The information and learning commons: a selective guide to sources

Tim Held

California State University, Stanislaus, Turlock, California, USA

Abstract
Purpose – This bibliography aims to give citations and annotations for a core selection of sources on the information and learning commons trend in academic libraries.

Design/methodology/approach – Articles, books, and web sites relevant to this topic were found in the Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts database; Library Literature Index; WorldCat; and on the internet. Sources were chosen that contribute to an overview of the concepts or cover practical considerations in implementation.

Findings – Libraries are developing best practices as they experiment with learner-centered service models, but they apply these best practices differently according to their unique needs. Early implementations focus on technology and access, while later implementations focus on more collaborations surrounding learner-centered pedagogies.

Research limitations/implications – This bibliography selects from English language books, web sites, and peer reviewed journals about US, British, Canadian, and Oceania academic libraries, large and small.

Originality/value – This survey of the literature will help librarians and administrators understand the theoretical trends and collaboration that influence how libraries can change service, space, and technology to meet emerging needs.

Keywords Bibliographies, Information services, Library systems, Information management, Best practice

Paper type Literature review

Academic libraries have been designing and implementing new services that redefine what it means to be the heart of the campus. Powerful networked computers in the library have not only transformed research but also accelerated the trend in higher education toward active, learner-centered pedagogies. In response, librarians are reconfiguring space and service around technology and exploring campus partnerships. The resulting cutting edge research environments are known as information commons or learning commons.

An information commons can be described as a set of best practices for improving reference space and service by integrating technology with student-centered learning. Each library incorporates commons principles as needed. At a minimum, these include the collections and technologies for students to complete their research in one common area. Sitting at a computer workstation, students should be able to take their research from the initial stages of resource retrieval to the final stage of producing “new knowledge” with technology assistants and reference librarians at hand. Often, a multimedia production lab enhances this goal. An adjacent hi-tech classroom can attract experimentation and collaboration between librarians and instructors to
integrate information literacy into the curriculum. Group study areas also allow for independent or group learning (MacWhinnie, 2003). Such gathering places can attract other student services, such as a cafe or writing center. Sometimes commons are new buildings on campus that co-locate various departments and services, of which the library is only one stakeholder, although these may not achieve the integration that can create seamless service points and true learning communities (Lippincott, 2004). In a commons, collaboration is important on many levels: between university departments, between library units, and among students themselves. Commons are a physical complement of the web-based research environment, and like the Web 2.0, they are social, process-oriented, and evolving (Daniels and Barratt, 2008).

Discussion of the commons in the literature grapples with several issues surrounding changes in technology and learning. In the 1990s, online resources and networked communication were transforming research. The University of Southern California’s Leavey Library was built as a test bed of technology integration into instruction and to “humanize technology in the service of learning” (Holmes-Wong et al., 1997, p. 75). One means of integrating service was coordinating reference and computer help staff service points, with mixed results. Some early adopters discovered that a central service point did not make sense (Church, 2005), others learned that separate service points did not make sense (Crockett et al., 2002), and still others learned that joined service points did not produce the hoped-for synergy between librarians and separately managed computer tech students (McKinstry and McCracken, 2002). Staffing, training, and assessment became key discussions. Several articles detail practical issues with technology, such as multiple operating systems that created barriers (Bailey and Tierney, 2002; Church et al., 2002). Others are more philosophical. Who owns copyright if students are the producers of information online? What is a librarian’s role in this production-oriented environment (MacAdam, 1998)?

Donald Beagle asks how an organization based on a print model of service can restructure itself to provide service in a fluid and digital environment (Beagle, 1999, p. 82). Beagle’s solution is to holistically reorganize the library’s increasingly disjointed service units around a common service point to provide the seamless service that emerging technology allows. At the same time, the library’s services are aligned with larger university goals. The University of North Carolina at Charlotte’s library used Beagle’s theory to re-cast not only public service but also administration around the information desk as the main public service “Hub” (Bailey and Tierney, 2002). Such structural alignment provided scaffolding to the commons experiment, strengthening it as a model for collaboration and in innovation.

Information commons attract new definitions and roles for librarians. From the beginning, they were designed to enhance information literacy. Their productivity software and multimedia capabilities allow students to experience the full range of skills articulated in the Information Literacy Competency Standards (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2008). Additional opportunities for instruction within the commons model include training faculty in instructional media technologies (Duncan, 1998), providing technology-rich classrooms for faculty to explore technology-influenced pedagogies (Creth, 1994), and partnering with faculty in content management systems (Beagle, 2006). Beagle et al. make a distinction between the focus on knowledge manipulation of the library-centric information versus the knowledge creation of the learning commons that partners with other campus learning
initiatives. Some examples of the ways libraries can play a larger role in learning include partnering with the writing center, faculty development center, and learning communities. Thus, a learning commons is more engaged with teaching and learning than merely supporting learning (Beagle, 2006; Bailey and Tierney, 2008).

The learning commons also highlights the importance of library space. Problem-based learning, active learning, and cognitive theory promote independent learning environments outside the classroom (Barr and Tagg, 1995) as well as the importance of social learning (Gardner and Eng, 2005). To meet these needs, a commons space can accommodate various collaborative, highly flexible and technology-rich activities that blur the distinction between learning and recreation. Scott Bennett’s influential study urged libraries to plan spaces around such casual learning, group learning, and socializing. Bennett (2003) uses learning commons to denote student-centered spaces and activities. In such a learning commons, student amenities are important, such as wireless connectivity, group presentation rooms, flexible furniture, cafes, and aesthetically inspiring spaces. Whereas Beagle thinks in terms of instructional roles for librarians in the creation of knowledge, Bennett focuses on space for student creativity. Their complementary interpretations exemplify the variety of opportunities for change. Libraries that aspire to change their service and space must be adaptable and assess their efforts for continual improvement. Although many articles discuss qualitative and quantitative assessment, others acknowledge that direct assessment of student learning can be difficult for libraries to capture (MacWhinnie, 2003; Bennett, 2003).

Librarians may call the transformed service and space an information commons, learning commons, or some other name. What these librarians share is a desire to make a more visible impact on student learning (Haas and Robertson, 2004, p. 12).

This guide collects key sources that help librarians define, build, and manage a commons. The sources offer examples of space renovations or reference service updates that support student success while redefining librarians’ roles. They discuss issues in reference and user services, instruction, technology, staffing, training, space design, collaboration, and assessment. Included are theoretical works, research reports, case studies, conference presentations, and bibliographies. They span the early 1990s to the present, ranging from academic libraries in the UK to North America and Oceania. Of the many print and online sources available, this guide selects only those that are representative, comprehensive, or particularly insightful. For a broader discussion of the commons trend in library administration or systems literature, readers can follow citations in the reviewed articles or see David Murray’s thorough bibliography (Murray, 2004).

This guide does not include sources on the tangential “knowledge commons”, which is also often called the “information commons” or “creative commons”. These terms refer to the free exchange of information in the public domain, as well as the social and legal practices to safeguard it from co-option by for-profit entities. For more information about the knowledge commons, see David Bollier (2004) or Nancy Kranich (2003).

Sources are arranged in categories by their main purpose, and chronologically within those categories. In order to identify these sources, a comprehensive search was conducted in the Library Literature index and the Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts database, as well as Books in Print, WorldCat, the worldwide web, Dissertation Abstracts, and citation chaining.
Sources: general
A discussion group listserv where any kind of commons-related question is asked and often answered by one of the published experts who monitor it. Question threads are archived back to 2004 on furniture, assessment, alternate names for lab assistants, or even “what is an information commons”. Also many position announcements and upcoming events are announced.

Barbara Tierney has compiled program documents from various Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and American Library Association (ALA) conference presentations by the Information Commons Interest Group. Archived resources include PowerPoints, bibliographies, and presentation notes by Russell Bailey, Barbara Tierney, Kate Hickey, Allison Cowgill, Shahla Bahavar, Melanie Remy, and others.

MacWhinnie conducted a textual analysis of 19 information commons websites. She compared mission statements, planning documents, funding, and evaluation initiatives. Although their variety sometimes makes comparisons difficult, her analysis helps build a detailed overview of the practical issues that arise for librarians who implement an information commons, including training, staffing, funding, and balancing traditional services with new technology.

Haas, L. and Robertson, J. (2004), The Information Commons, Association of Research Libraries, Washington, DC
This Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Supporting Effective Library Management series publication number 281 is a collection of information useful to those planning an information commons. Its centerpiece is a survey of ARL member libraries on how information commons are implemented. The result is a composite snapshot of insights on administration, funding, facilities, staffing, training, and evaluation. In addition to reporting data from the survey, it also includes examples of several documents from many of the respondents, including web pages, policy statements, promotional posters, position announcements, and training documents. A bibliography completes the survey, providing added value.

An extensive directory up to 2004. Its scope is broader than this guide and includes sources covering the issues of technology in libraries, management, and information literacy. It also includes several library planning documents on the web. This is a good history of relevant issues, although several links are no longer live.
Beagle, D.R. (2006), The Information Commons Handbook, Neal-Schuman, New York, NY

Beagle and collaborators Bailey and Tierney draw upon their previous writings and synthesize many other sources for a thorough and authoritative guide to planning and implementing an information/learning commons. In Part I, Beagle tracks the evolution of the information commons toward a learning commons. He also integrates the physical, digital, and “cultural commons” as layers of an interdependent information environment. Then he maps several emerging learning theories to the commons to make the case for its centrality to information literacy. Part II details strategic planning and tactical planning, including the issues of managing inter-departmental and intra-departmental collaborations. Part II will particularly benefit those planning a commons or those moving from an information commons to a learning commons. Part III considers issues in implementing a commons, such as delegating duties, managing budget, marketing, and assessment. A bibliography and CD of case studies conclude this guide.

Sources: theoretical

The Harland Hatcher Graduate Library at the University of Michigan experimented with a variety of technologies and services when it opened the “Knowledge Navigation Center.” Although a relatively small and robust technology lab, it was meant to explore the changing role of the library as students and faculty interacted with new technology-based knowledge resources. MacAdam discusses many philosophical issues that confront librarians regarding their service and roles at the Center, such as pedagogies for a wired generation, institutional cultures, training, copyright, and learning communities.


The complex online and print library environment creates both service and organizational dysfunction, requiring a new model of reference service. Beagle employs the management theory of “strategic alignment” with its two components of “functional integration” and “strategic fit” to integrate emerging technology with a library’s traditional service. For example, since technologies that once were platform-specific can now speak to one another, service distinctions between reference, data processing, and media services can become barriers. “Functional integration” resolves the problem by restructuring service units to provide a continuum of service across their now porous boundaries. “Strategic fit” assures that the emerging technological innovations in the library serve larger campus goals, such as course management systems for distance education initiatives. In this seminal work, Beagle articulates several goals and directions, including collaboration, technology integration, staff training, faculty development, adaptability, and the need for assessment.
University of North Carolina at Charlotte Library implemented Beagle’s strategic fit and functional integration theory, using their Information Desk as a central service point. Strategic fit is achieved through organizing the public service desks around a commons administrative head and planning committee. Functional integration is achieved by referring patrons from the information desk to various service desks by staff who share functional domains. Bailey and Tierney explain how they resolved issues of planning, training, technology, assessment, and various “tragedies of the commons” which work against the concept of sharing. While some commons focus on reference service enhancements, this library experimented with a much more holistic restructuring of all public services around a new administrative model. Vision and mission statements are included.

Beagle applies another management theory to explore how the information commons can partner with faculty and faculty support programs in an increasingly online learning environment. According to Weick’s theory of “loosely coupled units”, a commons, as a sub-unit of the library, can adapt more easily, more quickly sense the need for change, and act as a test bed for innovation. For example, the online component of a commons can integrate into online course management systems, making bibliographic instruction scaleable. Another example is library staff at University of North Carolina at Charlotte, providing instructional technology workshops to faculty. A third example ponders the potential for the learning commons to become a “knowledge discovery system” and combine many different functionalities, as demonstrated by Internet2.

Library reconfigurations often share space with other departments, but Lippincott argues for true collaborations between the library and other support units to provide seamless service, leverage expertise, and pool resources. Collaboration can be challenging because of silo cultures and their institutional funding streams. Examples of successful collaborations include gaining buy-in from the planning stage and tying the project to larger campus missions and goals.

This brief theoretical piece is based on a presentation at Georgia Tech’s Electronic Resources in Libraries Conference on how the information commons and Web 2.0 technologies mutually support each other to meet students’ needs. The author argues that the flexible study spaces that characterize information commons facilitate the role social networking technology increasingly plays in students’ work. Characteristics include “human-centered” design, wireless access, and flexible space for a variety of learners and activities. The commons should be both practical and inspire creative activity.
Gayton perceives Scott Bennett et al. to be promoting the learning commons at the expense of solitary learning spaces (Bennett, 2003). He argues that the National Center for Education Statistics shows a continuing demand for traditional library space, and that the “communal” nature of quiet study is neglected in the rush to transform libraries into social learning centers. He marshals several supporting quotes from the literature to support his thesis that developing social spaces is of dubious value. Although he does not see a necessary conflict between the two types of library space, he fears the overemphasis on information and learning commons will erode an enduring, unique role for academic libraries.

Sources: planning and implementation
For the new library at University of Nevada at Las Vegas to attract and inspire patrons, planners took up the information commons model. The authors explain how they planned the vision, space, hardware and software set-up. They focus on computer integration issues, such as how they resolved incompatibility of printing and login software suites, and address staffing and training for technology assistance.

University-wide strategic transformation and close collaboration with Information Technology facilitated the University of Calgary library’s information commons. Focus on the user and input from several inter-departmental planning documents emphasized access to technology and information literacy in the new information environment. Planners were informed by changes in student learning, a changing information environment, and input from major stakeholders. Strategies for success include obtaining grants, hiring a project manager, starting a training program, and promoting the commons.

This essay describes the process of updating learning spaces in two different academic libraries. Emory University expanded the library space to make the library a focal point for teaching and learning on campus. A collaboration between instructional technology and the library, this renovation included a technology-rich InfoCommons with flexible furniture and spaces for faculty and students to collaborate. Urbana-Champaign, on the other hand, wanted similar results within an historic building, and without a budget. A study group’s creative thinking produced a values statement, desired outcomes, and specific proposals. This deliberative group process was a success because it moved ideas forward and generated funding.
This article focuses on the planning phase for the renovated University of Florida’s Humanities and Social Sciences library. Steps included site visits, surveys, focus groups, and a design workshop. Results gave insights that helped planners make decisions about the technology to include, services to provide, and how to arrange the space.

When Westminster College’s Giovale Library merged with Information Technology, the newly constructed information commons was a success in several ways. Increasing gate counts generated more interest in other library offerings. Successful collaborations with the Faculty Technology Center included staff training and WebCT curriculum. The Library and Information Technology teamed up on new student orientations and promotions. Although the Writing Center is a link in the information commons service model, it retains its own identity. Despite the fact that one goal of the merger was to blur departmental boundaries, Malenfant notes that several departmental borders are respected, contributing to the success of the collaboration.

Several commons have their own director within the library’s administration, such as Joe Williams at the Hill Library. In this interview, Spencer and Williams touch on many key goals for the North Carolina State University Libraries’ new facility. The learning commons name was chosen to emphasize collaboration and a student-centered focus. For example, reference takes place in the student’s space more than at a traditional librarian’s desk. Williams is looking for ways to engage students and fill their needs, such as providing presentation practice rooms, laptop lending, and group study spaces. A student advisory group helped shape the space and service. Collaboration with Computing Services and training are also discussed.

Sources: case studies
An early and influential commons, this facility at the University of Iowa provides the latest networked technology in a lab, classroom, and multimedia center “adjacent to the Reference Department”. Designed to explore potential relationships between technology and innovative instruction, it is staffed by graduate students, funded by private and university funds, and operated by a collaborative university steering committee. The computer classroom fosters active learning pedagogies by turning faculty into facilitators for students’ hands-on learning. In the future this “playground” will be integral to developing faculty and student skills in technology literacy.
The Information Commons at the University of Iowa’s health sciences library is similar in some ways to the also pioneering Information Arcade elsewhere at UI (see Creth above), though it is more a faculty technology discovery and training lab. It includes a computer classroom, a multimedia lab, and a small open computer lab, but it does not integrate print media into its resources. Duncan discusses planning, staffing, and the resultant increased interdepartmental cooperation through this library-hosted instructional technology test bed.

The focus of this article is on the early collaboration between librarians and information technology administrators on a newly constructed facility combining several functions and administrative units. Director Miller describes in detail the planning and governance of a sometimes rocky marriage of an art and architecture library with an engineering library, a computer center, and a multimedia center. A complex commons, it confronts several of the departmental integration and continuous change issues that such experiments face. For example, the Union maintained more up-to-date computers than elsewhere on campus, causing maintenance and compatibility issues.

Henning visited 25 information commons at academic libraries around the USA and Canada and wrote a report to inform renovation at the University of Victoria. The libraries are easy to compare because of her systematic categories.

After surveying needs and collaborating with information technology, the undergraduate library at the Indiana University Bloomington built an information commons. This case study describes the resulting changes to resources, partnerships, service points, instruction, and reference.

Part student union, part undergraduate library, the Johnson Center was intended as a student centered “gateway” to research that combines several services in a stand-alone building. Students flock to the multipurpose space at the heart of the campus. However, inflexibilities in the layout, partnerships that did not take root, and rapid changes in technology have left the overly specific design inflexible to changing trends. The authors suggest including students in the design phase and building flexibility into the space. One central question highlighted by this article is the degree to which librarians should control change or facilitate it.

Similar to Henning’s web site (above), this sabbatical project gathered best practices to inform the development of a Learning Commons at Roger Williams University Library. McMullen visited 18 libraries and analyzed specific aspects for systematic treatment. She illustrates her case studies more liberally than Henning with photos of the layout and furniture.


The University of Guelph Library Learning Commons achieved collaboration with Student Services and several other success measures as well. In addition to describing its administrative structure and assessment, Schmidt and Kaufman describe the philosophical or theoretical approaches used to develop curriculum and service. For example, phenomenographic, discipline-specific, and cognitive theories informed the design of programming. Also, delivery of services was informed by learning assistance programs, information literacy frameworks, and the supplemental instruction program model. One service choice based on such theoretical foundations was the use of peer tutors.


Bailey and Tierney’s case studies compliment Donald Beagle’s earlier planning handbook. The introductory chapters give an overview of the multifaceted and shifting concepts, the connection of the commons to library information literacy goals, and an overview of history, planning, implementation and assessment. The second part reports the results of surveys of twenty large and small academic libraries that have implemented an information commons. These case studies include quantitative data about each commons as well as qualitative responses to questions about staffing and training, governance and assessment. Each study includes tips for success, based on that library’s experience, and this advice is aggregated in a “lessons learned” chapter. Designed for administrators and librarians who want to expand their service to encompass emerging campus and student needs, this work includes photos of space and furniture configurations, a survey instrument for the all-important user perspective, and a bibliography.

Shader, B. (Ed.) (2008), Learning Commons: Evolution and Collaborative Essentials, Chandos, Oxford

Inspired by the success of a California Academic and Research Libraries Pre-conference on information commons planning, Shader gathered case studies of learning commons in the UK, Canada, the USA, and Oceania. These case studies make the point that each library implements a commons differently, though all affirm student-centered learning. For example, California State University San Marcos found opportunities and constraints in integrating a commons into its new library building.
Glasgow Caledonian University’s Saltire Centre focused on student services and student informal spaces in its commons, while Stanford’s School of Medicine used commons principles to improve integration of faculty instruction with technology. Ohio University’s Alden Library Learning Commons focused on collaborations for student-oriented services, which laid the groundwork for a proposed companion faculty commons. Georgia Tech’s commons separates individual and group work areas, while the University of Auckland separates academic services from other student services in its dual commons. Each case details the planning process, collaboration, staffing issues, technology issues, and assessment. Photographs, planning documents, and floor plans are included. Somerville and Harlan’s well-researched introductory essay maps the evolution of the information commons to the learning commons.

San Jose State University library was inspired by social learning theory in redesigning its space, including their learning commons and classrooms. Planners used Web 2.0 tools and “participatory design” philosophy to collaborate or “co-design” with users. Students indicated need for a virtual commons, cross-disciplinary and interactive learning communities, and non-library learning services such as a writing center. Faculty indicated a shift toward collaborative. By including these stakeholders in ongoing assessment and improvement, the library can develop a more insightful mission and services.

Sources: assessment and improvement
The original separation of reference and computer help at University of Southern California’s ground-breaking Leavey Library was eliminated to better integrate service. It was replaced by a program of cross training for librarians and computer student assistants, and several measures indicate success. This article includes the results of a survey of other libraries’ information commons staffing models.

As an experiment, the Odegaard Undergraduate Library at the University of Washington moved reference from the library entrance up to the second floor computer lab. In a pro-con dialogue format, the director of the library, McKinstry, argues that the relocation moves reference closer to where students are working. McCracken, Coordinator of Reference, feels that moving reference away from the first floor entrance and integrating its service with the student computer assistants degrades reference service. Like Crockett above, McKinstry and McCracken sort out the philosophical and logistical issues confronting computer and reference cultures that integrate in the information commons model. The upshot to the debate is the need for more cross training, better communication between the cultures, and assessment of service.

University of North Carolina at Charlotte placed an information commons on the first floor of its library, but when students asked reference questions at the second floor circulation desk, a program of training for paraprofessionals at that desk was implemented. Supervisors worked together to identify the questions staff could be trained to answer versus referring questions. Circulation staff were trained on reference interview techniques, databases, full text availability, interlibrary loan, and more. Assessment indicated where training could be more successful, and resulting staff reference interactions were more positive. The training was loaded onto WebCT to supplement future in-person training.


Taking stock after three years of operation, administrators of the University of Nevada Las Vegas Lied Library’s Information Commons made adjustments in order to align service along established commons principles. Service points were consolidated and computer productivity software was standardized throughout the building. Departments were consolidated and collaborations cultivated with other student support services. The results included more intuitive service for patrons but more training for staff.


Curious about how to meet the needs of “Generation Y”, administrators of the University of Southern California’s Leavey Undergraduate Library developed a survey using multiple-choice and open-ended questions. These questions were formulated around four Generation Y characteristics, i.e. high achievement, customization, technology in learning, and new modes of communication. The results confirmed several generalizations about this group, which may help other information/learning commons planners identify service goals. More wireless, more computers, more flexible group study space, and more connections to reference help were some operational lessons confirmed by the self-selected, nonscientific survey. The article includes the survey instrument.


This article is a detailed description of the planning and implementation of a state of the art information commons at the Harold B. Lee Library. The commons includes collaborative work space, computer classrooms, multimedia workstations, reference consultation stations, a lounge, and a writing lab. As the commons expanded in phases, it was adjusted according students’ response. For example, future growth will include even more collaborative space for students. Other improvements include staffing, training, assessment, and more partnerships.

Applegate used several output and outcome measures to determine whether the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis’ commons met student needs. First, student usage behavior was explored through surveys, analysis of security cam footage, analysis of computer use, interviews, and reference question tallies. In a second study, Applegate compared a small sample of student work with those same students’ self-reported commons usage, with mixed results. In her final analysis, she concludes that webcam observations of student behavior and surveys provide the most problem-free assessment information.


After surveying the various assessment measures currently in use, Lippincott suggests improving assessment by tying it to institutional learning goals and promoting it to stakeholders. For example, if librarians can show that productivity software in a commons impacts student research positively, it can tell that story at a budget or accreditation forum. Similarly, if librarians partner with instructors in a learning community, they can show how their services impact learning in shared assessment instruments. Partnering with assessment coordinators on campus can utilize their expertise as well.


Not satisfied with a merged reference and technology help desk in the commons, librarians at the University of Massachusetts D.E.B. Du Bois Library separated the desks and used several measures to evaluate how well it was working. A patron survey and focus group, as well as librarian survey and reference statistics analysis, showed that for both patrons and librarians, a separate reference desk generated positive responses regarding reference service. Although separate desks lead to more time on the desk for librarians, the quality of services was better because there were fewer referrals and less mixing technology with reference questions.


In order to assess computer usage in the University of Montana Mansfield Library information commons, the authors gathered data longitudinally. Results show how many computers were in use, where, when, and what applications were used. Interesting findings include that students prefer the most private carrels, and that the percentage of time using library resources decreases as applications like MS Office became available. Along with other measures, this data contributed to assessments and decision-making to improve service.

A survey of 137 university and college libraries revealed how the information/learning commons is being implemented. Questions included not only the range of services and skills of staff, but also perceptions of impact of the commons desk on reference service. One finding was that where reference duties were shared, faculty could concentrate more on teaching duties. Another finding was disagreement on whether the commons increased or decreased the depth of reference questions asked. The most commonly reported success was increased traffic to the library, and the most commonly reported challenge was clashing philosophies of collaborating partners. The authors conclude that the commons is a way for the library to engage in the emerging community aspects of research and learning.

Sources: information literacy


The Student-centered Electronic Teaching (SET) library at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo is a computer classroom with rich multimedia capabilities that helps librarians meet the information literacy and multimedia instruction needs of their students. Designed with collaborative and active learning pedagogies in mind, it illustrates how a computer instruction lab carries out learning commons goals such as incorporating multimedia into research to produce new knowledge.


This is another article that highlights the pioneering efforts of the Information Arcade as a learning environment at the University of Iowa (see Creth). The Arcade has explored some valuable collaborations that integrate information literacy with technology. For example, librarians helped a faculty member develop a multimedia-rich curriculum that was taught in the Arcade’s electronic classroom. Staff training in technology also is accomplished in the Arcade. The Arcade helps librarians create scaleable online information literacy modules that extend their resource and technology skills into teaching and learning. Such expertise made librarians important collaborators in developing two university initiatives, TWIST and nTITLE, that continue to expand the role of technology in teaching and learning on campus.


In order to successfully engage faculty in technology at the University of Iowa Information Arcade (see Creth), librarians collaborated with technology and
curriculum experts to spark innovative instruction. One example was “TWIST”, which paired librarians with faculty who wished to learn about technology in a low-pressure, high-trust environment. Other examples include online tutorials, workshops, and a “Scholarly Digital Resource Center”. The face-to-face librarian-faculty collaborations in this early commons are examples of the learning commons ideal of librarians working with faculty on curriculum.

Sources: learning space
Infocommons-L listserv members created a Flickr account where photos of information commons implementations can be shared (and added by members). As there is no one way an information commons should look, these photos present various images of how it can look.

Yale University Librarian Emeritus Scott Bennett conducted a survey to determine the motivations behind library space planning in the 1990s, and to what degree emerging trends in the social nature of learning were weighed along with operational considerations of space and technology. This multi-method study is a rich mine of qualitative and quantitative data on how librarians and chief academic officers plan for new libraries. Findings show diverse perspectives and institutional values. Bennett concludes that although library planners had responded to the need for computers in space planning, they did not re-conceptualize the library as a space to meet the university’s learning goals. Instead of working with faculty and students to create learning-centered spaces, libraries were still thinking of their role in traditional operational terms, even when adding technology. He argues for a “learning commons” that combines resources and technology with consideration for how students learn in social settings and how faculty teach. A bibliography and survey instrument conclude the article.

Council on Library and Information Resources (2005), Library as Place: Rethinking Roles, Rethinking Space, Council on Library and Information Resources, Washington, DC
This work is a collection of six essays that envision library spaces and services that thrive, rather than become marginalized, in a future of digital content by providing superior access and cultivating social learning trends. For example, Scott Bennett argues for a balance in planning between student study habits and operational considerations (see also Bennett above), and Sam Demas reaches back to the image of the library of Alexandria as an inspiring and eclectic community space. Two examples of innovative library service illustrate the possibilities: Martin Luther King Jr Library in San Jose is a space designed around academic and public service, and Johns Hopkins Welch Medical Library liaisons bring library service to the users to meet needs outside of the traditional library space. Part of the growing literature of student-centered learning, these essays challenge librarians to align service and space with learning commons best practices.
Part One is a collection of essays by educators and consultants who describe the constructivist concepts that factor into designing computer classrooms and learning commons support spaces. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect, such as psychology, community, social technology, and the value of informal learning spaces. Joan Lippincott provides a good introduction to the various goals of a learning commons, particularly how space contributes to learning. Malcolm Brown and Philip Long explain how collaborative, flexible, and technology rich support spaces meet current trends in education. Cyprien Lomas and Diana Oblinger explain how attention to students’ habits can make learning space more participatory, connected, integrated, and flexible. Part Two consists of case studies of library and other university spaces from a variety of institutions that have been intentionally designed with these concepts in mind. Each case study succinctly defines the space and technology, how it is used, and what makes it successful. Many photos provide added value.

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Corresponding author
Tim Held can be contacted at: theld@csustan.edu

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