LEARNING COMMONS PLANNING: ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

Jan E. Heckman
Library Director
University of Connecticut – Avery Point

Mary V. Heckman
Services Program Assistant
University of Connecticut – Avery Point Academic

Abstract: Learning Commons, as a way to provide better service, has become a very active topic in librarianship on an international level. This paper will present the efforts of five regional campus libraries within the University of Connecticut to transform their physical plant and services to accommodate a Learning Commons. The main focus will be on the Avery Point campus.

Avery Point is in a unique position in regards to Learning Commons planning. The overall institutional attitude is that the present pre-World War II library building needs extensive renovation, and that some integration of the Academic Center programs in the new library plan would be desirable. A great deal of information was gathered from environmental scans, surveys, and focus groups with patrons in planning for the development of the main campus' Learning Commons. The same efforts are ongoing as they relate to the Avery Point campus, although the space issues and size of the campus are very different. There has been extensive collaboration between the Library and the Academic Center at Avery Point in an effort to find more efficient and collaborative delivery of services, even before physical renovation. There are several issues to consider if true physical integration becomes reality. Our collaboration will be presented in order to explore the many concerns an institution must face before creating a Learning Commons.

Keywords (LC subject headings): "Information commons", "Tutors and tutoring", "Library buildings", "Libraries--Space utilization", "Library use studies", "University of Connecticut at Avery Point", "University of Connecticut Libraries."

Learning Commons in the literature
The literature search focused on both older and recent articles because of the need for our campus to take a non-traditional approach. We also logged into a webcast by Joan

Lippincott held on August 14, 2008 which addressed the next generation of Information Commons.

In an editorial in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* (Bennett 2008) the definitions of an Information Commons and a Learning Commons were important to our thinking. The definitions were attributed to Donald Beagle (Beagle *et al.* 2006). The basic difference is whether there is support for learning (Information Commons) or active learning supported by other academic units other than the library (Learning Commons).

Some of the elements that ideally Avery Point would have are:
- access to numerous resources and formats of information and the technology to access those resources
- a writing center and a Q center (quantitative literacy, math and science) for learning support
- group collaborative work stations
- group study rooms
- presentation practice room
- quiet study areas/rooms
- comfortable furniture
- café where certain drinks and food that leave minimum mess could be available.

There have been and will be obstacles to creating a fully functioning Learning Commons at Avery Point. Because of these obstacles an Information Commons may be more realistic but as we move towards more learning activities we may evolve into a Learning Commons.

The Learning Commons efforts at the University of Connecticut
The main campus at Storrs http://www.learningcommons.uconn.edu/ has a commonly used approach where tutoring is housed inside the library building, as well as in other locations on campus. Each of the other Regional Campus Libraries (RCLs) besides Avery Point has a variation on the Learning Commons theme. Variations are in part because of the different campus physical layouts and buildings.

The Avery Point campus of the University of Connecticut
The Avery Point campus is a small regional campus in the University of Connecticut system. For a photo tour, please see the Avery Point web site at http://www.averypoint.uconn.edu/avery_point/photos.htm.

On the undergraduate side of campus, we have approximately 750 full time students. The campus supports students beginning their college careers with the intention of transferring to the main campus for completion of their degrees. In addition, the campus also supports a Bachelor of General Studies popular with non-traditional students, and three four-year degree programs (Maritime Studies, Coastal Studies, and American Studies). The Marine Sciences Department is a graduate level program which also

supports the Coastal Studies degree. The history of the campus is well explained in this brief excerpt from the Avery Point website:

> "The Avery Point Campus was formerly the summer estate of Morton Plant, a railroad, steamship and hotel magnate. Branford House, the mansion overlooking Long Island Sound, was reportedly worth $3 million when it was completed in 1904. Also located on the estate was a caretaker's house (the current police station) and a barn and horse stable (the current physical plant buildings). The estate included what is now the Shennecossett Public Golf Course located just north of the campus.
>
> The Plant estate was turned over to the State of Connecticut in the 1930's. During World War II, it was leased to the Coast Guard as a training center. During that period, the Coast Guard built the present cinder block buildings. In 1967, the estate was converted to the Southeastern Campus of the University of Connecticut, later renamed the University of Connecticut at Avery Point." http://www.averypoint.uconn.edu/avery_point/campus_history.htm

Because of the history of the campus, the physical plant is somewhat challenging. The mansion has been transformed into a combination of administrative workspace, an art gallery, and event rooms with spectacular views of Long Island Sound. The event space is particularly popular as a venue for private weddings.

A few other buildings on campus date from the Morton Plant era, such as the police station (the old guard house) and the physical plant building (the old carriage house). Most of the undergraduate classroom activity occurs in the Academic Building, which was built during the time that the campus was under the authority of the United States Coast Guard starting in 1941. The library, too, dates from this time period. The campus was turned back to the State and transformed into a University of Connecticut regional campus in 1967.

The cinderblock buildings have been updated somewhat and have been wired for technology. The electrical infrastructure has recently been updated in the library to support air-conditioning, but only the first floor of the library which contains the marine science collection is air conditioned.

The Academic Building, which houses the Academic Center as well as most undergraduate classrooms, has been cosmetically and technologically updated as well. Support for the technology comes from the Institute for Teaching and Learning at the main campus. The Academic Center has a peer student tutor staff of approximately 15 tutors. Writing tutors work alongside math/science tutors and in some cases, one tutor might be skilled in multiple disciplines. We also tutor in social and physical sciences, as well as Spanish. All of this takes place in a single space by a core staff working together.

(At the main campus, Q and W tutoring centers are distinct.) Tutors at Avery Point also provide in-class technology assistance for faculty teaching in the Academic Building.

The Library and the Academic Building are close to one another, but distinct in two different, neighboring buildings. In this model, our Learning Commons does not exist in a single physical place.

Origin of the Learning Commons concept at Avery Point
At Avery Point, the concept of a virtual learning commons grew from efforts at the main library and other efforts both nationally and internationally. Our first steps towards a Learning Commons at Avery Point grew from a mutual desire on the part of the library and Academic services staff to collaborate for the common good. We recognized that we share a common mission of teaching information literacy in particular.

We began with monthly meetings to share information on our individual efforts. From that, an idea was born to collaborate on a two-day workshop 'event' (as we began to call it) for faculty on plagiarism and related issues. The workshops were held in September of 2007 and were collectively called "An Allegorical Guide to Plagiarism & Other Forms of Academic Misdemeanors and Felonies". They were well received by faculty, and the collaborative effort was deemed a success.

With that, the Learning Commons planning committee was born. As our Learning Commons is primarily "virtual" it is comprised of some innovative elements.
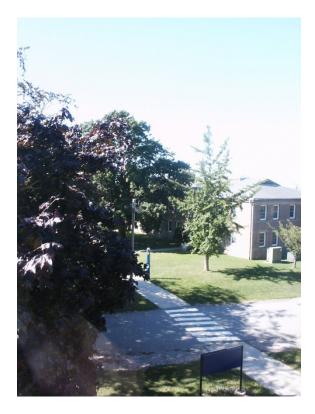
Virtual elements of the Avery Point Learning Commons
- By means of a website (developed by Academic Services) (http://www.averypoint.uconn.edu/avery_point/learning_commons.html), we promote ourselves to the community and offer services and information for faculty and students
- By means of a private, password protected wiki (http://learningcommons.wetpaint.com/), we share our progress and collaborate on projects.
- By means of a blog (developed by the Library) http://averypointlibraryblog.wordpress.com/ we also promote ourselves to the community and invite participation.
- Librarians are now members of the Academic Center HuskyCT site. HuskyCT is the University of Connecticut's Blackboard online web course tools (http://lms.uconn.edu) used for classes and for other non-class groups. This is a secure, password protected website for sharing documents, discussions, learning modules, surveys, assignments, and assessments among other things. This provides librarians a view of discussions among tutors as well as access to learning modules and assessments used in the Academic Center. Library and Academic Services staff collaborated this summer to convert the review quiz sections of Research 101 into a Blackboard Assessment that may be imported by faculty into their own HuskyCT class sites. Research 101 (http://www.lib.uconn.edu/using/tutorials/research/) is an

online information literacy tutorial originally developed by the University of Washington Information Literacy Learning 2001 and used on the University of Connecticut Libraries web site with permission. The quiz focuses on key concepts in information literacy.

Physical elements of the Avery Point Learning Commons
- Librarians hold office hours in the Academic Center. Monday through Thursday during the regular semester, a librarian spends one hour per day in the Center. While this arrangement is not typical, the literature shows that experiments with this model of a librarian spending time physically located in academic departments has been tried elsewhere with varying degrees of success but with generally positive outcomes. The degrees of success also depend upon the physical space and choice of location for the librarian. An ideal space is one that is located near a hub of student learning activity. Our experience at Avery Point with the librarian office hours has been increased contact with faculty more so than students, but this is based on a single semester where the experiment first began and before the renovation of the Academic Center space. Previously, the space consisted of two neighboring rooms with separate entrances. Today the Academic Center consists of two adjoining rooms with a single entrance and a large, open double-door between the two rooms. The new configuration allows flow between the two rooms that constitute the Academic Center and has changed the dynamic of librarian's office hours as well as the general dynamic of the Academic Center. Although the fall 2008 semester is very young, it appears that the open space between the rooms will make the librarians more visible and accessible. Providing easier access to the librarian for faculty (the office hours are in the same building as classes and faculty offices) improves communication and results in an atmosphere of collaboration. The librarian also provides additional "adult" support for the Academic Center while giving the librarian a chance for outreach and visibility to students who normally don't visit the library. Although the Avery Point campus is relatively small (an easy five minute walk takes you completely across campus), our students complain about having to go "all the way over" to the library. Librarian office hours mitigate their pain!

The Library at Avery Point from the window of the Academic Center

- The Library has study space that is available for tutoring sessions. This space provides an atmosphere conducive to concentration and could potentially be used to accommodate an appointment needed outside of normal Academic Center hours.
- At least one professor has used the library in place of his office for midterm conferences with students. This brings students to the library that might not normally make that trip.
- New tutors in the Academic Center are given a tour of the library and an overview of library services and resources. Conversely, new library student assistants visit the Academic Center during their training for a brief explanation of the services provided by tutors. This is so that as they work with students in their respective roles, students in both areas will be in a better position to advise and direct students towards whatever assistance they need. A side benefit for all of them is that they each learn something about services and resources available to them that they might not otherwise know. Taking each of these two groups of students out of their particular comfort zone to explore another area of the campus is beneficial to them as students and helps them to understand the campus more fully.
- Frequent meetings between Academic Center and Library staff have promoted an understanding of one another's challenges and missions. This summer we met

weekly to plan Academic Integrity Awareness Week, which took place just this past week at Avery Point. As a group, we collaborated on daily events (panel discussions, a quiz contest, and film screenings) and developed or located resources for faculty to use to incorporate the issues of academic integrity into their syllabi and classes. These resources were made available to faculty via email and our website. After this event is over, we have scheduled to continue to meet bi-weekly to keep a finger on our various projects, to continue our information sharing, and to develop new ideas for collaborative efforts.

The reality as it has developed has been increased collaboration, mutual benefits for our staff as well as benefits to the student population and to faculty.

The future of the Learning Commons at Avery Point
It has been recognized for some time that new physical spaces are needed on campus to support the growing programs. Much has been written and considered in planning for the future at Avery Point. In large part, the next phase of physical plant development on campus will depend upon the understanding of needs for a Learning Commons on campus.

Avery Point is not a residential campus, though in the past few years a cooperative arrangement has been made with a local apartment complex to provide an easier means of students locating local housing. At some point, on-campus housing may be considered. Such a move would logically require substantial additional support in library and Academic Center staffing, as hours would logically increase to accommodate a student population present overnight and on weekends. Overnight and weekend student presence would change the complexion of the library space and the Learning Commons.

Various models have been considered in plans for the next phase of campus renovation. The student union building is in bad shape and will be demolished as soon as an alternate location can be secured for student activities. One recent model that was considered to renovate the present library building involved the combination of the library with a student union. It is a recent phenomenon that the concept of libraries without walls has developed into a perception that libraries no longer need space for collections. Libraries are struggling to redefine their physical space needs in response to growing pressure to convert library space to other uses, especially on campuses where space is at a premium. The library/student union model eventually proved too expensive, so other alternatives are now under consideration.

The original (and optimal) model was a completely new academic building, built on the footprint of one of the older Coast Guard buildings that is presently still occupied by the Coast Guard Research and Development offices and which will be vacated by the USCG after this year. The originally envisioned Academic Building was planned to be the location of a new library, providing a hub of learning and information in such a way that the library, technology, and tutoring spaces would be contiguous. This arrangement is

now in use at the Stamford, Torrington, and Waterbury campuses of the University of Connecticut.

Funding in the state system was the only weakness in this plan. Other campus projects and time combined to erode the amount of money available for the new building. Now, a compromise plan is being considered that includes limited renovation of the present library building to include some elements of the Academic Center. Academically, this model is appealing, although logistically the services of the Academic Center involve more than simple tutoring.

The slogan of the Avery Point Academic Center is "Tutoring and technology", and providing direct in-class technology support for faculty is an increasingly complicated and necessary task expected of tutors. The Academic Services suite includes a PC lab for student use that is managed by Academic Services. If Academic Center staff were located in the library, then the services provided for audio-visual support in classrooms and support of the PC lab would become significantly more complicated. Most classes on campus are held in the Academic Building, so proximity to the classrooms is needed for prompt support of computer and audio-visual issues. We have yet to resolve this difficulty in planning for the future of the Academic Center.

Lessons we learned

What would be the strengths and the weaknesses of a virtual (or blended) approach to a Learning Commons model at your institution? For us, the lessons we have learned tell us that our model has both strengths and weaknesses.

Strengths

- Ironically, the fact that we do not share common physical space forces us to meet and to talk about how we can make our operations complimentary and efficient. Just the fact that we are talking to each other about what we are doing prevents us from redundant efforts. With our virtual model, we are forced to work together rather than to assume collaboration based on proximity.
- It's operational without a budget, thus it works without costing more than our time.

Weaknesses

- We are still separate and will be unless or until we are physically integrated. Students still need to span two different spaces to take advantage of all services we provide, and there is no way to provide all services seamlessly.
- To make it more than a virtual learning commons we will need funding for both physical plant and program.

References

Beagle, D. 1999. Conceptualizing an Information Commons. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 25(2):82.

Beagle, D.R. et al. 2006. *The Information Commons Handbook* (Neal Schumann, New York), p. xviii.

Bennett, S. 2008. Editorial: The Information or the Learning Commons: Which Will We Have? *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 34(3):183-185.

Church, J. et al. 2002. The Information Commons at Lied Library. *Library Hi Tech*, 20(1):58-70.

Cowgill, A., et al. 2001. Implementing an Information Commons in a University Library. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 27(6):432.

Fitzpatrick, E. et al. 2008. Reference Librarians at the Reference Desk in a Learning Commons: A Mixed Methods Evaluation. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 34(3):231-238.

Lee, J. et al. 2004. I Wouldn't Have Asked for Help if I had to go to the Library: Reference Services On Site. *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship*. 41, Fall 2004 [Online] Available: http://www.istl.org/04-fall/article2.html [Accessed: 9 September 2008]

Lippincott, J. 2008. Next Generation Information Commons, ARL (webcast)[Accessed: August 14, 2008]

Shoham, S. & Roitberg, N. 2005. From Electronic Library to a Learning Center in the Academic Library: Integrating Traditional and New Uses in the Library Workstation. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 31(4):339-346.

University of Connecticut at Avery Point. University of Connecticut – Avery Point – Campus history. 2005. [Online] Available: http://www.averypoint.uconn.edu/avery_point/campus_history.htm [Accessed: 8 September 2008]