

LEARNING COMMONS: AN OVERVIEW

Elizabeth Winiarz

Science Librarian

Claire T. Carney Library

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

285 Old Westport Road

North Dartmouth, MA 02747

Abstract: In recent years libraries have been converting their space to provide more services desired by students and faculty. Different kinds of space are needed as well as more technology. More group study areas are needed while quiet space is still in demand. The Learning Commons is a vibrant customer-driven space promoting interaction and learning. This article provides an overview of some of the planning that goes into creating a Learning Commons.

Keywords: Learning Commons; Information Commons;

These are exciting times for libraries. In an effort to meet the changing demands of students, faculty, and university administrators, libraries are scrutinizing how they do business. The Learning Commons or Information Commons is the current solution to providing library space that is inviting to users and supports everyone's learning needs.

University students today have grown up in a world where there were always cell phones, video games, and the internet. Even some of the younger professors fall into this category. They have used web sources to satisfy their information needs. They have their personal favorite information seeking strategies. This presents librarians with a dilemma. Do we teach these students about classical information sources such as books, standard reference sources, and journals (even online journals)? Will they even be willing to read a book if we place it in front of them? Or, do we provide something completely different and allow traditional collections and services to be set aside?

A number of educational institutions have adopted customer service models. Efforts are made to evaluate what the students want and to provide them with an experience that they will find satisfactory. Rather than evaluating our libraries using standard measures such as collection statistics, circulation figures or gate counts, we now look to evaluative tools such as LibQual, a user satisfaction survey. To make students happy libraries are relaxing traditional rules. Food is being allowed into library buildings, more noise is being tolerated as group study is encouraged and non-traditional activities are moving into library space.

As universities compete for students, the library can be one of the strengths that leave a lasting impression on visitors who are trying to decide on which university is best.

The library may be combined with the IT department for administrative purposes. It is important to remember that these two departments complement each other and neither replaces the other. The IT department provides the infrastructure and the library provides the content, just as an arena provides the ice and seating for a hockey game but nothing happens unless the players show up to compete.

The role of the library is changing. While there are still many traditional students who seek a quiet refuge for reflection and reading, many of today's students do not study alone and need to have background noise for concentration. It is not uncommon to see students talking on the phone while typing a paper and sending instant messages all at the same time.

So, what is a Learning Commons and why should we have one? It is a one-stop shop for delivery of services to support learning. It is a place for student/student, student/faculty and faculty/faculty interactions. It is a place to introduce information literacy and reinforce research strategies.

As electronic access replaces paper collections space is freed up in library buildings. Every unit on campus will be looking at this precious space! When a Learning Commons is created, it is important that consideration be given to which activities will make the most efficient use of the space and be most helpful to the students and faculty.

Keep in mind that the Learning Commons should comply with the mission of the university, the mission of the library and the students' need for active learning, and both collaboration and quiet contemplation. Invite and welcome units into the Learning Commons if they support these missions.

Learning Commons typically may include:

- Fully loaded workstations, plus wireless access and tables to bring laptops
- Lots and lots of electrical outlets
- Research assistance – reference librarians
- Technical assistance – IT help
- Group work tables, noise permitted and encouraged
- Single workstations for individuals
- Practice rooms for presentations
- Comfy, cozy areas, flexible furnishings
- Food, cafe
- Seminar rooms
- Instruction rooms
- Multimedia area
- Scanners, printers

- Consultation service for faculty – Center for teaching and learning, Faculty space for brainstorming for grant opportunities
- Language lab
- Videoconferencing facilities
- Digilab – Playground for faculty to practice using Wii and other technologies
- Tutoring

The Learning Commons should NOT be just another social space or just another IT lab.

Librarians have a very important role to play in the Learning Commons. As faculty partners, librarians are frequently aware of student's course content and assignments. They work with faculty to include information literacy opportunities in the course work. How often has a librarian been called to assist a student when the person at the help desk has exhausted all sources on a topic? The librarian opens the student's textbook and points to the answer. The subject expertise of librarians is a time and patience saving attribute that is esoteric but valuable. Students who have little previous experience with libraries are soon won over once they have had a successful research consultation with a reference librarian.

Students who have had a lecture from a librarian in the classroom are more likely to approach the reference/research desk, especially if the librarian on duty is the same person who visited their class.

The Library Commons serves many functions and provides many services in a defined space. Signage is very important. If this is a one-stop shop, comparison with a grocery store might be in order. At the grocery store a customer will find a number of counters where personal service can be obtained such as the bakery, the deli or the fresh fish departments. To provide the best experience for the customer, it is important to have a competent person on duty to provide each of these services and to clearly define where the customer should go if he or she is in need of one of these services.

The decision needs to be made when planning the Learning Commons how many service points will be created, who will staff the service points and what hours the service points will be populated. Clear signage will ensure that a visitor to the Learning Commons does not waste any time asking for assistance and then being redirected and having to explain the need all over again.

Some interesting features that may be considered in a Learning Commons include:

- A screen showing current news feed
- A collection of foreign newspapers for foreign students
- Contests offering prizes e.g. UPenn had a mashup contest. Create a parody of a Hollywood film. Prize was an expensive video camera. Movie night showed all the entries
- Promote collections – use a digitized image from the print collection as a screen saver

- Create a library or librarian blog
- Display student work in display cases or on display walls
- Lockers with electrical outlets to charge laptops while in storage

The Learning Commons needs to be inviting. It should be well lit, include a mix of furniture, tables, comfortable seating, art, color and appropriate signage. Everything should be flexible. The electrical grid should be placed in the ceiling or below a raised floor so that outlets can be more easily moved if the floor plan is rearranged. It should be maintained and kept clean.

Assessment

A particularly good example of assessment of a Learning Commons can be found at:

The University of Massachusetts Amherst Learning Commons Assessment:
www.library.umass.edu/assessment.learningcommons.html

Conclusion

Whether a library makes a dramatic change and restructures the services it provides or whether a library incorporates a few new ideas to accommodate different learning and teaching styles, it is always beneficial to take a look at the services we provide and assess if we are in tune with our users. The traditional library is evolving into a new model. We can only wait and see whether developments continue in the same direction or whether steps will be retraced.

Vinaka, thank you.