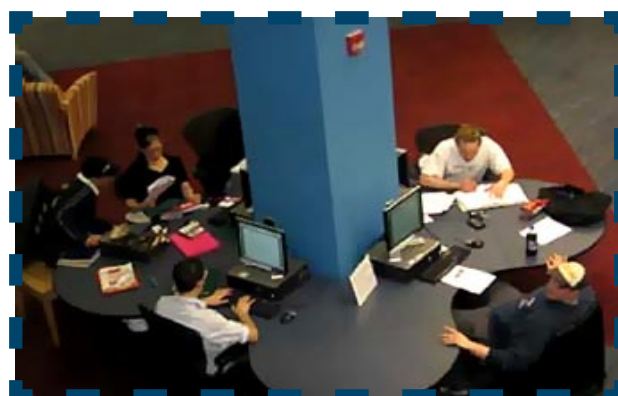
The following components of the learning commons were identified during the course of this study (each is described below):

- computer workstations clusters;
- a service desk;
- collaborative learning spaces;
- presentation support centres;
- instructional technology centres for faculty development;
- electronic classrooms;
- writing centres and other academic support units;
- spaces for meetings, seminars, receptions, programmes and cultural events;
- cafés and lounge areas.

Computer workstation clusters. No longer looking like the computer laboratory configurations of the 1990s, computer work areas are now being designed to functionally and spatially integrate into the library's overall design concept. These new computer configurations are commonly referred to as pods or clusters. They allow ample space for students to spread out their materials. Other successful arrangements are serpentine rows, clover leaf, Y shape, circular or octagonal pods, curving rows, short straight rows and a variation on a square design with four separate work points.



Hamilton College
Computer workstations designed in serpentine rows allowing space for students to spread out.



Bridgewater State College
Clover leaf work areas designed around building support columns offer plenty of space for individual or collaborative work.

1. Lippincott, J.K. (2006), "Linking the Information Commons to Learning", in D.G. Oblinger (ed.), *Learning Spaces*, EDUCAUSE, www.educause.edu/learningspaces.

Service desk. Support is an essential component of the computer workstation environment that includes a broad spectrum of productivity software. In using technology to complete a series of tasks, from identifying and locating information resources to producing a text-based or multimedia end product, students need both research and technological assistance. Librarians and information professionals are fulfilling these support needs by integrating service at a single desk or by staffing separate but co-located desks. In designing the service desk, careful consideration should be given to the types of activities that will be happening at this desk. Will this space allow for in-depth research assistance, or will research consultations take place in another area or office? Will students receive in-depth assistance at this desk with complex software packages?

Collaborative learning spaces. A major difference in the spaces designed for the learning commons as opposed to those of the traditional library is the influx of group study spaces which facilitate collaborative learning and satisfy students' desire to mix social interaction with work. In all of the libraries studied, several types of spaces were made available for students to work together, the group study room being the most easily recognisable. Most libraries offer both small and large group study rooms that accommodate 4 to 12 users. Rooms are commonly equipped with computer projection technology and a whiteboard.

Bridgewater State College
Large group study room with movable furniture, whiteboard and projection.



In addition to enclosed rooms, collaborative learning spaces are found throughout the commons. Using a variety of furniture configurations, spaces have been clearly designed to enable collaborative work. At the minimum, collaboration is encouraged by computer work areas large enough to accommodate two or more users. Connecticut College provides collaborative work areas in booths along the periphery of their café area. Mount Holyoke has collaborative work spaces with large screen monitors in designated areas of their commons. Successful spaces for collaboration also include tables with central electrical wiring for laptop use.

Mount Holyoke College
Collaboration area with shared plasma screen.



Internet cafés create an informal collaborative environment. Cafés often include both a wireless environment for laptops and a few computer workstations configured for guest login. Comfortable and inviting upholstered furniture provides a wonderful opportunity for students to gather informally for discussion and group collaboration. Having the furniture on wheels allows students to move it around into whatever configuration is needed to accommodate their numbers.



Appalachian State University
Cyber café.

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Presentation support centres. An important feature of the learning commons is an advanced technology facility to support students in developing multimedia projects. Presentation support centres go by many names: multimedia presentation centres, advanced technology labs, digital studios, media authoring labs, technology courtyards, special projects computer labs, etc. These spaces usually propose a mix of high-end PCs and Macintosh computers with full suites of macromedia software and other image and editing software. A good example of a highly equipped technology lab is at Hamilton College. Their multimedia presentation centre supports a variety of high-end multimedia enhanced projects including digital and audio editing, large format printing that can be used to make posters for conference and seminar presentations, and web content development with video, audio and animation.



Hamilton College
Multimedia presentation centre with high-end Macs, digital editing equipment and scanners.



Elon University
Student worker helping another student at a shared monitor in the Student Instructional Technology Lab.

Instructional technology centres for faculty development. In addition to the presentation support centres described above, some institutions supply separate services to help faculty use technology in the curriculum. Instructional technology centres for faculty development, often called teaching learning centres, are often supported by Instructional Technology departments. These centres give support in instructional design and strategies for teaching with technology, as well as assistance with course management software, digital technologies and various software packages.

Electronic classrooms. Not only are electronic classrooms integral to information literacy initiatives, they play an important role in offering additional campus learning opportunities such as staff training and occasional classroom support. These electronic teaching rooms are configured in a variety of ways to support different functionalities. Classrooms designed for library instruction usually have 20 to 30 workstations. Additional classrooms may be smaller or be designed for laptop use, having only the projection and instructor's workstation permanently fixed in the room. The trend has been toward more carefully integrating the public spaces of the learning commons, rather than tucking them away down a corridor or behind walls.



Elon University

Library classroom in the round, placed among the computer workstations in the information commons area and in clear view of the information desk.

Writing centres and other academic support units. Combining a variety of student support services makes good sense in the learning commons model that boasts the availability of “one stop” service to students. Nine of the 18 libraries in this study had established partnerships with the campus writing centre or other academic support units, such as Academic Advisement, Tutoring and Service Learning. They intentionally incorporated these services into their learning commons environments.



University of Massachusetts Amherst

Academic Advising and Career Services Desk is one of four main service desks in the learning commons. The other three are the Reference and Research Assistance Desk, Learning Commons and Technical Support Desk, and the Writing Center.

Spaces for meetings, seminars, receptions, programmes and cultural events. Offering spaces that create a sense of community and exchange of ideas should not be overlooked when designing the learning commons. These spaces reinforce the identity of the student as an integral part of the scholarly community and provide new ways for students, faculty and community members to interact. Not only do these spaces enhance student learning outcomes outside of the classroom, but they put the library at the heart of intellectual and cultural life for the campus community and beyond.

Cafés and lounge areas. Though many may view the availability of food and drink as inconsequential, cafés and comfortable soft seating areas are mainstays of the learning commons model. In encouraging students to spend more time in spaces designed to accommodate the research process from inception to conclusion, we need to give them an opportunity for a quick break and social networking.



Bridgewater State College
Soft seating.

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Spaces that focus on human-centred design and encourage learner participation will become increasingly important in transitioning to a commons model that emphasises the academic community of learners and the range of services they require. We need to recognise that space is transitional and that it will keep changing as user needs dictate. Duke University, in planning for new learning environments, cautions that one should envision new spaces and then envision them again to see how they can be reconfigured as future needs dictate.

A full description of this study and the 18 libraries visited is available from the author's website at <http://faculty.rwu.edu/smcmullen>.

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*See also www.oecd.org/edu/facilities/resources for further work related to libraries and resource centres, including the PEB publication *School Libraries and Resource Centres (OECD, 2001)*.*

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