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COMO WHITE PAPER

Information, Learning, Research: Evolution of the Academic Library Commons

By Charles Forrest

The Academic Library Commons: *From Information to Learning*

Fifteen years ago the information commons appeared in many academic libraries across the United States and in other parts of the English speaking world. Various styled “academic,” “knowledge,” or “library” commons, the use of the term “commons” points toward the academic library’s important symbolic role as a “...public place that supports conversation and sharing, free to be used by everyone, and which everyone has a right to use, a place that is generally accessible, affable, and familiar....”¹ The academic library commons is a “third place” on campus outside of the two main spaces, one for living (residence hall room, apartment, home), and the other for work (classroom, laboratory, office). The library commons is a place where the community can meet across disciplinary boundaries.²

The information commons features an integrated desktop environment, robust technological infrastructure, and an emergent service model typically built on collaboration between the library and a campus-level academic technology partner. Combining a broad suite of software tools from the student computer lab with the resource-rich online environment of the library, the information commons offers a “one-stop shop” focused on student *productivity*.

More recently, with the expansion of the information commons to include classrooms, group studies, coffee shops and cafes, spaces for individual and collaborative work, and academic support services such as writing centers, tutoring services, even counseling and placement services, the learning commons has broadened the information commons’ mission by paying increasing attention to student *success*.

Teaching and Research: *Knowledge and Learning*

These expanded learning spaces in academic libraries support teaching *and* research. Conceptual models in higher education tend to treat “teaching” and “research” as separate domains. But it is useful to think of teaching and research on a continuum of knowledge and learning. Teaching focuses on conserving and conveying existing knowledge; research involves discovering, creating and sharing new knowledge. For the student the “aha” moment is “I didn’t know that!” For the researcher, the “aha” moment is “Nobody knew that!” The new knowledge brought to light by research becomes part of the body of knowledge available to the student, supporting the cycle of insight, transmittal and verification. As Chaucer says of the clerke in the *Canterbury Tales*: “And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche.”³

Teaching and research are both characterized by curiosity, discovery, engagement and sharing; they can both be thought of as learning activities.

On this view the academic campus is a community of learners; every member is a learner. Every professor is a student of their discipline; every student of a discipline professes to have attained some level of mastery in their chosen subject. In this community of learners, every campus experience is potentially a learning experience, and every campus place potentially a learning place—especially the academic library and its commons.⁴

The Academic Library Commons: *Evolution and Differentiation*

The information commons and its successor learning commons deployed a seamlessly integrated desktop environment, rich in information and applications, supported by a robust data and network infrastructure joined to a service and support model that offered expert assistance by both content specialists and technologists. The commons was idealized as a sort of “one-stop-shop” where the student and scholar could find, in one place, everything needed for academic productivity and scholarly success.

The one-stop-shop model was never completely realized in practice. From the beginning of the academic library commons, one could find stand up workstations configured only for quick online catalog lookups or checking email, and specialized workstations supporting high-end applications with special equipment or computing resource requirements, or restricted or limited licenses. The ubiquitous, one-size-fits-all computing workstation environment has always contained elements of the information arcade, with its dedicated single-purpose workstations supporting one application or database, and no other.

Continuous and increasing differentiation and specialization characterize recent evolutionary developments in the academic library commons, spawning an increasing variety of places and spaces in academic libraries aspiring to some “flavor” of commons: knowledge, technology, research, digital, multimedia, and so on. This was very much in evidence at the American Library Association 2011 Annual Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana, at a program sponsored by the Library Leadership and Management Association—Buildings and Equipment Section—Library Interiors, Furnishings, and Equipment Committee (LLAMA-BES LIFE): “Designing the Specialty Commons.”⁵ Summaries of the panelist presentations appear in the next section.

Specialty Commons: *Visualization and Analysis, Data and Research*

Data Lab, University of California-Berkeley

Jesse Silva, Librarian, Federal Documents, Political Science, Public Policy and Legal Studies

The Data Lab is a space where students and faculty can obtain assistance in locating a numeric data set and can access and use specialized statistical software (such as SAS, SPSS, STATA, R) to manipulate the data set. Users may bring their own dataset and use the software available in the lab. While numeric data sets can be used by virtually all academic disciplines, most usage at UC-Berkeley comes from the social sciences. The lab has two staff and three student employees, with a reference desk staffed by subject selectors for various social sciences disciplines. Located within Doe Library, the largest of twenty

or so libraries at UC-Berkeley, the Data Lab is small, encompassing less than 1,000 square feet. The Data Lab is more than a computer lab—help is easily available in flexible space designed to support individual and/or group work.

Visualization and Analysis Labs, University of Michigan Library

Jennifer Green, Manager, Maps, Government Information, and Spatial & Numeric Data

Managed under a single conceptual umbrella, a variety of labs on the north and central campuses at the University of Michigan operate across a continuum from visualization (representation and image manipulation) to analysis (modeling, aggregation and rendering). North campus labs include SAND North (Spatial Analysis Lab), UM3D, DesignLab1, and the Digital Media Commons. On the central campus one finds the Clark Lab, Knowledge Navigation Center (KNC), Tech Deck, and Faculty Exploratory (FE). The KNC, Tech Deck and FE tip toward visualization, while SAND North and UM3D offer analysis tools and opportunities. The Design Lab 1 cuts across the continuum. Experience shows that chalkboards and whiteboards are just as important to learning and research as more high tech tools. Different types of space are needed to support independent work and consultation, group collaboration, and presentation. The program ethos is forward-thinking, requiring seamless access across unit boundaries and resources, and spaces that are complementary, modular, and adaptable.

Research Commons, Emory University Libraries

Charles Forrest, Director, Library Facilities

Emory University's Research Commons opened in the fall of 2011. Initially anchored by DiSC (the Digital Scholarship Commons, a multi-year grant funded initiative focused on digital scholarship primarily in the humanities), the Research Commons builds on the commons model in support of faculty and graduate student productivity and success. The first phase will feature support for computer-based research, project incubation, technology-enabled collaborative space, and videoconferencing. The planning process kicked off with brainstorming across a broad range of strategic partners, and then narrowed focus to DiSC as an initial key stakeholder. Its prominent location in the main library embeds the Research Commons adjacent to a suite of existing spaces supporting teaching, learning and public programming. The Research Commons space is designed to achieve flexibility through variety and mobility, of both furniture and technology, coupled with a strategy of phasing in emerging "moving-target" technologies.

A laboratory for digital cultural heritage within the Research Commons at UCLA Library

Gary E. Strong, University Librarian

The Research Commons in the UCLA Library is a laboratory for the humanities and social sciences, where discovery happens. The digital cultural heritage laboratory is knowledge focused, inter-disciplinary, and innovative, offering accessibility to data that is trustworthy and accurate. Well-managed content combined with technology supporting social networking will lead to transformative scholarship and pedagogy, characterized as interdisciplinary, collaborative, socially engaged, global in focus, timely and relevant. The Research Commons features flexible, technology-enabled spaces in which students and faculty can use library resources, conduct research, and collaborate with one another. Multi-dimensional digital representations will enable new forms of scholarly communication and offer revolutionary means of exploring the past.

The Technology Sandbox, North Carolina State University
David Woodbury, Learning Commons Librarian

The Technology Sandbox at NCSU is a test bed and showcase of new technologies and spaces. A grant-funded initiative, the Technology Sandbox originated in the need for a better understanding of emerging technologies, and is positioned to serve as an incubator and inspiration for the campus. Renewing the learning commons concept, the sandbox is devoted to prototyping and experimentation, making technology-rich spaces available to all, and preparing for the next generation of learning tools. The sandbox features a SMART Board, a Perceptive Pixel large scale interactive display, the Quad Screen (four displays mounted in a matrix), motion gaming, and multi-touch tables (Microsoft Surface). Moveable furniture is an early and resounding success. Analog technologies such as whiteboards are important in the mix. Users will experiment (especially at an engineering school). It is clear that new technologies require a lot of back end support.

The Commons: People and Technologies, Learning and Scholarship

The academic library commons is a place where people and technologies come together in facilities designed to enable and celebrate knowledge discovery and sharing. The ongoing evolution of the commons keeps the academic library at the center of a community of learners pursuing 21st century teaching, research and scholarship.

Charles Forrest is director of library facilities at Woodruff Library, Emory University.

Notes

¹ Charles Forrest and Martin Halbert, co-editors. *A Field Guide to the Information Commons*. (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2009), p. xi.

² For an introduction to the "third place" see Ray Oldenburg. *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You through the Day*. (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

³ Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*. Edited with Introductions, Bibliographies, Footnotes and on-page Glossaries by Dr. Lesley A. Coote, Lecturer in Medieval & Renaissance Studies, University of Hull. (Herftordshire, England: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2002), p. 16.

⁴ "Academic libraries as learning spaces: Library effectiveness and the user experience." *Georgia Library Quarterly*, Summer 2009, 46(3); 7-10. <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1317&context=glq>

⁵ The slides are available at ALA Connect: <http://connect.ala.org/node/151402>